

History of Winter Quarters, Utah

By: Eugene H. Halverson

The valley was called Pleasant Valley; a few early pioneers had built cabins along the valley floor and grazed their cattle there. It was pleasant and peaceful until about 1875 when coal was discovered. When reports of this reached the settlers of Fairview, Sanpete County, a Welsh coal miner led a group of twelve men and one woman up and over the mountain into Carbon County. They built a road, opened a small mine and began hauling coal to the settlements in Sanpete County. Their camp was pitched in Little Gulch where the Wasatch Store (See Castle Gate History) now stands. But Winter came early and they were stranded in the mountains. They almost froze to death. Because of this they named this camp "Winter Quarters". Several groups of miners from Sanpete County soon established claims to these deposits. The coal had to be hauled by horse and wagon over a 9300 foot mountain or down the natural course of the canyon to Soldier Summit and on down the Spanish Fork Canyon also by horse and wagon. By 1877 hundreds of miners came and a town was built. It became Utah's first commercial coal town. Though the need for coal was great there was little profit to be made. Wagons pulled by two and four horse teams came from Springville for the coal. The round trip took four days and sold for \$4.00 to \$5.00 per ton. There was now a great need to find a better way to market.

A Mr. Milan Packard, a freighter and merchant from Springville could see the need for a railway to these newly discovered coal fields. So, he sponsored and financed the building of a narrow gauge railroad from the Union Pacific tracks in Springville to Winter Quarters. He was his own contractor and hired many sub-contractors. It was a great undertaking for the amount of money that was available. Merchandise was given from Mr. Packard's store as part of the men's pay. Calico was the prized cotton material, store bought material used for clothing at that time. So, many of the workers took calico as pay, so, it was called the "Calico Railroad." But officially it was named the Utah and Pleasant Valley Railroad. The trains pulled 12 five ton cars. This was used until 1883 when the Denver and Rio Grand Railroad bought it. Utah Fuel Company a subsidiary of the D&RG took over the town and mine at this time. But it was still called the Pleasant Valley Mine. The trains now became longer and the cars were larger they now held 15 tons.

By 1900 there were almost 2000 families living there. Christian Nelson, (a relative) was the Railmaster for the D&RG. His office was on the upper floor of the Wasatch Store.

Utah Fuel brought in experienced Chinese laborers to drive a new tunnel. But shortly after the white laborers took the law into their own hands. One day they herded the Chinese into a boxcar, locked the doors and started the car down the canyon. The boxcar somehow stayed on the tracks until it stopped. The Chinese never came back.

It was 10:20 AM, 1900 and it was Dewey Day in honor of Admiral George Dewey who had defeated the Spanish at Manila Harbor in the Philippines two years earlier. A blast went off that shook the whole town. Many thought it came from the big celebration and dance which had been planned for that evening at the Odd Fellows Hall at Scofield. But it was soon determined that the explosion came from the #4 Mine. It was what they called a coal dust explosion. A miner accidentally ignited a keg of black powder, which ignited the coal dust throughout the mine, which in turn ignited 23 other kegs of powder. 100 men in the #4 mine were killed by the force of the explosion and the intense heat. Carbon monoxide spread to the #1 mine killing 99 more

men. 7 were injured. 103 men escaped the after-damp in the #1. Jack Wilson and his mule were blown 820 feet across the canyon, the mule was killed but he recovered. 199 men in all were killed with more than half of them burned to a crisp. Some families lost two or three members. 150 were buried in the Scofield Cemetery the rest were sent to other towns for burial.

In those days a miner was given a 25-pound keg of powder for blasting. It was carried to his work place. A pick was used to punch a hole in one end. Two to three pounds of powder were then poured into a cartridge made from an old newspaper. This was done by the light from their oil lamps burning on their caps and quite often with a lighted pipe or cigarette in their mouth. There was little or no ventilation either, if there was, it was furnace ventilation.

In time the burning parts of the mine were extinguished and reopened. It produced coal for another 28 years. There is still coal there but it is an inferior quality and too deep to profitably mine. The superintendent of the mine (Parmely) quickly blamed the Finns for the explosion but it was found later to be poor management. Both the Finns and the Cornish miners were superstitious, seeing ghosts. Weird and unexplainable sounds now plagued the mine. Many miners quit and moved.

Many of my wife's family came to Carbon County to work in the mines. The Nielson's were farmers from Richfield, Sevier County, Utah, who came to Spring Glen in 1898 and later to Winter Quarters in 1902, the Hall's were coal miners from England who came to Winter Quarters in 1904 and the Houghton's, also coal miners from England, came to Castle Gate in about 1905 or 1906. My family came to Winter Quarters a year or two after the explosion. Tommy Hall was the first family member to be killed there. He was killed in 1911. James Nielson (great grandfather) had his hand severely crushed in the mine. But being a part of the white Mormon community, work was found for him. Other nationalities and religions were treated poorly.

The Pleasant Valley ward of the LDS Church was started in about 1880 under the direction of the Sanpete Stake (later this became Carbon County), David Williams was the first Bishop. Thomas J. Parmely was Bishop from 1888 to about 1920. And John L. Parry was bishop until Winter Quarters ceased to exist, about seven years later. While some family members became quite religious and stayed with the Church others lost it when tempted by the many saloons and evils of the camps. T.J. Parmely also served as superintendent of the Winter Quarters mine for twenty five-years. (Joanne Houghton Hyatt's grandmother was a Parmely).

Many of the houses were taken down to Scofield, some were sawed into and taken to Castle Gate and elsewhere. You could see the saw marks in Helen Nielson Houghton's home until it was refinished. This home was later moved to Helper in one piece when Castle Gate was dissolved. The schools, churches, saloons and other buildings were torn down. I have been told that the rock on some of the walls of the Wasatch Store was even hauled away for other buildings in the area.

The site where Winter Quarters once stood is hard to find. One must leave the oiled road and drive up an old dirt road for about 3/4s of a mile to a locked gate with a "No Trespassing" sign on it. Where about a half of a mile away you can see where two walls of the Wasatch Store still stand. The only signs of the town are walls and foundations of homes and buildings. Come there on a foggy day and see the two stone walls visible through the fog and it will look to you as it did to me, like a Ghost Town, ghosts and all.