

The Maxey Mines

There is a highway sign on Interstate 90, a few miles east of Bozeman, which reads "Trail Creek Road". The road, which is labeled "impassable when wet", runs southeast and eventually connects with U.S. 84 about 12 miles south of Livingston. A person traveling along this road today passes through a fairly open valley where there are three ranches. The area's predominant use is summer grazing and lumbering, although there are some hay and grain fields. Several abandoned houses and other buildings may be seen along the route as well as some piles of black material. To the right the traveler may notice a cut along the base of the timbered hillside, which has the appearance of an old road. A stream, called Meadow Creek, runs for several miles from the highway until the road crosses a ridge. This is the divide between the upper Missouri drainage and the Yellowstone drainage. Over the ridge, Trail Creek soon courses its way approximately parallel to the road. In this stretch of road, a jagged peak by the name of Chimney Rock is seen atop one of the hills to the right and a short distance further down the road the valley widens out and the road forks.

In days past this little valley was a virtual beehive of activity - the cut along the hillside is the bed of a railroad which ran for eleven miles from the Northern Pacific mainline. The weathering buildings are all that remain of the several communities which once thrived there. The black material is coal slack, the fine particles which remain after coal is screened. During the peak years of coal mining operations many thousands of tons of coal were carried by the railroad. Below Chimney Rock is the site of the Maxey Brothers mine, which was the end of the railroad and supported a town which for a time boasted its own post office, store, saloon and school. This school was where Dr. Harold Ury, internationally known inventor of heavy water started his career as a high school teacher. ¹

The beginnings of this story date back to 1867 when Colonel Chesnut of Bozeman began taking coal from Rocky Canyon, several miles east of Bozeman. ² At first the coal was not entirely satisfactory for domestic use by Bozemanites, but it was in demand by blacksmiths. Later as the proper grating equipment became available for stoves, townspeople began to use more coal and Colonel Chesnut's market expanded.

In succeeding years, other mines opened in the vicinity. In 1881, one Daniel Maxey opened a mine on the east side of Rocky Canyon.³

Daniel Maxey was born in Carbondale, Pennsylvania about 1835 of Welsh and German parentage.⁴ He worked in coal mines there as a boy. He left Pennsylvania when trouble began with the Molly Maguires, and joined the gold rush to California in 1849. He mined gold there for a time, then went to Australia for about two years where he also struck gold. He returned to America and worked gold in Oregon, British Columbia and Idaho. Then he went to San Francisco and departed for the East by ship, crossing the Isthmus of Panama by saddle horse. Upon reaching Carbondale, he learned that Margaret Williams, a childhood sweetheart, had moved to Illinois. He followed her there and married her. While on their wedding trip to St. Louis, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Maxey learned of a party leaving for Alder Gulch, Montana. They purchased a new wagon, mules and harness for \$500 in April, 1866, and left for Montana. Reaching the Gallatin Valley on August 15, 1866, they decided to settle there rather than continuing on to Alder Gulch.⁵ They ranched in the Gallatin Valley and later moved into Bozeman, where Daniel operated a meat market and periodically contracted supplies to the Army at Fort Ellis. During this period, eleven children were born, including four boys: John, William, George and David. Because the price of meat was down, there wasn't much profit from the meat market and Fort Ellis was moved in 1879, Daniel Maxey decided to try his hand once more at mining, this time for coal.

The mine Daniel Maxey opened in 1881 was a horizontal shaft which was soon producing coal for domestic needs in Bozeman.⁶ In June of 1883 the Maxey mine, located in a gulch a little to the east of the big rock, was sold to J.P. Chater for \$20,000.⁷ The coal from this mine was later tested for coking qualities, but it proved to be unsatisfactory.⁸

Maxey still had cattle interests in Bozeman and for a period had a gold claim on Emigrant Gulch. About 1888 he purchased some productive land on Trail Creek where he farmed for a time. He also acquired a mining claim in that area. In 1889 the Yellowstone Park Railroad, installed by Turner Brothers of Spokane, was completed to the Maxey mine on Trail Creek.⁹

About this time a man by the name of A.B. Cook purchased some ground adjoining the Maxey claim. He is reported to have jumped the Maxey claim, and an ensuing lawsuit gave him legal title to it about 1895. Cook wasn't a good coal miner and encoun-

tered a lot of water in his mine. Faults were encountered and pumping operations were expensive. Cook was eventually forced out of business. In 1903,¹⁰ Daniel Maxey purchased land and machinery for \$3,600,¹¹ apparently at a tax sale. A.B. Cook, however, still had a year in which to redeem his property.¹²

Daniel Maxey turned the mine over to his four sons who were eager to begin mining. They resumed pumping of the mine shaft before A.B. Cook's year was up and the title was clear. Daniel cautioned them to be patient and advised them to saw some lumber while they were waiting. Cook was unable to reclaim the property and when the year was up the Maxey brothers drilled test holes to establish the location of the coal. They rigged up to a 1½ inch pipe and drilled with the aid of a spring pole device. About 90 feet down, nine feet of coal was encountered so they decided to go ahead and pump out the original tunnel and continue its length into the coal beds which they had found.¹³

In the years following the Maxey brothers' coal mine prospered. There were 22 acres of coal in the nine foot bed.¹⁴ Operations began slowly but by 1907, coal mined totaled 7,629 tons.¹⁵ In the peak year of 1910, production reached 32,308 tons.¹⁶ However, the bed was located between two faults and was therefore limited in size. With this fact hanging over their heads, the Maxeys searched for the remainder of the coal which the faults hid from them. In 1912 a rather extensive investigation was conducted by a Spokane mining engineer at the request of the Maxeys. This gave some good recommendations as to the improved operation of the mine, but it probably raised the hopes of the Maxey brothers by being optimistic in regard to locating the hidden coal. Production declined after the 1910 peak, but continued until 1915, when all efforts were concentrated on locating the elusive nine foot vein on the other side of the faults.

