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# The Alberta Coal Branch

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## Forever Home

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Galloway Station Museum  
Rosemarie Kilgannon, Ashley  
Olsvik and Madison Sharman

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The Coal Branch, a chain of abandoned mining towns along the eastern slopes of the central Canadian Rocky Mountains, was once an important part of Alberta's coal industry. Home to thousands of people with diverse backgrounds and heritages, the Coal Branch was famous for its guarantee of work and overall prosperity. However, technological advancement that once necessitated the mines outpaced production and outdated the collieries. The demand for coal, a resource that heated homes and businesses, fueled rail transportation, and kept the Albertan economy running steadily decreased with the introduction of diesel, electricity, and other forms of energy. In the span of about fifty years, the Coal Branch went from a buzzing industrial region to a series of ghost towns along a deserted railway track.

Like many other western Canadian communities, rail barons and their lines created the series of settlements southwest of Edson, Alberta. National boosterism mixed with overblown opportunism and railroad mania induced turn-of-the-century discussions of a second transcontinental line through Edmonton and a northerly Rocky Mountain Pass line - in addition to the Canadian Pacific Railway's (CPR) southerly route through Kicking Horse Pass. For this to be possible, however, another significant fuel source would be needed – and that meant more coal. The GTP ramped up its mineral seeking efforts when they sent out their prospector, Raymond Brutinel and fixed their gaze upon the Northern Brazeau Branch – specifically, the Cardinal River area's carbonized fossil fuels.

The area had been known for its coal deposits for some time already, since the Canadian Geological Survey staff had begun mapping the area in 1884<sup>1</sup>. The area was also home to the Embarras Gold Rush in 1909, which was sparked by prospectors searching the McLeod River headwaters in 1886.<sup>2</sup> After the North West Rebellion, a general Butler travelled through the area and recorded aboriginals who had stones that burned. One of the earliest surveyors in the area was John Gregg. Gregg aided Brutinel in finding the first coal deposit on the branch – near the future site of Lovett. Later, Gregg and his companions were helped and guided by his Métis wife Mary Gregg (Cardinal) and the local Stoney aboriginals, and this led to the discovery of Mountain Park and Luscar in 1907.<sup>3</sup> On finding the coal, Mary Gregg came back to her husband with blackened hands and 'playfully grasped Jack Gregg's face between them and blackened it with the coal.'<sup>4</sup> Between 1906 and 1909, several more discoveries were made by a number of different prospectors, including local personalities such as Donald McDonald, Bill Baillie, and P.A. "Baldy" Robb.<sup>5</sup>

The Coal Branch rail line was constructed by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR) and finished in 1913.<sup>6</sup> The company decided to build the southerly spur line to the Coal Branch (approximately fifty-eight miles long) off the main rail line which ran from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Prince Rupert, British Columbia via the Yellowhead Pass in the Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch* (Calgary: Toni Ross, 1974), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Kyba & Ross, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch* (Rocky Mountain Books: 2001), 181.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Foothills Research Institute, *Northern Rockies Highway Guide* (Foothills Research Institute, 2012), 35

<sup>5</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> The Coal Branch was originally called the Brazeau line, though this name was changed. For further information, see *Oh! The Coal Branch*.

Rockies.<sup>7</sup> This portion of the railways was considered to be a leaky roof line, as it was poorly constructed and had frequent derailments.

People from across Canada, and from all over the world, arrived in the Coal Branch area to work on the railways, in the coal mines, or in the service industry. The first town sites in the Coal Branch appeared in 1912 and 1913, although the area would experience most of its growth in the five years following 1916, as news of the prosperous area spread across North America and overseas.<sup>8</sup> In 1916, the entire population along the Coal Branch was only 315 people. By 1926, it had risen to 2758.<sup>9</sup> Over a dozen towns and villages appeared in the Coal Branch, though they were never incorporated as such save for Robb, which was declared a town in 1956. They were often referred to as mining camps instead, even though it was obvious that some of the settlements were much more than that. Many of the Coal Branch towns had their own sports teams, Scout troops, and army cadets, and although isolated, no one was ever without some sort of recreation. As former Cadomin resident Edith Wheeler recalled:

