



## COAL FEVER: FUEL SCARCITY IN EARLY SOUTHWESTERN KANSAS

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"250 feet to water,  
50 miles to fuel . . .  
6 inches to h—l  
God Bless Our Home"

—Sign on a deserted  
dug-out in Mead county.<sup>1</sup>

CIVILIZATION east of the Mississippi river, according to Walter Prescott Webb, stood on three legs—land, water, and wood. When it reached the Great Plains, "not one but two of these legs were withdrawn,—water and timber—and civilization was left on one leg—land."<sup>2</sup> Certainly the course of settlement in Kansas reaffirms that thesis with dramatic precision. To the new homesteader, the prairie of western Kansas seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see—"to the very horizon and beyond"—with scarcely a ripple and with only an occasional interruption by a fringe of trees

Although water and timber were scarce on the Kansas plains, the settlers came, lured by the prospect of cheap land and optimistic that prairie scarcities would be offset by hard work and Yankee ingenuity. The dugout and sod house were temporary solutions to the lack of wood for building material, and windmills provided the homesteader with another scarce necessity, water. But a supply of cheap coal for fuel was needed and the slightest hint of its discovery could cause "coal fever" in the vicinity.

1. The Coldwater *Republican*, September 17, 1885.

2. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1936), p. 9.

marking a run-off creek. Although it was obviously not the Great American Desert of earlier accounts, the land remained overpowering in its expanse. Still, the lure of such unbroken vastness was to prove irresistible to an agrarian society that traditionally counted land as the true measure of wealth.

As the pressure of population came to bear on the East, the prospects of wealth where "a straight furrow can be plowed a hundred miles long," offset whatever shortcomings might also be found to exist there. For the land-hungry Hoosier or New Englander, who described his farms in rods, the prospective discomforts caused by a paucity of wood and water seemed a small sacrifice to make in order to measure land holdings in quarter sections.

Not that the necessity for wood and water had escaped even the most tender of green-horns. The diaries and journals of the earliest traders and travelers devote much of their space to recounting the trouble they had in meeting these demands.<sup>3</sup> The homesteaders

3. However, George Stauth told of one Ohio settler who found room in his crowded wagon for a stump puller to help clear the timber claim he had been sold.—George J. Stauth, "Reminiscences of a Ford County Pioneer," typewritten ms., Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

were, however, "long on optimism," and reasoned that Yankee ingenuity and hard work would overcome these prairie hardships just as surely as they had those in the East. It was a conviction born of a strong Protestant ethic and long experience.

There was also an emotional rationalization, encouraged by the land agents and boomers, which held that the Creator operated under a "law of compensation." Having failed to provide trees for the use of the prairie settlers, these perpetual optimists believed God must have provided some other fuel supply, for instance, coal, and some source of water other than running streams.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the prospective Kansan found great difficulty in discerning the truth in the conflicting stories regarding the scarcities of the prairie. Land agents and townsite boosters fabricated glowing accounts of gushing springs, running rivers, and ample rain. It was not poetic fancy but crass commercial propaganda that dotted the early maps of southwestern Kansas with such town names as Spring Lake, Greensward, Shallow Water, Sharon Springs, and Rainbelt.<sup>5</sup>

IT WAS true that the presence or absence of underground water appeared to be an unpredictable, even capricious thing. When the Pearlette colony from Zanesville, Ohio, settled in Meade county, some chose to stay near Crooked creek because of an apparent abundant supply of water there. Addison Bennett, on the other hand, decided to immediately face up to what appeared to be a monumental task, of hand digging a well. He moved to his claim some distance away from the rest of the colony and settled down to the task. To his amazement, water in abundance was reached at eight feet. Unfortunately, the others who had pitched tents and made other make-shift quarters near the stream, found that "during

the summer Crooked Creek went dry . . . ; all the deep holes along the head of the creek cracking open like frozen ground in winter."<sup>6</sup>

Locating an adequate supply of water determined the immediate survival and ultimate success of the homesteader; and, before the railroads came, it also determined whether a townsite would flourish. When settlers a few miles from Spring Lake, also in Meade county, discovered artesian springs, even the town hall was "snaked across the prairie," to the new site which was renamed Artois and later Artesian City in order to make clear to prospective settlers its invaluable asset.<sup>7</sup>

For most of the homesteaders, however, an adequate supply of water was achieved only with considerable sacrifice. Their recorded memories tell of the painful drudgery of digging to great depths or hauling for great distances. One pioneer daughter recalls the experience:

The cedar trees at the farm are the ones mother's father sent to them from Missouri while they were still hauling water and was kept alive by water from the springs four miles away. A neighbor, . . . 1½ miles northwest of the folks, had the only deep well in the community at this time. So many neighbors hauled water from there, it was difficult to get a turn without waiting for hours.

They hauled water seven years. Since they did not have the money to drill a well dad decided to dig one. It was a big job to dig a hole 36" x 36", 150 feet deep. Besides the dangers of cave ins, damp gas would sometimes accumulate, a signal system for alarm was a string attached to a bell at the top. At the ring of the bell the worker would be pulled up. After [an] almost fatal experience, when Newt Novinger was almost unconscious before they got him to the top in the bucket, they would lower a lantern into the hole and if it went out, [they knew] deadly gas was present, [and] then fresh air was pumped down with bellows. It took a month to dig the well. In time pipe was purchased and then a windmill. What a glorious feeling that must have been to have water close by instead of the chore of hauling it four miles.<sup>8</sup>

The windmill and later the drilling rigs with their small-bore drills, eventually brought an acceptable solution. But even with these sophisticated advances, maintaining an adequate water supply was a chancy business. The drills sometimes failed to tap underground sources or brought brackish, unpotable water to the surface. Just over the line in Ford county,

4. F. V. Hayden, *Preliminary Report of the United States Geological Survey of Wyoming and Portions of Contiguous Territories* (Washington, 1872), pp. 101-102.

