



King Coal in Western PA

By Andy Reigel

Coal is a rock that burns and Bituminous coal, the coal of choice for the blacksmith, has been mined in Western Pennsylvania since 1760. Blacksmiths use bituminous coal instead of anthracite coal because bituminous forms coke in the fire of the forge. Coke is almost pure carbon and produces a hot and clean heat for working. Steel mills also use coke for the same reason to produce steel from iron ore. Anthracite coal, on the other hand, which is mined in Eastern Pennsylvania, is used for heating.

The Pittsburgh coal field, under the city of Pittsburgh, the South Hills, the lower Mon. Valley, Pigeon Creek in Washington County and the lower Youghiogheny Valley is the largest deposit of bituminous coal in Western PA. The dominant coal company in this area was the Pittsburgh Coal Company, which merged with Consolidation Coal Company after fighting the United Mine Workers Association and later became today's CONSOL Energy Corporation. Over 15 billion tons of coal have been taken from this state since 1760 and 1917 was the year of peak production, when 277 million tons were pulled from the ground. Pennsylvania produced the most coal in the country until West Virginia took over in 1930. 33 counties in Western PA. mine bituminous coal.

Coal mining was hard and dirty work, with pick axes, dynamite, and animals being the sole way to mine and remove coal from inside the earth until mechanization took over in WWII. Now machines both extract and remove the coal from mines. Needless to say this work is dangerous. From 1877 to 1940 18,000 men and boys died in the mines of Pennsylvania.

Most of us learned in school science class that coal is formed over millions of years when organic material gets compressed inside the earth, but now some scientists think that bacteria also plays a part in the process. Coal mined from different locations is rated by five properties-its heat value, moisture, ash, sulfur content, and the volatiles it produces when burned. Volatiles are other chemicals that are contained in the fumes when the coal burns. An interesting piece of trivia is that Aspirin is a product made from the condensed emissions of the coke making process.

There are some good websites to look at for more information on coal mining in Western PA. For a basic overview, go to <http://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=30>. This gives a history of W. PA. mining.

Chris Dellamea is a coal mining historian and photographer. He also gives personal tours of various coal mining areas around here (for a price, of course). For more info check out his site, www.coalcampusa.com. He can be reached at coalcampusa@yahoo.com and his number is 724-430-4158.

The Appalachian Blacksmith Association has some interesting pages also. For info on coal and its properties look at www.appaltnet.net/aba/coalspecs.htm#top. And finally for buying the real stuff, the actual coal, look at www.appaltnet.net/aba/coal.htm. This site gives locations to buy coal from, including prices and comments on its quality.

And finally if you want to see a mine in person go to Tour Ed mine, north of Pittsburgh in Tarentum. I have been there myself and had a great time. You get to go into a retired mine for a tour. Their website is www.tour-edmine.com.

Coal mining is a big part of Western Pennsylvania's industrial heritage. I'm glad I looked into it. If you have any questions for me feel free to call at 412-751-2366. I'll be happy to help as best I can.

"Tommy Sticker" or "Sticking Tommy" (right) were used in mines as a candle holder light source. They could be inserted into beams or hung by the hook. Fisherman also used a similar type of candle holders on ships also called by the same name but were smaller in scale.