[s]omething was taking place most evenings in either the homes or the hall. Plays were put on the second and fourth Saturday of each month, beginning at 11 p.m., to allow the late shift of miners to attend. The mine manager directed a six-piece orchestra and the music was terrific. Most of the camp turned out for the dances and everyone had a wonderful time.<sup>10</sup>

Originally stemming off at the community of Bickerdike (16 kilometers west of Edson) in 1912, The Coal Branch Line runs south to McLeod River, Erith, Weald, Embarras, Robb, and Coalspur, where it then forked and created a wishbone or an inverted “Y” shape. The west branch, known as the Mountain Park Line, was made up of Mercoal, Shaw, Leyland, Cadomin, and Mountain Park, with another spur line at Leyland which went out to Luscar. This section of the line was famous for having the ‘Blue Flea Special’ locomotive, a mixed train with passenger, coal and baggage cars to provide for the communities. The east leg, named the Lovett Line, consisted of Diss, Sterco, Foothills, and Lovett.<sup>11</sup> The area was divided into two main districts reflective of the quality of coal in each of the regions. Mountain Park coal was best suited for steaming, while the Coalspur area product was ideal for heating and cooking proposes, and marketed for the domestic market.<sup>12</sup>

From 1922 to 1926, the Coal Branch mines produced 2.5 million tons of bituminous coal and 1.9 million tons of sub-bituminous coal (27% and 84% of the provincial sum,

<sup>7</sup> The Historica-Dominion Institute, “Grand Trunk Pacific Railway,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=a1ARTA0003379> (accessed August 10, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, “Halfway Between Heaven and Earth: A History of the Coal Branch,” Atlas of Alberta Railways, <http://railways.library.ualberta.ca/Excerpts-9-3-7/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, “Halfway Between Heaven and Earth: A History of the Coal Branch,” Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>10</sup> Edith Wheeler, “Life on the Frontier: Remembering the Coal Mining Camp at Cadomin, 1929-1934,” in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women’s History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon A. Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O’Rourke, 96-100 (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, “The Coal Branch,” Atlas of Alberta Railways, <http://railways.library.ualberta.ca?Chapters-9-3/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

respectively).<sup>13</sup> During the height of the Coal Branch's success, it was responsible for about 22% of Alberta's total coal production.

Mines in the Coalspur district, which provided "hard coal" (anthracite, one of the highest grades of coal), were less dangerous than those in the Mountain Park area which produced softer coals. In many tests, the Coal Branch 'hard coal' beat out the world famous Pittsburg coal.<sup>14</sup>

Between 1920 and 1929, 42 men were killed in the Coal Branch, and 87 others were seriously injured.<sup>15</sup> Cadomin was considered one of the safest mines in the area. However, on the last shift of the last working day in 1939, a methane gas leak in the Cadomin mine trapped a group of miners. Three of the men died, while the other six barely managed to escape. Among the deceased was Jimmy Maddams, age 29. Maddams had managed to escape the danger area, but turned back in an attempt to save his fellow workers and friends John Burnside (age 41) and Dan Spinazzi (age 48).<sup>16</sup> Although tragic, this story helps to demonstrate that these towns were very much tightly knit communities.

There were various mixtures of gases that were created during the process of mining. Many of these were harmful to people and in some cases fatal. The most feared gas in the mine was the 'firedamp'. It was a mixture of methane and air which could spark an explosion. 'Whitedamp' was a combination of carbon and oxygen to produce carbon monoxide, which if left around an open flame, could spark and ignite. Lastly, 'blackdamp' or 'chokedamp' was carbon dioxide.<sup>17</sup> All of these types of gases were monitored by safety systems within the mine. However, there were cases of mechanical failure, which resulted in the deaths of miners.<sup>18</sup> To track if all miners made it out of the mine, each man was assigned a copper ID tag that they would take into the mine with them. When returning their lamp at the end of their shift they would place the metal ID tag back up onto the wall, letting everyone know they made it out safely.<sup>19</sup>

At the height of the Coal Branch's production, the three largest towns were Luscar, Cadomin, and Mountain Park. These communities were isolated from the rest of the branch as there were no roads connecting them to the outside world. In 1936, the 3 towns owned a total of 100 vehicles but only had 17 miles of road to drive on.<sup>20</sup> Mountain Park, Cadomin and Luscar became their own close knit community and would rely on each other in case of emergencies, or celebrate together on joyous occasions.

