

COAL MINING IN IOWA

1870
to
1940

© Explorations
in Iowa History
Project
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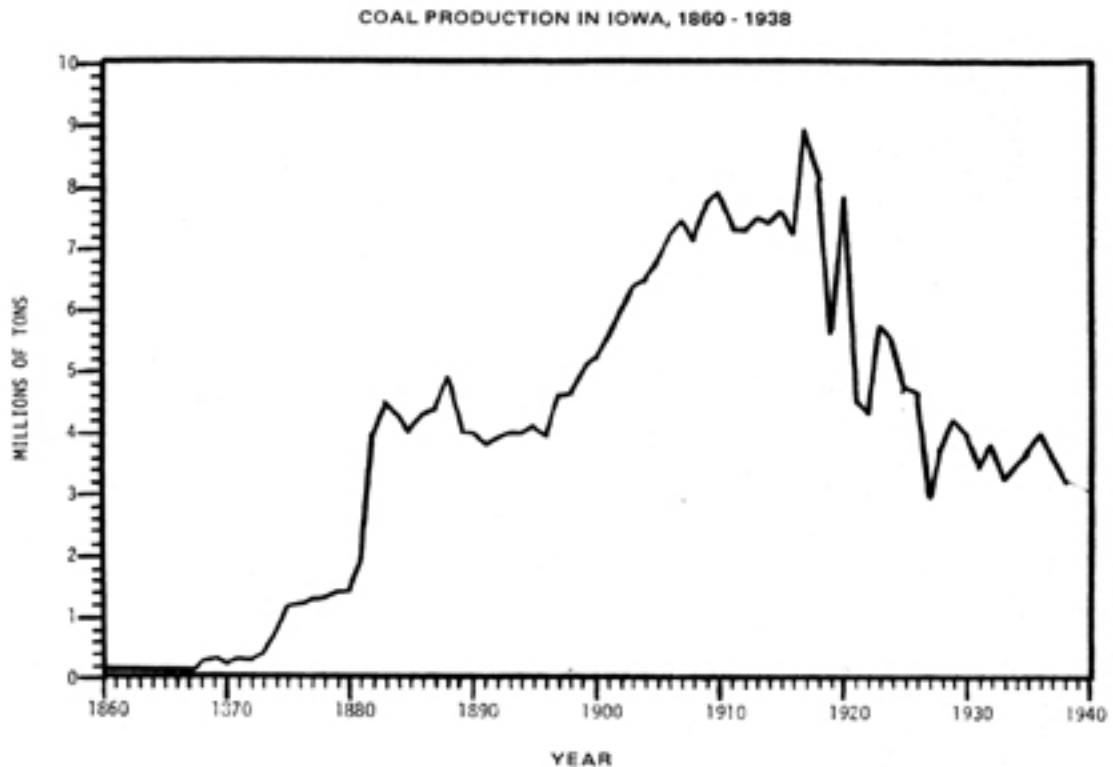
IOWA COAL MINING

How did coal mining begin and develop in Iowa?

The earliest settlers mined coal among the hills of south central Iowa. They used coal to heat their homes and cook their food in areas where timber was not available.

Not until 1870 did the industry of coal mining begin to rapidly grow in Iowa. By that time the major Iowa railroads reached from the Mississippi River in the east to the Missouri River in the west. The railroads leased land in coal producing areas and operated mines which produced coal for the use of the railroads. These were the largest and most productive mines in the state.

Iowa coal mining grew rapidly from 1870 to 1920. The graph, "Coal Production in Iowa, 1860 - 1938," shows the decline of coal production after 1920. Mining declined for several reasons. The railroads began buying coal from other states such as Illinois and Kentucky. As a result, the mining industry in Iowa was thrown into competition with the national markets. In addition, Iowans began looking to other energy sources for home use such as electricity, natural gas and fuel oil.



Source: Census of Iowa, 1905, p. lxxxix; Iowa Geological Survey, Vol. xxxvii, p. 465.

"A Mineral Map of Iowa" (p.5) shows the areas where coal was located and mined. Coal deposits could be found in much of central Iowa. The mining area however, extended from Wapello County in southeastern Iowa to Boone County in central Iowa. Throughout the mining area were dozens of coal camps which provided housing for the coal mining families.

What was life like in a coal camp?

Usually a coal camp had several hundred small homes, a company store, a tavern or pool hall, and a school. Most coal companies required that miners shop only at the company store which sold everything from "cradles to coffins." Most mining families didn't like this restriction. Because the average coal mine lasted only ten years, little care was given to the appearance of these camps.



Coal mining camp houses about 1900. Location unknown

One of the best remembered and most unusual coal camps was located in Monroe County in southern Iowa. Buxton, as it was called, was a thriving coal community during the early 1900s.

At first the camp was located at what was called Muchakinock about five miles south of Oskaloosa in Mahaska County.

For at least two years mining was good in this area. But then in 1875 labor troubles began. The workers went on strike. In 1881 black workers recruited from the south were hired as strike breakers. In a few years the mines of Muchakinock were nearly exhausted. The Chicago and Northwestern railroad, which owned the Consolidation Coal Company, bought more land south in Monroe County. The community moved south where they began to build the town of Buxton. It was named after J.E. Buxton, the superintendent of the Consolidation Coal Company.

