

SECTION F, GEOGRAPHY

Coalgate, Oklahoma: Some Aspects of Its Historical Georgraphy

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Coalgate, Oklahoma, a small community with a population of 1689 (1960), is situated in southeastern Coal County. Today the town is an administrative center, as well as the site of an excellent medical complex, for the county. This municipality is the commercial hub for the surrounding agricultural district, and its cotton gin is the only such processor within a four-county area. A small clothing plant, part of a nationally operated firm, has been located here since 1957. However, none of these functions are attributable to its establishment as Liddle (its original name) in 1889. This was provided by coal deposits, after which the town and county later derived their names, that were extensively exploited for more than three decades.

The Coal County seat is on the northern margin of a gently sloping area, conforming to an underlying shale formation, which extends to the county line, some eight miles to the south. Lehigh coal, a bituminous grade, crops out in several places within this low-lying area, south, southwest, and northeast of Coalgate (Knechtel, 1937). Along these numerous outcrops both strip and underground mining evolved, as did the settlements necessary for housing the miners.

Mining activities began at Liddle (renamed Coalgate the following year) during 1889 when a slope mine was sunk by the Southwestern Coal and Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad. Coal, from this mine and others which were soon developed, was conveyed over a branch railroad to the Katy's main line at Atoka. The following year, 1890, the settlement was estimated to have had 2,500 inhabitants, although this number most likely included those people living near company mines at Cottonwood, to the northeast. About 850 employees were needed, in 1894, for the operation of the underground workings belonging to the railroad. These miners were housed in shabby, three- and four-room company-owned homes. Food and other necessary supplies, of questionable quality, were obtainable at company commissaries whose prices were highly inflated.

Though the Katy-owned company was responsible for the major mining development in the Coalgate vicinity, several independent operators procured small tracts southwest of the settlement. Many small and poorly equipped mines were situated in this area, known as Dead Horse Prairie. Coal production at most of these sites was variable and proved to be closely correlated with public demand and the availability of labor. Mergers created one large firm, the Coalgate Company, the biggest, independent producer in the area for several years.

When it became apparent that coal production would continue over a long duration, many merchants, tradesmen, professional persons, and those providing services migrated to Coalgate. The town also became a service center for the surrounding area where farming was carried on. *The Coalgate Courier* in 1899 boasted of the city's having 12 general stores, four grocery stores, two furniture stores, two drug stores, two bakeries, two newspapers, four doctors, one lawyer, four blacksmiths, two cotton gins and several individuals providing various services. The many merchants offered competition to the company stores, although this was only in a variety of wares, as their prices were fully as inflated. Nearly all of these retail businesses and service establishments were housed in frame buildings which usually had false fronts. Few stone structures had been erected since titles to the property could not be obtained from the Choctaw government. Main Street consisted of a long row of such buildings on either side. Each row had a staggered arrangement since the buildings were erected at different times (Coling, 1966).

Coalgate became an incorporated city in 1898, but few public services were provided. Water was delivered by a private dealer to each home in a waterwagon. This supply, stored in large barrels outside each residence, was replenished every

two days. One- and two-hole outhouses fulfilled another necessity, remaining in the backyards of many dwellings until sewers or septic tanks were installed much later.

There were no public schools, but an education was obtainable at subscription schools which met in churches and at the homes of various teachers. These sessions would last for eight months and meet five days a week. Each student paid one dollar a month for instruction. An order of Roman Catholic nuns ran a church school where all grades were taught. Six churches, representing various denominations, were located in the city.

The various ethnic groups found in Coalgate in the 1890's included Italians, French, Germans and Slavs who had recently immigrated from Europe, many coming directly to the coal fields in the Indian Territory. Many Americans, English, Welch and Irish miners had migrated from the coal regions in Pennsylvania due to the higher wages. Several Negroes were also present, who had been brought by the railroad to work in the mines during strikes. Each ethnic group tended to segregate into various parts of the settlement. Particular streets were known as the place where certain nationalities could be found. Most of these groups later became assimilated because of the several labor disputes and strikes when they banded together, attempting to force settlements and halt work at the company facilities.

