

Coal Creek/Lake City: Coal Miner's Museum and Historical Trails

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | August 1, 2006

Just northeast of Oak Ridge and Clinton lies yet another potential “gold mine” of heritage tourism. This article will highlight Lake City Mayor, “Buck” Wilson’s vision for heritage tourism and remind you of the rich history of our neighbor to the northeast.

Much of the historical information for this article was taken from *Coal Creek/Lake City - Visions of the Past*, a project of the Lake City Homecoming '86 Committee. The book was given to me by “Buck” Wilson. I found the book to contain several most fascinating stories. From the almost exclusive reliance on railroads for the first 80 years of Coal Creek’s existence to the boom town growth in just four short years to the Coal Creek Rebellion of 1891 - 1892 to the 1902 Fraterville and 1911 Cross Mountain Mine disasters, the history of coal mining is rich with intrigue and adventure.

A little over 140 years ago in 1866 or right after the end of the “War between the States” as the South named it or the “Civil War” as the North labeled it, coal began to be mined in an area of Anderson County known then as Coal Creek. A major reason for this growth came from the resurgence of railroad construction to the area after the war ended. On May 4, 1868 the first Coal Creek Post Office was established. However, the name “Coal Creek” goes back even farther.

As early as 1777, land grants were being given to Revolutionary Soldiers in Cherokee territory. The 1798 Treaty of Tellico opened up the area to more settlement. On November 6, 1801 Anderson County was created by an act of the Tennessee Legislature. In 1805 the western section of Anderson County was purchased from the Cherokee. The land in the northeast section of the county was not seen as worth anything at that time. In 1825 a few families lived in the valleys along Coal Creek. In 1834, “Coal Creek” was described in the Tennessee Gazetteer as “a north branch of Clinch River, above the Eagle Bend in Anderson County.”

In the years 1866 to 1870 Coal Creek quickly developed from a little known valley of a few settlements to a town of ten businesses, three of which were saloons. It was a boom town! By the mid 1870’s coal mining was in full swing. Other towns developed in the area, Briceville being the larger of the settlements. Beech Grove and Fraterville also sprang up near mines as did other small communities. In 1909 when Coal Creek was incorporated, the combined population of Coal Creek and Briceville was more than twice that of Clinton.

The “convict lease” system was used by the state as a way to avoid the cost of housing prisoners and also as a source of revenue. Leasing the convicts to private industry seemed to solve several problems for the state, but in reality it created many more problems that it cured. Eventually it led to armed rebellion with many confrontations and much turmoil before being abandoned by the state as a viable option.

The Coal Creek Rebellion was slow to start. It had several bloodless confrontations between miners and militia in 1891 resulting in first sending the convicts and guards out of Coal Creek by train and later burning the stockades and freeing the convicts. It later evolved into armed conflict and finally martial law and actual military occupation of Coal Creek in August 1892 and lasting through much of 1893.

Some 300 miners were put on trial but the jurors ultimately only convicted two individuals, D. B. Monroe and S. A. Moore for conspiracy. Monroe served only seven months of a five year sentence and Moore was sentenced to only one year. The rest were acquitted.

It all started simply enough. The miners first obtained agreement from the Tennessee Mining Company to appoint their own check/weigh man – the person entrusted with inspecting and weighing the coal that determined how much each miner was paid. Although the legislature had passed a law in 1887 allowing miners to elect one of their own to this position, some three years passed before it was allowed in Coal Creek. The practice was short-lived at that, lasting only from January 1891 to April 1891 when the company demanded the miners sign an iron clad contract agreeing to abandon demands for an elected check/weigh man. The miners refused and went on strike.

Immediately the company signed a five-year contract with the Tennessee Mining Company to provide convict labor to work in the mines. On July 5, 1891, the first convicts were brought to Coal Creek by train. When this

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happened, the miners began to get support from surrounding communities. Other miners came to their support and on July 15, 1891 some 300 miners descended on the recently built stockade at Briceville. The guards surrendered immediately without even the thought of a fight. The convicts and guards were put on a train and sent to Knoxville.

A telegram was sent to Tennessee Governor John P. "Buck" Buchanan explaining the miners' actions and asking the governor to refrain from sending more convicts to Coal Creek. The governor's response was to call out three companies of Tennessee National Guard as escort and to travel by train in his personal coach to Coal Creek returning the convicts to Briceville.

Approximately 600 miners met the governor's train at Thistle switch. This proved a bit unnerving for him to say the least. After an unsuccessful and feeble attempt to convince the miners of the government's right to use convict labor and after being inside the stockade that night when the miners fired shots in the air just to let folks know they were not happy with the return of the convicts, the next morning the governor returned to Nashville. He did not return to Coal Creek, but did come back to Knoxville on July 22, 1891.

On July 20, 1891, over 2,000 armed miners - many of whom had come into Coal Creek from other coal mining towns - and supporters refused a compromise that would have removed the convicts from Coal Creek but left them in other mines in the state and declared that "the convict lease system could be tolerated no longer." They surrounded the stockade at Briceville and again the guards immediately surrendered - this time the guards consisted of approximately 100 soldiers led by Colonel Granville Sevier, grandson of John Sevier, Tennessee's first governor.

As the miners marched the convicts and militia to Coal Creek, they were observed by the miner's families and baskets of food and coffee was offered to all - convicts, militia and visiting miners. There prevailed a good natured atmosphere because the confrontation had been handled such that no violence had been required.

While this victory of the miners had been bloodless, Governor Buchanan was fuming in Nashville. He ordered General Sam T. Carnes to muster 14 militia companies in Knoxville. They camped at the University of Tennessee campus until the governor arrived on July 22, 1891. He met with a committee of miners who demanded a special session of the state legislature to repeal the convict lease system. The governor replied that he would enforce the law even if it led to bloodshed. However, he did call the special session.

A sixty-day cooling off period was agreed upon. The miners agreed to allow the convicts to return pending the outcome of the legislature's decision on the convict lease system. The only result of this special legislative session was to make it unlawful to interfere with the convict labor system. The miners' cause was not helped by the legislature. Reaction was strong in the press in favor of the miners. A miner's rebellion was predicted in the newspapers.

On October 28, 1891, the miners committee called a meeting where a final statement was made expressing the exasperation of the committee and tendering their resignation. They left no doubt in anyone's mind what was next - a call to war!

At night on October 31, 1891, a meeting was held where attendees were disguised and a speaker, known only as "Jack in the Box," called the gathered crowd to an oath of secrecy. The angry mob then marched to the stockades and released the convicts and told them to "take to the hills." Clothing was provided the convicts when the miners looted the company stores. Governor Buchanan, suffering from indecision, failed to take immediate action and the miners continued to defy the law.

On November 2, 1891, a group of miners released the 200 convicts at the Cumberland Mine in Oliver Springs and burned the stockade. The release of over 400 hardened criminals into the East Tennessee country side did not set well with the press or the locals.

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Yet the situation in Coal Creek calmed down and the mines were worked using miners as the Tennessee Coal Mining Company in Coal Creek and the Cumberland Mine in Oliver Springs refused to use the convicts.

However, on January 1, 1892, General Keller Anderson and a company of militia escorted 200 convicts back to Coal Creek to work in the Knoxville Iron Company's mine. The stockade was rebuilt. Breastworks were constructed on a hill overlooking the stockade. The knoll where "Fort Anderson" was located became known as Militia Hill and remains known as that to this day.



Mayor Buck Wilson points out the Coal Creek Mines Historical Trail planned for Lake City