

History of coal mining in Toluca, Illinois

an Oral History Interview

**Lester Arendell, Interviewee
Of Toluca, Illinois**

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Q: The information on this tape was put together by Lester Arendell of Toluca, Illinois.

A: This is a small part of the early history of Bennington Township and especially of the coal mine in Toluca. Bennington Township lies in the southeastern portion of Marshall County and is the youngest township in Marshall County, becoming a township in 1856. Bennington contains 36 full sections. The land when first settled varied from marshy unwooded plains on the eastern section to timbered land to the west. It is named after Thomas Bennington, an early settler. Land in this area was granted by the government to veterans of the early wars, but as most did not wish to venture this far west it was opened up to homesteaders. Most of this land was first acquired in this manner. Our subject is the coal mine at Toluca with some early history of Toluca necessary to complete the scene. Toluca was first plotted by Mr. William W. Twist in 1888 when the Chicago & Santa Fe Railway brought its first right-of-way and extended its mainline from Kansas City to Chicago. This is now known as old town and lies south of the railroad tracks. In 1892 Mr. Charles J. Devlin began prospecting for coal in Toluca. Three veins of coal were found. Later the Devlin Coal Company was formed and purchased mineral rights to 11,000 acres in Bennington, Bell Plain, Evans and Roberts townships. The first sod was turned to sink mine Number One on February 9, 1893. This later was developed into one of the best equipped mines in Illinois. The third or lower vein of coal was mined, this being the best vein. It averaged about 28 inches from bottom to top. The shaft to this vein was 512 feet deep from the lower level to ground

A: level. Down below, the height of the main mine entries were between five and seven feet. These entries were shored with timbers to prevent rock from falling. The main entries ran from bottom of shaft north, south, east and west. From these main entries other branches extended over the bottom. As coal was dug out from the shaft, new entries were extended and the first ones abandoned or used for storage purposes, some being used for new entries and some kept open for circulation of air throughout the mine. At the time the mine closed in 1924 some of these entries extended over two miles from the shaft. Track was laid into these entries and coal cars were pulled over these by mules. Some distance from the shaft double track was laid to handle loaded cars coming out and empties being returned. There was at one time approximately 800 employed as miners and maintenance or company men. To the north of the shaft there was a stable which accommodated the 40 to 50 mules that were used to pull the cars. There was a fully equipped blacksmith shop also below. The mules were never brought up unless the mine shut down for a lengthy period of time such as a strike. As they were nearly blind, when they first came up they were brought up on cloudy days if possible. They were not worked for two days after being returned below as it took this long for them to become accustomed to the darkness again. There were two work shifts, the night shift being the maintenance men. When the coal or rock could not be loosened with pick or wedges dynamite was used. This was called shooting. This was done by drilling into the face of coal or rock to be loosened at strategic points then placing the dynamite in this hole and tamping dirt or wet clay on top of this. This particular duty required a light touch as cap and fuse were placed on dynamite before it was tamped in.

A: Track and switches were installed by maintenance men who also checked entries for loose rock and installed extra shoring where needed. Over-head rock was tested for looseness by tapping the seam. The rock could not be put alongside entries where coal had been removed, was stacked alongside of the road as daily progress forward. This was known as a room. This room of stacked rock and shoring were necessary to prevent the top rock from falling. Excess rock was hauled out and miners were not paid for this. The roadbed throughout the mine was not level as it ran with the contour of the coal. At some points the elevation varied quite rapidly. This created a problem as the coal cars had no braking system. On going downhill at such points the cars were slowed down by what was known as spragging. This was done by the mule driver getting off the car and placing a ~~short~~ stout piece of hardwood in the wheels of the car. The weight and speed determined the number of these needed. If the cars were not slowed sufficiently or if the mules stumbled and fell, which did happen occasionally, the car ran over him and he was killed or crippled so he had to be destroyed. When the cars reached the bottom of the incline the sprag was removed and thrown alongside the track. They would return to the top of the hill and empty cars going by later. The first miners used oil lamps which gave off considerable smoke and soot. These were later replaced with carbide lamps. Above ground a huge tower surrounded by a covered platform was erected 60 feet above the mouth of the shaft. From ground level to the platform was 30 feet. Upon this platform the load of coal and rock cars are drawn from below. This platform was built on an incline to give the coal an inclined pitch into the cars below. In descending, the coal passed over a set of strains