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<sup>13</sup> University of Alberta Railways, "Halfway Between Heaven and Earth: A History of the Coal Branch," Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>14</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, "Halfway Between Heaven and Earth: A History of the Coal Branch," Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>16</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Salzsauler, *Mountain Park Memories: Volume 2*, (Edmonton: Mary Lee Salzsauler and Joan P Talbot Wegert, 1999), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> John A. Smith, *I Heard My Mother Calling (Yes! I Heard My Mother Call)*, (Hinton: John A. Smith), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 139.

Located at the end of the spur line on the left branch, Luscar's original underground coal mine was opened in 1921. It was considered one of the worst mines on the branch, due to the inconsistent availability of work. Men were paid by ton produced, so gaps in production would leave employees without pay. The mine closed in the mid 1950s, but was converted to an open pit mine in 1970.<sup>21</sup> This mine is operated by Luscar Ltd, Canada's largest coal producer. The company was acquired by Sherritt International in 2001. There are no remains of the former town today.

Cadomin (an acronym for Canadian Dominion Mining) was the largest of the Coal Branch towns, boasting approximately 1800 residents in the 1930s.<sup>22</sup> Ten miles north of Mountain Park and six miles west of Luscar, Cadomin was the hotbed of activity on the branch. In the mid 1920s the town's population was flourishing so quickly it threatened to outpace Edson. The living and working conditions in Cadomin during its mining days also seem to be of varied opinion. One source claims that the housing conditions for workers were "not ideal":

There are about 100 men lying around, some of them in filthy and verminous bunkhouses and others sleeping in the bush, preferring to be eaten by ants than by bugs. Management seem anxious to keep the bunkhouses in this undesirable state to make sure of full patronage for the revenue-producing rooming houses where the beds are, in some instances, double shifted (men on different shifts sharing one bed). Many families are living in single rooms.<sup>23</sup>

However, sixteen year old Herb Belcourt remembered the Cadomin living quarters as a far more pleasant experience. Belcourt arrived in Cadomin in 1946, and having left the employ of a railroad tie camp where his mattress was a forkful of lice and bedbug-infested straw, he considered the bunkhouses to be 'like a palace'. According to Belcourt miners had their own rooms, beds, closets, and daily maid service so everything was very clean.<sup>24</sup> The coal mine at Cadomin closed in 1952.<sup>25</sup>

In 1909, John Gregg staked his claim for the future Mountain Park mine as well as the one at Luscar. The creation of the town's name can be attributed to Robert Thorton, who was a British financial baker for Mr. Gregg's stakes. Thorton had never been in the Canadian wilds before, and when he came across the location for the future site of Mountain Park, he said, "If we do start a mine, I have chosen a name for the town that will be built. This is like a park in the old country. We will call it Mountain Park."<sup>26</sup>

The first rail line that traveled up the incline to the isolated coal mine would be Canada's highest rail line and would cost the GTP \$750 000 in 1911.<sup>27</sup> The mine was closed in 1950,

<sup>21</sup> C.W. Langenberg, D.E. MacDonald, and W.D. Kalkreuth, "Geology and Coal Quality of the Cadomin-Luscar Coal Field, Alberta," Alberta Geological Survey, [http://www.ags.gov.ab.ca/publications/abstracts/OFR\\_1989\\_09.html](http://www.ags.gov.ab.ca/publications/abstracts/OFR_1989_09.html), (accessed August 10, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: James Corimer & Company, 1979), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Johnnie Bachusky, "Cadomin," Ghosttowns.com Presents Alberta, Canada, <http://www.ghosttowns.com/canada/alberta/cadomin.html>, (accessed July 14, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Johnnie Bachusky, "Cadomin," Ghosttowns.com Presents Alberta, Canada, <http://www.ghosttowns.com/canada/alberta/cadomin.html>, (accessed July 14, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 82.

and today there is nothing left of the former town except for mining remnants and a restored cemetery. In the 1920s and 30s, this same cemetery was the location where many novice skiers, such as schoolteacher Katherine Farnham, would practice. Farnham and a group of friends enjoyed spending winter weekends climbing up the mountains and skiing down in threes as there were not enough ski poles for everyone. The adventurous skiers found they could extend their run by utilizing the cemetery.<sup>28</sup> At its peak, Mountain Park was home to about 1500 people, and was also recognized as the highest town in Canada at an elevation of 6200 feet.<sup>29</sup> Today, Mountain Park is the location of the Cheviot Mine, which opened in 2004.