5. Some names followed honest assessments. The story of one such literal adaptation is told by the granddaughter of one of the founders:

"My grandfather's claim was south of the present State Lake. . . . Here on the claim or near it was Sand Creek where the water was better than usual and if there was no water in the creek there was always water a few inches below the surface. After grandmother arrived, looking over the claim and noting the good water she remarked, 'This is a good place to be, at water. So here they stayed and called it Atwater.'—The Bonham Story—Written by Patty Brown Haskings, County Council of Women's Clubs Meade county, comp., *Pioneer Stories of Meade County* (Hutchinson, 1965), p. 20. Hereinafter cited, *Pioneer Stories of Meade*.

6. William Jobling, "Early History of Meade County," *Meade Globe*, July 4, 1891.

7. "The Dead Town List," Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka; Spring Lake *Homet*, later the Artesian City *Homet*, June, 1885-August, 1889.

8. "A Pioneer Family—Mr. and Mrs. R. R. Singley—Written by Flossie M. (Singley) Bolan," *Pioneer Stories of Meade*, pp. 216-217.

within 10 miles of Artesian City, the springs were heavily laced with sulfur and gave off the aroma of rotten eggs. Then, too, the windmill was dependent upon an unpredictable nature. It may have seemed to the Easterner that the winds of the plains never ceased, but there were calm days in the summer and frozen pipes in the winter which plagued the farmer until electrical power made possible a self-contained, enclosed well. It was an early folk axiom: "No woman could live in this county who cannot climb a windmill tower or shoot a gun."<sup>9</sup>

**I**F MAINTAINING sufficient water for the household and the stock was a burdensome chore, there was, at least, a local and permanent solution. For the other leg of civilization there was neither. For all his labor and ingenuity, the western Kansan never found an adequate, near-at-hand substitute for wood. The homesteader's adaptive powers were indeed remarkable. He did "make do" with materials he found on the prairies but in every instance the substitute for timber remained temporary and insufficient. Long-range, adequate supplies were found only after the railroads made it possible to bring them in from some outside source.

Nevertheless, the story of the homesteader's imaginative use of what he did find on the prairie is a remarkable one. But from the beginning an improvisation was recognized to be just that. Sod houses and dugouts were never intended to be more than temporary shelters. The use of limestone in parts of northwestern Kansas for fence posts and houses was an exception limited to that area and was not available to the settlers of southwestern Kansas. It is also true that the many brickyards which appeared throughout Kansas might have furnished much of the material for exterior construction but could not solve the total building and fencing needs of Kansas. While shelters could be improvised, it was the scarcity of fuel that caused the greatest hardships.

Cow and buffalo chips formed the principal fuel for many settlers during the first two or three years on a Kansas claim. If they provided a fast, smoky fire and were not very durable, they were, at least, free for the taking. The

homesteaders found them to be as strange and unlikely a substitute for wood as any contemporary housewife might and laughed about their own adjustment to what nature had provided. One of the more succinct descriptions of their utility came from the editor of the *Pearlette Call*:

You know wood is scarce in Meade county, and coal expensive, hence you will doubtless wonder what we do for fuel.

Those who can afford it buy coal in Dodge . . . while others, having teams, get some wood in the canyons east of us.

But most of us burn chips—buffalo chips we call them, but the majority of those we find were doubtless dropped by Texas cattle, when passing north.

These chips make a tolerable fair fire, but of course burn out very rapidly; consequently to keep up a good fire you must be continually poking the chips in and taking the ashes out. Still we feel very thankful for even this fuel.

As the gathering expedition swept farther out from the dugout, it was clear that the supply was limited. Restocking "prairie coal" did not come easy, although there were the rare and fortuitous instances of homesteaders persuading a trail herd boss to stop over night on his claim in order to provide fuel for the cook stove.

Numerous other wood substitutes were used—sunflower stalks, corn cobs, corn stocks, and even the grain itself.<sup>11</sup> Once wheat became a dominant crop, the abundance of straw led to the development of "hayburner" stoves. In spite of an intricate arrangement of coils, springs, and drums to control the fire, the "hayburners" required the almost constant attention of one person to keep them burning. One verse of the "prairie anthem," "The Little Old Sod Shanty on My Claim," reveals the homesteaders' judgment of hay as a fuel substitute:

And when I left my eastern home  
So happy and so gay  
To try to win my wealth and fame  
I little thought that I'd come down  
To burning twisted hay  
In my little old sod shanty on my claim.<sup>12</sup>

11. When coal reached \$16 a ton and corn was selling for 32 cents a bushel, the Department of Agriculture urged the farmers to burn corn to save money.—*The Annals of Kansas*, ed. Kirke Mechem (Topeka, 1956), v. 2, p. 306.

12. Edward Everett Dale, "Wood and Water: Twin Problems of the Prairie Plains," *Nebraska History*, Lincoln, v. 29 (June, 1948), p. 96. At least one ingenious contraption reportedly had better results: "A containe[r] fashioned like a wash boiler was made of sheet iron, this was filled with fine hay from the mangers, packed tightly, then inverted over the top of a cook stove after the lids had been removed. This would keep fire for several hours, usually sufficient for one evening's fuel."—Vallie McKee, "Passing of the West," typewritten ms., Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

Since it was abundant, it was expected that straw could meet other needs as well. The Larned *Chronoscope* urged local citizens to support a project to establish a paper mill which would utilize straw as the major ingredient.<sup>13</sup> The town boosters of Kinsley saw in their "straw stock" an ideal substitute for lumber. An article in the October 22, 1887, issue of the Kinsley *Daily Mercury* told of a new manufacturing concern which had chosen the town for its new plant to manufacture "straw-board," an artificial lumber, that was "waterproof, fireproof, lighter, and ridiculously inexpensive. . . ." The editor continued:

One of the greatest hindrances to the settler on the prairies of Kansas has been the excessive cost of lumber, necessitating the unhealthy sod-house and dug-out which in some localities obtain to the almost utter exclusion of anything else, but the successful manufacture of straw lumber on the plains, will soon relegate this primitive architecture to oblivion, or at least make it as great a curiosity as the buffalo.

