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HISTORY

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Beneath the surface

Distillers try extracting future from eastern Kentucky's past



Pike County's mountains were mined relentlessly for valuable coal/ Photos by Jessica Baltzersen

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In 1987, the coal town of Pikeville in eastern Kentucky achieved the unthinkable with its Cut-Through Project, the biggest engineering feat in U.S. history. The small but ambitious town excavated 18 million cubic yards of earth to relocate a river, a railroad, and multiple highways—all in the name of protecting its residents from flooding and expanding (along with believing in) its town.

Now, in the same spirit of ingenuity, a distillery in the town that moved a mountain has come up with a process combining two of Kentucky's most famous industries. Namely, it's begun aging bourbon in abandoned coal mines.

Whether that experiment has been effective may depend on your priorities.

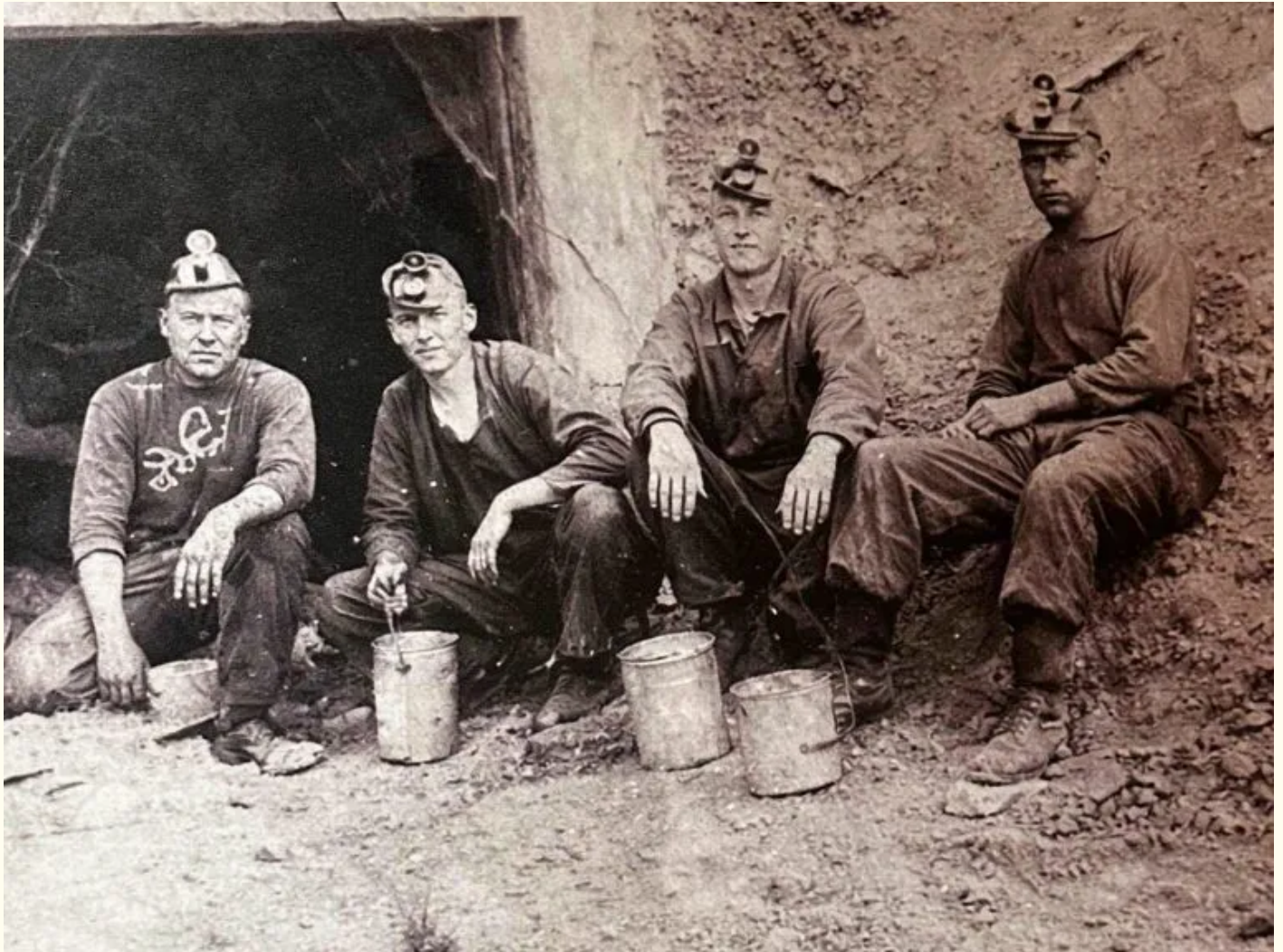


The Cut-Through Project reshaped Pikeville

Coal is everything in eastern Kentucky. Or rather, it was everything. Pike County recorded Kentucky's largest cumulative production of 1.33 billion tons from 1904 to 2001. Throughout the first part of the 20th century, coal

companies ran the towns, built the houses, and distributed scrip, a private currency redeemable in employer-run stores.

As late as 1990, coal mining accounted for more jobs in Kentucky than anywhere else in the country, and many of the state's rural communities still consider it an economic driver.

