

Picking Coal

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

A century ago, most homes in our area were heated by coal. In the 1960's, natural gas became the preferred home heating fuel and coal furnaces started to fade away.

Coal furnaces need a ready supply of coal. Many houses had a coal cellar or a shed in the back yard to store coal. The coal might be supplied by a local dealer, who would deliver a truck load to houses. But families could save money with any free coal that could be added to their storage pile. The smell of coal smoke from the communities along the Montour was always present during cold weather.

For those who lived in the coal patch communities or more rural villages, coal would be picked up off the ground. One chore for kids in those communities was to pick coal into a burlap bag or a pail and carry it home. An old mining engineer told of days during the depression when his parents would send him out walking the tracks to retrieve coal that had fallen off railcars and use it to heat their home. Pickers knew that locations where trains were switched or regularly stopped and started would have coal knocked off overloaded hopper cars.



At coal mines, the waste pile or slate dump also contained some good coal. Many mining companies had strict rules about picking coal. At National #3 Mine in Muse, lorry cars carried waste rock out of the mine and dumped it on the surrounding hillsides. For safety reasons, the coal company did not allow kids on the slate dump while machinery was in use. At Muse, the dumping stopped at the end of the day shift at 3:00. The mine

whistle would blow, signaling the end of the shift and kids could then go onto the dump to pick chunks of coal that came out with the slate and rock.

Old stories tell of residents climbing onto parked hoppers and throwing coal down to cohorts on the ground. This was common in Cecil Township when the locomotives would cut off from a loaded train to go to Muse or Westland, leaving their cars on the main track. Cars set off temporarily at Cowden or Peacock sidings would often be picked by the locals.

An ex-Montour Railroad employee recalled riding trains as they labored slowly up grade through Hendersonville, looking back from the engines and seeing men tossing large chunks of coal from the hoppers. The Montour crews said when this happened, especially during wintertime, no one would say or do anything about it.

Crews also remember seeing the locals walking the tracks with burlap bags picking up the chunks that fell from the hoppers, especially between #4 Mine up through Hendersonville. The first few miles coming out of a mine was where the rocking motion of overloaded hoppers would most likely spill some coal.

Another source of free coal was the scene of a derailment, where loaded coal hoppers would spill part of their load or overturn after derailing. If a derailment involved only a car or two, or a partially spilled load, the coal company often did not bother to clean it up, making it “open season” for local folks to gather coal for their furnaces.



A derailment at Galati Road spilled coal onto the roadway. Gene P. Schaeffer photo.

An incident at the bridge over Muse-Bishop Road saw a carload of coal spilled onto the bank of the railroad. Some enterprising locals built a wooden chute leading down to the roadway below to load the coal into their personal vehicles.

An ex-resident of Imperial told this story. “Near the end of Montour operations in many places the track and ties were in very bad shape. This was definitely true of the curve just outside of the Jeffrey Town tunnel near Enlow. In the 70's, I saw numerous

derailments there with hoppers lying on their sides and coal was everywhere. I remember seeing entire families filling anything they could carry with coal to take home for heating.”

Picking went on year-round, as coal recovered during the summer months was stored for use during the next winter. Picking coal was a way for families to save some of their hard-earned wages.

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