The straw-board factory, it was predicted, coupled with a packing house which was also negotiating for a construction site, would make Kinsley "second to no other city in Kansas, save the possible exception of Wichita." "Business Barometer Booming—Buildings Being Built. Fair Fame Forging Forward Finely."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the depression of 1887 swept the straw-board factory and most of the rest of Edwards county prosperity from the scene.<sup>15</sup> Straw was not to be the salvation of Kansas.

What the western Kansas homesteads seriously missed was the Easterners' old enemy—the forest. The few cottonwood, hackberry, and willow along the creeks were poor substitutes for the "lofty pine" and "towering oaks" of the eastern "forest primeval." Settlers in Kansas would travel miles to bring back a wagon load of wood. Kansans hauling wood across the border had largely denuded the Cherokee Outlet of timber long before it was opened for settlement in 1893.<sup>16</sup> "The Old Timer," writing in the Coldwater *Western Star*, explained that an important income supplement in the early days had come from hauling

cedar post and fire wood out of the "Strip." As a result, he complained, "only an occasional scrawny evergreen scarcely large enough to make a Christmas tree" remained in the canyons south of Barber and Comanche counties.<sup>17</sup>

Naturally, the homesteader tried to correct nature's error. Where the Eastern pioneer carved a farm, tree by tree, out of the timber, the western Kansas settler planted a grove as a shelter, tree by tree, around his house. The federal government joined in the effort by offering "Timber Claims" as an inducement to bring trees to the prairie. The Timber Culture act called for cultivation of 10 acres for at least 10 years and the planting of a specific number of trees on each acre. Over nine million acres in Kansas were entered under this act.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, these groves scattered about the region might have partially alleviated the shortage of wood, but it is doubtful they would have been a final solution.

Without native timber, fuel remained hard to come by and no substitute was ignored. Even small unlikely sources were exploited. For instance, a constant annoyance to the early railroads was the pilfering of railroad ties by the homesteaders, who used them to warm the sod houses along the right of way.

**I**N THE END, however, it was these same railroads that brought the first substantial solution to the fuel shortage. It was not until the tracks crossed the prairie that it was possible to transport cheap coal in quantity to the plains. Only then was the fuel scarcity permanently relieved. It can be argued that cheap coal in abundance was as important in the settlement of western Kansas as barbed wire fences, dryland farming, the windmill, and the Colt revolver. Even when the homesteader could not afford to burn coal exclusively, it was essential to have a small stockpile to see him through the crisis of a blizzard. After three severe winters culminating with the blizzard of 1886, the slightest interruption of the coal supply or even the rumor of its interruption was enough to bring panic to an isolated farm family. Two specific instances, some 15 years apart, illustrate the extent to which Kansans would go to prevent this from happening.

17. "Comanche Co., Thirty Years Ago and Now—Written for the *Star* by 'Old Timer.'"—Coldwater *Western Star*, April 6, 1917.

18. William Frank Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1957), p. 172.

13. Larned *Chronoscope*, April 16, 1880.

14. Kinsley *Banner-Graphic*, December 16, 1887.

15. James C. Malin, "The Kinsley Boom of the Late Eighties," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. 4 (February, 1935), pp. 43-49.

16. Dale, "Wood and Water," p. 93; Nellie Snyder Yost, *Medicine Lodge; The Story of a Kansas Frontier Town* (Chicago, 1970), p. 51.

# EUREKA!

## Comanche County's Coal Find.

A MINE OF WEALTH UNCOVERED.

*The Black Diamonds Show Up  
in Superior Quality on the  
Ranch of Capt. Pepperd  
Near Wilmore.*

Wednesday last word was received at the REVIEW office that Capt. C. C. Pepperd, of Wilmore, ten miles east of Coldwater, had struck a vein of superior coal with a drill, seventy-five feet below the surface. Yesterday morning a REVIEW reporter, in company with Glave Goddard, of the Greensburg Rustler, drove out to Wilmore for the purpose of satisfying themselves in regard to the truth of the report. We found Messrs. Hazlett and Miller, owners of the drill, hard at work, and raising superior looking coal. Mr. Hazlett informed our reporter that at twenty feet below the surface the drill encountered and passed through a body of iron eight feet in thickness, then into a kind of clay, then several feet through a kind of sand rock, which lays immediately above the coal. At the time our reporter left the find, yesterday at 1 o'clock p. m., the drill had gone through forty-six inches of very superior coal and yet in it. The thickness of the vein is as yet unknown, but should there not be another inch of coal the find is a valuable one and will be of untold value to this section of Kansas.

Capt. Pepperd owns a large body of land in the vicinity of the find,

The memory of the blizzard of 1886 had made the western Kansans extremely nervous as the winter of 1887 deepened. There had been many reported cases of coal shortages the previous year and coal dealers had placed heavier than usual orders.<sup>19</sup> When these orders were not filled, all three of the Syracuse newspapers ran editorials pointing to possible danger. The *Syracuse Journal* in late November reported:

The inability of our dealers to obtain any adequate supply of coal . . . is cause for great alarm. The result of this scarcity in event of a blizzard, would be harrowing in the extreme. We certainly have no desire to unduly excite fear in the public mind, but this is too serious a matter to trifle with, and a danger confronts us even now. We have seen a storm in this county once when for more than two weeks a man's life would be in peril who attempted to leave home at all, and when only two trains of cars passed Syracuse in thirty days.<sup>20</sup>

The *Syracuse Sentinel* expressed much the same alarm and blamed the Canon City Coal Company for not supplying the dealers. The company was reported to be some one thousand car loads behind.<sup>21</sup> The *Kansas City Star* picked up the story and warned that if the coal dealers' orders continued to be ignored there would be violence throughout western Kansas and eastern Colorado. It proved to be more of a prediction than a warning; violence of a sort, at least lawlessness, did occur.

