# Coal City, Indiana

# Then & Now

By

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## Preface

This slim e-volume is a slightly edited version of a paper I first wrote as an undergraduate mining engineering student fresh from the fields of Indiana. The final section of this e-volume is a short retake written as a post-grad student some five years later.

I resist complete rewriting or significant alternation that would reflect my current opinions. Rather I let this stand as a record of the times. Much like the slag heaps and opinions of the community I write about that have not changed much in all that time.

## Introduction

Americans constantly revisit the nation's energy needs. Many worry about America's dependence on foreign oil. One possible solution is increased use of coal. Coal has been one of America's greatest resources and curses; it has left a legacy of slag piles, acidic waters, and soot. But is has, at the same time, provided fuel for the industrialization of America. Coal mining has changed in many ways in the past century; most of this the result of the Surface Mining and Reclamation Act. In this report I examine the effects of coal mining on rural communities and recommend ways to lessen negative impacts on such communities. I look at Coal City, Indiana as an example of one community I know well that has been affected by coal mining.

## Coal City, Indiana

Coal City, Indiana, is a small village of about 200 people thirty minutes outside of Terre Haute Indiana on the Owen County - Clay County line. For as long as I can remember, Coal City has been "home" to my father's side of the family. As the name indicates, coal mining, both in the past and present, has been a major influence in Coal City. The area surrounding Coal City is farms, fields, forest, strip pits, and surrounding slag piles. Attractive plots of land have been developed as vacation homes. The economic base of Coal City is farming; the main crops are soybeans and corn. And then there is the other natural resource: coal.

## Personal Background

Some personal background to explain why I choose to write about coal mining: My career goal is to work on the legal and administrative issues of mining. The primary influence prompting this goal is my experience with coal mining in Coal

City and the surrounding area. I am currently attending school to obtain a degree in Mining Engineering, with the hope of continuing on to law school. I live in a community where mining and an extractive approach to natural resources is the norm. As an avid outdoorsman, I regard the health of the land and ecosystem as important; this makes me a supporter of proper reclamation and land management. Because of my emotional attachment to the community, Coal City may not be the best place for me to write about. Yet to many of the people that I interviewed, I am a familiar face, and this may have helped me get a more honest opinion than an unfamiliar person would have. With this in mind I have tried to present the issue as fairly as I can for all sides involved.

## The History of Coal City

Coal mining of some sort has been going on around Coal City since before the early 1900s. Slope mines and open pit dragline or strip mining have historically been the two types of mines around Coal City. There are an estimated forty-five mines that have been worked in the Coal City area. Slope mines, sometimes referred to as deep mines, were mostly small operations involving anything from a single farmer to eighty men. Slope mines were very simple: when a seam of coal outcropped on the side of a hill, the miners would dig into the coal and follow the seam. Most farmers who worked the seams did so to provide for their own heating needs. They sold anything left over to others for the same purpose.

As technology advanced and equipment became available, a new way of mining was undertaken, namely strip-mining. Strip-mining involves removing the layers of earth above the coal seam with a large steam shovel or dragline. Once exposed, the coal seam is removed by truck. In the past, the overburden or spoils were dumped to the side and the pit resulting from mining was allowed to fill with water. These large strip mines kept Coal City alive during the Depression and Coal City faired better than many communities.

## The Railroad

The railroad had been a fixture of Coal City since 1873 when the Cincinnati and Terre Haute Railroad came to town. The railroad proved to be the life blood of the community and many small communities around it, bringing in many businesses. At its peak, Coal City had seven saloons, three doctors, six churches, three blacksmiths, a school, and a drug store. As the large coal mines moved further away from Coal City, the railroad became less viable. Finally in 1940, the railroad pulled out and the town started a steady decline.

## Coal City Today

Historically mining has changed Coal City, both economically and socially. For many people, this image of the past has an influenced how they look at the mining currently going on. Accordingly, in the rest of this paper, I look at current mining and the issues involved. Specifically, I examine the difference in the effects of mining currently and in the past.

