

Field Worker, Gomer Gower,
September 9, 1937.

CALHOUN

A Ghost Mining Town.

Calhoun, a coal mining village, established in 1889-1890, in what is now LeFlore County, was one of the many flourishing coal producing towns which after a long period of prosperity became victims of the introduction and use of fuel oil to replace the use of coal as fuel for railroad locomotives in practically all the Southwestern States in the nineteen twenties.

Calhoun was first known as Sutor, as a Mr. Sutor opened the first mine in the vicinity; however, after the construction of the Kansas City Southern Railroad Mr. John Medsker became the operator of that mine and the name of the village was changed to Calhoun.

Its location was some seven miles distant from the nearest point on the Kansas City Southern Railroad, Shady Point, and a spur track was constructed for the transportation of coal from the mine to the railroad.

In 1910 the property was leased to the Central Coal and Coke Company, a Kansas City concern, which made extensive coal

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operations in Kansas, Missouri and in other states. This company, upon acquiring a lease to the property, immediately set about putting in modern mine equipment and increasing the production of the mine in order to meet the market requirements for coal at that time. In a short time the daily production of the mine was increased from six to eight hundred tons.

To produce that amount of coal required the services of approximately three hundred and fifty miners and other mine-workers, more than half of whom were whites of various nationalities and the remainder were negroes.

The employees were comfortably housed in either houses constructed by themselves or in houses constructed by the operating company to be rented at a nominal figure to the employees. Of the latter there were probably some two hundred, and these were built in rows or streets, one facing the other. Water for domestic use was provided from drilled wells, one for each four houses placed immediately in the center of the streets.

As may be surmised, the mercantile requirements of a village of such proportions were extensive, and were met by the establishment of stores by individuals and by the

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operating company.

The accounting department of this vast business was housed in a large office where the performance of each employee, whether in tons of coal mined by the miner, who was paid on that basis, or the number of hours worked by others whose services were paid for on the hourly basis, was duly credited each day, and where the shipping records of from fifteen to twenty, forty-ton railroad cars, daily, were kept and, more important than all, where the employees received their pay-envelopes semi-monthly. During the world war period these semi-monthly payrolls were approximately thirty thousand dollars, aggregating nearly three-quarters of a million dollars annually.

From the foregoing it will be realized that Calhoun was a village of considerable importance; a village that provided a home for many families, employed a large number of men at good wages in producing a commodity which, in its day, was indispensable to the channels of commerce and at the same time promised the investor a fair return on his investment.

The same claims can be made for many other coal mining towns which flourished in that period. All the inhabitants of these coal-mining towns were prosperous and happy. Then, like claps of thunder from a clear sky, came one announcement after the

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other that orders for coal had been cancelled by one or the other of the railroads of the southwest. That fuel oil would be used in its stead for locomotive purposes, as the use of fuel oil would effect great savings for the railroads since it could be procured at a figure with which coal could not hope to compete.

It came announcements by coal mine operators, not alone those at Calhoun but also by coal mine operators at such places as Hartshome, Burton, Weaver, Callester and Henryetta, that the operations would be abandoned. The average coal miner was stunned by these announcements. He could not visualize a condition in which coal would not be a factor. Consequently, he lived in idleness, cherishing a futile belief that the supply of oil would soon become exhausted and the railroads would be forced to resume the use of coal as a locomotive fuel; and that the mines in which he had found employment in the past would again resume the activities to which he had become accustomed.

Calhoun, too, is common with all other coal mining centers, provided the farmer and truck grower in the vicinity with an excellent market for his produce and the effect of the abandon-

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ment of mining upon his well-being was disastrous when that source of income was destroyed. The coal miner, when working steadily and earning good wages, not only requires but demands the best of food and is in no wise niggardly in buying it; so, the coal miner and the coal mine operator were not alone in suffering the consequences of the abandonment of the mines, which occurred in 1925.

The mine was reputed to be one of the best equipped in the entire Southwest. Its ventilating system and equipment was such that no major gas explosions occurred during its entire period of operation. This is a wonderful record when it is considered that gas pockets were frequently encountered, which, if not swept away and diluted with air to a mixture of less than four per cent gas would, upon contact with an open light, explode with a terrible force. The rhythmic exhaust of the engine which drove the fan at high speed was a constant assurance to the wives, mothers and sweethearts of the miners at work within the mine that all was well. The sound of exhaust could be plainly heard at the nearby dwellings every minute of the day and night.

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Next in importance in the way of equipment is the hoisting engine which, under the skillful operation of an ever-watchful engineer, hoists the trips of loaded mine cars from the inner workings of the mine to the surface to be dumped into the railroad cars and lowers the empty trips into the mine for distribution to the miners who load them.

