



RAILWAYS AND COAL:

Good Old Days on the Coal Branch continued

by *Leslie S. Kozma*

As discussed in *CN LINES* Vol. 10, No. 4, due to its strategic location Coalspur, Alta. was the operational heart of the Alberta Coal Branch. The Foothills Subdivision ran on one side of the Coalspur station and the Mountain Park Subdivision on the other, with a wye connecting track between them. The engine servicing facilities were located within the wye. Overlooking the

yard to the east was a picturesque, if somewhat ramshackle, coal mine, one of the last to operate on the Coal Branch. All this, in a setting of a valley amongst the rolling foothills — makes this an excellent modelling subject.

The Coal Branch begins at Bickerdike —ten miles west of the former main line divisional point of Edson—and proceeds southwesterly for 36 miles from Bickerdike to Coalspur. From there it once jogged easterly all the way to Lovett

(Mile 57) but was later cut back to Foothills (Mile 50.7) resulting in a renaming of the Lovett Subdivision to the Foothills Subdivision (FH Sub.). The Mountain Park Subdivision (MP Sub.) branches southwesterly from Coalspur for 31.6 miles to Mountain Park. The Luscar Subdivision runs 5.3 miles from Leyland (Mile 22.3 MP Sub.) to Luscar.

The Coalspur depot

The Coalspur depot was originally located near the junction switch of the Foothills and Mountain Park Subdivisions. Commencing in the spring of 1921 the train-order office at Coalspur — formerly open only during daytime — was kept open around the clock.

In 1928, the station building was moved about 2,800 feet south, between the main lines, making operations more convenient, since it was much closer to the wye. Order boards were installed on each side of the depot at this time. The junction switch was named Parkhill Jct. the next year. There were two passing and two yard tracks, with a standing car capacity of about 174, but space was always at a premium. In 1934, to relieve



—CNR photo, Les Kozma Collection, 1962



—Provincial Archives of Alberta, A-6838

A panoramic view of Coalspur in 1964, after most of the railway servicing facilities had been removed. The Blackstone mine (centre) was on the hill side above Coalspur station (left centre). Merely a helper station in 1921, within nine years Coalspur had blossomed into quite a busy intermediate terminal. Four crews were assigned there by 1949. However in the following year, the Edson assignment board for the Coal Branch showed work for eight crews, with only two working out of Coalspur. By the end of the steam era, Coalspur was no more than an extension of Parkhill Jct., but the wye connection remains to this day. The “town” faded away after the removal of the railway servicing facilities, the local mine closure and the general malaise on the ACB. Present day Highway #40 passes through the sites of the old town buildings.

congestion in the terminal, a short connecting track—with a diamond crossing of the north leg of the wye—was installed at the south end of the yard. In effect, this created nearly three-quarters of a mile of double track between the wye and Parkhill Jct. Trains descending from the Foothills and the Mountain Park Subdivisions used the Foothills Subdivision (east) main line. Those ascending used the Mountain Park Subdivision (west) main.

The lack of width between the tracks resulted in some modifications to the station. The kitchen annex was fixed to the north instead of at the rear of the building. A door to the waiting room was likely installed facing the Foothills Sub., on the rear side of the station.

Servicing Facilities

The locomotive servicing facilities at Coalspur were a real “grab bag”. A three-stall wood-frame engine house erected in 1921—between the two main lines, about 4,000 feet south of the junction—was strictly for running repairs.

The old manual coal hoist was replaced in 1922 with the 200-ton Fairbanks Morse coaling plant from the abandoned CNoR yards at North Regina. It was modified so that locomotives could be refueled on both main lines. After the 50,000-gallon enclosed wooden water tank was moved in from Selwyn, B.C. in 1923, the old Coalspur tank was shifted to Foothills.

