

FORGOTTEN FRONTIER

A History of
Wyoming Coal Mining

A. Dudley Gardner
and Verla R. Flores

Westview Press



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WESTERN WYOMING COLLEGE

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Front cover photograph: McDonald's Coal Mine, Big Horn County, Wyoming, circa 1900 (*photo by J.E. Stimson, courtesy of the Wyoming State Archives, Museums and Historical Department, Stimson Collection*). **Back cover photograph:** Miners outside the Reliance Mine in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, circa 1900 (*courtesy of the Sweetwater County Museum*).

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Acknowledgments

"Time flies like an arrow," say the Chinese. The same can be said of history; it passes swiftly and to the mark but is seen clearly only after the arrow has struck its target. The history of Wyoming coal mining is like an arrow still on its way to the target—still in motion and not easily perceived. Yet part of the path can be charted. The history of Wyoming coal mining has proven to be an uneven flight—a history of economic ups and downs, tragedies and triumphs, and uncertainties. So in the midst of the arrow's flight, we attempt to chart its course.

The course of Wyoming history began with daring people. It was through the efforts of men mining coal that many Wyoming towns had their beginning. It was through the sacrifices of women and men that towns continued. Some towns, however, were abandoned once the mines closed. Yet the memory of the once-thriving camps survives. "Gone but not Forgotten" is a common inscription on tombstones in deserted coal camps. Through this book we attempt to pay tribute to the men and women of Wyoming's coal camps who are gone but not forgotten. Their lives helped to make and shape Wyoming; we owe them much.

To trace this history of Wyoming, we spent hours in the homes of miners and their families. They told us about their lives and shared food with strangers. Each of these people is listed in the bibliography and deserves our thanks. To Alice Antilla in Kemmerer, Homer Alley in Sheridan, the William Harrises in Frontier, and Amy Pivik in Rock Springs, we extend our gratitude for opening their homes and providing food and shelter. They extended this courtesy because they, like other miners and miners' families, want others to know of the courage and grit it took to make Wyoming home.

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This work reflects part of the history of Wyoming coal mining. Much more needs to be written. To those that have produced written histories, historical overviews, and manuscripts we cited here, we extend thanks. To the archaeologists and historians who are studying Wyoming's past and attempting to preserve its lasting legacy, we applaud your efforts. The flight of time is not complete, but the history that has passed shows coal miners will be a part of the future. To those that are attempting to preserve the mining history of Wyoming and the West, we are grateful. And to men such as Steven Creasman and Gary Beach, who have the courage to dream and the willingness to persevere in attempting to save America's past, thank you. With the help of such unselfish individuals this work has been strengthened, but the responsibilities of accuracy fall to the authors alone.

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Royalties from the sale of this book will go to the Western Wyoming College Museum of Natural History to fund displays relating to Wyoming coal mining history.

*A. Dudley Gardner
Verla R. Flores*



Miners outside the Reliance Mine in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, circa 1900. (Courtesy of the Sweetwater County Museum)

Introduction

When we think of settling the West, we often imagine trappers, gold miners, or ranchers seeking new lands and new opportunities. The settlement of the West, however, was not accomplished by these people alone; the region was also settled by men and women engaged in a less glamorous occupation: coal mining. Like the trappers and traders who preceded them, the coal miners sought new lands and new opportunities. Although the coal miner and his family often traveled to their destination by railroad and wagon, they moved to areas just as unsettled as the earlier pioneers had encountered. In the desert landscape of what is now Wyoming, they built towns like Almy, Carbon, Winton, Dines, Cambria, Monarch, Sublet, and Dana. When the mines closed, the miners moved on, but usually to mine a new coal field and build a new town. To the coal miners fell the burden of settling the land skipped over by the gold miners, farmers, and ranchers. These men and women settled areas previously unoccupied and were true pioneers.

