



# SMOKELESS COAL FIELDS OF WEST VIRGINIA: A BRIEF HISTORY

*JR., W.P. TAMS*

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*The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia: A Brief History* first appeared in 1963, a little book by a man with no training as either a writer or a historian. Since then, this volume has become an essential sourcebook, consulted and quoted in nearly every study of coal field history. The surprising impact and durability of the book are due to both the information in it and the personality behind it. Through the first half of the twentieth century, **William Purviance Tams** lived coal. Rising from a young coal engineer to a senior coal baron, Tams stood at the center of Southern West Virginia industrialization. When he sold his company in 1955, Tams was the last of the old owner-operators, men with no personal or financial interest outside of coal. Tams wrote a book which could only have come from an ultimate insider. The everyday work of mining coal is here-laying track, blasting and loading the coal. So is the everyday business of coal, from sinking shafts and ventilating the work area, to administering a town and keeping the workers happy.

Tams gives the financial details of the volatile business, and offers capsule biographies of the other major developers of the Southern West Virginia coal fields. It was a passion for Tams. He never married, and tended his business and his town with paternal care. After retirement, this industrial baron spent his final decades in a modest bungalow in his little coal-camp community, watching the town he had built fade back into the mountains. It is W. P. Tams's passion and attitude, as much as his place at the center of history, which make *The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia* worth reading nearly 40 years after its first publication. Tams's 1963 account of his career, *The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia*, offers a unique perspective on the business and the life of coal mining. The book is especially valuable for its account of the daily life and work of the miners, engineers, and families in the mines and in the mining towns. Our reprint of this fascinating and important book combines Tams's original work with a new introduction by Ronald D. Eller, author of *Miners, Millhands, & Mountaineers*.

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