This particular mine is what is commonly called a slope; the pitch being about ten degrees from the horizontal. This slope had extended to a distance of about five thousand feet from the entrance point and the loaded trips-twelve cars-were hoisted to the surface by means of a continuous cable being wound on the drum of the hoisting engine. The cable was then detached from the trip of loaded cars and attached to a trip of empty cars to be lowered into the mine by gravity, pulling the cable with it. The trips, loaded and empty, were in charge of a "rope-rider" whose duty it was to equitably distribute the trips of cars to the various subdivisions of the mine and to properly signal the engineer when to start and stop.

These signals were given through electrically charged wires which were attached to a signal bell in the engine-house

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and extended from it to the bottom of the slope. At no time does the engineer see the movement of the trips but is governed entirely by the signals given by the man in charge of the trip. The trips are made at a high rate of speed once they are under way. This is necessary because to hoist from seven to eight hundred tons of coal in eight hours and since only twelve tons per trip can be hoisted, only about seven minutes time is allowed for making a round trip of something like ten thousand feet, including starts and stops.

Perhaps next in importance was the indispensable pit-mule, of which twenty-six were in use at this mine. These pit-mules were used in the lateral or horizontal entries leading off at right angles from the course of the main slope at intervals of some two hundred feet. A sidetrack of sufficient length to accommodate a slope trip of twelve cars was constructed next the main slope in each of these entries, where the rope-rider would exchange his trip of twelve empty cars for a like trip of loaded cars. The mules were used to distribute the empty cars into the innermost parts of the entries and in turn to bring out loaded cars to the side-

track where they would be accessible for hoisting to the surface.

The mule is usually regarded as being stupid and stubborn. He may be stubborn but he is not by any means stupid. In his work in the mine he first learns to be driven without lines to guide him. He quickly learns to obey the spoken word of his driver, and when properly treated soon develops a noticeable affection for him, often showing anticipation of the wants of his master.

One of the mules at this mine, "Old Mike," was considered to be one of the best in the mine when driven by his regular driver, a negro, Bill Jones. But on all occasions when Bill failed to report for duty Old Mike would resist all efforts to make him work in the absence of his beloved Bill. Such was his persistence in his refusal to work except when driven by Bill, the negro, that on every occasion Bill took a day off Old Mike was given a day off as well. It appeared that no other driver could be found who could use the persuasive language to Old Mike that Bill used.

Having had a cursory view of the mine, let us now look at the village life of those who had identified themselves

with its operation. It has already been stated that the village was located some seven miles distant from Shady Point on the A.C.S. Railway. It is obvious that in the pre-automobile days all educational facilities, church privileges and entertainment were necessarily provided within the village. Both whites and colored had their own churches and schools. For entertainment the United Mine Workers of America, the miner's union, provided a commodious hall where dances, local entertainments and other amusements were enjoyed. Nigger Creek, close by, provided the boys with several good swimming holes where they played "wolf over the river."

Cavanaugh Mountain, whose northern foot extends right into the village, was a favorite resort for the swains and their sweethearts on Sunday afternoons.

Picnic parties would be formed of young people and with well-filled baskets they would go to the top of the mountain in the early morning and spend the day kodaking, playing games and enjoying the unsurpassed views afforded from the top of the mountain- an elevation of twenty-three hundred feet.

With these surroundings and with plenty of work at good wages provided for the bread-winners, the people were happy,

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little dreaming that their means of support- the coal mine- would ever be forced to discontinue operation by reason of the railroads introducing cheap fuel oil for locomotive purposes.

The loss to the operating company, the Central Coal and Mining Company, was immense. Not less than one hundred fifty thousand dollars was tied up in mine equipment and other property. Much of the splendid equipment had to be sold as junk and its recovery barely paid the cost of salvaging.

Then, again, a substantial loss in royalties accrued was felt by the Choctaw Nation through this calamity as the mine was in prime production before the coal lands were segregated and placed on the market for sale. In that connection it may be noted that the Choctaw citizens have complained that the Federal Government has failed to sell the segregated coal lands as agreed upon. At the time the agreement was made little thought was given to the possibility of coal being displaced by any other fuel and no doubt the Federal authorities could not, at that time, foresee the decline in demand for coal lands which was the result of the discovery of oil right at our back door, as it were.

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The massive concrete piers upon which the mine machinery was placed; the stone and mortar piers stretching out in long symmetrical lines, upon which dwelling and other buildings were erected, now appear as ghosts in the wooded surroundings, and the appellation, ghost town, is fully warranted.

The writer is indebted to Mr. Frank Grubbs, a former employee at mine, for much of the information contained herein. He was employed at the mine in various capacities for more than twenty-five years, and is now conducting a small country store near the old village.