Syracuse had become the coal marketing center for a 90-mile radius. The farmers in the area, one of the editors explained, after "driving from fifty to ninety miles, leaving their families exposed to all kinds of weather, they themselves in danger of being caught on the open prairie, . . . are not expected to be in the best of humor when they arrive at their destination and find no coal. . . ." <sup>22</sup> The violence when it came was rather mild but there was no denying the determination of the

19. *The Annals of Kansas*, v. 1, p. 3.

20. *Syracuse Journal*, November 25, 1887.

21. *Syracuse Sentinel*, December 2, 1887.

22. *Syracuse Democratic Principle*, December 7, 1887.

One instance of a "coal strike" was the one in Comanche county in 1887. The effect of coal fever there was not much different from the early stages of gold fever in other parts of the West. The editor of the *Coldwater Review* boasted of the county's new prosperity and rich resource and on October 28, 1887, cried "Eureka!" in the headline on a story about the discovery of the "black diamonds" (left).

farmer. The Syracuse *Democratic Principle* described the incident under the headline:

VI ET ARMIS!!

Is the Way Western Kansas Secures Its Coal.

The Hardy Sons of Kansas, Side-Track a Train  
and Secure the Wherewith to Keep Warm

Thus it was some ons [sic] hundred and fifty men viewed the matter last Friday afternoon. Many had families at their homes without fuel of any kind, and it was decided that no more coal should pass through Syracuse while the surrounding country was destitute. About 1 o'clock p.m. a train had considerable difficulty in passing this station. About four o'clock a large number of wagons, and some three hundred people were waiting for the freight to pull into town, which had stopped on the main track some distance west of the station. One half of those present may be said to have been there out of mere curiosity, yet sympathizing with the coal prospectors. At last the train slowly pulled into town, but it was no good. The switch was closely guarded by a company of determined men, and there was no escape in that direction, even with one locomotive pulling and one pushing, which had been sent to the assistance of the captured train, they could not overcome the pressure of breaks applied by men who swarmed over the tops of the cars like veteran railroaders. Coupling pins were soon withdrawn and the train was helpless. There was no disposition to deeds of violence, every thing was accomplished quietly and with that systematic precision, that denoted some organization. Not a seal was broken; the teams weighed at the coal yards, ranged alongside of the cars and waited for them to be broken by the proper authorities.

A dispatch was sent to the coal company, explaining the situation, who at once ordered six cars for Syracuse. Cheer after cheer, was given, as the doors were opened and loading commenced. As the teamsters finished, they filed quietly away to the coal yards, weighed and paid for their coal like men. Taking it all in all, it was about the most legal case of lawlessness, we ever witnessed.<sup>23</sup>

The story was picked up by nearly every newspaper in Kansas, usually with some exaggeration. The Sun City *Union* blamed the "A.T. & S.F." railroad for the shortage and reported great suffering, particularly in Garden City. The results were that "Threats are openly made of burning the railroad properties all along its line in western Kansas. . . ."<sup>24</sup>

The incident was reported with some embellishments and great sympathy in both Larned and Kinsley. However, when a few men in Kinsley attempted to follow the Syracuse example, they were charged with robbery and found little local support for their action. The Larned *Chronoscope*, in fact, questioned the whole moral climate of rival Kinsley, espe-

cially, the editor explained, since the coal that was stolen had been billed for Larned. The Kinsley *Daily Mercury* admitted that the situation was much different from that in far western Kansas. It was not a case of "steal or freeze," for there was coal, albeit high priced coal, available in town. The "toughs" who stole the coal deserved the fine they were given. But even with this agreement, the Kinsley editor found a way of putting his rival down. The difference, he said, between Kinsley and the self-righteous Larned was that Larned apparently had no such element because it was a well known fact that "Toughs like rats, always desert a sinking ship."<sup>25</sup>

The Syracuse press was at some pains the next few weeks, first, in defending the action of the farmers and, later, trying to correct the image of suffering homesteads which went against their usual "booster" rhetoric.

Newspapers throughout the east and some of the papers in eastern Kansas—be it said to their shame—are publishing the meanest kind of exaggerations about the sufferings of the residents in this portion of the west. Death by starvation and exposure, suffering and want, and other stories equally awful and untrue being the foundation of long articles purporting to give a description of the present condition of western Kansas and eastern Colorado.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the blandishments of the press, the specter of a winter blizzard without fuel was indeed terrifying and did not pass quickly from the minds of the western Kansans. One of the first measures passed by the state legislature to avert disaster after the crop failures of 1894 was one providing for the distribution of coal. In Edwards county some 100 grants were made.<sup>27</sup> Farther west the conditions were even worse. In 1895 coal was shipped and distributed by the State Board of Railroad Commissioners to some 233 needy applicants in Colby alone.<sup>28</sup> Fluctuating prices, strikes, transportation delays, misdirected assignments, and railroad confiscation made for continued concern. Once again in 1902 the farmers took matters in their hands.

In this instance the coal dealers in Greensburg had been unable to have their orders honored. Some 18 cars of Canon City, Colo., coal billed to Greensburg had been "appro-

25. Kinsley *Daily Mercury*, December 7, 1887; Malin, "The Kinsley Boom," p. 47.

26. Syracuse *Democratic Principle*, December 28, 1887.

27. Malin, "The Kinsley Boom," p. 181.

28. *The Annals of Kansas*, v. 1, p. 189.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Sun City *Union*, December 9, 1887.

riated" by the Rock Island railroad. At Bucklin, some 20 miles west, the coal supply was completely exhausted. At Mullinville, 11 miles away, there was a limited supply which had been acquired earlier in the season. When this became known, farmers hurried to the town with their wagons and within "two days not a pound was left." Gov. William Stanley and the Board of Railroad Commissioners were notified but they offered no relief.<sup>29</sup>

When the weather turned "dreary, cold and rainy" the temper of the citizen, according to the editor of the Greensburg *Republican*, "took on the same line." At this point, the editor, Glove Goddard, takes up the story:

A few days of milder weather set in and by the aid of store boxes, rubbish and by borrowing small quantities of coal from each other fair comfort for all was maintained. But on Friday last another spell of bad weather set in, and when on Saturday morning it was learned that a car of coal had been set out here for the company's own use a consultation was held by the citizens with the result that when the railroad employes broke the seal on the car for the purpose of unloading it, it was as if by magic that some forty determined men, accompanied by teams, arrived and began to help themselves to the fuel. The proceeding was quiet and orderly. Pay for the coal was tendered the agent but he would not, or rather could not, accept it, so each one that got any of the coal had it weighed to him on Mr. Watts' scale and a record was kept so that the company in its own good time can collect its pay through an authorized agent. It was amusing to see the employes of the road shoveling for dear life to get all they could for themselves before the car was empty.

