

the 7 Wonders of Osage County

Coal Mines



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Staff Writer

Osage County has a long history of coal mines. Coal was mined in the county from the late 1800s to 1969. In 1889, Osage County had 118 coal mines that employed over 2,200 people and produced almost 400,000 tons of coal. For years this was the main source of fuel for the Santa Fe Railroad, whose main line ran through the county. Coal mines in Osage County was important for the railroads and influenced the location of railroad lines.

Coal was discovered at Carbondale around 1860. The discovery determined the route of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. By 1871, Osage

County became a leading center for coal mining and employment.

Osage County coal fields were some of the first in Kansas to receive a boost by a railroad; the railroad was the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. Construction on the railroad line started in late 1868, in Topeka, and by September 1869 was completed southward through Carbondale to Burlingame. The original course of the railroad was to bypass Osage County, however, the discovery of coal caused the course to be diverted along a more southerly route through the Osage County coal field.

The exact date of the start of mining in the county is in question, but some production occurred as early

as 1867 near Scranton. In this same year, mines were opened at Osage City and Carbondale. Mining did not start in Burlingame until 1897 because the coal was deeper and was thought not to exist in that area.

Before the railroad, the sale of coal in the county was minimal. At the onset it was hauled by wagon and the market did not extend beyond a 40-mile radius. After the railroad was built, the coal market greatly expanded and no other coal field in the state could boast such a large market area.

In the 1870-1880 period, the railroads built many lines in Kansas and the market area for Osage County coal increased. Besides the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe, there were St. Louis, Law-

rence and Western, a branch of the Union Pacific, and the Manhattan, Alma and Burlingame, that was completed in 1880. The last railroad built across the coal field was the Missouri Pacific. Completed in 1887, Missouri Pacific opened additional territory for coal to be sold.

Osage City was the center of the coal fields of the county. At the peak of coal production, there were 28 shafts, yielding 1,600 tons per day and employing over 1,200 men. Besides shafts there was a large number of drifts and stripping, which employed many others.

The Osage Carbon Company succeeded The Osage Carbon, Coal and Mining Company, which was the first to open shafts in Osage City.

In 1964, Burlingame's Bell Mine No. 4 was the last coal mine shaft in the state that closed. At the site south of Burlingame were both deep and surface mines.

At first, Osage County had a small advantage in coal mining costs compared to other mines in Kansas. As competition increased, Osage County mining went unchanged. The increase in population and industry expanded the coal market.

One state mine inspector commented, "For years afterward, Osage County was the leading center in point of quantity of coal mined and the number of men employed west of the Mississippi."

Osage County mines' economic well-being was tied to the Santa Fe. Osage County

was the principal supplier of the railroad's fuel from 1869 until 1886. The Santa Fe Railroad opened its own mines and was mining over half of the county's annual production. The Santa Fe wanted to control its own fuel supply.

When Santa Fe coal development began in Crawford County, and when supplies were sufficient for its needs, Osage County coal mining reduced drastically and the sale of the Santa Fe properties began. By 1898, Santa Fe had disposed of more than half of its Osage County coal mines. The other railroad companies also started reduction of Osage County coal consumption. The Manhattan, Alma and

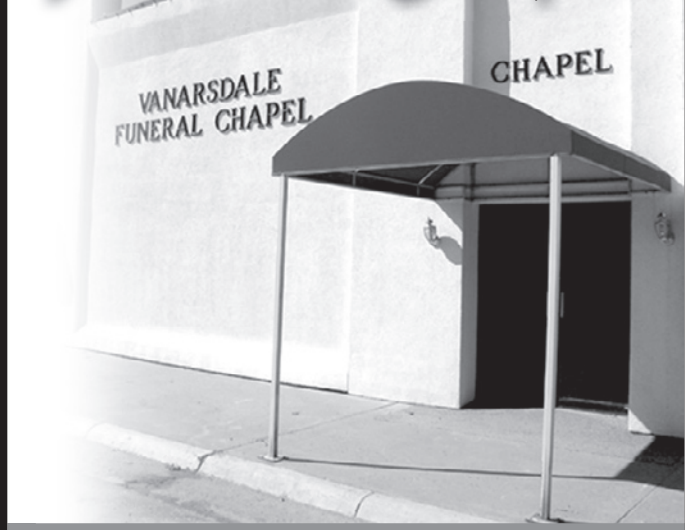
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