

# Putting the Coal in Coalgate, exhibit teaches about past

Recently, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Historic Preservation Department completed a small exhibit in Coalgate, Oklahoma, called “Putting the Coal in Coalgate.” This exhibit houses some exciting artifacts that date back to the late-1800s era coal mining operations in Choctaw Nation. These artifacts help us understand what life was like for miners and their families during that time. This month, Iti Fabvssa will discuss the archaeological excavations completed by our staff, the history of mining in Choctaw Nation, and provide information on the “Putting the Coal in Coalgate” exhibit! In 2017, the Housing Authority of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma contacted the Historic Preservation Department to assist with a new Independent Elderly Housing project planned in Coalgate (Coalgate IEH). The land selected for the new housing turned out to be part of one of the original mining camps settled by coal miners back in the 1890s! Coal mining activities in this area were unique from anywhere else in the United States and were an important part of Choctaw history. Usually, when our department comes across an important archaeological site, we prefer to leave it undisturbed out of respect for the ancestors and so future generations can have a chance to also learn from the site. We call this method, “in-situ archaeology,” an archaeological practice often used in an Indigenous Archaeological methodology. To learn about Indigenous Archaeology, we invite you to read our October 2019 Iti Fabvssa called “Indigenous Archaeology: What is it, and why is it important to the Choctaw Nation?”.

However, in this case, circumstances required that this archaeological site be excavated. Artifacts – things left behind in the ground by people of the past – are not the only important part of an archaeological site. Context – the way that artifacts are positioned in the ground and in relation to each other – can be just as important in learning about the past people who created the archaeological site. When an archaeological site is excavated, its context is destroyed. Excavation must be approached carefully by professional archaeologists using an excavation strategy that is designed to record as much information about context as possible. Choctaw Nation set up a formal agreement with Housing and Urban Development (a federal agency) and the State of Oklahoma that laid out the strategy on how excavation and information recording would take place. Professional archaeologists with the Historic Preservation Department carried out this plan, making careful notes, drawings, sketches, and photographs, as they excavated. A lot was found, including the foundation of a dugout house, the foundation for a more modern house, and nearly 4,000 artifacts that provide information about many aspects of the lives of the people who lived in the coal mining camp. The information producing during the excavation was used to put together a full report on the archaeological site. It was also used to put together the exhibit at the Coalgate IEH.

Here is a little bit of the story. In 1875, Chief Coleman Cole declared that Choctaws should develop the natural resources in their lands to fund their schools. For years, Choctaws collected coal as fuel for their homes and blacksmithing, but General Council's decision to allow industrial coal mining completely changed life in Indian Territory. Choctaw Nation established a system in which coal mining companies paid permits to operate their mines, permits to bring in non-Choctaw citizens as workers, fees for each bushel of coal removed from the ground, and leases to mine the land owned by individual Choctaws. Private companies operated these mines and used the railroads that were increasingly being built during this period to export the coal throughout the United States and Mexico. Some of these companies were also owned by Choctaw citizens. In 1901, thirty-nine companies employed 4,005 workers and produced 1,433,809 tons of coal in all of Indian Territory, with the majority of them being within the boundaries of Choctaw Nation.

Coal mining provided a substantial amount of money to the Choctaw Nation to spend on expanding the number of schools they operated. It led Choctaw Nation to create the office of the Mine Trustee, who was responsible for keeping track of mining permits and fees. The Trustee also kept detailed records of how much coal was mined and exported out of the Nation. For those interested, those records are available in the Choctaw national records microfilm at the Oklahoma Historical Society. This information was then shared with the U.S. government, which published reports to Congress every year.

There were multiple effects of coal mining. Mining provided the Choctaw Nation with money to support its citizens and allowed them a degree of independence from the U.S. government. It led to the development of roads and railroad lines, connecting Indian Territory to outside markets. With money coming into the Choctaw treasury, Choctaws were less reliant on U.S. treaty annuities that sometimes did not get paid out in a timely manner or would be less than they were supposed to be. Because the coal mines mostly employed outside workers, thousands of people moved to Indian Territory. Workers came from other parts of the U.S., Ireland, Italy, and parts of eastern Europe. Many of the towns that we know today originated from mining camps. From McAlester to Poteau to Lehigh, communities popped up near coal mines and railroad stops. Mining camps would sometimes become towns, as was the case of Hartshorne. In 1902, Coalgate was a mining town with a large number of one-story frame houses that cost \$50 each to build. Most of its inhabitants were immigrants or Black miners, which is reflected in the objects recovered from the land for the elderly housing project. Now featured in the Coalgate exhibit, these objects and their stories help us to learn more about what life was like in Choctaw Nation during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

#### Exhibit Information

One might ask, "What does an archaeologist do with the artifacts they dig up?" While Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation prefers to leave artifacts in the ground to keep them preserved and safe, the Coalgate excavation was necessary in order to document this important part of Choctaw Nation and Oklahoma history. Staff from Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department recovered nearly 4,000 artifacts from the Coalgate excavations, along with hundreds of photographs and pages of excavation notes. Once the reports were written, it was time to present this important part of history to Choctaw tribal members and residents of Oklahoma.

Staff from Historic Preservation would create a small exhibit that would be housed at the former site of the Coalgate mining town: the main office of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Independent Elder Housing located in Coalgate, Oklahoma. Behind a glass case, sits 45 of the 4000 artifacts recovered at the Coalgate IEH archaeological project that was held to tell the story of some of Coalgate's earliest residents. Just a few of the featured artifacts include ceramic shards of tableware that were brought with the immigrant miners to the mining camp in Coalgate; children's toys that were manufactured in Germany; an Italian-made wine bottle with seal; and even two bottles made by the Crown Bottling Company, which was located in Coalgate, Indian Territory. While there were thousands of artifacts to choose from for this exhibit, we decided that it was best to give viewers of this exhibit some insight into who was living in Coalgate and working in these coal mines.

There was great ethnic diversity in the coalfields in southeastern Oklahoma. In the 1870s, immigrants from Ireland, Scotland, and England moved to Indian Territory to eke out a living in coal camps. During the 1880s, immigrants from places like Italy, Russia, Poland, and Hungary moved out to Indian Territory to work in the coal mines. Coalgate had a rather large community of Italian immigrants and this is evidenced by the Italian-made wine bottle in this exhibit. Miners and their families entered this complex foreign land with few material possessions but brought with them the hope for a better life and future.

Among the people who lived at the Coalgate mining settlement were individuals who helped to shape state and national history. Peter Hanraty was a Scottish immigrant who moved to Indian Territory after being blacklisted for his efforts to organize miners in Ohio and Pennsylvania to seek safer working conditions. Hanraty went on to become the first mayor of Coalgate, the first President of the Twin-Territorial Federation of Labor, the first Mine Inspector for the State of Oklahoma and was eventually instrumental in developing the State of Oklahoma's constitution. If you are interested in viewing the exhibit and learning more about the Coal Mining history of Coalgate, Oklahoma, please feel free to contact Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Historic Preservation Staff!



Photo by Kristen Walczesky

Our exhibit features items excavated from the elderly housing site in Coalgate.