These pioneers came from all over the world. Initially they came from England, Wales, China, and various parts of the United States. As the mining industry grew and the need for workers increased, immigrants from Sweden, Italy, Greece, Austria, Hungary, Japan, Korea, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Scotland, and Finland came to Wyoming seeking employment in the coal fields. Japanese immigrants arriving in San Francisco by boat were transported by train to treeless Wyoming coal towns like Superior. The transition from the green Island of the Rising Sun to the high desert of southwestern Wyoming took some getting used to. One mail-order bride from Japan cried for days upon her arrival in Superior. Nor was she alone in her feelings. Countless groups of people were shocked to find that their new homeland lacked water and trees. Accustomed to Mediterranean climates or the forests of northern Europe, women who had followed their husbands to dusty or snowbound villages felt isolated from all that was familiar. Initially, the only positive aspect of their new location was the availability of work. Italians moved next door to Poles. Greeks moved near "Finns." Soon an area that had recently been a sagebrush flat or hillside was transformed into a community. These pioneers, living and working side by side with immigrants who might not even speak the same language, changed the landscape.

Coal was the magnet that drew people to the previously uninhabited areas of what would become Wyoming. Beginning in 1868 when the first steam engine began to climb the Continental Divide of the Wyoming Rockies, coal was regarded as one of the most valuable assets of the area. Towns developed wherever coal and the means of transportation coincided. Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, towns were built almost overnight in previously isolated areas. The area still remains relatively unpopulated because once the mines closed the towns were abandoned and buildings removed for use elsewhere. The vast landscapes that are still evident today in Wyoming prompted one twentieth century writer to call the area "the Empty Quarter." Though coal drew the miners to the area, they never quite conquered the land. Therefore, when the energy crisis hit America in the 1970s, a new wave of settlers rushed into Wyoming. Trailers replaced the dugouts and the stone houses built by earlier pioneers, but the attraction of the least populated state in the United States was coal and other fossil fuels. Drawn by the possibility of finding good paying jobs and a better life, people came, but once again they left when the employment opportunities changed. In turn, the landscape absorbed the remnants of these modern pioneers. The vast, unlimited skyline that greeted the first coal miners and their families to Wyoming continues to greet new dreamers seeking their fortune.

This study centers on the state of Wyoming, but the story is regional and national in scope. It deals with the tenacity of pioneers attracted to an area to seek a new life. These pioneers came from all over Europe, Asia, and America to work the coal mines. People from Austria lived next to Greeks. Japanese and Chinese drawn from Asia found themselves with common goals in trying to adapt to living in an inhospitable environment. Black Americans found jobs in the West when opportunities were limited in the East. The common focus was extracting coal. The history presented here points out how the men and women succeeded in turning an empty land into a productive region. The by-product was the settlement and growth of Wyoming.

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1

Wyoming Coal Mining: The Early Years

Wyoming is a wide open land made up of basins, prairies, and mountains. From border to border these different land forms create a varied appearance, but it is the wide open spaces that give the state continuity.

Climate, topography, and geology have combined to make the state unique. The environment and remoteness of the region have kept the state's population small. Wyoming remains the least populous state of the United States; yet it is the ninth largest in area. Mountains, basins, and plains separate the people of Wyoming from one another, and vast, untouched areas tend to isolate them from the rest of the United States. As John Rolfe Burroughs said of southwest Wyoming, it is an area "where the Old West stayed young."¹ This statement, in many ways, applies to the entire state.

The mountains of Wyoming are part of the Rocky Mountains, but instead of being formed in long, continuous ranges running from north to south, they are interrupted by prairies or basins or mountains running from east to west. The uplifting forces that created the mountains made Wyoming the second highest state in the Union. This idea is often difficult to grasp. For example, Laramie, on the flat eastern plains, is situated at an elevation of 7100 feet.

The flanks of the Uinta Mountains, which run from east to west, serve as the southern boundary of southwestern Wyoming. The Western Wyoming Range, which runs from north to south, forms the western border. In addition to the Western Wyoming Range in northwestern Wyoming, there are also the Teton, Wind River, Gros Ventre, and Absaroka mountains and the uplifted plateau that forms Yellowstone National Park. Not only do these ranges give Wyoming some of its most spectacular scenery, but they also serve as the headwaters of a surprising number of America's largest rivers. Although the Yellowstone, Green, and Snake rivers drain into separate oceans, they share the mountains of northwest Wyoming as their point of origin. The grandeur of Wyoming's landscape was described as early as the 1800s. One traveler crossing the mountains

of western Wyoming in 1851 wrote, "On the divide we look eastward and see the Green river valley in all of its grandeur, with its snowy range, the source of the river trending northward as far as the eye can reach. . . ."²

In the northcentral section of the state, the Big Horn Mountains separate the Great Plains from the Big Horn Basin. East of the Big Horns, in the middle of the grasslands, the Black Hills rise as hilly islands in the midst of a sea of prairie grass. The southeastern quarter of Wyoming contains the Laramie, Medicine Bow, and the Sierra Madre ranges, but these three ranges never truly touch the Big Horn or Wind River mountains. Instead, separate, smaller uplifts, like the Shirley, Seminoe, and Green mountains, bend westward in a broken arch that runs from the Sierra Madres to the Wind River Mountains. Between these uplifts and mountains are open expanses of prairies and basins.