On Monday a car of Weir City nut coal was received from the east by one of our dealers and the fuel situation is thus relieved for a week or two as far as this city is concerned.<sup>30</sup>

It is small wonder that the homesteaders greeted the slightest hint of the discovery of coal in their vicinity with exaggerated enthusiasm. Naturally, the land and townsites agents, embellished such stories, but even the local sober citizens—farmers, bankers, and cattlemen—found the prospect of abundant local fuel exciting. In their wildest fantasies they saw their own hamlet turned into an industrial metropolis, railroads fighting for access to the area, and land prices sky rocketing.<sup>31</sup>

There were also the more immediate and prosaic advantages of fuel near at hand at a reasonable price. Canon City coal in Cold-

water cost the farmer \$9.00 a ton in 1887. A farmer near Pittsburg in 1891, on the other hand, could get coal for 50 cents a ton and a housewife in Leavenworth in 1890 could get a bushel of coal for nine cents.<sup>32</sup> The *Kansas City Times* observed that at 50 cents a ton of coal was cheaper than corn cobs.<sup>33</sup> The western Kansas homesteader, who was hard pressed to find any suitable fuel, found the thought of coal as cheap as corn cobs a fascinating one. So for very practical reasons, the report of an accidental discovery of even traces of coal elicited immediate enthusiastic response.

REPORTS of coal discovery were fairly common, usually as a result of the search for that other scarce necessity—water. With the introduction of the water drilling rigs, the exploration could go to depths of 175 feet with comparative ease. In the process the drill passed through many formations and one of the easiest to recognize was coal. These were well drillers, however, not geologists and they lacked the precision and objectivity of the scientists. Furthermore, their drills did not bring exact core samples to the surface, so it was easy, even tempting, to think the layers of coal were thicker than they actually were. Seven inches of coal at 75 feet could not be profitably mined and should not have caused much excitement. Seven feet of coal at any depth did. Even the seven inches held out hope and the settlers of western Kansas were optimistic. Not surprisingly, the report of a few inches of coal could bring excitement to a fever pitch.

Two instances of "coal strikes," one at the beginning of the homestead era and one at the end, will illustrate that the effect of "coal fever" on the community was not much different from the early stages of "gold fever" in other parts of the West. The first discovery was in Comanche county in 1887 and the other was in Gray county in 1908.

Comanche county was organized in 1885 with its major town incorporated a year earlier. By 1887 Coldwater had a newspaper, a bank, merchants, and the prospects of modest growth. It was still primarily cattle country although homesteaders in increasing numbers were digging homes into the bluffs and into the banks of draws. The great Comanche Cattle

29. *Greensburg Republican*, November 27, 1902.

30. *Ibid.*, November 27, 1902.

31. For a discussion of the Nebraska land-promoter's zeal in supporting exploration for coal, see Robert N. Manley "Wealth Beneath the Prairie: The Search for Coal in Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, v. 47 (June, 1966), pp. 157-176.

32. *The Annals of Kansas*, v. 1, pp. 93, 126.

33. *Kansas City (Mo.) Times*, December 3, 1891.

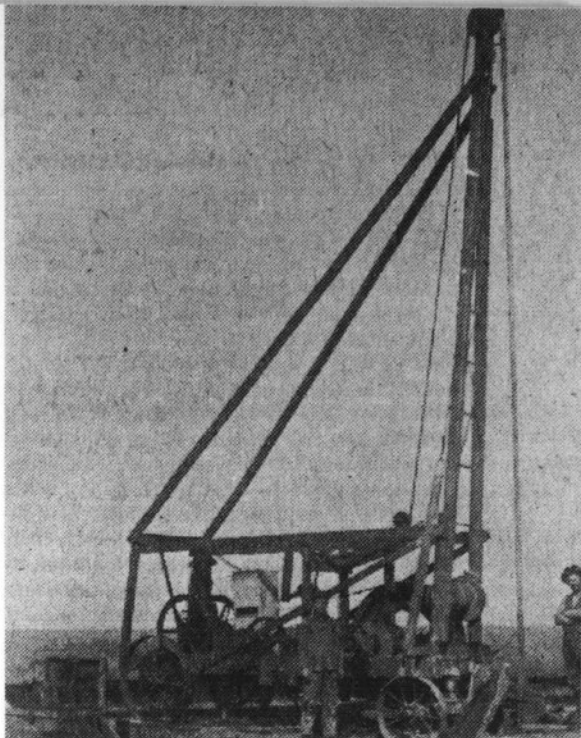
Pool had recently overstocked the range and the disastrous winter of 1884 had decimated the herds. M.S. Justis records that of the 80,000 head in the Comanche Pool only 7,000 survived the ice and snow of that winter.<sup>34</sup> The next winter was equally severe and the blizzard of 1886 finished the range business in Kansas. The last big roundup in Comanche county was held that spring and the cattle were moved to Wyoming where free range could be found.