Time has not been kind to Coal City. Today there is a small general store, a gas station, a bank, and a post office; a considerable change from the town of 1940. Anyone passing through will be reminded of past mining activity by the railroad bed, pine-covered slag heaps, and strip pits. That same passerby will notice the bad roads, large equipment, reclaimed fields, and piles of separated dirt—all evidence of modern surface mining. Coal mining is still present in Coal City, but it has taken a different shape and route, with challenges to match.

Coal mines in the Coal City area are now exclusively small strip mines known in the profession as truck-shovel operations. The mines are operated mostly through Black Beauty Coal, which is a subsidiary of Peabody Coal. Truck shovel mines use smaller equipment than a dragline-equipped mine and produce a much smaller volume of material. Current mines in the Coal City area are small

and employ a handful of workers, most of whom commute long distances. The mines also have a relatively short mine life with most pits being opened and closed in the course of a year.

## Concerns about Mining

While the mines have changed, coal is still vital to Indiana's economy. Coal provides 80% of the state's electric power . All this combines to bring new challenges—that are much different than the mines of the past faced.

Today, the local population has two general concerns about the local mines. The greater concern is that most members of the community do not understand the mines with the intimacy they once did. Many do not understand their rights or the mining companies' responsibilities. The result is distrust by many of the mining company. On the flip side, many feel that the community needs mining to survive. However, in the current era of environmental concern coal mining is a changing industry in many ways, and many of these changes are not looking good for coal mining in the Mid-West.

My interviews made very clear that trust is a major concern. Comments from landowners illustrate this: one couple said to never sign the lease that the mining company gives you, because they have written it so as to give the mining operation as much benefit as possible.

Many landowners felt that they had little influence on the mining companies. One stated "(there is) No law about it." And that you'd have to go to Indianapolis to really change anything.

## Mined Land Reclamation

One issue where this distrust becomes most evident is mined land reclamation. In an area such as Coal City, where agriculture and farming are the way many earn their living, the land is of most importance. The value placed on the land, is why there is concern about reclamation in the Coal City area. Indiana has regulated the environmental impact of coal mining since 1941 and was the second state in the nation to require mine reclamation (Office of Surface Mining, 1997, 2:34). The extent of reclamation has changed over the years and depending on whom you talk to, you get a different answer to what was and is required.

One retired miner says that reclamation began in 1965 when the mine operators had to doze the top of the spoils pile and plant pine trees. Another miner says that reclamation began in 1976 or 77 when they had to start separating the types of soils and putting them back in order. The first miners I quote is talking about reclamation controlled by the state of Indiana; the second mine I quote is talking about reclamation after the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.

Since 1977, the most important piece of legislation controlling how coal mines operate is the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA). This legislation, spearheaded by environmental congressmen Morris Eudall, has influenced just about every aspect of surface coal mining. The SMCRA requires that mined land be returned to as close to the original condition as possible. Part of this involves separating the topsoil so that it can be placed back on top of the land when reclamation is finished. A common example of this is that if a stream runs through the land before area is mined, when reclamation is finished the same stream should be present in identical form unless the permits allow otherwise (Office of Surface Mining, 1997, 1:14).

Reclamation is divided into three parts: backfilling; regarding; and revegetation. To ensure that all parts of reclamation are performed properly, SMCRA requires a mine operator to post bonds that can be returned as reclamation is accomplished successfully (Office of Surface Mining, 1997, 1:4). Even with the regulations governing reclamation set forth by the SMCRA, many in Coal City do not feel reclamation is done well or that the land is a healthy and productive after reclamation.

## Reclaimed Land Productivity

The productivity of reclaimed land is an issue where the distrust of mining companies comes to a head. Everyone has a different view of the value of reclaimed land. When talking with one group of landowners, the view was overwhelmingly negative. The farmer said flat out, "reclaimed land is never as productive." His partner said that the amount of topsoil put down on his land was not nearly as much as the companies should have put down and that as a result reclaimed land wouldn't grow corn.

He also mention that the mining companies could tear up land with their equipment and not have to reclaim it if the land wasn't actually mined. He cited an example of the area of his land that was used as a vehicle and equipment park while mining operations where proceeding on his land.

Even landowners that have a very positive view of reclamation, said they did not understand some parts of the reclamation process. One farmer talked directly about the return of top soil to the land and how it appears as if they mixed most of the layers all together except the topsoil and then put about three to four inches of top soil on top of the land, where he thought there should be one to two feet of topsoil.