The prairies exhibit gently rolling hills punctuated by buttes and uplifts. Pine trees can be found in the uplifts, but it is the sea of unending grasses and sagebrush that catches attention. The monotony of endless stretches of prairie grass was noted by emigrants traveling westward in the 1840s and 1850s, and motorists on the modern interstate often comment on the treeless stretches. These grasses, however, have endured through blizzards and droughts alike, and they once supported large herds of bison that made places like the Powder River Basin in northeastern Wyoming one of the most valued hunting grounds of the Plains Indians.

The climate of Wyoming is similar to that of steppes found throughout the world. Steppes are treeless expanses with seemingly unlimited vistas. The open expanses lend themselves to harsh weather in the form of long winters, high winds, and arid summers. Except for the eastern plains and the basins around Cody and Riverton, the growing season in Wyoming is too short to grow field corn. At Laramie the average growing season lasts only 113 days.³ Jackson Hole, in the northwest, has virtually no growing season. Across the state the amount of available moisture also varies. In the mountains the precipitation can range from 20 to 40 inches per year, but at Green River in southwest Wyoming the average annual precipitation is a scant 8.9 inches. Interestingly, in Wyoming short growing seasons generally correspond with the areas that receive the most moisture. The opposite is true of areas with longer growing seasons. So where there might be enough growing days to raise crops, there is little moisture. Then there is the wind. The winds of Wyoming are legendary. Some say the wind never stops, but Wyoming residents know better. As old-timers claim, "there are days when the wind doesn't blow but a little bit." Although moisture may fall in the form of rain or snow, the winds evaporate the moisture, which makes farming almost impossible without irrigation. Only on the eastern plains is dryland farming possible.

The intermountain basins of the state contain the beauty of vast, silent expanses broken only by buttes and sandstone outcroppings. The sands of these basins are covered with sagebrush, spiny hopsage, Indian ricegrass, pricklypear cactus, and a host of other wild flowers and plants that have adapted to living in a high elevation desert. In some places, nothing but phlox and rocks are evident; here the landscape is stark. The dominant plant, however, is sagebrush. Although sagebrush extends into the prairies and mountains, it is in the basins that this species is most evident. One traveler who crossed the state in 1863 decried sagebrush as "the dreariest mockery of vegetation that ever grew." He went on to call it "an exotic from the Valley of Desolation, a ghost of departed brush heaps, [a] ghostly skeleton of a plant, of an ashy pale color and as dry as the sand it stands in."⁴ Sagebrush and prairie grasses provide the covering over the geological formations that contain most of Wyoming's coal. Coal basins underlie practically the entire state; it is on the prairies, however, that it is most economical to mine coal.

It was obvious even to the fur trappers and early explorers, who understood little about the geology of the area, that coal was abundant. The mineral was found in outcrops along cliff faces and eroding out of ridge sides and drainages. Eventually, when the overlying strata were stripped away, coal seams ranging from four to forty feet thick were exposed. Wyoming was (and is) rich in coal. On the windswept plains and in the high intermountain basins, a black bonanza awaited the pioneer entrepreneurs.

Early Discoveries

Possibly the first people to use coal in Wyoming were Native Americans. There is no conclusive archaeological evidence that Indians actually extracted coal from outcrops within the borders of the state, but in nearby North Dakota, archaeologists have found traces of lignite coal in a fire hearth dating to 4000 years ago. Also, at excavations conducted at the Sakakawea Village site in Mercer County, North Dakota, three pounds of coal were recovered from a sweat lodge dating to the early nineteenth century.⁵ Even though these sites lie outside the boundaries of Wyoming, it is more than likely that the Indians of this area knew about and understood the nature of coal.

