Forgotten Ghosts of the Southern Colorado Coal Fields: A Photo Essay

By
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Colorado, among other western states, makes a nice living these days from the tourism generated by its ghost towns and mining camps, a number of which survive as fashionable resorts. With rare exceptions, however, these are never the remains of former coal towns. That is understandable. Early twentieth century coal mining was a dirty, dangerous, low-paying industry, more evocative of the writings of Charles Dickens than those of Bret Harte or Dan DeQuille. While the tourist would find little romance in these places, they are still worth remembering precisely because of what they were—the foundation of industrial Colorado.

Colorado's three great coalfields of a century ago were the northern field, the small towns of which lay between Denver and Boulder, and the southern fields. The southern fields included the coal towns around Walsenburg in Huerfano County, and those around Trinidad in Las Animas County. This essay explores some of the towns of the Trinidad region.

In 1900, R. L. Polk and Company's *Trinidad City and Las Animas County Directory* declared "Las Animas County the great coal bed of a State which ranks fifth in the union in the production of coal. The coal fields embrace a little over 1000 square miles, and the supply is practically inexhaustible. The coal is of a superior quality, and is readily converted into coke. There are more than 1500 coke ovens in the county, and much coke is supplied to the outside world."

That production increased through the next two decades. The 1915 state coal mine inspector's annual report shows Las Animas County's thirty-five mines producing 2,985,661 tons of coal, almost twice Huerfano County's tonnage and three times that of Boulder County, the state's second- and third-leading producers. Las Animas County's 1,706 coke ovens manufactured 661,910 tons of coke that year, over 98 percent of the state's production.

The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company dominated production in Las Animas County and in Colorado to feed its steel-making operation at Pueblo. CF&I's 4,411 miners produced 2,379,767 tons of coal in 1915 and the company's ovens manufactured 80 percent of the coke produced in the state. The 1,252 miners of the Victor-American Fuel Company, second in the county and state, extracted 1,068,836 tons of coal, while Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, king of the northern field, employed 1,027 miners who produced 883,420 tons.

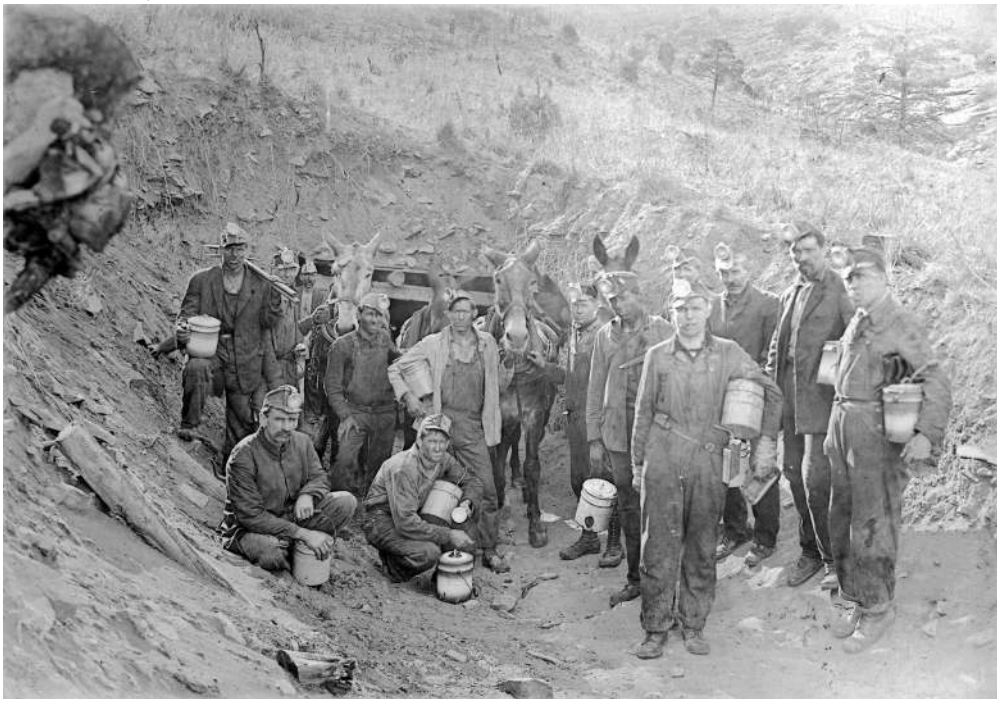
The keystone of the Las Animas field was Trinidad, located on the Purgatoire River at the foot of the Rockies and Raton Pass. North and south along the Front Range and west up the Purgatoire Valley from Trinidad lay a score of little coal towns. Some survive; others have all but vanished. What follows is an attempt to compare a few of those places of a century ago and today. The historic photos are courtesy of History Colorado, the modern views are by the author.