There remained, however, a number of ranchers in the area with considerable holdings. One of these was C.C. "Capt." Pepperd who was considered to be "a man of considerable wealth" and "among the foremost of the cattle men of Comanche county. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

Two Pepperd brothers, Christopher Carson and Lawrence, had settled early in the Wilmore area and C.C.'s son, Richard E. "Dick," was the postmaster there.<sup>36</sup> Both brothers were active Democrats and had helped organize the party in Comanche county and joined in bringing a new school to the community.<sup>37</sup> In short, Pepperd was attempting to adjust to the new system of stock raising with its limited range and need for self-contained feed and water supply.

In the fall of 1887, Pepperd contacted a local drilling team, Hazlett and Miller, to bore a water well near Mule creek which during the summer frequently went dry. At about 75 feet the drill hit a vein of coal.<sup>38</sup> The coal was judged by local authorities to be of a superior quality. When the drill was still bringing up coal after going nearly four feet into the strata, the owner, as well as the community, contracted a serious case of "coal fever." The editor of the Greensburg *Rustler*, following up on the rumor of the find, drove out to Pepperd's ranch to investigate. The scene there reminded him of the early gold strikes in Colorado.

One hour's drive brought us in sight of an unfurled flag, and its floating folds, combined with the wild yells of excited men, brought to mind vivid pictures of the Leadville find of a few years ago. There, in the heart of a beautiful grove of winter-clothed cotton wood, close to the



Deposits of coal were often discovered when settlers drilled water wells. When this happened, coal fever set in, prospecting companies were organized, stock sold, and drilling continued in an effort to make quick and easy profits in coal mining. This photograph in the *Cimarron Jacksonian*, March 19, 1908, shows a driller employed by the Cave company with his rig at one "coal field" site in Gray county.

water's edge of that clear, bright little stream Mule creek, was an anxious, eager crowd, among whom we noticed Capt. C. C. Pepperd, owner of the ranch; H. H. Rich, mayor of Coldwater, and president of the First National Bank of that place; John P. Jones, cashier of the same institution; John P. Kern, the jovial merchant tailor, and quite a large number of strangers.

On examination we found what is pronounced by old miners the finest bank of fire clay in America. The next material they went through was eight or ten feet of sulphur and iron. The coal was struck at about 52 feet from the surface and found to be three feet and ten inches in thickness. We are led to believe this is the strongest vein of coal in the state. Experts pronounce it superior to either Trinidad or Canon City. . . . After satisfying ourselves as to the truth of all reports, we accepted Capt. and Mrs. Pepperd's cordial invitation to dinner, thereby teaching the genial Capt. that newspaper men knew better how to appreciate a good dinner than a coal find.<sup>39</sup>

39. *Greensburg Rustler*, November 3, 1887. Also carried in the *Coldwater Review*, December 2, 1887. Some newspapers spelled the name with an "a" (Peppard) and it was undoubtedly pronounced that way at the time.

34. Yost, *Medicine Lodge*, p. 57.

35. Larned *Chronoscope*, November 25, 1887; *Coldwater Review*, December 30, 1884.

36. *Ibid.*, March 2, 1888.

37. *Ibid.*, September 21, 1888. Frequent mention of his activities run through the Coldwater press. Family tradition has the brothers driving cattle up from Texas sometime in the early 1870's to establish their ranches.—Typewritten copy of a history of the Pepperd family written by Clair L. Pepperd of Coldwater, p. 9.

38. *Ibid.*, October 28, 1887.

This was not the first report of coal in the county. The *Coldwater Review* carried stories of Comanche coal being used as fuel as early as 1879 and in 1884 the editor wrote a tongue-in-cheek account of a local hermit, whom he dubbed "The Coal Hunter," who carried a shovel around with him and offered bits of charcoal as evidence of his discovery.<sup>40</sup> Pepperd's find was a different matter. Apparently he tried to keep some control over the rumors by refusing to boast of the progress at the site. His reticence only inflamed the imagination of the local press.<sup>41</sup> It apparently was Pepperd's intention at first to develop the mine on his own, but it soon became obvious that he needed more capital and more expertise than he could muster. His first feelers went out to the railroads. Both the Rock Island and Santa Fe sent officials to survey the situation, and Pepperd reported that they had agreed to furnish the necessary funds. He also indicated that the Chicago, Kansas & Western, a southern branch of the Santa Fe, had proposed making Wilmore a division town since it was only two miles from the coal strike. If that happened, the *Coldwater Review* opined: "Wilmore will fly."<sup>42</sup>

As the news spread, others, outside speculators as well as local men, came to investigate and to invest. It was reported that members of the Sun City Mining Company were definitely interested along with various entrepreneurs described as representing certain "monied corporations."<sup>43</sup> After visiting the mine, representatives of the Sun City group reported back that they were "fully satisfied that it's a big thing. . . ."<sup>44</sup> It was, however, an enthusiastic group of local businessmen who moved first to follow up on Pepperd's lead. Incorporated as the Eagle Coal and Mining Co., they found in Joseph Grant an aggressive vice-president and mine supervisor.<sup>45</sup>

A tunnel on an incline into a hill was started, following the general path of several of the thin veins which Grant was convinced would merge eventually into a thick strata of solid coal. To heighten the excitement, the ore from

the shaft assayed in Chicago, revealed 940 ounces of silver to the ton. There was also some evidence of copper and a trace of gold.<sup>46</sup> This latter bonus sparked even more rumors and the *Coldwater Review* picked up a number of articles from other papers around the state which indicated that a "Kansas City syndicate" had developed great interest in the mine and Coldwater would soon have a stamping mill.<sup>47</sup>

There were other exploratory holes bored, all showing evidence of mineral deposits. But all were hampered, as Pepperd and The Eagle Coal and Mining Co. had been, by a "strong flow of artesian water" and by collapsing quicksand.<sup>48</sup> Outside enthusiasm and interest tapered off, although exploration and some digging continued.

