Mining in East Tennessee

**Introduction**

Mining has been an important part of East Tennessee’s economy for over 150 years. A number of different minerals are found in East Tennessee including marble, bituminous coal, zinc, copper, lead, mica, and iron ore. The Cumberland Plateau region also has deposits of petroleum and natural gas especially in Morgan, Fentress and Scott counties. Roane County’s deposits of both coal and iron ore led to the creation of the Roane Iron Company after the Civil War. The coal was processed to produce coke which was then used to refine the iron ore. East Tennessee’s marble has a distinct pink tone and ease of polishing that has made it very popular with architects. East Tennessee marble can be found in a number of important buildings including the Tennessee State Capitol, Washington Monument, National Gallery of Art and the Lincoln Memorial. Knoxville was known as the “Marble City” in the late 18th and early 19th centuries because of the vast amount of marble quarried in the area. Mining has not only played an important role in East Tennessee’s economy, but has also served as a catalyst for political and legal change.

**Coal Creek War 1891-1892**

Following the Civil War, Tennessee employed the convict lease system to raise revenue. In the convict lease system, individuals who had been sentenced to prison were leased to a company to perform manual labor. The company paid the state for each leased convict and was responsible for guarding the prisoners to prevent escapes. The system generated income for the state and provided companies with a large and inexpensive labor force. The Coal Creek War began with a dispute between miners and company officials over unfair practices including paying employees in script. The company tried to force miners to sign an unfavorable contract and when the miners refused, the company brought in convict laborers to replace them. On July 14, 1891 the miners in Briceville marched to the stockade and ordered the convicts and their guards to leave. The miners sent the convicts and their guards to Knoxville. This action was repeated several times before Governor Buchanan intervened and sent the State Militia to Anderson County. Buchanan urged the miners to obey the law and by late 1891 an uneasy peace settled over the community.

The summer of 1892 brought renewed attacks against the convict lease system in Anderson County and other communities throughout the state. Ultimately, General Carnes and a militia force of over 500 men arrived in Coal Creek to put down the rebellion. Hundreds of men were arrested but few were ever convicted for their participation in the Coal Creek War. The Coal Creek War highlighted the problems the convict lease system created for free laborers and later investigations revealed the abuses inmates suffered under the system. In 1893, a law authorizing a new penitentiary at Brushy Mountain was passed. The final end of the convict lease system in Tennessee came in 1896 when the final lease contracts expired.

**Fraterville Mine Disaster**

The Fraterville Mine in Anderson County was unique in both its reputation for safety and the good relationship between the miners and company. Miners in Fraterville had the opportunity to own their own land, build their own houses, join the United Mine Workers and were paid in cash, not script. For these reasons, many Fraterville miners had encouraged their relatives to join them in Fraterville. This peaceful community was shattered on the morning of May 19, 1902 when an explosion rocked the mine. A desperate rescue attempt was mounted to save the men trapped inside. Sadly, none of the 216 men and boys inside the mine survived. Some were killed instantly, but others lived for several hours before succumbing to toxic gases inside the mine. Many of these men wrote messages for their families that were later found on their bodies.

*Dear Wife and Children:*

*My time has come to die. I trust in Jesus. Teach the children to believe in Jesus. May God bless you all is my prayer. Bless Jesus, it is now ten minutes till 10 and we are almost smothered. Don’t know how long we will live, but it is our time to go. I hope to meet you all in heaven. May God bless you all, wife and children, for Jesus sake goodbye until we meet to part no more. My boys, never work in the coal mines. Henry and Condy be good boys and stay with your mother and trust for Jesus sake. Powell Harmon*

The tragedy of the Fraterville explosion was magnified by the fact that so many of the miners were related. Only three adult men were left alive in Fraterville after the disaster. Newspapers around the world reported on the tragedy and reprinted the heartfelt messages the miners left behind. The publicity surrounding the Fraterville disaster was a leading factor in the creation of the U.S. Bureau of Mines.

***Cross Mountain Mine Disaster***

An East Tennessee mining disaster once again gained national attention on December 9, 1911. An explosion at the Cross Mountain Mine on the Anderson County/ Cumberland County border trapped 89 miners inside. The rescue operation conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Mines was the first to utilize caged birds to determine air quality and self-contained breathing apparatus for rescuers. Sadly, 84 of the 89 trapped miners died. One of the dead, Condy Harmon, was the son of Powell Harmon who had died in the Fraterville disaster nine years earlier. However, the dramatic rescue of 5 miners 56 hours after the explosion greatly enhanced the reputation of the recently created U.S. Bureau of Mines.