

MERCER COUNTY AIRPORT built on Hurricane Ridge at an elevation of 2,857 feet, is the highest commercial port east of the Mississippi.

Station Of The Month

Deep Mines But Tall Hills-- It's Mercer County, W. Va.

MERCER COUNTY, W. VA.—High in a land where the company store is not yet a legend, the hills of two states gaze at each other across an expanse of valley.

Down below lie three cities. Two are called Bluefield; the other, Princeton.

The people, some 500,000, who live here are immensely proud of their towns. They are proud also of the airport—the highest commercial port east of the Mississippi—they struggled to build atop one of the purple-tinted hills.

Located within a convenient distance of the three towns, the Mercer County Airport buzzes with traffic, for this area is one of the most aviation-minded districts to be found.

'Only Way Out'

One Bluefield resident summed up the interest in air travel this way: "Before air service we were pretty well stranded. We had a choice of driving over the hills or taking the train.

"Not many people like to drive. The train goes only east and west. Then, too, there aren't any pullman cars now. So we've turned to the air. It's the only way out over these hills."

At Mercer County Airport today there are about thirty private aircraft based. And countless other private planes land every day, all in addition to the commercial air service offered by Piedmont Airlines on eleven daily flights.

This interest in flying is not surprising. The first scheduled commercial flying in West Virginia started here in 1926 with the Pocahontas Air Transport Corporation.

Airport Planned

But when the local citizenry began plans for a modern airport, they ran into several obstacles. First of all, putting an airport in the West Virginia hills was to be no easy task.

Even with the Civil Aeronautics Authority's approval of the Hurricane Ridge site, things seemed to stand in the way.

Two months after the ground-breaking in 1951, the road leading up to the airport was blocked by picketing strikers who were trying to prevent non-union construction workers going to work.

First Piedmont Flight

Finally the airport was dedicated on May 15, 1954, and the first Piedmont service started the next day. Just a few weeks ago an open house at the Mercer County port celebrated the completed terminal building (see story, page 1).

The intense interest in air travel—private planes, commercial aviation, modern airport—represents the modern Bluefield-Princeton, where business and residential sections speak loudly of increasing prosperity.

However, the area is really a combination of old and new, decadent and progressive.

The mining town of Pocahontas, centered in the fabulous smokeless coalfields of the same name, is a typical example of contrast.

Company Store Exists

Even though the mining proc-

ess has become mechanized, the company store still exists. But company houses—batten-board structures, all sporting the same color of paint, stand for the most part empty. The miners now have private homes, neat bungalows of their own choosing.

The only exhibition coal mine in the world is located here. Built so a car can drive through, it illustrates modern mining methods such as rock dusting to minimize gas, modern equipment and the five types of coal—pea, egg, nut, lump, and slag—mined in the area.

'Richest Little Town'

An alternate route back from Pocahontas to the airport runs by Bromwell, once so-called the richest little town in America. Today, the streets are quiet except for children playing in the streets with motorized go-carts.

But brownstone homes, fortress-like and capped with oxidized copper roofs, still stand as relics from another, bygone, era. And a small shop displays a clock with wooden works along with the brightly-packaged modern products.



THE BLF STAFF works eleven flights a day. Top photo shows (left to right) Agents Jim Thompson, Jonny Lawrence, Eddie Jones and Ted Farrington. In the bottom photo are (left to right) Station Manager Vize Dotson and Agents Adron Woodruff, Kenny Moses and Joe Robertson.



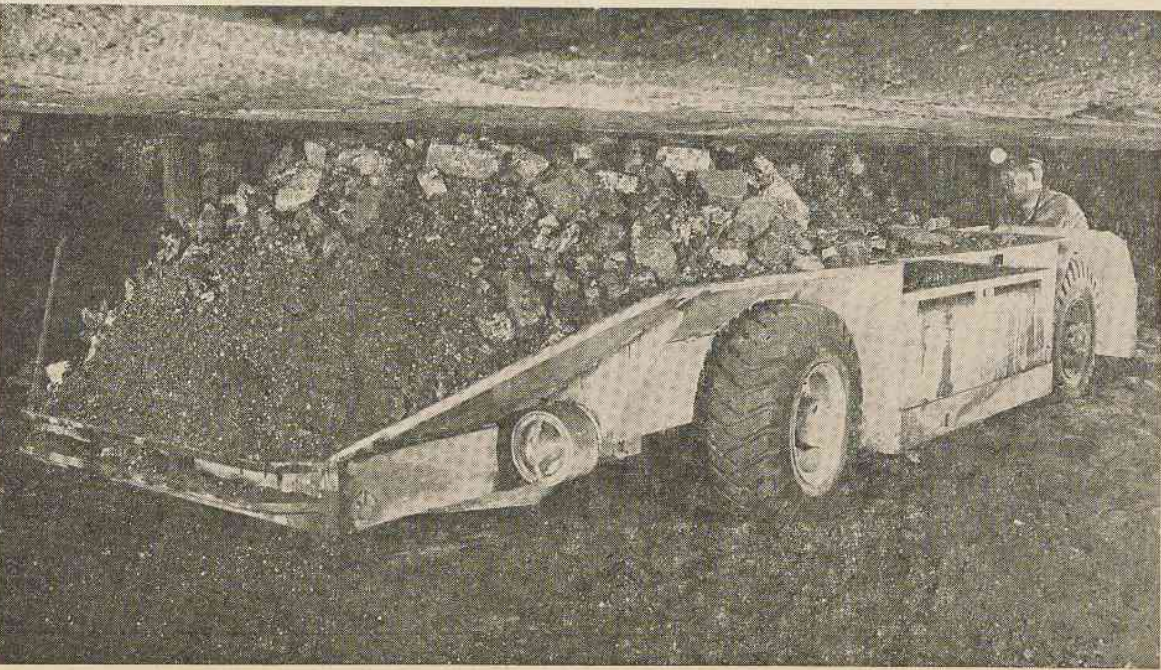
This is the area and the people Mercer County Airport serves.

es, that also Piedmont serves. For Piedmont is the only commercial carrier operating in and out of here.

Besides the 800 to 900 passengers boarded here each month, Piedmont also gets air freight and air express business from large local manufacturers such as Micamold Corporation of Virginia.

Helping to make the Mercer County Airport a hub of air activity are Airport Manager C. W. McGlothlin and FAA personnel who staff the new Air Traffic Communications Station.

Most folks here in the Bluefield-Princeton area like Piedmont Airlines service. Responsible for much of the good relations with the Mercer County residents are the station personnel who go about their work enthusiastically and seem to have a sincere love for these West Virginia hills and their people.



A MODERN COAL LOADER is put to work in a mine near Bluefield-Princeton.