Established in 1889, Hastings, two miles west of Ludlow up Delagua Canyon, had a population of about 1,200 in 1915. Victor-American Fuel Company operated 190 coke ovens at Hastings, producing about 300 tons of coke and 2,300 tons of coal per day. (Trinidad Collection, Scan #20004914, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

"A long row of dilapidated coke ovens and the foundations of a few old buildings are all that remain at the disaster site. Not even a wooden sign marks the location on the dusty road."—*Denver Post Empire Magazine*, 10 February 1963.

Hastings suffered Colorado's worst mine accident in 1917, when an explosion in Hastings No. 2 killed 121 miners. The mine was closed and sealed in 1923 and the town deserted by the end of the 1930s. The disaster was eventually commemorated at the site of the former town and mine by this granite monument, dedicated on 1 August 1963.

In the early 1890s, CF&I established its mine and town at Berwind, which had a population of about four hundred in 1915, and "[two] general stores, [a] meat market, saloon, etc., and a good public school." The town lay about 15 miles northwest of Trinidad and 2.5 southwest of Ludlow.



The 1915 state mine inspector's report divided Colorado's 11,666 coal miners into twenty-eight nationalities, listing "English"—meaning English speakers—Italians, and "Mexicans"—which included both Mexican and American citizens—as the most common, a third, a fifth, and a tenth of miners, respectively. These miners pose with their equipment before the portal of a mine, probably at Berwind. (Original Photographs Collection, Scan #20004599, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

Berwind No. 3 mine closed on 8 February 1928 after producing over nine million tons of coal in thirty-eight years. Berwind's post office closed three years later and the town was soon deserted.

Since coal is a low-value, bulk commodity, railroads were as important as mines to the prosperity of the coal towns. Above, a string of loaded hoppers await shipment from Berwind over the Colorado and Southern Railway. (Welborn Collection, Scan # 20005002, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

Once the mines closed, some abandoned railroad grades became county roads, as at Hastings, while others became traces still visible upon the landscape, as at Berwind.

Colorado Fuel and Iron Company opened its mine at Morley, on the north side of Raton Pass three miles from the summit and the New Mexico state line, in 1907. To attract workers to such remote sites, coal companies established company towns all over the region and built houses such as these for their workers. The WPA Writers' Project described the longer-settled Morley of the 1930s, population six hundred, as "a model coal camp, [with] neat cement houses surrounded by attractive gardens; the company offers prizes each year for the most attractive yards." (Welborn Collection, Scan #20005017, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

CF&I closed Morley's mine in 1956 after it produced more than eleven million tons of coal, and the company razed the town two years later. Today only foundations remain, though those in the lower photo opposite, farther up the street to the south, are in better condition than those in the upper view, taken at the location of the historic image. At the extreme left of the lower photo, the Santa Fe rail line winds its way south up Raton Pass. Neither roosters nor rattlesnakes were encountered while taking the modern photos.

The coal camps built prosperity for Trinidad, too. With a population of ten thousand in 1915, the city developed as an agricultural and mining supply center and a railroad junction. Polk's directory for 1900 reported that "Trinidad has two national banks, and one savings bank, two daily . . . newspapers, a public library, several large hotels, a flour mill . . . three machine and repair shops, two planing mills, [a] foundry, a large wool scouring mill, [a] brewery, [an] ice plant, four cigar factories and a large oil storage and distributing plant, besides wholesale and retail business-houses of all kinds." The directory extolled the city's municipal fire and police departments, schools, waterworks, gas and electric lighting, and telephone and telegraph systems, as well as noting the presence in Trinidad of eleven different religions. Polk's also observed that "although Trinidad is completely surrounded by mining camps, yet no mining is done within two miles of the city limits, which gives it a cleanliness and purity of atmosphere not usually encountered in a mining section."

Trinidad's two national banks, The First National Bank and the Trinidad National Bank, stood on opposite corners of Main and Commercial streets. Trinidad National Bank shared its handsome brick building with the Columbian Hotel "situated in the center of the business district. Electric Elevator and modern throughout. Rates $1.00 per day and up" in 1915.