Another farmer mentioned that a lot of farmers don't like to farm reclaimed land because rocks will work their way to the surface in reclaimed land more often and damage the equipment. This same farmer said that the reclaimed land erodes easier and doesn't hold moisture as well as before it was mined since the ground has been more broken up allow water to flow through the soil easier.

In contrast, some of the people I interviewed, and the Office of Surface Mining, have a very different view. A farmer supportive of mining mentioned that for a while some of his most productive land was reclaimed land, and that the only reason it wasn't anymore was because he had plowed the plot.

A local business owner noted that she didn't feel the farmer let the land sit as long as they were supposed to. Instead they tried to farm the land before the reclaimed land could support the same farming practices it had before mining.

The Office of Surface Mining uses a reclaimed mine in Southern Indiana called the Lynnville mine as an example of effective reclamation in it's 20th anniversary report (Office of Surface Mining, 1997, 1:13).

## Blasting and Coal Transport

Another source of contention is the effect mining operations such blasting and transporting the coal have. Many believe they damage surrounding structures and property.

Many are concerned about the dust and dirt from the mine's operation. This was expressed most directly by an old man with the comment that his house "had mud up to the second story window" from the trucks passing by. He also mentioned at one point that he felt some of his walls had been disturbed by the blasting at the mine site.

His wife mentioned that some people complained about damage to their houses from the blasting and trucks as much as two years after a mine had finished operations, and being upset when the mining company refused to pay for the damage.

One of the most obvious mining-related damages are the roads around Coal City. Many were potholed and broken up to the point that safety is a very serious concern from all of the trucks hauling coal from the mine site. The mining companies did repair the roads once the mines causing the traffic on the road had finished operations and the equipment moved to another site. The mining company does do a premining survey; pictures are taken of private property so that the company can show the condition of the property before mining operations commence. However, many feel that this was more to protect the mining companies than the common citizen. All of these add up to more tension between the local community and the mine operators.

## Groundwater & Drinking Water

Most people I meet and talked to in Coal City get their drinking water from private wells. Several people voiced concern over the quality of this water source during my interviews. One water-well user talked about how he felt his well had gone dry because of the mine, yet the mine would not reimburse him for the damages since he lived too far from the mine site. Another member of the community had her well go dry from the mining activity, however due to her close proximity to the mine, the mining company replaced her well.

## Causes of Concern

When I looked at the all the concerns, I noticed a major theme as to why the concerns that existed were present. Most of the issues causing the mistrust between the different groups in the area have to do with a lack of knowledge.

A retired mine superintendent best summed up this problem with the comment that people don't understand everything about mining. An important point to remember is that mining threatens the sense of security for many people more than other industrial activities due to the way that the land is changed. This is true even with current reclamation laws that require the land to be returned to a near identical state.

This was most clearly pointed out by a retired miner when he said he was sure there would be hurt feelings to see the land torn up.

## What to do

With these comments in mind, I developed a suggested plan for building trust and cooperation between the mine operators, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the local community.

Most of my suggestions are to develop a plan to help educate members of the local community about their rights and the mining process in general. The two major parties in an effort to educate the community will be the DNR and the mine operators.

## The Department of Natural Resources

In the State of Indiana, the DNR is charged with enforcing the laws that the mine operators must follow. As such, they are the ones the community members need

to voice their concerns to. From personal experience, most people associate the DNR with protection of wildlife and not with mining.

The DNR needs to inform the public about its other roles. The mine operators need to communicate with the public better to avoid future conflicts. Many do not understand the mining methods currently being used. Since the mine operators no longer live close to the mines they are working at, the interaction between miners and community members is much lower than in the past. Both the DNR and the miners have to develop so form of communications plan for the future if mining is to continue in the Coal City area.

For the DNR to be successful it is very important they interact more with the community and change how they are perceived. Currently many landowners feel that what the DNR does is mostly for show. Simply increasing the amount of interaction between community members and the regulatory agency will facilitate a more open flow of concerns between the two parties. By having DNR representatives attend community events in Coal City such as fundraisers for the fire department and the Coal City Festival and explaining to people the role of the DNR in mining, will help people understand the constraints that are placed on the mine operators. In addition the DNR needs to make a more concerted effort to contact landowners and community members before any problems arise, and continue interacting with them throughout the whole mining process. This is especially true before landowner make any binding agreements with the mine operators. In most cases, the DNR should encourage the landowners to seek legal counsel.

