

Highlights in the History of Coalmont, Tennessee

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(Submitted by Thomas Curtis)

Coalmont, a rural community, was settled about 1903 and was named by Mrs. John E. Patton (deceased). It was, until the late 1920's, a busy mining community, dependent on the Sewanee Fuel and Iron Company for its existence. The Company was organized by the late John Evander Patton who was the president and manager for many years. There were many coal mines of the drift type, scattered over a large area around the town, a large coal washer, and three large batteries of coke ovens in which coke was manufactured for sale to steel mills and foundries all over the South. At one time, this company employed as many as 600 men. The town consisted of about 100 company houses, a large company commissary, a big railroad station and freight depot, big barber shop manned by the late Giles Parmley, boarding houses, a large two-story school house which served as a community center and Lodge Hall, two churches, a theatre building, and a hotel building known as the "Wigwam."

As the years have passed, many people and families have come and gone as economic changes have taken place all over our country. A few members of original families remain and with them the small history of the changing times of the community.

The community is located exactly halfway between Tracy City and Altamont, almost the exact center of Grundy County. Highway 56 passes through the middle of the town, and the L & N Railway (formerly NC & St. L. Railway) from Cowan, Monteagle, Tracy City, extends through it on to Gruetli, Lager and Palmer. Many train loads of coal and lumber are shipped via this track every week.

The population of Coalmont at present is about 700 and covers an area of about 2 ½ square miles. This includes the small old settlements of Sweeton Hill, part of Freemont, Dogtown, Roddy Springs and Flat Branch. There is a third class Post Office which serves as a distributing office for six of Grundy County's nine post offices. There is a bank, five general merchandise stores, two filling stations, a barber shop, four churches and a fine new modern five-teacher school. The existence of the community still depends partially upon the coal industry. Sawmills, truck farming, and the broiler production are other means of livelihood. Many people commute to their jobs in the mine areas of Palmer, "The Pocket," Reels Cove and other places, just as it is necessary for people in other towns all over the mountain. The old coal company is now owned by the W. L. Hailey

Company of Nashville and is operated by the L. P. Phipps Coal Company, which is a large drag line operation now operating in the old Freemont section west of Coalmont. There are two coal loading stations located on the side tracks furnished by the L & N Railway.

The bank is known as the Coalmont Savings Bank and was organized in 1921, and is one of the two banks serving Grundy County. On account of its location in the center of the county, it has always been a very busy place and serves a large portion of the whole county. The building is owned by A. R. Curtis, the only living original organizer and officer of this institution. He is still active in the business affairs of the bank with his son, John E. (Johnny) Curtis who is cashier. They are assisted by one full-time employee and two part-time employees.

Coalmont has changed in the past twenty-five years—the old Company Commissary has been replaced by the five smaller general merchandise stores—and with the coming of the good highway and the improved means of travel, the community, like so many others, goes to larger towns and cities to trade. The “Wigwam” is gone (*summer 1956*), giving way to the more modern motels; the old coal washer and old-fashioned coke ovens have served their usefulness; the old school house has been replaced by a modern building which is used for a community center since it has a large auditorium and cafeteria.

Recently the town has become an incorporated town (*1957*) with three commissioners: Lewis Meeks, Mayor; John Curtis, City Recorder; James A. Anderson and George Tate, J. P.'s. The aim of the city fathers, with the community, is for more modern improvements, perhaps a factory, for everyone knows this mountain top is a good, healthful place to live, and the population is growing every day, and more industry of a substantial nature is a must in the very near future.

NOTE: Below are some happenings around the Coalmont area taken from Ike Woodard's “Tracy City from 1893-1910.”

1895 – Jan. – Telephone line begun to Altamont, Beersheba and Gruetli

1903 – Jul – Ben Ray died at Coalmont and buried here.

1904 – Mar – Rails laid to Coalmont; Coalmont coal put on the market; **Jun--** Flat Branch railroad nearing completion; **Sep** – Formal opening of St. Alban's Chapel at Coalmont

1905—May—John Vanhoosier shot, but not seriously, while on guard for Nunlely Ridge Coal Co., at Roddy Springs; **Aug**—Miners & Sewanee C. C. & L. Co., Flat Branch Coal Co., and Gem Coal Co., meet but come to no agreement; **Dec**—Lon Keel killed by Jesse Bell at Coalmont.

1906—Jan—Flat Branch miners' strike; Flat Branch tippel burned; **Mar**—Switch engine ditched on Coalmont branch; **Nov**—John Godby accidentally killed in mines at Coalmont ; **Dec**—John Tucker killed at Coalmont by jumping from train.

1907—Sep—Mines settle at Coalmont with company at an advance; **Oct**—Arthur Curtis and Miss Minnie Lovelace married in California.

1908—Jan—Arthur Curtis appointed postmaster at Coalmont; **Mar**—School house at Coalmont completed and school begun; First exhibition in Coalmont school house by Woodard's M. P. Show; Skating rink opened at Coalmont; Red Men organize at Coalmont; **Jul**—John Payne died at Coalmont; **Aug**—Strike threatened at Coalmont; **Sep**—Little evidence said to be seen of the strike at Coalmont; Strikes here and at Coalmont called off.

1909—Oct—Link Tate shoots his brother Joe at Coalmont, not fatal.

1910—Jan—Mrs. Dave Doak died at Coalmont; **Sep**—Woodard's Band plays for Educational Rally at Coalmont