

Miners went to war against state government in Coal Creek

When I think about the concept of “erasing history,” I normally think of two actions: tearing down old buildings and writing textbooks that make no mention of important things that have happened.

Another way to erase history is to change the name of a place to make people forget about what happened there.

In 1936, a state senator named Robert Lindsay convinced the Tennessee Legislature to change the name of his hometown from Coal Creek to Lake City. At the time, Lindsay and other officials hoped the new name would help the town capitalize on the creation of nearby Norris Lake and become a tourist destination.

Lindsay and the business leaders in Coal Creek did it with the best of intentions. But as the years went by, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Army Corps of Engineers built so many dams that Lake City became one of hundreds of small towns in the Southeast that happened to be close to a man-made lake. So I don't think calling the town Lake City helped any.

Renaming the town did, however, encourage people to forget Coal Creek's history. That's too bad because the people who lived and died there deserve to be remembered.

Coal Creek was founded shortly after the Knoxville and Ohio Railroad was opened in 1869. Like many towns on or near the Cumberland Plateau, it was a mining community where men walked into underground mines in the morning, worked hard all day and were paid based on how much coal they mined.

People often make the assumption that coal miners worked in inhuman conditions, were paid poorly and lived in company-owned houses. Barry Thacker, who has studied the area extensively and founded a nonprofit organization called Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, has come to believe otherwise.



Free miners gather near Coal Creek for the arrival of Gov. John Buchanan on July 16, 1891. Photo courtesy of Harper's Weekly

“In the 1890s, wages that coal miners were getting for two days' work would buy an acre of land in the Coal Creek area,” he says. “And the housing units owned by the mining companies in Coal Creek were mainly for new miners. Once a man had been mining for a while, he had enough money to buy his own land and build his own home.”

Through his research of the area, Thacker discovered that coal miners donated enough money to fund construction of a local opera house and that one of them donated a rare collection of books to Harvard University. “If these miners were so poor, how could they afford to build an opera house?” he asks. “And if they were so dumb, what was one of them doing with a rare collection of books?”

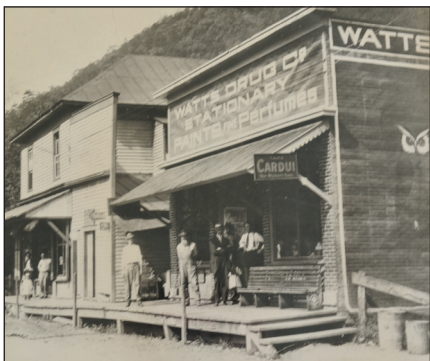
By the late 19th century, Coal Creek largely consisted of “a rough-hewn settlement of wood frame houses, miners' shacks and a scattering of businesses facing on the town's main street with the backs supported by pilings, hanging over Coal Creek,” according to a series of articles written in 1983 by Charles Winfrey.

The series of events that made Coal Creek and the mines around it famous started in 1891. In January of that year, miners who worked at Coal Creek and nearby Briceville obtained from the company the right to elect a

“checkweighman” — the person who weighs coal as it is turned in to the company and logged. A few months later, the company demanded that the miners abandon this right. Miners went on strike on April 1.

Rather than make concessions, the Tennessee Mining Company signed a contract with Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company (TCIR), which for years had operated mines through the use of prison labor under a contract with the Tennessee state government. In the summer of 1891, TCIR began sending convicts (and armed prison guards) to Coal Creek, tearing down the company-owned homes of free miners and building a stockade to house the convict miners.

A mass meeting of miners from the area took place on July 14. The next day, about 300 armed miners surrounded the stockade in Briceville. The guards surrendered without firing a shot. The convict miners and guards were marched to Coal Creek and loaded on a train to Knoxville. The miners sent a telegram to Gov. John Buchanan, saying their action was “a necessary step in the defense of our families from starvation and our property from ruin.”



Buchanan responded by calling out three companies of the Tennessee National Guard and going to Coal Creek himself. The reception he got there from an estimated 600 miners on July 16, 1891, will probably go down as the single most uncomfortable moments ever experienced by a Tennessee governor. “Gov. Buchanan said he had no speech to make but also said that he did not make laws but executed them and, ‘so help him God’ the law must be obeyed on this occasion,” The New York Times reported.

Under National Guard escort, the convict miners were sent in again. Again, the local coal miners took over the stockade and sent the convicts back to Knoxville on a train.

In early September, the Tennessee General Assembly met in special session, and Buchanan asked the legislature to repeal the system under which convict labor was sent into the mines in the first place. The legislature met for three weeks and did nothing to change the law. In fact, the biggest news that came out of the special session was when two state senators (named Alexander and Early) nearly got in a shoving match in the Senate chamber.



At left, citizens work to clear the site of Fort Anderson. Photograph courtesy of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation. Below are stores in Coal Creek in 1914. Photo from Anderson County, Tennessee, Pictorial History.

The saga between state government and the miners spread to Oliver Springs on the other side of Anderson County and to Tracy City in Grundy County and Inman in Marion County.

It was well publicized in national magazines and newspapers. Many Americans came to sympathize with the miners and even sent money and food to help them.

Real battles took place between troops and miners, but for the most part it was guerilla warfare. There were reports of company officials, prison guards and convicts being shot at by unknown snipers from nearby hills. There were also reports of state militia taking shots at local citizens and miners. During the course of the “Coal Creek War,” as it became known, dozens of miners and soldiers were killed.

Needing a safe haven, the National Guard built a fortress on a hill overlooking Coal Creek. It became known as Fort Anderson.

In November 1891, miners burned stockades to the ground yet again. But this time, instead of putting the convicts on a train, they turned them loose. “Upon getting possession of the stockade, the mob quickly released all the convicts, and after providing nearly all of them with citizens’ clothing, ordered them to leave at once,” the Times reported.

“The order was obeyed without hesitation, the convicts fleeing in every direction. The mob then set fire to the buildings, and in a few moments dense volumes of smoke carried up and made the heavens blacker.” The convicts were eventually rounded up and sent back to the mines.

The last wave of violence took place in August 1892 when state militia, under the command of Gen. S.T. Carnes, put down the rebellion and arrested several of its leaders.

At first it appeared as if Gov. Buchanan had won the war against the miners, but not really. In 1893, he was defeated by Pete Turney. During Turney’s two terms, Tennessee abandoned its convict lease system in 1896 and built two new prisons, one just west of Nashville and the other at Brushy Mountain.

So, by the late 1890s, free miners had returned to the mines near Coal Creek. But as I’ll talk about in the next column, a tragic fate awaited many of them.

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