A: which relieved it of all the strainings or small coal. These strains were so arranged from top to bottom to allow the smaller coal to fall first, then came the nut coal and finally the lump. When a car of rock came up it was dumped on another part of this platform and tripped into a car of approximately the same size which would attach to a cable which pulled that to the slag pile. At the bottom a stationery lever tripped the car by the work of a device that lets the sides of the car fall open dumping the rock. As miners were paid by weight it was necessary to weigh each individual coal car brought up. Each miner was given a number. This number was stamped on a small metal peg. As the miner began loading his empty car he attached one of these pegs onto a small hook on the side of the car. As the car was weighed above by the weightmaster this tag was removed and recorded with weight. Miners received 75¢ per ton. The output of this mine in 1905 being 379,974 tons valued at \$450,104.00, of which 323,469 tons were loaded on cars and shipped. Gross wages paid in one year being \$275,000.00 or about \$23,000.00 per month. Coal cars were hoisted to the surface by 110 horse power steam driven engine. It took an average of fifteen to sixteen seconds to draw a load of coal to the surface. The boiler room housed six boilers of 100 horse power each. These furnished power to operate the hoist, ventilating fan, and water pumps. The mine as well as the fine agricultural products in this area brought much prosperity to Toluca. There were seven churches, three schools, two newspapers, and 40 rooms in a steamheated hotel and many stores with the latest fashions of the day. Thirty freight and eight passenger trains stopped at Toluca daily.

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A: The following is part of the history, early history of Woodford County. Travelers from the northeast came on the Great Lakes to Fort Dearborn, afterwards called Chicago, and continued their journey overland. Others came in covered wagons called prairie schooners. They suffered many hardships. The first railroad was built through Woodford County in 1854. This was the Illinois Central which passed through the eastern part of Woodford County. At this time this part of the county was practically unsettled. The railroad received substantial aid from the government being granted each alternate section of land for six miles on each side of the track. This gave the company thousands of acres of land in the best region of the county. For this grant of land the company agreed to pay into the State Treasury seven percent of its gross income annually. The income to the state from this source from 1855 to approximately 1910 exceeded \$27,000,000.00. In 1856 a second railroad was built in the county known as the eastern branch of the Peoria & Oquakwa, later called the Toledo, Peoria & Warsaw and now known as the Toledo, Peoria & Western. This road crossed the IC [Illinois Central] at right angles. As in the case of the first railroad it resulted in the establishment of several towns that have since become of considerable importance. It extended a mile north of the old town of Eureka and had the result of the locating of the city a mile north of the original site. This road has since become an important line of travel between Peoria and eastern cities and also has extensive Chicago traffic. The same year that witnessed the construction of this road saw the surveying of the Tonica & Petersburg Line through Metamora. But it was not constructed. In 1870 the St. Louis, Jacksonville & Chicago was built through Metamora and later was finished to Washington by the Chicago & Alton Company, which had

A: come into possession of the road. Metamora Township bonded itself for \$50,000.00 to aid in the construction of the road and Cazenovia Township also took stock in the company to the amount of \$50,000.00. The original plan was to complete the road further south but the work was not done. On completion of this line the Low Point post office and store were located a short distance from the present site of the town and were moved to the town as it is now located. In 1872 the Chicago, Pekin & Southwestern road was constructed. The various townships along the road subscribed liberally toward building the line. Minonk Township subscribed \$50,000.00, Olio Township voted \$50,000.00 after a bitter contest. The road was never completed through the township although grading was finished. The completion of the road required the building of two expensive bridges. This coupled with suits for damages incurred in grading probably resulted in the abandonment of the plans, the TP&W [Toledo, Peoria & Western] tracks being used instead. Roanoke Township did not vote bonds but donated \$5,000.00 in private subscriptions on condition that a switch be put in near the present site of Roanoke. The road is now under control of the Santa Fe Railway. For several months during 1892 this branch was a link in a line from St. Louis to Chicago, operating what was known as the Red Express. During the continuance of this arrangement Eureka was the end of the division, a roundhouse and turntable being located at the junction of the TP&W and the Santa Fe east of there. The trains were discontinued because of the protest of the Passengers Association which charged that the St. Louis end of the line with cutting rates. The last railroad to be constructed through Woodford County was the Lake Erie & Western through Montgomery Township. This was constructed in

