

Coal Mining

Contributed by Administrator
 Friday, 19 August 2011
 Last Updated Friday, 19 August 2011

Coal Mining In Monroeville, Pa. Louis A. Chandler While coal was discovered in western Pennsylvania in colonial times, because of limited markets and poor transportation, it took a while to develop as a commercial enterprise. But by the middle of the 19th century the rapidly growing iron and steel industry was creating a vast new market for coal, and mining expanded, particularly to the north and east of Pittsburgh, to exploit the richness of the vast Pittsburgh seam. In 1870 Andrew Carnegie purchased tracts of coal lands in Patton and Plum Townships and began forming the New York and Cleveland Gas and Coal Company, which was to become one of the largest mining operations in Western Pennsylvania. Perhaps the first local mine was begun in 1891 when the Oak Hill Mine Number 4 was opened in Patton Township. And in 1914 The New York and Cleveland Coal Company began mining the area. And with the advent of the First World War, the need for coal to support the war effort was becoming critical, trenches were being dug in local cow pastures to get at the thick rich coal of the Pittsburgh seam. By the 1920s, in addition to the New York and Cleveland Company, a number of others were actively engaged in mining operations in Patton Township, e.g., Blanchard Coal, Reynolds Coal, Beatty Gas and Coal, Monroeville Coal Company, John Mathews Coal, and Thomas Harper Coal Co. Local mines like Renton, Gascola and Cunningham's of the Pittsburgh seam, and later mines of the Freeport seam, continued to be active during the 1920s and 30s. While Denmark, McCullough, and the Pittsburgh-Westmoreland Coal Company were to become prominent coal mine operators in the region, particularly exploiting the coal fields to the east of Patton Township. Since the Pittsburgh seam was easily accessible, running about 50 feet below the surface, shallow underground mines could be dug to exploit it, while surfaced strip mining techniques could also be used in some places. Strip mining used large mechanical shovels to strip away the surface coal and truck it to the nearest railroad sidings. The firm of R. H. Cunningham was reported to have transported such a gigantic shovel, once used to dig the Panama Canal, up the lower Monroeville Road, crumbling the brick surface. (Later, the company repaired and re-surfaced the roadway.). In 1918, R. H. Cunningham began strip mining at McMasters Grove. McMasters Grove was situated near the center of the farming village of Monroeville at the southern side of Route 22 near the intersection with modern Route 48. In the latter part of the 1800s, this centrally-located wooded area, originally part of the Mc Masters farm, had been serving as the community's picnic park. Family picnics and community events like concerts and festivals were frequently held there. Like much of today's commercial corridor, the area would soon show the devastating effects of strip mining. One local residents writing in the 1950s recalled that: "After the coal was taken out, this naturally left these coal pits in their destructive state, besides great heaps of soil, rock, slate, red dog, slack and other refuse remaining. These great heaps of refuse are still found in our Borough destroying its natural beauty; Wherever you may be living the chances are that there are one or more of these slag heaps in sight of your home." In underground mining, coal would be dug out by men and machines, and the men, later mules, then hauled the coal on small tram car that ran on iron rails from the working face to the mine's entrance, (or adit), often built into a hillside, to a storage or transfer point. Over time, mule haulage was replaced by mechanical haulage over steel tracks using electric motors. The coal hauled to a storage bin or "coal tipple." A coal tipple was a structure for temporary storage where wagons of coal from the pits were "tipped" or dumped, eventually to be loaded into railroad cars on sidings running beneath the tipple. At one time such coal tipples were a common feature of the landscape in Patton Township. Mining was made considerably more efficient with the coming of the railroads. To feed the steel industry's voracious appetite for coal, spur lines were built in Monroeville to service the local mines and haul the coal to the steel mills of the Mon Valley. Coal could then be hauled by tram cars to the nearest railroad sidings. The railroads, particularly Carnegie's Bessemer and Lake Erie, (later the Union Railroad), ran narrow gage spur lines across the Township to service the mines at various loading and transfer points. Stations grew up along the railroads north-south corridor that ran along Thompsons Run to the Steel Mills in the valley. Edels Creek, Halls and Linhart stations were built to service the nearby mines, like Gascola which serviced the coal mines of the Carnegie Steel Company. Soon a network of narrow gauge rail lines crisscrossed Patton Township, servicing the coal mines; the name of today's "Trestle Road" reflects that heritage. Local work trains were a common sight laying, maintaining, and removing tracks as were the narrow-gauge work locomotives or "Dinkys" used to service the mines. As the railroads expanded a minor housing boom grew at places like Hall's Station, as an influx of workers settled in the area to work in the mines. As time went on, more and more of the local men who didn't work on the farms would become miners. Mining continued in the area well into the 20c, but even as the older underground mines were being depleted new methods of strip mining were then being developed and employed. By the 1950s the results of that poorly-regulated mining activity was apparent. Great heaps of surface soil, rocks, debris, mine trailings, slag, and other refuse littered the landscape, left behind as the mines began to close. McMasters Grove had been left scarred by coal mining operations. By the 1950s the land was devastated, the results of the surface mining. When the land had been re-claimed, Patton Township officials laid plans for a new high school to be built on the site. But increased traffic forced them to look for another site for the school, and the land was sold to developers. Eventually, the property was to be used as a drive-in theater (in 2005, the site of Lowe's Home Improvement Center), while the adjacent land became the site of the Miracle Mile Shopping Center. Still another pile of debris and a massive slag heap marked site of the mule barn for the old New York and Cleveland Coal Mine, later part of Harper's strip mine. This was the parcel of land, that once reclaimed, would become the future home of the Monroeville Mall. More Recent Developments Eventually the strip mines were abandoned and the land reclaimed; today there are few traces of Monroeville's surface mines. However, underground mining was to continue in the area into more modern

times. From the 1960s to the 1980s efforts were made to exploit the Freeport seam which ran about 600 feet below the surface in northern Monroeville. This lode of high grade metallurgical coal could be up to 7-feet thick in places under parts of Garden City, and the Logan's Ferry Road area, in northern Monroeville. Unknown to most Monroeville residents in the targeted area, hundreds of coal miners were at work directly below their streets and houses. The reason few were aware of this mining was that the entrance to the mine was located three miles north of Monroeville in Penn Hills. The miners would enter Republic Steel Corporation's Newfield mine at that point and travel a few miles underground to the excavation site in Monroeville. This mining took the form of Room-and-Pillar Mining. This method begins with an advance move when a system of tunnels and cross tunnels are generated removing about 50% of the coal. Once the mine had advanced to the furthest point, the retreat mining started in a process that removed as much of the remaining coal as possible, allowing the mine roof to collapse. Using continuous mining machines these mine pursued a coal seam of 84 inches yielding a daily output of some 3,000 tons. Coal mining has always been a hazardous business and an accident at the Newfield Mine in 1977 in which one miner was injured and one killed, attested to the on-going underground activity in the area in the latter half of the twentieth century as large areas of Plum, Monroeville and Penn Hills were undermined. The Newfield mine, like the adjacent Renton mine has since been abandoned. And although a state mining act in 1966 required that sufficient coal be left in place to prevent subsidence, subsidence did occur, and continues to occur, in some instances in Monroeville today.

NOTE: The author is indebted to Tom Henningsen whose generosity in sharing his research in the history of mining in our area contributed much to this paper.