In September, 1888, Pepperd sold his land holdings to S. A. Gibbs and returned to Texas.<sup>49</sup> Local optimism was hard to kill. A new group organized the Coldwater Coal and Mining Co. in January, 1889, with a charter broadening its mission to include mining and boring "for Coal or Natural Gas, and for developing and raising the same, and for boring for artesian wells . . . and any purpose, not inconsistent with the law." The board of directors consisted of local Coldwater men, all connected in some way with Comanche county banks.<sup>50</sup> Five hundred shares at \$10.00 a share were issued, giving the company enough capital to pursue exploration if not development.<sup>51</sup> As was true of those before them their assay reports revealed significant mineral content including silver, gold, and lead. But the company's efforts, like its charter, seemed diffused and gradually the ardor of its backers cooled.

While it lasted, the local citizens had become thoroughly infected. The *Coldwater Review* had seen in the "rich resources of Comanche County" a new prosperity, which would bring the county "to the front in great shape [during] the coming year." "Look out," the editor boasted, "for a season of unprecedented pros-

46. *Ibid.*, February 17, 1888.

47. *Ibid.*, August 17 and September 7, 1888.

48. *Ibid.*, April 6, 1888.

49. Records in the register of deeds office, Comanche county courthouse, Coldwater; Pepperd, "The Pepperd Family History," p. 12.

50. Benjamin Haworth, who had moved from Milan to start a bank in Coldwater in 1885; H. H. Rich and John P. Jones of the First National Bank; Vernon J. Miller of the Coldwater Bank; and Z. J. Wallis, a stockholder.

51. "Corporation Charters" (records compiled by the secretary of state, in archives of the Kansas State Historical Society), v. 31 (January 21, 1889), pp. 547-548.

40. *Ibid.*, May 19 and July 14, 1885.

41. *Ibid.*, March 2, 1888.

42. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1888.

43. *Ibid.*, February 3 and April 6, 1888.

44. Sun City *Union*, November 4, 1887.

45. Other officers were Vernon Miller, president; J. W. Grant, secretary; and A. Darrock, treasurer.—*Coldwater Review*, January 6, 1888.

perity."<sup>52</sup> The *Review* had found the prospects glowing indeed and headlined stories with bold faced print: "EUREKA! . . . The Black Diamonds Show Up in Superior Quality. . . ." The editor predicted that "a good coal mine in Comanche county would be equal to a good gold mine." The *Review* also carried the prediction of the Larned *Chronoscope* that Pepperd's discovery would "annihilate that dreadful state of affairs, a coal famine," and would keep "untold millions of money in the state. . . ." <sup>53</sup> It had been a serious, and, as compared to other such flashes, a fairly prolonged affair. The second case history, the one in Gray county, was more typically of much shorter duration.

THERE IS an inclination to consider the frontier phase of Kansas history as ending with the new century.<sup>54</sup> This was not totally true of all of Kansas.<sup>55</sup> But by 1908, at least, Ford, Gray, and Meade counties had achieved a kind of stabilized prosperity based on hard winter wheat farming. Still, the old raw days were clear memories and contemporary photographs of the small towns in the area—Fowler, Copland, Meade, and Cimarron—reveal the prairie scarcely mastered. The local newspapers still carried an occasional statement of final proof of a claim.

There was prosperity both in town and on the farms based on good crop years and a fair market price. The farmers and the merchants were finally reaping the rewards of survival. The old-timers had outlasted the blizzards, droughts, and depression. The newcomers expected good but reasonable returns on their investment of time and hard work. They were basically steady, stable men with no great expectations of quick and easy wealth—at least on the surface. But the drilling of a well on a dry land farm could change all that. The hint that but for the accident of time and location these steady farmers might have blossomed into Western Jay Goulds, or more likely, praying Daniel Drews, can be seen in the misad-

ventures of the Cave Prospecting and Mining Company and the South Gray Prospecting and Mining Company.

The Slocum brothers had established themselves as dependable water well diggers and had ranged across Meade, Ford, Clark, and Gray counties with their rig. On February 1, 1908, George Slocum, while drilling on the J. P. Buswell land in Gray county<sup>56</sup> struck a vein of what he judged to be several feet of coal. A sample was immediately sent to the state geologist who confirmed that it was lignite coal of a quality equal to that being mined in eastern Kansas. He also warned that in order for commercial mining to be profitable the vein would need to be at least six feet thick.<sup>57</sup>

Coal fever soared. The two neighboring communities represented by the one-room school houses at Cave and Jumbo became the focal points for rival companies. On February 22 a public meeting was called at the Cave school and about 150 persons showed up. A stock company was organized with the officers and stockholders coming from farmers who lived north of Fowler in the triangle of the Meade-Ford-Gray county lines.<sup>58</sup> The company was to begin operation with 500 shares limited to five shares per person to be sold at \$10 a share. Shares were offered on the spot and \$350 worth were immediately sold.

The rival company met at the Jumbo school house and elected officers mainly from the Cimarron community. Since they were organized after the rumors had more time to circulate, all their stock was immediately taken up.<sup>59</sup>

Nor were the rival companies to have a clear field. The Cimarron *Jacksonian* reported that "scarcely a train comes in that does not bring eastern holders of Gray county land." The real estate men complained that land in "the coal regions" could not be bought. M. V. Powell, a Ravanna real estate man, tried to get neighboring Jetmore and Hodgeman county in the act by sinking "a good sized shaft" there.<sup>60</sup>

52. Coldwater *Review*, December 30, 1887.

53. *Ibid.*, October 28, December 2, 1887; Larned *Chronoscope*, November 25, 1887.

54. Zornow, *Kansas*, pp. 172-173; Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (Saint Charles, Mo., 1974), p. 146.

55. Professor Malin has pointed out that in the far western belt of Kansas the age of settlement had "scarcely passed the frontier period when the World War came, if the same time is allowed for the process as in the eastern belts."—James C. Malin, "The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. 4 (November, 1935), p. 350.

56. NW¼, Sec. 17, T. 29S, R. 27W.

57. *Fowler Gazette*, February 28, April 10, May 15, 1908; Cimarron *Jacksonian*, February 6, 27, March 5, 1908.

