

Coal Mines along the Montour Railroad/Montour Trail (Bob Ciminel ©2011)

No history of the Montour Railroad would be complete without a discussion of the coal mines that provided the reasons for the railroad's existence. From its construction in 1877 until it was abandoned in 1983, the Montour was first and foremost a coal-hauling railroad. At its peak, the Montour served 27 mines along its 42-mile right-of-way, with the centerpiece being the Champion No. 1 coal washer located just south of the intersection of U. S. Route 22 and PA Route 980.

The first coal mine in the Pittsburgh region was located on "Coal Hill" [Mount Washington] across the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh, described by Captain Thomas Hutchins (c. 1730-1789), an officer with the British army's colonial troops in Pennsylvania, during a visit to Fort Pitt in 1760.

Coal mining began in earnest with the Industrial Revolution, and by 1884 the Pittsburgh region provided 25% of the bituminous coal produced in the United States. The 1886 *Annual Report of the Geological Survey of Pennsylvania* provides a brief description of the coal field at the western end of the Montour Railroad between Imperial and Montour Junction:

"At the Montour mine of the Imperial Coal Co., the initial dip of the coal is to the northwest, the coal [seam] rising south-eastward at least as far as the Steubenville Pike, before the dip is reversed towards Robinson [Run].

In the Cliff mines, of the same company, located about 2.5 miles further east; the natural dip is to the southeast"

Figure 1 is an excerpt from *Lee's Map of the Industries of Western Pennsylvania No. 1* showing the western end of the Montour Railroad and the Imperial Coal Company coke ovens and mines existing at that time. Note the dotted line showing the outcrop of the Pittsburgh Coal Seam and its elevation above the railroad.

The Montour Railroad's beginnings, along with the first two mines along the railroad are described in the following excerpts from the *History of Allegheny County Pennsylvania*:

The Montour Railroad company, William McCreey, president; L. M. Jenkins, treasurer, and F. L. Shallenberger, superintendent, was incorporated in 1878. The road is eleven and one-half miles long. The terminal points are Montour Junction, on the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie railroad, in [Moon] township, and Montour City (Imperial), in North Fayette. The road was built for coal transportation from the mines of the Imperial Coal company, a corporation identical in management and control, but also affords passenger facilities, and has proven an important factor in the development of the Montour valley. The coke ovens on the line of this road, on the farm formerly owned by William Ewing, about a mile from the Ohio river, constitute the only industrial feature of any importance in the township. The ovens are one hundred and twenty in number.

The village of Imperial was laid out by the Imperial Coal company, ten years [ago]. Prior to that its site was the farm of Robert Wilson. The population is largely composed of miners and their

families, and numbers about six hundred. Most of the houses are owned by the company. The town is superior in some respects to ordinary mining villages.

The company now operates three mines – two on Montour’s run, in North Fayette township, and one at Bower Hill, on the Pan Handle road. The two first named are operated by wire-rope haulage. The daily output of the three mines is one thousand tons. The company operates coke-works on the line of the Montour railroad, near Montour junction. There are 102 ovens here, and a coke-crusher, for preparing domestic coke, has recently been added.

The Montour railroad, though a distinct organization, is under the control of this company. Four hundred men are employed in the mines of the company, at the coke ovens and on the railroad.

The company owns one thousand acres of coal-land, and operates the “Montour” and “Cliff” mines, both in North Fayette township. The first coal shipments were made in July 1879. The amount produced ranges from eight hundred to one thousand tons daily. Five hundred men are employed.

Imperial (formerly called Montour City), the terminus of the railroad of that name, is a town of about one hundred and thirty houses, and is virtually owned by the Imperial Coal Company. It is a place of recent origin, and presents the features usually associate with mining towns. A postoffice was established under the name of Imperial in April, 1880.”

Aerial photographs and mine maps from the Depression Era provide the most accurate information about the mines along the Montour Railroad. The names and descriptions of the mines will be based on the period between 1937 and 1942 except in cases where additional information is available.

The following sources will be used in the articles:

Aerial photographs of the area southwest of Pittsburgh were taken by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agriculture Adjustment Administration (now the Farm Service Agency) between 1937 and 1942 and again between 1967 and 1972. The images were digitized by Penn State University under a program sponsored by the U.S. Geological Survey and made available on line at the *Penn Pilot* web site: <http://www.pennpilot.psu.edu/>. (Note: All hyperlinks were valid as of the date of this article, June 12, 2011)

Underground mine maps were obtained from the National Mine Map Repository, Appalachian Region, operated by the Office of Surface Mining. The NMMR facility in Greentree, PA, contains over 135,000 maps dating back to the 1850s: <http://mmr.osmre.gov/>.

Historic and current topographic maps are from the MyTopo.com web site, which maintains the U.S. Geological Survey’s collection of historic maps (<http://historical.mytopo.com/index.cfm>) and also provides online downloadable copies of current maps: <http://mapserver.mytopo.com/homepage/index.cfm?BPID=MAP0060030900%2C1%2C1%2C0&CFID=11621636&CFTOKEN=37573630>.

Present day views of coal mine sites will be taken from Google™ earth:

<http://www.google.com/earth/index.html>.

Historical information on mine operators and dates of operation will be based on information from the *Virtual Museum of Coal Mining in Western Pennsylvania* web site:

<http://patheoldminer.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>.

Historical photographs of the mines are from a variety of sources, and the photographer or collection owner will be referenced when known. However, I have been downloading photos from multiple sources over the past 10 years, and any photo not provided with references can be attributed to my lack of knowledge, or simply an oversight.

The mine histories will be published in Adobe™ pdf format and can be viewed with Adobe™ Reader X (10.0.1) available for download here: <http://get.adobe.com/reader/>.

Each article will be posted on the Montour Railroad Historical Society Yahoo group (membership required): http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/montour_rr/.

When the series is completed, all of the articles will be available for purchase on CD-ROM through the Montour Railroad Historical Society: <http://mrhs.montourrr.com/>. The MRHS is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving physical artifacts and the oral history of the Montour Railroad and providing historical interpretation along the Montour Trail, a multi-use facility that has preserved and maintained the original Montour Railroad right-of-way: <http://www.montourtrail.org/>.

Figure 1

(Note: The Montour Railroad is incorrectly identified as the Montour Run R.R.)