The rail line from Coalspur to Mountain Park was originally built by the Mountain Park Coal Company in 1913 for a total cost of \$1 185 000. This 50 km stretch became an immense burden on the coal company due to maintenance costs. In 1921, it was said that the 'leaky roof line' cost the CNR \$10 000 a month as a result of all the wrecks on that stretch of the track.<sup>30</sup> It was not until 1927, when the CNR leased the railway from the Coal Company that it became a reliable grade that met government standards.<sup>31</sup>

The three towns of Mountain Park, Cadomin, and Luscar had a fierce sports rivalry. Many of the employees of the mine were hired because of their talents in hockey and baseball.<sup>32</sup> The sports days in the region would bring in crowds of hundreds of people. On more than one occasion the Luscar Indians hockey team took the provincial championship and traveled across western Canada competing.<sup>33</sup>

Music was another passion for the branch, as many of the communities had bands. Luscar boasted having the only philharmonic orchestra between Edmonton and Vancouver.<sup>34</sup> Cadomin's band competed provincially and for two years beat the city of Edmonton in competition.<sup>35</sup> The Hotel Cheviot in Mountain Park would be the home to many plays as well as silent motion pictures for which local musicians would provide the score.

Another important town along the Coal Branch line was Mercoal - an acronym for McLeod River Hard Coal Company, which was co-owned by Nick Gurchich. During the late 40s and early 50s Mercoal had about 800 residents, although now it is virtually another ghost town with only a couple summer residents. With the closing of the Cadomin and Mountain Park mines, Mercoal attracted many more workers from other Coal Branch towns in the 1950s until the town's own mine closed in 1959.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*.

<sup>31</sup> Kyba & Ross, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch* (Rocky Mountain Books, 2001), 259.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 98.

<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*.

<sup>35</sup> Katherine Farnham, "Skiing on the Alberta Coal Branch," *Alberta History* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 12-14, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Johnnie Bachusky, "Mercoal," Ghosttowns.com Presents Alberta, Canada, <http://www.ghosttownpix.com/alberta/mercoal.html>, (accessed July 14, 2011).

Many other towns from the area had interesting histories as well. Lovett (also referred to as Lovettville) was named after H.A. Lovett, the President of North American Collieries.<sup>37</sup> It was the first mine to open on the branch, as production began in 1909. Coalspur was the transportation hub of the Coal Branch. The community began after a group of British financiers founded the Yellowhead Pass Coal and Coke Company in 1912. When the mine at Coalspur first opened, it employed about 70 men. At the peak of its production, this number had risen to 400.<sup>38</sup> Today, about a dozen people still live in the Coalspur area. Robb is home to the Bryan Hotel, which is the only business that started in the Coal Branch's "early days" and is still running today. Embarras, as well as McLeod River, Erith, and Weald, were all settlements that were originally rail sidings. Technically, a rail siding is a short stretch of railway track that is used to store railway cars or allow trains on the same line to pass one another. All of the aforementioned areas were basically ghost towns by the 1960s, due to a decline in the demand for coal as railways converted to diesel locomotives.<sup>39</sup>

Many of the mines relied heavily on horsepower. Unlike mines in the east, these horses would live outside in a barn when not in use.<sup>40</sup> Both full sized draft horses and ponies were used to haul coal out of the mine. These beasts were trained by voice command- gee meant to right and haw was to the left.<sup>41</sup> Many of these animals got into such a routine of pulling and turning, that they would not need voice commands and would lead themselves out of the mine.<sup>42</sup>

The railway companies needed coal in order to run their trains. These same trains were needed to transport the coal elsewhere. It was for this main reason that the Coal Branch was so successful for nearly fifty years. Prosperity in the Coal Branch declined during the Depression, like most places, but the area seemed to suffer less than most of the province.<sup>43</sup> In most towns, the extreme recession barely seemed to affect the citizens at all. Edith Wheeler's husband was manager of the bank in Cadomin for several years (beginning in 1929), and she recalls hearing stories of elsewhere in the province.