58. The officers were C. D. McCauley of Wilburn, president; C. E. Haywood of Wilburn, vice-president; T. J. Davis of Cave, secretary; J. M. Dowell of Cave, treasurer.—*Fowler Gazette*, February 28, 1908; Cimarron *Jacksonian*, February 20, 27, 1908.

59. C. W. Sutton, president; J. E. Wood, vice-president; Henry Magary, treasurer; S. L. Gamble, secretary.—Cimarron *Jacksonian*, March 5, 12, 1908; state census of 1895.

60. Cimarron *Jacksonian*, March 5, 1908.

The area around the strike immediately became "the coal fields" in the editorial enthusiasm of Cimarron's Elmer T. Peterson. He saw great advantage in a North-South railroad to Cimarron. What was most urgently needed, he felt, was a railroad to compete with the Rock Island and the Santa Fe. A road tying Wichita to Trinidad running through Meade, Dighton, Shields, Grainfield, and Cimarron, in order to serve the Cave coal fields, would make "Cimarron the most important town in western Kansas."<sup>61</sup> Besides the obvious coal present, he predicted that there would be additional discoveries of gas, oil, and other mineral deposits and, somewhat inconsistently, spoke glowingly of the possible tie-in with the iron ore of Colorado. "Day dreams sometimes become realities," he wrote, "and who knows but that this will at some time in the near future be one of the most important coal mining and manufacturing regions of the state?"<sup>62</sup> The brother of the vice-president of the Cave company found the editor of the *Fowler Gazette* a ready listener and filled him "full and running over with coal talk." The editor took his revenge by assuring the public that he had carefully examined his informant and had not found "any coal dust behind his ears . . . or any big black lumps of the said substance in his pockets. . . ." <sup>63</sup> The *Cimarron Jacksonian* began running its lead local feature as "Coal Gossip." In Meade, the gossip according to the most informed man in the community, Postmaster Chlumsky, was the "straight goods," but by the time of his telling the vein had grown to be 10 feet thick.<sup>64</sup>

There was a brief period of vexation when it was rumored that the original Homestead act had reserved the mineral rights for the federal government. A letter from the United States Land Office quickly relieved the prospectors. Kansas and Missouri had been specifically exempt from the restriction in order to "promote the development . . . of coal or other minerals."<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile the rival companies got down to the real business of exploration. The Cave company hired George Leonard to begin drill-

ing on Albert Barbour's land which cornered the Buswell quarter and was within 40 rods of the original strike.<sup>66</sup> At 198 feet Leonard struck a small vein of coal five or six inches thick, and at 234 feet "a strong flow of water." This forced him to move his rig to the original site with the intention of going down at least 400 feet.<sup>67</sup> The officers of the company were, however, by now having lease problems and Leonard was having difficulty getting casing and other equipment. But the fever remained high and the local press kept the subscribers alert to all developments. "Meanwhile," it advised, "hold your breath and get ready to holler."<sup>68</sup>

By May the hope of hollering had completely faded. The Cave operation stopped digging in early April and on May 14 the *Jacksonian* reported that: "The South Gray Coal Company have gave up the ghost and left us." Although the Cave enterprise still intended to go on down, the momentum was lost and with it the mining fever broke.

But for just a moment, a few heady weeks, the spirit of the Gilded Age and the aspirations of a Mesabi Range titillated the imagination of the Meade and Gray county neighbors. There were undoubtedly gaudy visions of owners becoming wealthy on their share of one cent a bushel coal, as the Cave lease provided, and giant industries billowing smoke loomed on Cimarron's and Fowler's horizons. A picture in the *Cimarron Jacksonian* showing G. W. Leonard standing beside his tinker-toy rig seems a far cry from industrial Detroit or Pittsburgh but as the *Jacksonian* editor put it, "considerable excitement has been created . . . many men who are conservative in their ideas believe that the coal is there in a large body."<sup>69</sup>

Communities that were not caught up in "coal fever" tended to ridicule those who were. The Larned *Chronoscope* after its own initial enthusiasm tartly reminded its readers that Kansas towns were not built on "mining excitements."<sup>70</sup> The Kinsley press also disparaged the effort in Coldwater and other towns that had promoted the boring of test holes. In the end, however, even cynical citizens of Kinsley were to succumb to the lure of

61. *Ibid.*, March 12, 1908.

62. *Ibid.*, February 20, 1908.

63. *Fowler Gazette*, March 6, 1908.

64. *Meade County News*, Meade, February 13, 1908; *Meade Globe*, February 13, 1908.

65. *Cimarron Jacksonian*, February 13, 1908.

66. NW¼, Sec. 17, T. 29S, R. 27W.

67. *Cimarron Jacksonian*, May 7, 1908.

68. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1908.

69. *Ibid.*, February 6, March 19, 1908.

70. *Larned Chronoscope*, January 7, 1887.

the unknown. A company was organized for "the purpose of boring into the bowels of the earth in order to see what might lie beneath the surface."<sup>71</sup> It was not as foolish an enterprise as it might appear. The potential of Kansas was totally unknown. The search for substitutes for water and fuel had already led to unexpected discoveries. Then, too, there is truth in the prospectors' credo: Gold is where you find it! And, for that matter, so is oil, gas, lead, iron, and coal. Only not this time.

**I**N RETROSPECT, the real bonanza had been struck in Leonard's and Pepperd's casings. The "strong flow of water" each re-

71. Kinsley *Weekly Mercury*, December 20, 1888.

ported was, within four decades, to bring the prosperity to the area that the coal failed to provide. But there was to be no new Pittsburgh, no new Detroit, and no new coal barons. Technology propelled the fuel requirements of the area beyond the needs of immediate access to coal or wood. As was to be true of the rest of the nation, southwestern Kansas became dependent upon a complex international marketing system of fuel, and was to be vulnerable in the same degree to the vicissitudes of that arrangement as Detroit or Pittsburgh.

In the long run, water in abundance for irrigation was to provide greater wealth than the gilded glories promised by "coal fever."