The Coal Branch

Few outside our area have heard of The Coal Branch, which is a chain of abandoned mining towns along the eastern slopes of the central Canadian Rocky Mountains. However, it was once home to thousands of people, and was an important part of Alberta’s coal industry. People from all over the world came to our region with the intention of working in the renowned Coal Branch, famous for its guarantee of work and overall prosperity. Just like everywhere else, though, the area was at the mercy of human advancement. The demand for coal, a resource that was at one time valued more than any other, died off with the introduction of diesel, electricity, and other forms of energy. In the span of about fifty years, the Coal Branch went from a highly successful industrial region to a series of ghost towns along a nearly-abandoned railway track.

The Coal Branch rail line was constructed by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR) and finished in 1913.¹ The company decided to build a southerly spur line (approximately fifty-eight miles long) off the main rail line which ran from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Prince Rupert, British Columbia via the Yellowhead Pass in the Canadian Rockies.² The area had been known for its coal deposits for some time already, since the Canadian Geological Survey Staff had began mapping the area in 1884³. One of the

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¹ The Coal Branch was originally called the Brazeau line, though this name was changed. For further information, see Oh! The Coal Branch.
³ Toni Ross, Oh! The Coal Branch (Calgary: Toni Ross, 1974), 7.
earliest surveyors in the area was John Greig (also referred to as Jack Gregg or John Gregg), and it is likely that he and his companions were helped by the local aboriginals.\textsuperscript{4}

Between 1906 and 1909, several more discoveries were made by a number of different prospectors, including local personalities such as Donald McDonald, Bill Bailie, and P.A. “Baldy” Robb.\textsuperscript{5} Soon enough people from across Canada, and all over the world, were arriving in the Coal Branch area, to work on the railways, in the coal mines, or in the service industry. The first townsites in the Coal Branch appeared in 1912 and 1913, although the area would experience most of its growth in the five years following 1916 as news of the prosperous area spread across North America, and overseas.\textsuperscript{6} In 1916, the entire population along the Coal Branch was only 315 people. By 1926, it had risen to 2758\textsuperscript{7}. Over a dozen towns and villages appeared in the Coal Branch, though they were never incorporated as such save for Robb, which was declared a town in 1956. They were often referred to as mining camps instead, even though it was obvious that some of the settlements were much more than that. Many of the Coal Branch towns had their own sports teams, Scout troops and army cadets, and although isolated, no one was ever without some sort of recreation. As former Cadomin resident Edith Wheeler recalled:

\[\text{something was taking place most evenings in either the homes or the hall. Plays were put on the second and fourth Saturday of each month, beginning at 11 p.m., to allow the late shift of miners to attend. The mine manager directed a six-piece}\]

\textsuperscript{4} Ross, \emph{Oh! The Coal Branch}, 7.
\textsuperscript{5} Ross, \emph{Oh! The Coal Branch}, 9.
orchestra and the music was terrific. Most of the camp turned out for the dances and everyone had a wonderful time.\textsuperscript{9}

Originally stemming off at the community of Bickerdike (16 kilometers west of Edson), The Coal Branch Line runs south to McLeod River, Erith, Weald, Embarras, Robb, and Coalspur, where it forks and creates an inverted “Y” shape. The left branch was made up of Mercoal, Shaw, Leyland, Cadmin, and Mountain Park, with another spur line at Leyland which went out to Luscar. The right side consisted of Diss, Sterco, Foothills, and Lovett.\textsuperscript{9} The area was divided into two main districts: Mountain Park and Coalspur. This was because the quality of coal in each of these regions was different. Mountain Park coal was better for steaming, while coal from the Coalspur area was better for the domestic market\textsuperscript{10}. This would include the coal being used for things such as heating and cooking in the home. From 1922 to 1926, the Coal Branch mines produced 2.5 million tons of bituminous coal and 1.9 million tons of sub-bituminous coal (27% and 84% of the provincial sum, respectively)\textsuperscript{11}. During the height of the Coal Branch’s success, it was responsible for about 22% of Alberta’s total coal production.

Mines in the Coalspur district, which provided “hard coal” (anthracite, one of the highest grades of coal), were less dangerous than those in the Mountain Park area which produced softer coals. Between 1920 and 1929, 42 men were killed in the Coal Branch,


\textsuperscript{9} Ross, \textit{Oh! The Coal Branch}, 5.


and 87 others were seriously injured\textsuperscript{12}. On the last shift of the last working day in 1939, a methane gas leak in the Cadomin mine trapped a group of miners. Three of the men died, while the other six barely managed to escape. Among the deceased was Jimmy Maddams, age 29. Maddams had managed to escape the danger area, but turned back in an attempt to save his fellow workers and friends John Burnside (age 41) and Dan Spinazzi (age 48).\textsuperscript{13} Although tragic, this story helps to demonstrate that these towns were very much tightly knit communities.

At the height of the Coal Branch’s production, the three largest towns were Luscar, Cadomin, and Mountain Park. Located at the end of the spur line on the left branch, Luscar’s original underground coal mine opened in 1921. It closed in the mid 1950s, but was converted to an open pit mine in 1970.\textsuperscript{14} This mine is operated by Luscar Ltd, Canada’s largest coal producer. The company was acquired by Sherritt International in 2001. There are no remains of the former town today.

Cadomin, an acronym for Canadian Dominion Mining, was the largest of the Coal Branch towns, boasting approximately 1800 residents in the 1930s. The living and working conditions in Cadomin during its mining days also seem to be of varied opinion. One source claims that the housing conditions for workers were “not ideal”:

> There are about 100 men lying around, some of them in filthy and verminous bunkhouses and others sleeping in the bush, preferring to be eaten by ants than by bugs. Management seem anxious to keep the bunkhouses in this undesirable state.