A: 1888 and has resulted in the establishment of Goodfield and Congerville. This road is now known as the Norfolk & Western. Milling of grain was an important industry in this area at this time. Roanoke had one of the few mills left in operation in the county around 1900. It was erected in 1877 by Issac Snyder and is located near the Santa Fe tracks, west of the machine shops. In 1910 it was controlled by E. E. Husseman. Benson for many years possessed a mill that had drawn the attention of men far and wide. It was built on the pattern of the old Dutch windmill. It received power from four great wings which were propelled by the wind. These were 40 feet in length and consisted of lattice work on which canvass could be stretched. When the wind was strong a small amount of canvass was used and when the breeze was fainter a corresponding increase of canvass was used to produce the needed power. These wings were attached to a revolving cap that could be turned by the operator into the wind. Wheels, cogs and shaves were made of wood. The mill was erected in 1872 by J. N. Schmidt and brother. It is said that was but one other mill like this one in Illinois. Roanoke has always been a good grain point, situated in the heart of the rich prairie region it has been prosperous as a result of the wealth of the surrounding country. Soon after the completion of the first railroad in 1872 the first elevator was erected by William and Peter Crow. But it soon passed into the hands of Samuel Hallenback and W. B. Rickey. This elevator was afterwards purchased by Bartlett Fraizer & Company who later sold to N. R. Moore. The property is now owned by J. P. Garber, about 1910 this was. The second elevator was soon erected by C. K. Snyder. A third grain house was erected on the west side by John Wren of Washington. The banking interests of Roanoke have grown

A: to be of great importance. The early banking was in the hands of Herbst, Altofer and Sauder. But in 1895 the Farmer's Bank was organized. It prospered and was in the hands of H. D. Harms, president, L. W. Harms, chasier, and H. D. Hallenback, assistant cashier. This was about 1910. In 1893 Roanoke had a paper called the Roanoke Era which was abandoned and later had a publication called the Roanoke Call. Coal mining was an important industry in the early years of Roanoke. The second shaft in Woodford County first was at Minonk in 1869, was sunk in 1881. A company was organized to sink it in which Issac Snyder, Peter Kennell, and Peter Belsley were the shief investors. A shaft was sunk in the east part of town to the depth of 480 feet. A vein of fine quality coal was reached at this depth. The mine at one time produced 500 tons of coal a day and employed about three hundred men.

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Now I have an article on the village of Roanoke that appears to have been written approximately 1910. "Situated in the midst of prairies of unsurpassed fertility stretching for miles in every direction, underlain with rich deposits of coal that but needed the hands of man to bring them forth that they might pour their wealth into the coffers of the people, it is natural that Roanoke should become the prosperous little city. Forty years ago the present site of the town have little evidence of important achievements of or the attainment of business success. But in the memory of the older _____ Roanoke was founded, and these have witnessed its growth from a few scattered houses to a prosperous town with a thriving business. In 1866 A. J. Darling opened a blacksmith shop in what is now the western part of town. He later ran a hotel while

A: his son ran the blacksmith shop and machine shop. The first store was opened in Roanoke by M. Pfiffer, a pioneer of the county who later resided in Eureka and also had a business interest there. His store was located on the south side of Panther Creek. In the early 1870's the plans for the new railroad were completed and in 1872 the Chicago, Pekin & Southwestern was built through the town. The same year that the railroad was built the town was laid out by D. T. Fauber, Ben G. Kindig and Hiram Barney. The plaque was signed December 17, 1872. A post office was established and F. C. Pfiffer was appointed the first postmaster. He was since succeeded by J. F. Wheelwright who received a salary of \$12.00 per quarter. The town at once began to improve, Henry Frantz put up the first building erected after the town was laid out and John Frantz opened a store. Jacob Engle, son of Peter Engle, the pioneer, also opened a store. The first doctor in town was Dr. John, who served several terms as coroner. Fauber and Hall first bought grain in Roanoke although they never had an elevator, they dealt in coal. The lumber yard was conducted by Doc Miller but soon after passed into the hands of Philip Moore, who was one of the pioneers in _____ in that vicinity. In 1874 a movement was set a foot to organize _____ village. The town at that time had the 300 inhabitants necessary for its organization. A petition for such an action was circulated and on July 18, 1874 the people voted to incorporate. John Frantz, M. W. Gish, and A. Fisher were judges of the election, and R. A. Fisher and R. T. Ogle were clerks."

