From the Ground Up
Whitley, Colleen

Published by Utah State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9302
Throughout the history of Utah, coal has been a critical resource for the development of the state’s economy. Initially coal was used to heat homes and buildings, as fuel for the steam locomotives, and when the coal was of high enough quality to produce coke, as fuel for smelting metals mined from Utah’s mountains. Later, when natural gas replaced ash- and soot-producing coal as a source of heat, railroads converted to diesel fuel to power their locomotives, and the principal market for Utah coal became local coal-fired power plants and markets outside the United States.

In addition to water and land, coal was one resource that Brigham Young and other early leaders considered essential to develop a viable and self-sufficient economy in the Mormon homeland. Considerable effort was expended to open mines as part of the Iron Mission when coal was discovered near Parowan and Cedar City in 1851. The attempt proved unsuccessful, but in 1854 a new source of coal in the Sanpitch Mountains on the western slope of Sanpete Valley, about 120 miles south of Salt Lake City, offered renewed hope. Brigham Young visited the outcrops in 1855, and several wagonloads of coal were shipped to Salt Lake City that year. Several families of Welsh coal miners were sent to mine the coal, and the name of the settlement was changed from Coalbed to Wales. However, Wales did not become the mining center that its name promised.

Closer to Salt Lake City, outcrops of coal were found on Chalk Creek in 1859, and mining operations began. The settlement of Chalk Creek was renamed Coalville in hopes that this location 45 miles east of the Salt Lake Valley would become a regional coal center. Several coal mines opened in the area, and the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad through Echo Canyon and down the Weber River in 1869 offered a much easier transportation system than horse-drawn wagons. While coal continued to be mined in the Coalville area until the midtwentieth century, it was Carbon County, not Coalville, that became the new center for Utah’s coal-mining industry.
Carbon County and coal are synonymous and have been ever since the county was created in 1894. The 27th of Utah’s 29 counties established and the last before statehood in 1896, Carbon County was carved out of the northern end of Emery County. Castle Valley, which encompasses both Carbon and Emery Counties, was first settled in the mid-1870s as settlers from Sanpete Valley to the west and Utah Valley to the northwest crossed the coal-laden Wasatch Plateau to establish farms along the streams flowing through the valley on their way to the Green River—Price River, Huntington River, Cottonwood Creek, and Ferron Creek. However, with the completion of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad through the northern end of Castle Valley in 1883 and the expansion of coal-mining operations along its route, the towns of Price and Helper became economic centers for the region, while the communities of Huntington, Castle Dale, and Ferron to the south languished as agricultural villages tucked between the mountainous Wasatch Plateau to the west and the expansive, largely unexplored wilderness of the San Rafael Swell to the east. Residents and businessmen along the Price River felt that their interests were not being served and tired of the 30- or 40-mile wagon or horseback ride from Price and Helper to the county seat in Castle Dale. Initially they worked to have the county seat relocated to Price, but when their efforts failed, petitions were circulated to establish a separate county. The Utah territorial legislature passed a law, and on 4 March 1894, territorial governor Caleb B. West signed the bill creating Carbon County.²

At the same time as settlers moved across the mountains to establish farms along the Castle Valley streams, fledgling coal companies organized to pursue opening recently discovered coalfields in the high mountain valleys. The Fairview Coal Mining and Coke Company was organized in May 1874 and opened a mine in Coal Canyon.
Allan Kent Powell

near the head of Huntington Canyon. The company also built 11 coke ovens and named the fledgling mining camp Connellsville after the large Pennsylvania coking center that the Utah venture hoped to emulate. Coking efforts were carried out for about three years. Wagons hauled coke to Springville, but transportation costs and the questionable quality of the coke doomed Utah’s Connellsville to a short existence.

Eastward nine miles from Connellsville in Pleasant Valley—another high mountain valley of the Wasatch Plateau—the first of several major Carbon County coal-mining locations opened when the Pleasant Valley Coal Company, a local business headed by Miland O. Packard of Springville, began mining coal from its Winter Quarters properties in 1877. That same year the Pleasant Valley Railroad Company was organized and began construction of a narrow-gauge line that was completed from Springville to Winter Quarters in October 1879.

The decision to connect Salt Lake City and Denver with a railroad line running through western Colorado and eastern Utah had a major impact on the development of coal in eastern Utah. As Denver and Rio Grande Western crews surveyed the route along the northern rim of Castle Valley and up Price Canyon to Soldier Summit, a company geologist located rich coal seams in what would become Sunnyside in the northeast corner of Castle Valley and at Castle Gate, a few miles up Price Canyon. In 1882 the railroad company began to acquire the Pleasant Valley Coal Company and Pleasant Valley Railroad.

The arrival of the Denver and Rio Grande Western ended the monopoly that the Union Pacific had held on the Utah coal trade since the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. The Union Pacific attempted to meet the competition head on through the Utah Central Coal Company, which opened a mine in Pleasant Valley in 1882. The mine operated until 1884, when the mine tipple caught fire and the fire spread to the mine itself, killing John McLean and his son. The mine was permanently sealed after attempts to extinguish the fire were unsuccessful. A second mine opened in 1885, and in 1890 the Union Pacific Coal Company took control of the former Utah Central coal mines. The Union Pacific had planned to construct a railroad to its mining operations in Pleasant Valley; however, the line was never built, and the excessive freight rates the rival Denver and Rio Grande Western line charged the Union Pacific to haul coal forced the railroad to cease coal mining in eastern Utah in 1897.