By implementing these suggestions the DNR would restore the community's security by knowing that someone with power over the mines is acting on their concerns and looking out for their interests.

## The Mine Operators

For the mine operators to be successful, they will need to convince the community that mining is only a temporary land use and that they, as mine operators, will be responsible.

With the long commutes that most miners are taking to work in the mines, it is important that they maintain contact with the local community. If there is little to no contact between the local community and the mine operators, the stage is set for the establishment of an in-group versus out-group mentality among the local community and the miners. It is in situations such as this that concerns can lead to disruptive activities such as monkey wrenching.

Currently the mining companies seem to be doing a good job of communicating with the landowners according to some. However, the people I talked with that are not landowners, did not feel as if they were being paid the same courtesy. In order for the mines to operate smoothly, the mining companies must do a better job of interacting with community members that are not landowners. One easy way for this to happen is for the mine operators to attend community social events in the same way as I recommended that the DNR does. An additional method is for the site managers to visit the general store in the morning were several members of the community meet for breakfast in the morning.

It would also help ease the community's sense of security if the mines were to hold open houses allowing people to come and see the operation and about the mining process. Together with the DNR the mine operators would greatly benefit by producing a pamphlet explaining the rights and responsibilities of the community members and how member of the community should go about voicing a concern over the mining process. Such a pamphlet should be made available at the post office, bank, and general store. The image and perception of

the mine operators can be assisted by continuing their good deeds such as supporting the fire department and helping to clear the roads in winter. By carrying out with these ideas the mine operators could go a long way towards gaining the trust of the community.

## Conclusion

Coal mining is an important part of Coal City, which is recognized by many of the community members. One of the most enthusiastic supporters of the mining is the owner of the general store who feels that the business she has gotten from the coal miners is the only thing that has kept her business alive. However, in order for mining to continue, communication between the community, the DNR, and the mine operators must improve. Unlike in the past, most coal companies owned the land that they were mining, current practice is to lease the land for the duration of mining activities. So if the mining companies want to have lands to mine in the coming years they will need to ensure that the community feels coal mining is beneficial.

## Five Years Later: A Different Perspective

Five years later: I have a significantly increased understanding of the mining industry and the intricacies that surround both it and the communities that they operate in. This has led me to change, or at least fine tune, some of the views that I expressed as an undergrad.

My overall conclusions remain the same. Nevertheless, I would change some of my recommendations. One is the emphases I put on the traditional legal process governing how landowners and the community interact with the mining companies. Overtime I have come to realize that the traditional legal system does

not add trust in the way that would be desired by the either party and often is seen as simply a “call to arms.”

Additionally, I have come to the conclusion that by and large, the single largest issue is a lack of a feedback method between the community at large and the mining company. Many of the complaint and concerns I heard, I now can say with certainty, were most likely not mining-related. There is no way that one can ever prove this a 100%. A common thread that ran through all concerns was a feeling of distance from government and associated permitting agencies. One of the most obvious quirks of this community, so obvious I missed in during my first look, is that there is no formal local government that interacts on a regular basis with this community.

Looking at another major issue in this community right now, that of a community sewage treatment system, it becomes obvious that there is a lack of technical and leadership assets for this community, or a means of obtaining it. As a result there is no unified voice to cover the concerns of the local community, or for that matter for the mining company to even being a formal process at the community level.

The major result of this, especially in a highly regimented permitting and legal environment, is the closest elected official that the miners can interact with is on the county level. On a local level, the community could benefit by having in its employ someone with the background to look at many of the local issues such as mining, sewage treatment, and other environmental concerns; however in a rather cash strapped county a community of 200-300 people will not carry much weight and their relatively small issues will not warrant the time of the few people the county has that possess this knowledge.

While I personally do not feel that even if the mining companies attempt to help the local community establish a local town manager or mayoral position, they would be successful, in another community with a different demographic background, this might be a means of taking the disjointed views of many and allowing the mining company to find a way to address their common concerns efficiently.