

# Coal Creek/Lake City: Coal Miner's Museum, historical trails, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | August 15, 2006

EDITORS NOTE: *This is the second half of a two-part article about the Coal Creek Rebellion and the current work to make Lake City a heritage tourism destination. The first half was published on Aug. 8. At the end of last week's account, conflict in Coal Creek between miners and convicts brought in by the state to work in the mines had been escalating since July 1891.*

For the next seven months Coal Creek and Briceville were under militia rule. The situation was tense. Incidents of exchanging gunfire were common. The miners would sneak into the woods and fire off a few rounds and the militia would respond with a Gatling gun. This standoff continued for several months until an incident in another coal mining community on August 13, 1892 happened to change the situation. Approximately 200 miners advanced on a stockade in Tracy City and forced its surrender. Some 362 convicts were sent to Nashville on a train. One convict was shot to death when he attempted to escape.

A similar situation occurred in Coal Creek when a militia man named Perry Fytte got into a fight with a miner named Dick Drummond and ordered him hanged. "Drummond's Trestle" got its name from this incident.

On August 15, 1892, Oliver Springs stockade was targeted. There were only 35 guards who did not surrender this time. They inflicted the first setback the miners had encountered when they refused to give up and exchanged fire with the miners wounding many miners. This was the first setback for the miners. However, the next day an overwhelming force of miners overtook the stockade at Oliver Springs.

With this victory at Oliver Springs, the miners soon attacked Fort Anderson on Militia Hill in Coal Creek, but the Gatling gun inflicted several casualties on the miners. The miners then put the fort under siege. On Vowell Mountain at a location known today as the "Miner's Nest," they fired upon the fort during the day and went home to their families at night. Fort Anderson was a single holdout of the government in the area.

Governor Buchanan ordered General Carnes to form a regiment of militia in Chattanooga and to proceed to reinforce Fort Anderson. He also ordered local sheriff's to form posses to overturn the miner's rebellion. One posse became lost on their way to Coal Creek and was overtaken by a group of miners. The battle of "Fatal Rock" resulted in two deaths and several wounded. The sheriff then retreated to Clinton.

General Anderson was captured by the miners and was threatened with hanging if he did not surrender Fort Anderson. When General Carnes arrived in Coal Creek, he placed artillery pieces and men with guns around the town and demanded that General Anderson, a close personal friend, be delivered to him by 9:00 AM. This was done. General Carnes took command of the city and essentially arrested everyone in sight. The first person recorded as being arrested was Marshall Bud Lindsay who, according to a story told of him, jumped astraddle of one of the artillery pieces before it was unloaded from the railroad flatcar and started joking about the militia coming to town. Thus General Carnes took command of the situation in Coal Creek. His strong military style and huge show of force immediately resulted in many of the miners leaving for the hills. Those who did not leave were arrested one by one – even including the State Commissioner of Labor, George W. Ford, who just happened to be in town. So, the Coal Creek Rebellion which began in July, 1891, was crushed by the end of August 1892.

As a side note, this "Bud Lindsay" mentioned in the above paragraph is the father of the State Senator Robert D. Lindsey who single-handedly changed the name of Coal Creek to Lake City in 1939. The name change was done without fanfare or involvement of many of the residents. A telephone poll was conducted by the *Clinton Courier* on February 16, 1939 and found a mixed reaction to the new name. The postmaster in Knoxville at first refused to send mail to "Lake City." However, on March 2, 1939, a bill was signed by Governor Prentice Cooper making the name change official. It was still two months before any record was produced making use of the new name. There are still some today who prefer Coal Creek and who would like to see the old name return.

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The trial of some 300 miners began in October 1892. Only two individuals were convicted of crimes and sentenced to do time in prison. One was sentenced to five years and the other to one year.