It was a treat, too, for us to hear news from the outside world, where the Great Depression was in full swing. Living as we were, where there was steady employment with good wages, we had no conception of the struggle that was taking place elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

Other towns were lucky as well. Katherine Farnham, a teacher at Mountain Park in the late 1920s and early 1930s, fondly remembered her Coal Branch experience with a sense of gratitude:

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<sup>37</sup> Alberta Online Encyclopedia, "Lovettville," Place Names of Alberta, [http://albertasource.ca/Placenames/resources/displaycontent.php?source\\_id=4026](http://albertasource.ca/Placenames/resources/displaycontent.php?source_id=4026) (accessed July 14, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*.

<sup>39</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, "The Coal Branch," Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *I Heard My Mother Calling*.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *I Heard My Mother Calling*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, *I Heard My Mother Calling*, 53.

<sup>43</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, "The Coal Branch," Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>44</sup> Wheeler, "Life on the Frontier: Remembering the Coal Mining Camp in Cadomin, 1929-1934," in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, 99.

During the Depression years, as incredible as it seems, we weren't affected quite as much as many other places. Teachers had an assured salary of \$90 to \$100 per month, which was a little less than most of the miners and coal company staff made. With light and water, and rent costing about \$20 a month, and no transportation to pay for (there were no roads for many years), we all managed fairly well.<sup>45</sup>

Law enforcement was always spread thin over the Coal Branch. Only one Royal Canadian Mounted Police Sergeant was assigned to the whole area. The police office was located in downtown Cadomin.<sup>46</sup> Most of the work for these law enforcers was created by the locals producing illegally made alcohol, also known as moonshine. The most famous of these Branch moonshiners was Jack the Frog, who had a reputation throughout the area as the gentleman moonshiner. It has been said that for every four dollars of moonshine he sold, he would buy four dollars in groceries to give to the poor.<sup>47</sup>

During the Coal Branch's most successful years, most colliers (coal miners) would not have been considered wealthy or poor. Nevertheless, they were often able to afford periodic voyages to their home country or another small vacation.<sup>48</sup> Throughout World War II, coal was in high demand so the region was very productive. However, with the war ending in 1945, the Coal Branch was also fast approaching the end of its prosperity. The introduction of oil-burning, diesel-electric locomotives, as well as a growing dependence on oil and gas as a primary energy source, resulted in a steep decline in the demand for coal. By the early 1960s, the Coal Branch was virtually a series of ghost towns. The two exceptions to this were Cadomin (where limestone quarrying still takes place), and Robb (the main industry is lumber).<sup>49</sup>

Alberta currently produces about half of the coal mined in Canada, and contains 70% of the coal reserves in the country.<sup>50</sup> Although coal is surrounded by much controversy due to its environmental damages, coal accounts for more than twice the energy of the province's non-renewable resources - oil, gas and the oil sands. Metallurgical coal mined in the branch is suitable for use in smelting irons, which is then exported to countries across the world.<sup>51</sup>

Although many people have never heard of it, the Coal Branch was an important part of Alberta's history, as the railroad line and the mining camps played a necessary role in the development of four provinces - from Manitoba to British Columbia. The resources in the Coal Branch mines were used to fuel the Grand Trunk Pacific locomotives, and many towns had sprung up solely because of the GTP rail line crossing through their provinces. For nearly fifty years the Coal Branch was a highly successful industrial area, as well as a place that thousands of people were proud to call home.

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<sup>45</sup> Farnham, "Skiing on the Alberta Coal Branch," *Alberta History* 45, no. 3:12.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *I Heard My Mother Calling*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 69.

<sup>48</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, "Halfway Between Heaven and Earth: A History of the Coal Branch," Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>49</sup> University of Alberta Libraries, "The Coal Branch," Atlas of Alberta Railways.

<sup>50</sup> Government of Alberta, "Natural Resources – Coal," <http://gov.ab.ca/resources/provitot/coal>, accessed November 1, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Foothills Research Institute, Northern Rockies Highway Guide (Foothills Research Institute, 2012), 30.

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