

## History of Coal Mining in Iowa

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## HISTORY OF COAL MINING IN IOWA

The State Mine Inspector's bi-ennial report for the period ending December 31, 1945, contains some brief but interesting facts in connection with the history of coal mining in Iowa. The report says:

Coal is the principal mineral resource of the state, and its production has been one of the most important economic pursuits of Iowa residents.

Lieut. A. M. Lea, early Iowa explorer, while canoeing down the Des Moines river from the Raccoon fork one hundred and ten years ago (in 1835) discovered the presence of coal.

The earliest available statistical record of coal production in Iowa is given by the U. S. Census as 400 tons in 1840. It is reported that the earliest mine operations were in Jefferson county, and that Fairfield coal was hauled by wagon to blacksmiths in Mississippi river towns years before the railroads reached Iowa. In 1840 mines were opened near Farmington and Doubs in Van Buren county, and near Jamestown in Scott county. These early mines had no rail connections, and their production was limited to the demands of local trade. Because of limited transportation facilities, small mines had little competition from more efficiently operated mines, or from mines producing better quality coal. A number of small mines were opened in the later 1840's, and in the years following in practically every county underlaid with coal, and as railroads extended their markets less profitable mines and those which had exhausted the supply of coal near the surface were abandoned. In the early days most of the operations were drift mines, although there were a few shallow shafts and strip pits.

The State Mine Inspectors office had its inception July 4, 1880—first Mine Inspector, Park C. Wilson, of Mahaska county. The first tour of inspection in Iowa mines commenced August 18, 1880. The State Mining Law amended July 4, 1886, provided for three mine inspectors—each inspector to have supervision over one district. R. T. Rhys of Ottumwa established an all-time inspector's record of 38 years.

The total number of fatal mine accidents since records were first kept 66 years ago has been 1,405, an average of 21-3322 annually. The first fatal accident on record was that of Wm. Jukes, an employee of the Whitebreast Coal Company in Lucas county, who was killed by a fall of slate July 22, 1880. The greatest catastrophe occurring in the annals of Iowa's coal mining happened January 24, 1902, at Lost Creek, in Mahaska county, when 20 miners were killed, and 14 injured by an explosion.

Largest number of fatal accidents in the Iowa mines in one year was in 1902, when there were 55. Lowest number was in 1945, when there were 4, an all-time low record. In the three year period, 1943-44-45, there were 14. In the previous three year period, 1940-41-42, there were 32.

The total tons of coal produced in the entire 66 year period has been 318,533,928. The peak year in Iowa coal production was in 1917, when 9,049,806 tons were produced. This was because of war conditions, which directed a great deal of coal produced in Illinois to eastern markets—thus leaving a larger territory to be supplied with Iowa coal. The smallest number of tons produced was in 1945, with only 2,071,648 tons—lower than in any year since records were first kept in 1880. This decline in coal production in 1945 was due mainly to the shortage of labor and trucking equipment. Many mines forced to close during the war will be re-opened.

The first county to reach the 1,000,000 ton mark was Mahaska county in the year 1895. This lead was maintained until 1901, when she was surpassed by Monroe and Polk counties. For the next quarter of a century Monroe county was the leading coal producing county. For several years its production was in the neighborhood of two and one-half million tons, a figure which has not been approached by any other county. Since that time production has dropped steadily, until in 1945 only 193,848 tons were produced.

There are 21 coal producing counties in the state. In the early eighties and nineties, coal was produced from one to four mines in Scott, Muscatine, Washington, Henry, Poweshiek, Marshall, Hardin, Story, Hamilton, Adair and Cass counties. In later years, two mines were opened in Decatur county but were soon abandoned.

The decline of the Iowa coal industry has left serious problems in its wake. In the good days here of the industry from 16,000 to 18,000 workers were employed in and around the mines. In recent years loss of employment has been due primarily to mechanization of mines, loss of sales of coal to railroads, competition of foreign coals, use of natural gas, oil and water power. Many mines were forced to close during World War II because of labor shortage and inability of the operators to secure trucking equipment. To expedite deliveries some coal operators employed two men on each truck during the winter months, and limited each customer to two tons of coal.

What will the future be? No one can say. The immediate outlook is for no great increase in production. Except as new industry may be added to the market and the house heating market increased, little advance can be foreseen. Perhaps in the next

decade when oil and gas reserves will approach exhaustion, and thinner veins of eastern coal are worked, the Iowa coal industry will again prosper. Many operators who were forced to close their mines during the war will reopen in 1946. Several other companies plan to sink new mines.

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### NAVIGATION OF THE DES MOINES

The *St. Louis New Era* says: The steamer *Iola*, Captain Devinney, started from this city about three weeks since with a cargo of assorted merchandise for Fort Raccoon, some 300 miles up the Des Moines river, Iowa. The boat returned last evening, and we learn from her officers that they succeeded in reaching the Fort with less difficulty than was expected. Fort Raccoon is some distance higher up the river than any steamboat has ever gone before<sup>1</sup>, and the appearance of the *Iola* was hailed at Keosauqua, Fort Des Moines, Ottumwa, and a number of other points she passed as the harbinger of wealth and prosperity to that country. The *Iola* visited and discharged portions of her cargo at Fort Des Moines, Keosauqua, Ottumwa, Fort Raccoon and several other points above what has been heretofore considered the head of steamboat navigation.

Among her freight was a steam engine and machinery for a flouring mill which is being erected at Ottumwa. She also carried up some machinery for a steam sawmill which is in a state of completion at Keosauqua. Captain Devinney thinks he could have ascended 150 miles farther had not the river commenced falling and for fear of being detained he was compelled to return. From Fort Des Moines<sup>2</sup> to the mouth of the river, on his return, the soundings were never less than two feet in the channel, and the river was not considered very full.—*Bloomington* (Muscatine) *Herald*, July 19, 1844.

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<sup>1</sup>One year previous to this, May 9, 1843, the *Agatha*, Captain J. M. Lafferty, landed at Raccoon Forks, bringing the soldiers under Captain Allen, when the fort was established.—Editor.

<sup>2</sup>The *New Era* reflects the uncertainty in the minds of the people at that time about the name of the fort. Raccoon Forks was the popular designation of the locality, and Captain Allen recommended the fort be called Fort Raccoon, but the war department ruled it should be Fort Des Moines.—Editor.

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