Trappers seeking beaver furs in the Rocky Mountains during the early 1800s were the first Americans to write about the presence of coal in Wyoming. Prior to 1803, the area that would become Wyoming had been claimed by both Spain and France. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 brought

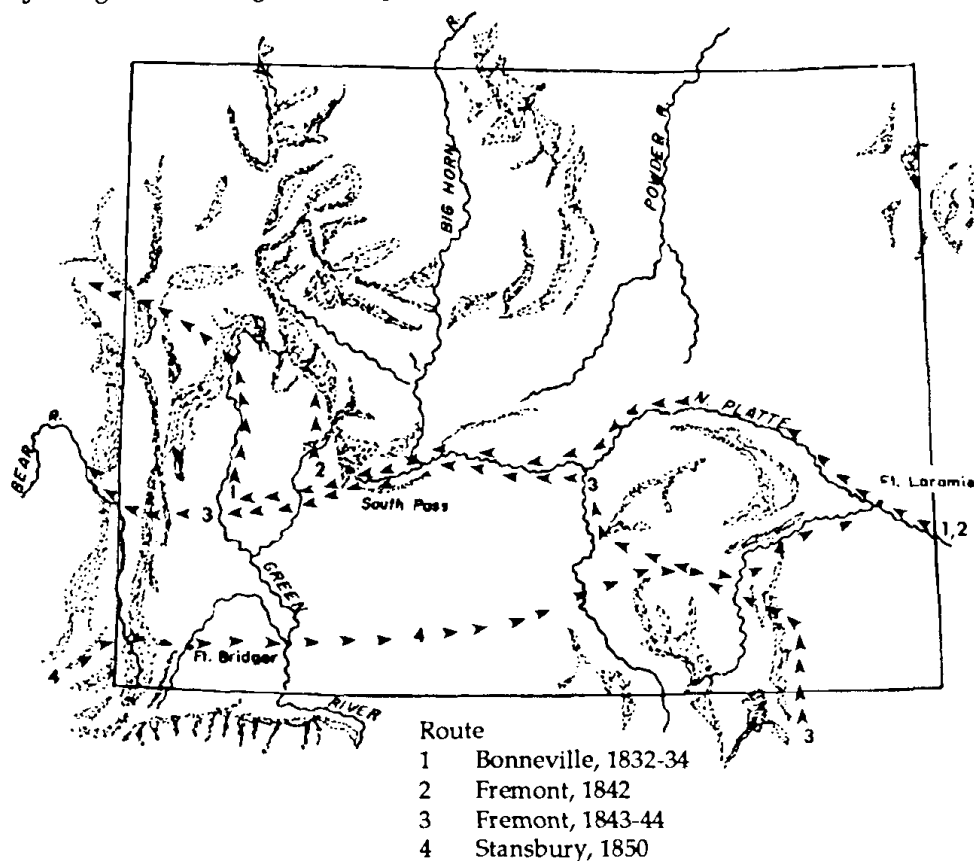
the lands east of the Continental Divide under the jurisdiction of the United States, and it was not long before fur trappers began trapping for beaver in the streams of the region.

In 1831 a young French-born American, B. L. E. Bonneville, took leave of the U.S. Army. With a party of "one hundred ten men . . . most of whom were hunters and trappers," he set out to explore the Rockies. Captain Bonneville left Fort Osage, Missouri, in May of 1832 and did not return to Missouri until August 1835. Bonneville spent a good portion of his western travels in present-day Wyoming. Washington Irving, the author of *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, published Bonneville's journal material in the book *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*. In his flamboyant writing about Bonneville's journeys, Irving related that the Crow Indians held a place called Burning Mountain on the Powder River in "superstitious awe." He wrote, "Here the earth is hot and cracked; in many places emitting smoke and sulphurous vapors, as if covering concealed fires."⁶ Burning coal seams still abound in the West.

Osborne Russell, who trapped in the Rockies, kept a journal describing his life in the fur trade between 1834 and 1843. In July 1835 he reported finding "rich beds of iron and bituminous coal" near the site of present-day Cody. In 1837 Russell, in describing the area adjacent to the Popo Agie River near Lander, noted that "beds of iron and coal are frequently found in this part of the country."⁷ Other trappers, such as Jim Bridger, were also aware of the presence of coal. Bridger informed Captain Howard Stansbury, a member of the United States Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, that he had used coal at his trading post for years.⁸ Bridger's trading post, established in 1843, was located on the banks of the Black's Fork River in southwestern Wyoming near good outcrops of bituminous coal.