\textsuperscript{13} Ross, \textit{Oh! The Coal Branch}, 122.
However, sixteen year old Herb Belcourt remembered the Cadomin living quarters as being much more pleasant. Herb Belcourt arrived in Cadomin in 1946, and having left the employ of a railroad tie camp where his mattress was a forkful of lice and bedbug infested straw, considered the bunkhouses to be “like a palace”. According to Belcourt miners had their own rooms, beds, closets, and daily maid service so everything was very clean. The coal mine at Cadomin closed in 1952. As of 2006, the population of the town was 56 residents, many of whom are employed by the Lehigh Cement Company, which mines limestone at the Cadomin Quarry.

Historians are unsure as to whether coal mining in Mountain Park started in 1912 or 1914. The mine was definitively closed in 1950, and today there is nothing left of the former town except for mining remnants and a restored cemetery. In the 1920s and 30s, this same cemetery was the location where many novice skiers like schoolteacher Katherine Farnham would practice. Farnham and a group of friends enjoyed spending winter weekends climbing up the mountains and skiing down in threes as there were not enough ski poles for everyone. The adventurous skiers found they could extend their run by utilizing the cemetery. At its peak, Mountain Park was home to about 1500

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18 Katherine Farnham, “Skiing on the Alberta Coal Branch,” *Alberta History* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 12-14, 12.
people, and was also recognized as the highest town in Canada at an elevation of 6200 feet. Today, Mountain Park is the location of the Cheviot Mine, which opened in 2004.

Another important town along the Coal Branch line was Mercoal. During the late 40s/early 50s Mercoal had about 800 residents, although now it is virtually another ghost town with only a couple summer residents. Mercoal is an acronym for McLeod River Hard Coal Company, which was co-owned by Nick Gurvich. He opened the mine there in 1920, and it was sold to the Saunders Ridge Coal Company Ltd in 1924. With the closing of the Cadomin and Mountain Park mines, Mercoal attracted many more workers from other Coal Branch towns in the 1950s until the town’s own mine closed in 1959.\textsuperscript{19}

Many other towns from the area had interesting histories as well. Lovett (also referred to as Lovettville) was named after H.A. Lovett, the President of North American Collieries\textsuperscript{20}. Coalspur was the transportation hub of the Coal Branch. The community began after a group of British financiers founded the Yellowhead Pass Coal and Coke Company in 1912. When the mine at Coalspur first opened, it employed about 70 men. At the peak of its production, this number had risen to 400. Today, about a dozen people still live in the Coalspur area. Robb is home to the Bryan Hotel, which is the only business that started in the Coal Branch’s “early days”, and is still running today. Embarras, as well as McLeod River, Erith, and Weald were all settlements that were


originally rail sidings. Technically, a rail siding is a short stretch of railway track that is used to store railway cars or allow trains on the same line to pass one another. All of the aforementioned areas were basically ghost towns by the 1960s, due to a decline in the demand for coal as railways converted to diesel locomotives.\textsuperscript{21}

The railway companies needed coal in order to run their trains. These same trains were needed to transport the coal elsewhere. It was for this main reason that the Coal Branch was so successful for nearly fifty years. Prosperity in the Coal Branch declined during the Depression, like most places, but the area seemed to suffer less than most of the province.\textsuperscript{22} In most towns, the extreme recession barely seemed to effect the citizens at all. Edith Wheeler’s husband was manager of the bank in Cadomin for several years (beginning in 1929), and she recalls hearing stories of elsewhere in the province.

It was a treat, too, for us to hear news from the outside world, where the Great Depression was in full swing. Living as we were, where there was steady employment with good wages, we had no conception of the struggle that was taking place elsewhere.\textsuperscript{23}

Other towns were lucky as well. Katherine Farnham, who taught school at Mountain Park in the late 1920s and early 1930s also looks back at that time period with a sense of gratitude.

During the Depression years, as incredible as it seems, we weren’t affected quite as much as many other places. Teachers had an assured salary of $90 to $100 per month, which was a little less than most of the miners and coal company staff made. With light and water, and rent costing about $20 a month, and no transportation to pay for (there were no roads for many years), we all managed fairly well.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[24] Farnham, “Skiing on the Alberta Coal Branch,”\textit{ Alberta History} 45, no. 3:12.
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During the Coal Branch’s most successful years, most colliers (coal miners) would not have been considered wealthy or poor. Nevertheless, they were often able to afford periodic voyages to their home country or another small vacation.  

Throughout World War II, coal was in high demand so the region was very productive. However, with the war ending in 1945, the Coal Branch was also fast approaching the end of its prosperity. The introduction of oil-burning, diesel-electric locomotives, as well as a growing dependence on oil and gas as a primary energy source, meant a steep decline in the demand for coal. By the early 1960s, the Coal Branch was virtually a series of ghost towns. The two exceptions to this were Cadomin (where limestone quarrying still takes place), and Robb (the main industry is lumber).

The Coal Branch was an important part of Alberta’s history, despite the fact that many people have never even heard of it. In a broader sense, it could even be argued that this railroad line and the mining camps played a necessary role in the development of four provinces (from Manitoba to British Columbia). Much of the resources in the Coal Branch mines were used to fuel the Grand Trunk Pacific locomotives, and many towns had sprung up solely because of the GTP rail line crossing through their provinces. For nearly fifty years the Coal Branch was a highly successful industrial area, as well as a place that thousands of people were proud to call home.

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References:

Alberta Online Encyclopedia. “Lovettville.” Place Names of Alberta.  


