

The Champion Coal Preparation Plant

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

The heart of Montour Railroad operations was the Champion Preparation Plant, which was located at the intersection of Routes 22 & 980 near Imperial, at trail mile 12. The plant was dismantled years ago and nothing remains on the site. It is now mostly an empty field and it is hard to recognize that this valley was once filled with large buildings, conveyor systems and railroad tracks.

Built by the Pittsburgh Coal Company in 1928, raw coal (called green coal or stop-off coal) from their various mines was shipped to this large facility for cleaning, sorting and processing. Different customers would require different sizes and forms of processed coal. The processed coal was reloaded into hopper cars for shipping to its final destinations, which included power plants, large industries, and overseas shipments.



A view of Champion, looking south from the Rt. 22 overpass. Gene P. Schaeffer photo.

Inside the plant's buildings the coal went through screening, sorting, and crushing equipment to prepare it for customer orders. At open picking tables, men would hand-pick rock, slate and impurities out of the coal. Washers and large rotary driers were used to clean the coal. A system of conveyor belts moved the coal to different areas of the plant, which could produce 13,000 tons of processed coal each day.



A picking table, where workers hand-picked impurities out of Green Coal.
John Collier photo in 1942.

Trains of green coal were brought into the plant and shoved up a hill to the rotary dumper. The dumper would flip an entire hopper car upside down, unloading its coal in a few seconds. A conveyor carried the green coal past a large electromagnet, which would pull metal pieces out of the coal. Roof bolts, mine car coupler links and pins, tools, etc., which fell into the coal loads at the mines, could damage the Champion processing equipment.



The rotary dumper flips an entire hopper car upside down to empty its load of coal.
John Collier photo.

In the winter, coal loads might freeze inside the open hopper cars and additional work was needed to unload it. Heaters were used on the cars to thaw the coal and allow dumping. At times the coal would be unloaded into piles on the ground so it would not freeze in the hoppers. Frozen loads would take the hoppers out of revenue service.

The Montour assigned train crews as necessary to service the plant. Three yard crews were kept busy each day switching Champion from 7:30 am to 10:00 pm. Empty hoppers in shuttle service were returned to the mines and never left the Montour. Cars from other railroads were taken to the Champion tipple tracks for loading processed coal and then shipped offline to the coal company's customers. Unit trains of 75 cars or more were loaded several times a week and shipped to large customers. The yardmaster kept track of which cars were to be used for different customers on the various railroads receiving outbound shipments and a company agent processed the appropriate billing forms. The Montour built a yard office housing the yardmaster, company agent, and a crew lounge near the edge of the complex to handle the railroad's needs. The Montour delivered the processed coal to the Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh & Lake Erie, Union and B&O Railroads at various interchange points along its main line.

Another facility called Disco was part of the Champion complex and was serviced by Champion yard crews. Disco (distilled coal) was a processed coal similar to charcoal briquettes that burned without smoke, using coal as its base instead of wood. Disco fell out of favor in the 1960's as natural gas became prominent for home heating. This part of the Champion plant was then closed and sometimes used to store excess coal that was needed to keep Champion working.

With a declining coal market and its aging equipment in need of a complete overhaul, Champion was closed in 1983 and dismantled a few years later.

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