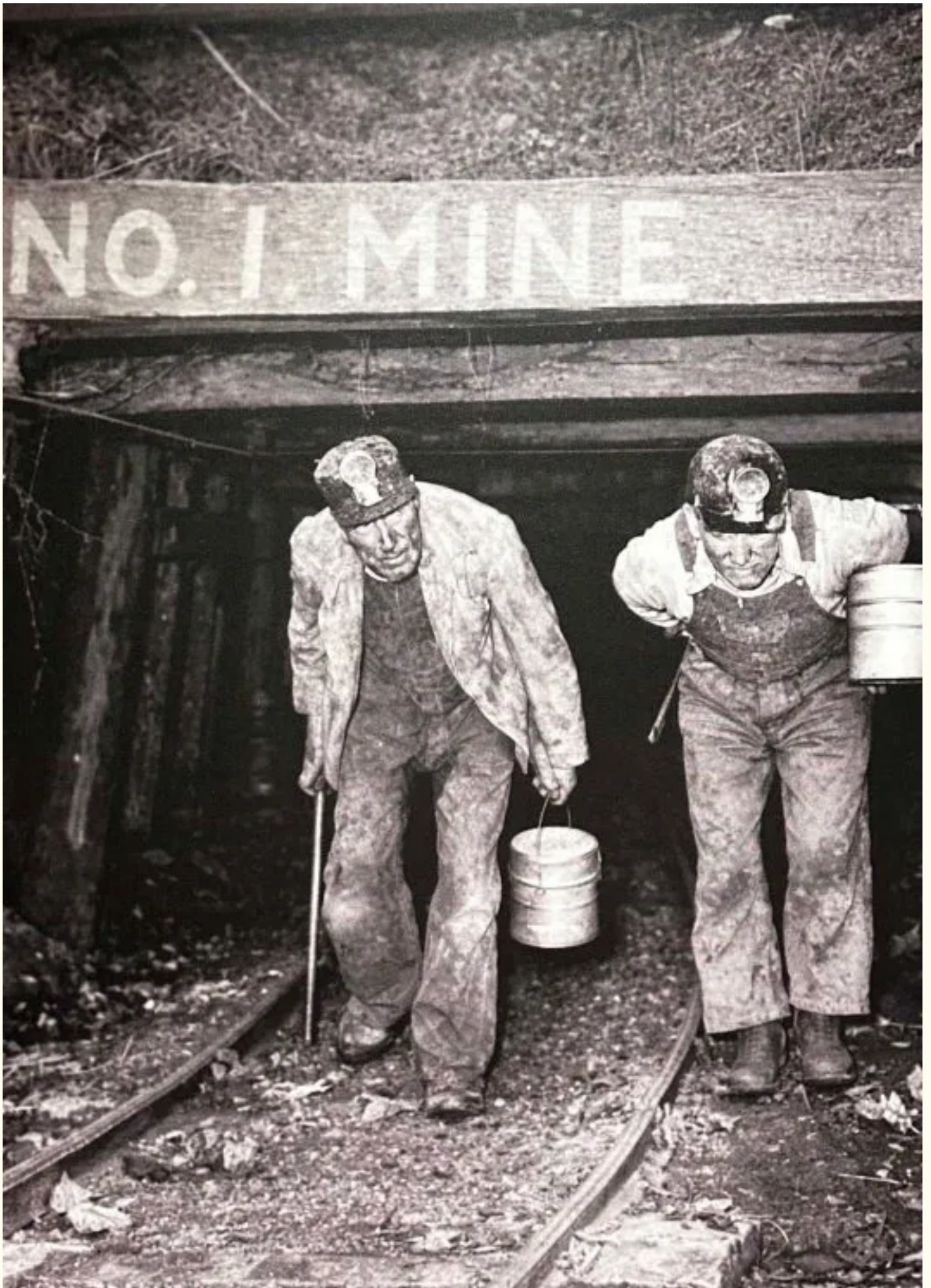


Brothers Wright Distillery Co. displays vintage mine photos at its distillery

But much like the mountains cradling those mines, the industry's modern history is a series of peaks and valleys. For more than a century, workers and the environment alike suffered grievously from the reckless and rampant extraction of coal. The national shift toward natural gas and renewable energy sources hasn't improved the situation for many eastern Kentuckians either. In the last three decades, Kentucky has lost 85 percent of its coal jobs, with eastern Kentucky suffering the highest unemployment rates in the state today.

Some are still waiting for the coal industry to boomerang, while others, like Shannon and Kendall Wright, the brothers behind Brothers Wright Distillery Co., are trying to move forward by repurposing the mines.

Shannon and Kendall had discussed the idea of coal-mine-aged bourbon long ago with Lincoln Henderson, master distiller behind legendary bourbon brands, including Angel's Envy. But they'd moved on from that dream when they purchased a 1000-acre farm along the Tug River in Aflex, an unincorporated community about 30 miles from Pikeville. Their plan was to build a corporate retreat.





The distillery is located atop Leckie Collieries Mine No. 1

Then, they discovered they'd bought the land atop Leckie Collieries Mine No. 1, which operated from 1913 through 1946.

In 2021, they tucked hundreds of contract-distilled and Kentucky-sourced barrels of rye, wheated, and four-grain single-barrel bourbon into the previously hidden coves.

With their new bourbon aging method, the Wright brothers proudly honor their region's coal mining heritage and the people who helped power a nation. Earlier this year, they released Hillbilly Days 2026 Bourbon, a special reserve paying homage to the city's most iconic weekend festival. Its label reads, "Rooted in Appalachian heritage, this bottle brings together hard work, craftsmanship, and a nod to the communities that keep that legacy alive."

But one question remains unanswered: Does aging whiskey in abandoned coal mines produce better liquor, or is it more marketing noise in a crowded industry? Maturation outside of a traditional rickhouse environment is nothing new. Some distilleries have experimented with aging the spirit underwater. One company has even patented its finishing process with the low frequencies of a Metallica playlist.

Unfortunately, the Brothers Wright team never responded to *The Food Section's* interview requests. But experts say science is possibly on the brothers' side—depending on how they're managing production.

Temperature is a crucial variable that influences bourbon flavor. In an underground mine that hovers consistently around 58 degrees Fahrenheit, Brothers Wright's marketing team has told media outlets including Whisky Advocate and The Robb Report that the company will use heat cycling to manipulate aging conditions.