During the 1840s, settlers began moving westward in ever increasing numbers. Following trails used by the Indians and the trappers, the settlers found a way to travel over these mountains. Oregon, and later California, would be their destination, but most of these westward travelers took advantage of the natural break in the Rocky Mountains found at South Pass, Wyoming. At first emigrants to Oregon and California sought new lands to farm; but with the discovery of gold in California in 1848, their reason for migrating westward changed. The increasing numbers of people, more interested in seeking California gold than in farming, saw Wyoming as a high, dry desert to cross and not as a place to settle. They did, however, keep diaries of their journeys, and one of the things they noted was the existence of coal.

The overland emigrants, the frontier army, and the wagon road surveyors carried on an almost accidental process of discovering coal. Joel



Routes of early explorers that noted and mapped the occurrence of coal in the region that was to become Wyoming.

Palmer, who crossed the eastern plains of Wyoming in July 1845 by following the Oregon Trail, noted a coal deposit on Deer Creek (at the site of Glenrock).⁹ In describing the area where he camped, this Oregon-bound traveler wrote, "stone coal was found near the road. This would make a suitable place for a fort," he went on to add, "as the soil and timber is better than is generally found along the upper Platte."¹⁰ The coal seam noted by Palmer would be mentioned by other westward travelers. Albert Carrington, traveling with the Pioneer Band of Mormons during the 1847 emigration to the Salt Lake Valley, also pointed out this deposit to other members of his party. The Latter Day Saints would later use coal from this area to fuel their lucrative blacksmith shop at Mormon Ferry, approximately 28 miles to the west. The presence of coal along Deer Creek became well-known to travelers, and the coal "was commercially mined during the late nineteenth century."¹¹ Joseph Goldsborough Bruff, who was part of the

1849 Gold Rush to California, reported finding coal two days before reaching Independence Rock on the Sweetwater River.¹² In an enthusiastic report, Osborne Cross, a major in the United States Army, reported to his superiors in 1849 that, "the country from Deer Creek to the Sweetwater abounds in coal in great quantities I have no doubt."¹³ These travelers along the Oregon Trail provided information about the extent of Wyoming coal deposits.

John Charles Fremont wrote one of the earliest reports of coal deposits along what would be called the Overland Trail crossing southern Wyoming. Fremont carried out an expedition to provide preliminary mapping of the major trails over the Rocky Mountains for the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers.¹⁴ In his report of the *Expedition to Oregon and North California in the years 1843-1844*, Fremont mentioned coal found along the North Platte River between the sites of Saratoga and Fort Steele, Wyoming. Fremont wrote that several coal beds were located in "precipitous bluffs" along the river. He went on to say, "In some of the beds the coal did not appear to be perfectly mineralized, and in some of the seams, it was compact and remarkably lustrous."¹⁵

In 1849 and 1850 Howard Stansbury conducted a survey of the Great Salt Lake and portions of southern Wyoming for the Bureau of Topographical Engineers. When he returned east from Salt Lake in 1850, Stansbury traveled over what would become the Overland Trail. In his journal he reported finding coal from Evanston eastward to Rock River (virtually the entire length of Wyoming). He mentioned coal deposits along Bitter Creek and near the Green River. In fact, Stansbury labeled the entire area the "Coal Basin." Near Rock Springs he noted "a bed of bituminous coal cropping out of the north bluff of the valley with every indication of its being quite abundant."¹⁶ He went on to mention coal outcroppings in the vicinity of Point of Rocks. After reaching the North Platte River, Stansbury again encountered coal. Coal was noted along Rattlesnake Creek between the North Platte River and Elk Mountain.¹⁷ James Hall, who wrote the Geological Appendix to Stansbury's report, stated, "The importance of this mineral in that distant region cannot be too highly estimated, and the geographical position and extent of the beds should be one of the first points ascertained in the location of any route of communication between the East and West."¹⁸ This geologist understood early the significance coal would play in establishing a transcontinental transportation route.

South of Evanston, along the future route of the transcontinental railroad, coal was mined in 1859 to provide fuel for Fort Bridger's blacksmith shop. This coal seam was first reported by William Clayton in his 1848 *Latter Day Saints Emigrants Guide*, which described the Mormon Trail from Fort Bridger to Salt Lake City.¹⁹ Early development of this seam occurred