So, the Coal Creek Rebellion ended in defeat for the miners, but did it really? Governor Buchanan did not win re-election. The convict lease system continued until the Tennessee Mining Company's contract with the state expired in 1896. The state of Tennessee refused to renew the contract ending the convict lease system 20 years before other southern states. Brushy Mountain Prison came into existence.

Coal Creek returned to normal and the miners worked the mines for years to come. Many of them became victims of the Fraterville Mine explosion of 1902 and the Cross Mountain disaster in 1911. But those disasters are for another story in the near future.

Lake City Mayor, Buck Wilson realizes the unique heritage tourism opportunity that could be developed from the coal mine history. He is seeking ways to implement his vision of attracting tourists who see a huge billboard on I-75 announcing the Coal Mining Museum and Historical Trails and who choose to stop at Lake City to experience the history of coal mining. Buck has in mind a complete coal mining experience for the tourist. His vision includes a visit to a museum with a working model of a coal mine as the centerpiece, a ride in a bus equipped to travel on both railroads and roadways that would take the heritage tourist on a trip to see the actual locations of the mines, the convict stockades, the graveyards where the convicts were buried, and would even let them actually venture slightly inside a mine to feel the cool air and smell the underground atmosphere. Can't you just feel the claustrophobia setting in? Those mines have a history to tell and the only way to do that well is the put oneself inside the actual structure to see the dark, breath the staleness, hear the silence and sense the isolation of an underground experience.

I think it is worthy of mention here that Buck Wilson's dream actually fits right into a much larger regional opportunity for Heritage Tourism that could and should be developed. Envision this: Lake City (Coal Creek) captures the family of visitors coming south on I-75 where they start the heritage experience. The tourist family then goes to The Museum of Appalachia before stopping at the Green McAdoo Museum in Clinton where they learn the "Clinton 12" story. Then they proceed on to Oak Ridge where the Secret City story of the Manhattan Project is told through the American Museum of Science and Energy and other pertinent stops such as the K-25 gaseous diffusion building along with the Wheat Community, Happy Valley, the African Burial Ground, the Southern Appalachian Railroad Museum, the Graphite Reactor, the Spallation Neutron Source, the Y-12 National Security Complex's Beta 3 Calutrons and historic Oak Ridge. And finally, the cities of Kingston (capital of Tennessee for one day!) and Harriman (the city that temperance built) have Heritage Tourism stories to tell. We are sitting on a heritage tourism dream spot that is ripe for developing.

Of course, some changes would be required at the DOE sites to accommodate the tourism visitors in Oak Ridge, but part of the DOE mission requires support for heritage tourism according to presidential executive order. And with time and dedicated creative yet secure actions, the above scenario can be realized.

Other locations with much less real history have capitalized on much less.

The Casey Jones Story comes to mind. I understand it is expected to soon become the fifth largest tourist attraction in Tennessee. If a little old country store restaurant, a mighty small museum and a home that has been moved to the spot can do it, surely the area where the single most important industrial and military achievement in the history of the world occurred can do it too!

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We just have to put our collective minds to it and work together as a region instead of a series of small efforts. Let's get behind Buck Wilson and make the Coal Creek Heritage Tourism dream a reality.

The Coal Creek Watershed Foundation (see their web page: [www.coalcreekaml.com](http://www.coalcreekaml.com)) is doing just that. Barry Thacker and Carol Moore are leading a tremendous effort to bring the Coal Creek and surrounding area's history alive. They are doing tangible things like purchasing the land, doing archeological research and helping the area in many ways. All because of their interest in the history of the area and an active and continuing commitment to improve the quality of life in the Coal Creek watershed area.

A note of thanks: Many phone calls resulted from my request for help identifying individuals in the Ed Westcott photograph of Y-12 shift change. One lady is still alive and another is confirmed and will be represented at the Jack Case Center grand opening. Thanks again to all who helped seek to learn if any of the people in the photo were still alive. Maybe we will find even more who are still living.



Barry Thacker and Carol Moore examine a Welsh Bible from early Coal Creek history