

Old Newcastle's Impact on the King County Area

In 1853 the area around current day Newcastle was heavily forested with 10 foot diameter trees, a multitude of streams, and many gorges and valleys. It was also home to an array of wildlife including cougar, bear, raccoon, bobcat, and deer. In that year, a couple of explorers found something that would change that landscape forever. They found chunks of coal along a creek (later to be named Coal Creek).

The first coal wasn't mined until 10 years later, but when it began it was in earnest. In the 100 years between 1863 and 1963 the Newcastle coal mines produced 10.5 million tons of coal. The coal mined was of good quality, and the proximity to Seattle made it an important commodity. In 1870, Seattle had only 1107 residents, but because of coal from Newcastle being shipped to San Francisco and the growth of the port this number grew to 42,837 by 1890. (The first coal shipment of 405 tons was in 1870). The timber industry was in full swing, and shipments to San Francisco were being made directly from the mills on the Hood Canal.

In 1880 President Rutherford B. Hayes and General Tecumseh Sherman visited Newcastle during a trip to the Northwest. In 1886, Newcastle had the only Post Office and voting district on the Eastside of Lake Washington, and in the late 1890's, Newcastle was the second largest town in King County with 3000 residents.

Coal was King, but Newcastle was also a leader in the process of justice. There was a resident Justice of the Peace who oversaw proceedings from verbal and spousal abuse to assault and battery and murder. Miners were frequently witnesses and jurors. The process of dispensing justice was so important that failure to appear as a witness or juror could result in a fine 50 times as great as the fine for the crime being heard at trial. Jurisdiction was not limited to Newcastle. Cases from Renton, Bellevue, and Issaquah were also heard.

Operations continued at an uneven pace in the early 1900's as demand for coal varied. In 1916 that all changed with the threat of World War I. During the years of 1916 through 1918 the mines at Newcastle produced 1 million tons of coal to support the war effort. After the war, demand dropped. By 1929, with cheaper coal available from Montana, oil on the scene, the depression, and a fire at the main bunkers, the Pacific Coast Coal Company decided to cease operations. Newcastle was a Company town and with the selling of the homes, dismantling of some buildings, removal and reuse of equipment, and the pulling up of the railroad tracks by 1937 the town of Newcastle no longer existed.

The Pacific Coast Coal Company moved operations out of the area, but did sell and lease land to "Gypo" mining operators that went into the existing mines and cleaned out smaller pockets of coal. These smaller outfits worked the mines from 1932 until 1963 when all coal mining stopped. During this time they had produced 536,000 tons. One of the Gypos, the Strain Company, stripped mined an area 80 to 90 acres in size that later became a landfill, and in 1999 became the site of the Newcastle Golf Course.

Seattle continued to grow and the Newcastle area was a prime location as a bedroom community and so it also grew in population. In 1994, the City of Newcastle was incorporated. We have 150 years of history that has included discovery, growth, decline, and growth again.

Rich Crispo