Once under the control of the Denver and Rio Grande Western, the Pleasant Valley Coal Company expanded its Winter Quarters operations near Scofield and opened a mine at Castle Gate in 1888. Several coke ovens were built at Castle Gate in 1889. They proved successful, and by 1896 104 coke ovens had been constructed at Castle Gate, and coke production totaled 20,448 tons that year. By 1901 an additional 100 coke ovens were operating at Castle Gate, and production amounted to approximately 5,000 tons a month.

In the meantime, the Denver and Rio Grande Western organized a second coal company—the Utah Fuel Company—to open a mine at Clear Creek, four miles south of Scofield, and began developing the rich Sunnyside coal deposits. A company town was established at Sunnyside, and subsidiary companies—the Magnolia Trading
Company and the Wasatch Store Company—were organized to manage the saloon and mercantile trade. At Sunnyside 200 coke ovens were constructed in 1900, and by 1907 there were an additional 450 coke ovens, increasing production from 50,620 tons in 1900 to 324,692 tons in 1907.

The Panic of 1907 impacted coal and coke production significantly. Carbon County coal production declined from 1,816,133 tons in 1907 to 1,606,853 tons in 1908, while coke production dropped to only 134,195 tons in 1908, a reduction of 190,500 tons from the previous year.

Beginning in 1904, Utah Fuel became involved in a series of legal battles and suits over the company’s illegal acquisition of public coal lands. Agents of the company hired individuals to file on desirable coal property as agricultural land and then transfer title to the coal company. The litigation lasted for five years, and in the end Utah Fuel was found guilty, fined, required to pay for coal extracted from land fraudulently acquired, and forced to return some of the property and forfeit entry fees it had paid for the lands.

The coal fraud cases against Utah Fuel and the promise of lucrative markets in Salt Lake City and other parts of Utah encouraged independent coal companies to organize and open mines in locations within Carbon County outside of the Pleasant Valley, Castle Gate, and Sunnyside areas controlled by Utah Fuel. The first of these independents was the Independent Coal and Coke Company, which opened a mine at Kenilworth a few miles northeast of Helper in 1906. Although the company built a railroad line to its mine, it was still dependent on the Denver and Rio Grande Western to haul coal to the Salt Lake market.

Two other companies, the Consolidated Fuel Company and the Castle Valley Fuel Company, opened another major area about 15 miles southwest of Price at Hiawatha, Black Hawk, and Mohrland beginning in 1908.

Mining began in the Spring Canyon area just west of Helper after 1912 when Jesse Knight, a Mormon businessman from Provo and mine developer in the Tintic Mining District, acquired 1,600 acres of land in the canyon at what became known as Storrs. A second mine in Spring Canyon, the Standardville, developed by the Standard Coal Company, began mining coal in 1913. Three other mines opened in Spring Canyon: the Latuda Mine, owned by the Liberty Fuel Company, in 1914, and mines at Peerless and Rains in 1916.

Also in 1916 Ogden businessman W.H. Wattis opened the Wattis Mine, located a few miles north of Hiawatha. Across the valley, the Columbia Mine opened three miles southeast of Sunnyside in 1922 and became an important factor in the production of cast iron at the Columbia Steel Company’s plant at Irontown, just south of Provo in Utah County.

The last important coal-mining area opened in Carbon County was Gordon Creek, located south of Spring Canyon and approximately halfway between the county’s two principal towns—Price and Helper. Work began in 1923 when the Sweet Coal Company, National Coal Company, and Consumers Mutual Coal Company developed a series of mines.
The rapid expansion of mining in eastern Utah during the 1890s made it the state’s largest coal-producing area, led to the creation of Carbon County in 1894, saw the establishment of coal-company towns around the mines, and brought the first of several waves of immigrant miners to Carbon County when Finnish miners moved into the Scofield-Winter Quarters-Clear Creek area and Italian miners were recruited for the mines at Castle Gate and Sunnyside. They worked side by side with English and Welsh miners. There were also American-born miners, some of whom had farms in the surrounding valleys.

Such a group of miners entered the Winter Quarters Mine on 1 May 1900, when an explosion ripped through the mine killing 200 miners. The Winter Quarters or Scofield Mine disaster was, in terms of the number of miners killed, the most tragic coal-mine disaster in the United States to that time. The explosion received national and international attention and raised the question, “What can be done to make coal mines safer for the miners?” One practice immediately adopted was already in place in the Castle Gate mines—to shoot off explosive charges only when the miners were outside the mine. Many contended that the unsafe practices of taking in excessive amounts of blasting powder and discharging the explosives while the men were inside the mine that had led to the explosion. Later, in 1924, the Castle Gate Mine was the site of an explosion nearly as disastrous as the one at Winter Quarters. One hundred seventy-two miners were killed at Castle Gate when inspectors unknowingly touched off a pocket of methane gas that ignited an excessive amount of coal dust inside the mine. Fifty Greek miners died in the explosion.

While these two disasters still rank among the most tragic in American coal mining history, hundreds of other coal miners died from falling rocks and other accidents. J. Eldon Dorman, a young coal-company doctor at the coal camp named Consumers, recalled the tensions that were typical throughout Utah and other coal camps:

I had a mine telephone in my office and one at home. If an accident happened, I was frequently requested to meet the more seriously injured at the portal. It was quite an uphill walk, so I started driving my car. No road existed, but I could drive almost to the mine entrance. The entrance stood in view of the entire town, however, and every woman in camp recognized my car. Soon, each was standing on her front or back porch wringing her hands on her apron and wondering if her husband or son was hurt or killed. I only drove up there twice. The ever-present fear of death in mine accidents, explosions or afterdamp already haunted the families enough.

**Immigrant Populations**

Carbon County coal miners came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were Mormon farmers from Castle, Sanpete, and Utah valleys. They traveled to the mining camps...