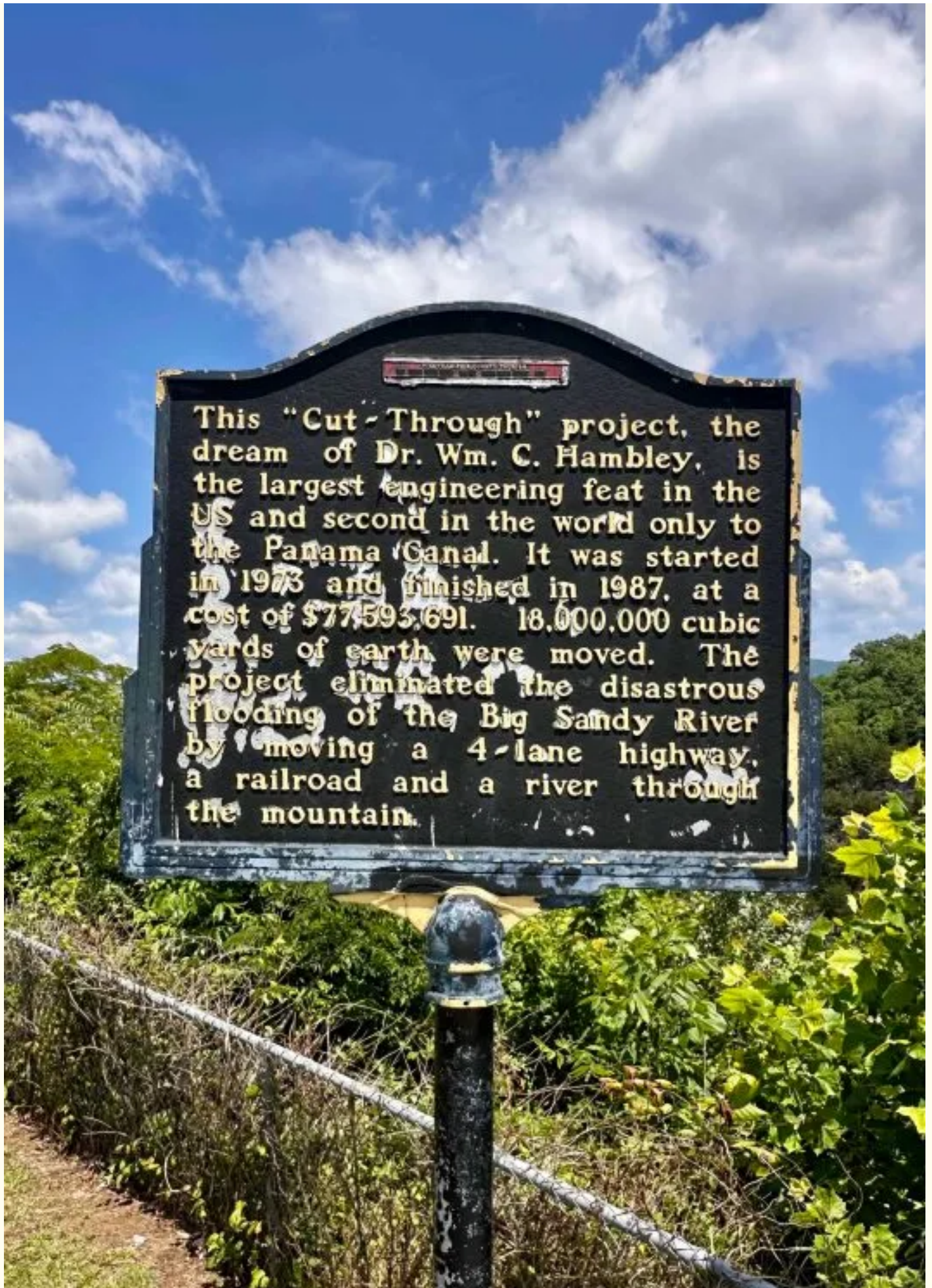
"How quickly you cycle temperature and humidity impact(s) how quickly different processes happen," Brad Berron, chemical engineer and professor at The University of Kentucky, says. "Looking at a coal mine, you have the opportunity to be very deliberate."





Brothers Wright bills its whiskey as coal mine aged

Early reviews of the Wheated Single Barrel Bourbon call it sweet-forward, citing notes of caramel, vanilla, and oak as “solid” and “enjoyable.” But given that the whiskey has only spent six short months underground before bottling, consequences of the brand’s unique aging process aren’t pronounced—at least not yet. Only time will tell if the flavor becomes more distinct when the barrels are given years to rest.





Yet the project's value may not be measured solely by what's in the glass.

In a region that needs economic diversification to survive, Brothers Wright acquired Dueling Barrels Brewery & Distillery from a woman whose husband passed away during its construction. The downtown Pikeville venue includes a large restaurant, tasting room, gift shop, and event space, expanding the brand's footprint and prospects for growth in Pike County.

So, while perhaps right now you can't taste the mine, you can already pick up a sense of hope for what an old mine can become.

Jessica Baltzersen is an Ohio-based freelance journalist covering nature, science, and the cool places and people across the Midwest and Appalachia. Her work has appeared in National Geographic, The Guardian, Sierra Magazine, among others. She's a 2026 Alicia Patterson fellow under the Fund for Investigative Journalism.

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