Coal production in the study area averaged approximately 500,000 short tons annually between 1900 and 1920. Outputs soared at the beginning of this 20-year period when two railroad divisions joined the coal field with additional markets. The Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad (later the Rock Island) provided one of these outlets. More notable, however, was the increase following the Katy's extension of its line from Coalgate to Oklahoma City in 1904 (Shannon, 1926).

Consumer demands for coal declined after 1906 due to competition from natural gas and oil, which were fast becoming acceptable fuels. Another detrimental factor, accounting for additional losses in markets, was the interruptions in the coal supply caused by wage disputes between operators and the union, representing the employees. During 1912 and 1913, output increased when natural gas and petroleum production diminished in the Mid-Continental Field and shortages of coal occurred when strikes halted work in the Colorado coal fields. Following this temporary upsurge in marketing conditions, the decline was again apparent and more than 1000 miners left the coal field around Coalgate during the next three years.

When the United States entered World War I the situation for the coal industry changed quickly. Although there was some increase in total production in the Coalgate vicinity, the increase in coal valuation was very significant. Within a year the average price of coal per ton rose nearly one dollar. Profits for the mine operators became much greater. The miners were given a wage increase under the direction of the United States Fuel Administration. "The war years were a period of high wages for the miners . . . Regular wages were between \$5.00 and \$6.00 a day, and many skilled miners earned more (Ryan, 1935)."

When the period of high coal production occurred, between 1912 and 1913, Coalgate's population was estimated to be 5000. There were 158 retail and service establishments in the city at this time, a considerable increase over the 40 such concerns found in 1899. Although much of this craze is attributable to the mining activities, another influence is significant. Following the townsite survey and evaluation of Coalgate by crews working for the Dawes Commission, the residents of the city could file for titles to platted lots after 1903 (Foreman, 1942). Along Main Street the major businesses and services extended four blocks, while several establishments were situated on side streets. A majority of the stores and other concerns along the main thoroughfare occupied long narrow buildings constructed primarily from stone or brick.

Though a large variety of commercial enterprises were found, the most numerous included those dealing in: groceries, meats, dry goods, clothing, hardware,

confectioneries and drugs. Several services were likewise represented, among which hotels, rooming houses and restaurants composed the largest number—all necessary for the single miners. The presence of two banks portrays the prosperity which the community was enjoying. Three cotton gins, located in different portions of the city, indicate the importance which agriculture had achieved. Some other small processors and manufacturers at this time were: a bottling works, an ice cream factory, two grist mills, a saw mill and a foundry.

Coalgate attained another functional activity when the administrative seat for Coal County was relocated here following a referendum in June 1908. Previously, Lehigh had been the location chosen for the county government. With the start of the new fiscal year the county offices moved to the city and the county courts were transferred later the same year.

During the boom period the city initiated its own water system, established a fire department and operated a large independent school district. Other improvements, such as paving streets and the installation of sanitary sewers, evolved more gradually. Debris from several mine dumps, consisting mainly of shale, was utilized as road fill and prevented miry conditions from prevailing.

Many new residences were erected in the city following 1900. The city was reported to have 740 dwellings in 1910, but this included the numerous company homes. As a result of two incidents the miners began constructing their own homes after the turn of the century. During the long strike, from 1898-1902, many miners had been evicted from the company-owned homes. As a consequence, they often chose to build their own dwellings as soon as possible rather than chance expulsion during labor disputes. Also at this time, titles were obtainable for lots and many took advantage of this opportunity.

Like any settlement dependent upon mineral extraction for its main source of income, Coalgate's brief prosperity was rigidly controlled by conditions in the mining industry. Shortly after World War I the railroad's demand for coal ceased abruptly, transforming economic prospects within the community. During a three-year period, from 1921 to 1923, the number of mining employees fell from 900 to 150. Primarily responsible for the abandonment of the coal sources was the nearly exclusive utilization of oil by the railroads after 1920. However, just as important a cause for this decline was the fact that unjust wage demands were placed upon the mine operators by the United Mine Workers of America—which resulted in shutdowns throughout the state.

The coal industry at Coalgate has never been revived to its former status. Limited production occurred at several leases into the 1950's, but these operations were short-lived and involved very few employees. Instead, the community remained a service center for the surrounding rural area, but its permanency and stability has been basically sustained by the presence of the county government.

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