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A: "The first mayor was S. W. Schulengerger and the first clerk was G. P. Lyons. The town and country surrounding enjoyed an excellent

A: telephone service operated by the Roanoke Telephone Company and under the efficient management of E. N. Wheelwright. The first line that sought admission to the town was from Secor. A little later one came in from the south and west and entered Wren's Grain Office. Soon after eight lines were carried into N. R. Moore's Grain Office. John Schoon was the first manager and in 1903 E. N. Wheelwright took the management of the exchange. In 1908 a stock company was formed and now has 265 phones in operation, this was about in 1910. The office is nicely arranged and well put and the wires along main streets of the town are underground." They talk about laying lines underground nowadays. "In 1899 another important industry was started in Roanoke by George H. Williams who in that year opened a tile and brick yard in that city. In 1906 he sold his interest to the American Clay Products Company, but Mr. Williams still manages the plant. The manager of this plant, George H. Williams has an interesting private history, having spent twelve years on the sea. He has served before the mast and also down below. He also made one voyage as second mate. He was twice shipwrecked, one being tossed about in a lifeboat for three days and nights, finally coming to land on the Fiji Islands where the shipwrecked party was taken up. Roanoke has suffered seriously at various times from fire. In 1892 the west block was burned, destroying a number of buildings, entailing a loss approaching \$20,000.00 The fire started about midnight and there was no means of fighting it save by the use of buckets. In 1902 a second fire occurred which destroyed the buildings on the east side of the street. Two years afterwards, A. Rosenak, whose store was destroyed in the second fire suffered a second loss in the burning

A: of his store. In the spring of 1909 a number of frame buildings in the city hall block were burned causing a loss of several thousand dollars. Although Roanoke has a number of fine artesian wells that have stood the test for many years the town has been slow about taking the steps for construction of waterworks. The city now has a good well and will doubtless soon have a good system in operation. Roanoke has been lighted by electricity for a number of years. The plant has been owned and operated by E. E. Husseman until W. J. Whetzel purchased it and furnishes light from his powerhouse in Eureka.- The religious interests of the city and township are well looked to by a number of churches representing various demoninations. In 1846 the Christian Church was organized in the vicinity of Roanoke. As in so many cases the early services were held in the homes of the members until a suitable place of worship could be secured. It was not until 1873 that their present church was erected. The organization was a result of the labor of Elder Abner Peeler. Two years later the Methodists began holding service in the neighborhood but their church was not built until 1875. In recent years a Catholic church has been erected at Roanoke and has a number of members. The schools of Roanoke have been the center of deep interest among the better class of people. The school has a three year high school course, and is prospering under the superintendency of O. C. Kindig. In 1909 the district was enlarged so as to take in two outlying districts and a modern school building is in contemplation. Among the names of men who have ben prominent in the development of the town are C. A. Sauder, Henry Altofer, and Theo Herbst. The father of the former, Christian Sauder, came to Illinois 50 years ago and the names of Sauder has been

A: highly respected throughout the county. Mr. Altofer has been in the county since 1874 and has been connected with the business interests of Roanoke for many years. A. Rosenak has extensive business interests and has been closely identified with the town. The city at present is governed by the following officers: President A. L. Ray, Trustees, J. E. Woltzen, T. E. Brown, Samuel Ramsey, Charles Preller, John Gray, E. L. Fincham, A. J. Nofzinger, Treasurer Jacob Sand, Jr. and Marshall J. W. Fauber."

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