During these prosperous years, the Maxey mine became a community. A post office was established there, known as Chimney Rock, Montana. Fifty-two workers were employed at one period,¹⁷ many of whom had families. Small houses dotted the landscape and a company store and saloon furnished the needs of the residents, most of whom were of Austrian descent. A boarding house was operated by the Maxey brothers to feed and house the workers who didn't have families. Baseball games were held between the Maxey Mine team and teams of other mining communities in the area.¹⁸

The mine operators were not skilled in management and seemed to have had some labor problems when the employees became organized by the United Mine Workers of America.¹⁹

The mine was built up and a large tippie and stone boiler house were added. A good sized house was built, but it was never used as a home because it was pressed into service as a general store, post office and company office.²⁰ A telephone system was installed and a reservoir was constructed to supply water to the boiler and residences. Some of the miners cottages and the school were brought to Chimney Rock from the town of Stores, when the coke ovens there closed down.²¹

In 1910 Daniel Maxey died and his estate passed to the eleven children. The four sons purchased the interest of the seven sisters.²²

The Yellowstone Park Railroad was conceived as a route to Yellowstone National Park.²³ It was begun in 1888 and completed in 1889 as far as the site of the Maxey Mine.²⁴ This was a quirk of fate which was to pay off for the Maxeys. Construction of the Y.P.R. was stopped because the Northern Pacific Railroad began building a branch line to Gardiner at a faster rate than the Yellowstone Park Railroad.²⁵

There were a number of mines in operation along railroad routes which made use of the Y.P.R. Among these were the coke ovens at the town of Stores. The Northern Pacific railroad leased the Y.P.R. and operated it for many years, hauling coal and coke from the Meadow Creek and Trail Creek operations to the mainline at Chestnut.

Just before the First World War, the railroad changed hands and the N.P. terminated the lease and stopped operating it. The Maxey brothers then purchased a small saddle tanker engine, which had lain idle at Electric, Montana for some time.²⁶ In conjunction with another mining company on Meadow Creek, they leased the Y.P.R. and moved their own freight and coal.

The railroad was quite steep and crooked and became known as the Turkey Trail. Several hair-raising experiences occurred, including a few wrecks during its years of existence.

During the war, the owners decided to abandon the line and sell the rails for scrap. The Maxeys prevented this for a time, but the end came in 1918.²⁷ However, by then trucks were available to haul the coal, so there was no great crisis.

The years 1915 to 1918 were quiet at the Maxey brothers coal mine while the search for the remainder of the nine foot bed continued. Eventually, though, mining operations increased again as smaller disconnected veins were worked. The coal was

mostly sold to schools and institutions. In 1926 the advent of gas heating severely affected the coal market and the mines shut down while the brothers sought work elsewhere.

In 1929, the mine was reopened and continued to operate on a small scale through the 1930's. The coal produced was used mostly for domestic purposes and sold locally in Livingston and Bozeman. Operating capital was difficult to obtain, during this period, and many of the land holdings were sold in order to meet expenses. Gradually the good agricultural land disappeared until only a small area around the mine remained of the original 2,160 acres.²⁸

Operations were still going on at the mine after World War II. During the summer of 1947, the Three Forks Portland Cement Company of Trident purchased 5,000 tons of coal.²⁹ This was not freshly mined coal, but slack which was left over from the previous mining operations. The slack was loaded by means of a caterpillar into 12 trucks, each of which made the 104 mile round-trip daily. The brothers still held hope that the lost bed would be located and were still drilling in search of it.

Shaft mining was done on a small scale at this time. The following recollection by one of the descendants, characterizes the last days of the mine. "I remember Brownie, the mine horse. He would eat anything out of any of the miner's lunch buckets from tuna fish sandwiches to bananas. He would pull four mine carts full of coal out of the shaft, but when the miners hooked on the fifth car as a joke, Brownie wouldn't budge an inch. When I was five and my brother, Dick, was four, we went with my grandfather and greatuncle Will to get coal for the stoves at the big house. We entered the shaft and as I remember it, about 20 or 30 feet from the entrance, the shaft branched off. After the dynamite holes were drilled, the sticks of dynamite set in place and the fuses were set we were ushered out by my grandfather while "Uncle" Will lit the fuses. He came out in a hurry and we waited for the blast. After the blast, my grandfather, Uncle Will and Dick went back into the shaft. In a few minutes grandfather came back out, carrying Dick who was "out cold" from the fumes. Grandfather put Dick in the wagon and in a few minutes Dick was feeling fine. Brownie was no longer working for the Maxey brothers so when the cart was loaded I recall my grandfather and Uncle Will pulling the coal up the shaft and shoveling it into the wagon."³⁰

Towards the very end, the only coal taken from the mines was for use in the homes of the Maxey brothers who remained at the mine. The last lump was probably removed about 1950.³¹

The Maxeys were miners and all their efforts were put towards mining. Most of the land that once belonged to Daniel Maxey and his sons is today producing income for farmers and ranchers, while the mines lie idle and worthless.

A government publication dated 1966 gives much technical data concerning the mining operations. It states that the quality of coal in the vicinity is among the highest in the state and suggests that if the demand for coal ever increases it may be feasible to reopen mining operations at the Maxey Mine.

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