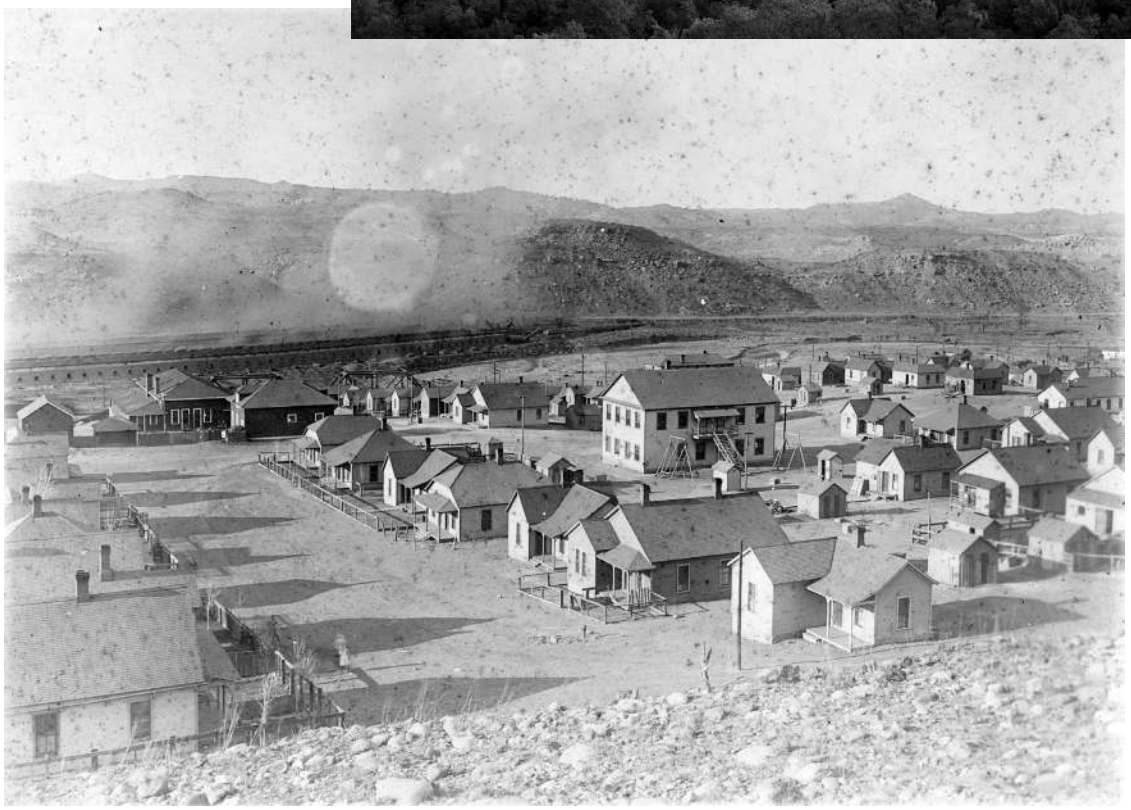
Looking north along Commercial Street, a photograph from near 1900 shows the three-story Columbian Hotel in the foreground and the four-story Southern Hotel, built in 1885, down the block. A century later the Southern has been replaced by a modern bank building. (Trinidad, Colo. Collection, Scan #10042982, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

Many Las Animas coal towns also produced coke, coal baked in ovens to drive off impurities and water. When burned, coke generated more heat than coal, useful for making steel or smelting ore. Carbon Coal and Coke Company, an ASARCO subsidiary, established its company town of Cokedale in 1906. Eight miles west of Trinidad, it had 350 ovens, produced 1,500 tons of coal and 800 tons of coke daily, and had about a thousand inhabitants in 1915. ASARCO burned the coke at its Leadville and El Paso smelters.

In a photograph taken after World War I, the man atop the ovens charges them with coal from above, while the men standing on the lower level prepare to seal the openings in front with bricks. After the coal baked into coke, those openings would be unsealed, and the coke raked out and loaded into the gondolas for shipment. (Trinidad Collection, Scan #20004889, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

The remains of the ovens and loading spur, photographed from the opposite end than the image above. ASARCO closed the operation in 1947 and Cokedale incorporated the following year. The town and ovens were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984.

Not every coal town is a ghost. Segundo, a company town of six hundred founded in 1901, still exists fifteen miles west of Trinidad on the Purgatoire despite losing its industry when CF&I centralized coking at Pueblo in 1930. A WPA writer observed something of the character and habits of its residents, noting that "in the fall, strings of small dried pumpkins and red peppers hang from porch beams."



A very early view shows the company school and houses in the foreground and some of Segundo's roughly eight hundred coke ovens in the background. The rear banks of ovens are already operating, but railroad ties before the ovens in front await installation of the Colorado and Wyoming spur to serve them. That CF&I subsidiary began building its thirty-mile line west up the Purgatoire Valley from Jansen in 1901. (Original Photograph Collection, Scan #20004733, History Colorado, Denver, Colo.)

Not every ghost is a coal town. Although mining occurred in the area, Polk's classified Ludlow, established in the late 1890s, as "a station on the C & S Ry [visible to the left], 17 miles northwest of Trinidad." The site was a junction point between the Colorado and Southern main line and branch lines that brought coal from mines to the west. The directory noted Ludlow's "general store, two saloons, etc." and daily stage service to the mining camps of "Berwind, Tabasco, Hastings, Delagua and Tollerburg" up Berwind and Delagua canyons. Ludlow, at the mouths of those canyons, became the focal point of Colorado's notorious "Coalfield War" of 1913-14. Strikers established their tent colony a quarter of a mile north of the town of eight hundred, just beyond the bend in the road. With the area's mines closed and its mine railroads removed, Ludlow itself died in the early 1950s.

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