Buxton was a thriving community for at least twenty years. By 1920 the mines began to run out of coal. By 1927 the last mine was closed. Buxton soon became a ghost town like the many other mining camps dotting central Iowa.

Buxton was unique because of the highly developed community with many businesses and public buildings. At its height, Buxton had black doctors, lawyers, teachers, ministers, undertakers and pharmacists. It had the largest industrial Y.M.C.A. in existence in the United States.

Buxton was also unique because of the long life it had in comparison with other mining camps. The community had its beginnings at Muchankinock in the 1870s and lasted until the late 1920s.

Mrs. Minnie B. London provides much interesting information about Buxton in her account, *As I Remember*.

What was it like inside a coal mine?

The best way to answer that question would be to visit a mine. Since that may not be possible, the following diagrams and materials may be helpful.

During the course of Iowa's coal mining days, there were four main methods for reaching the coal deposits. Figure 1. shows a comparison of these methods.

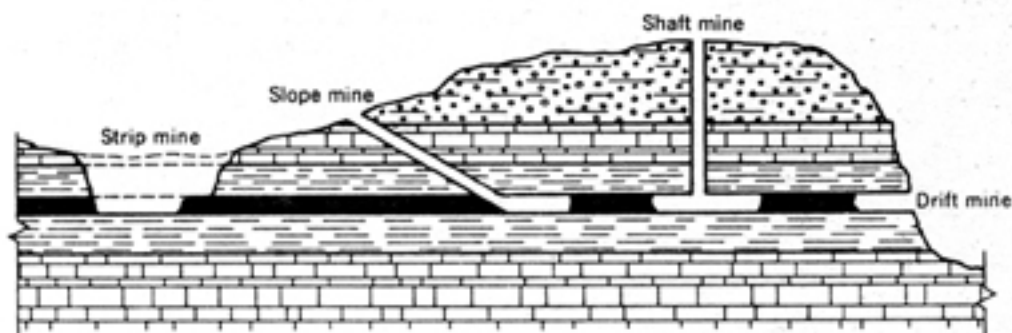


Fig. 1. Comparison of drift, slope, shaft, and strip mines.*

Where the coal deposit lay horizontal and was visible from a hillside, entry could be made directly into the coal deposit. This was called a drift mine.

Where the coal deposit lay not more than a hundred feet from the surface of the ground, a sloping tunnel could be cut to the coal. This was called a slope mine.

Where the coal deposit was close to the surface and the layers above could be easily removed, a strip mine was set up.

When the deposit was so deep that a slope would be difficult to construct, a vertical shaft was sunk down to the coal deposit. From there horizontal tunnels were cut into the deposit forming a room and pillar mine. (see figure 2.)

A Tour Through An Albia Coal Company Mine provides an early description of a room and pillar mine operation in Monroe County, 1878.

*Used by permission: Schwieder, Dorothy, Kraemer, Richard, *Iowa's Coal Mining Heritage*, The State of Iowa, 1973.

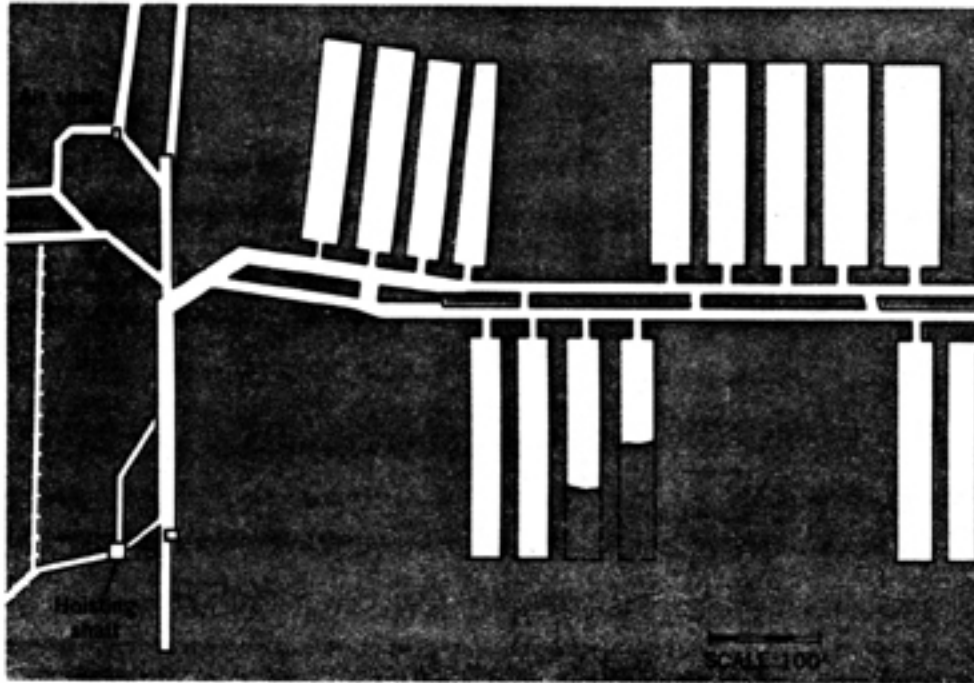


Fig. 2. Top view (plan) of a room and pillar mine. *

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A MINERAL MAP OF IOWA 1904