While enginemen got paid for junction switching at Coalspur, ten minutes was

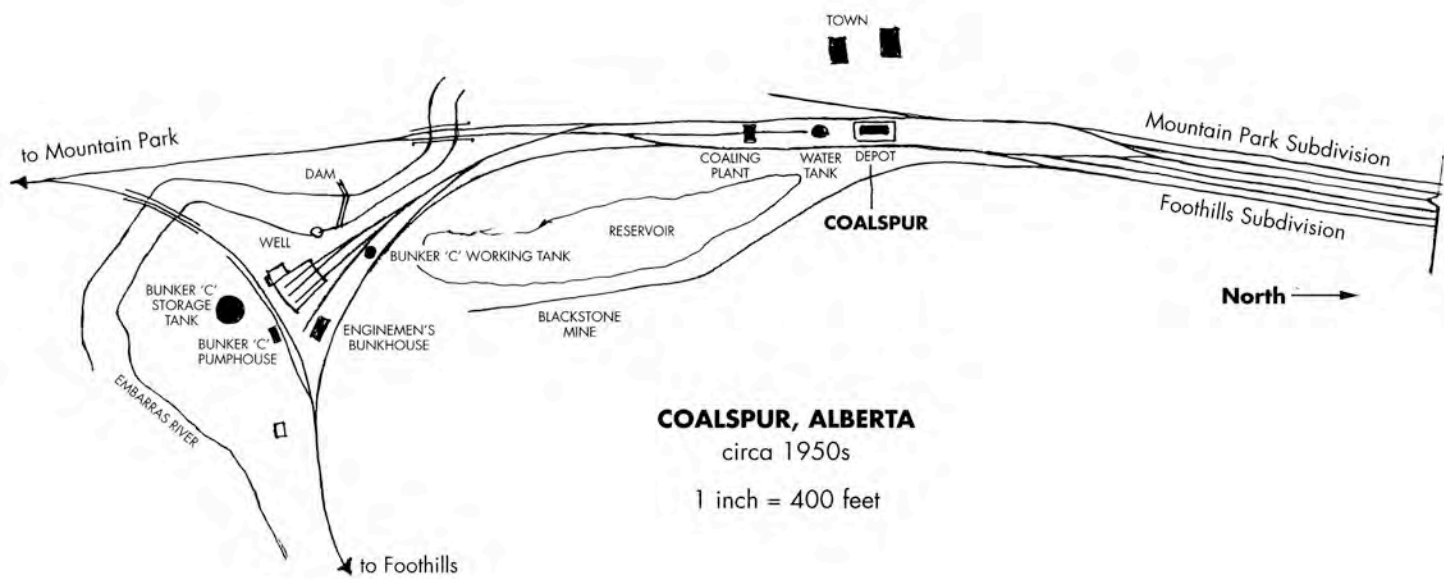
deducted each way for coaling and watering their locomotives. The Coalspur engine house burned down in 1949. A stationary boiler was quickly set up, but it was not until the following year that the three-stall engine house from Murphys, Saskatchewan was re-erected onto the old shop foundations.

The dim future of the local coal business was made all the more obvious in 1950 when its largest customer, the CNR, erected a Bunker C fueling facility at Coalspur. Within two years Coalspur closed as a terminal. The fuel oil unloading point, storage and working tanks were removed in 1956. The pump house was subsequently used for storage, and the engine house was demolished in December 1962.



Engine House at Coalspur, Alta., June 1962, six months before removal. The track curving off to the left of the engine house was the line to Foothills.

—Ray Matthews photo



COALSPUR, ALBERTA

circa 1950s

1 inch = 400 feet

King Coal and Lumber Ltd. Mine at Coalspur.



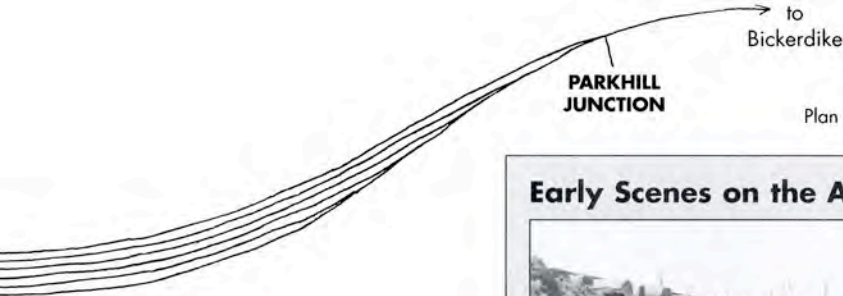
—Provincial Archives of Alberta PA 3464/1

WESTWARD TRAINS				Miles from Parkhill Jct.	Symbols	FOOTHILLS SUBDIVISION	Train Order Office or Telephone	Office Signals	Car Capacity	EASTWARD TRAINS		
THIRD CLASS			THIRD CLASS							FOURTH CLASS		
317 Mixed	381 Mixed	383 Equip't	382 Mixed							318 Mixed	384 Equip't	
Thurs	Mon	Fri				Tue	Fri	Thurs				
L 11:35	L 11:35		0.0	RZ	Bickerdike Jct. with Brule Sub. 5.5	D N KD			A 13:20	A 15:30		
F 11:50	F 11:50		5.5		McLEOD RIVER 5.2	P	51		F 12:57	F 15:07		
F 12:05	F 12:05		10.7		ERITH 5.6	P	59		F 12:42	F 14:52		
F 12:25	F 12:25		16.3	W	WEALD 8.9	P	49		F 12:25	F 14:35		
F 12:50	F 12:50		25.2		EMBARRAS 5.3	P	60	14	F 12:00	F 14:10		
F 13:05	F 13:05		30.5		OKE 3.5		35		F 11:45	F 13:55		
F 13:20	F 13:20		34.0		ROBB 2.1	P	48		F 11:30	F 13:40		
A 13:30	A 13:30		36.1	Z	Parkhill Jct. with Mountain Park Sub. 0.5				11:20	13:30		
Via Mountain Park Sub.	To Mountain Park Sub.											
L 13:50		L 9:00	36.6	K WYZ	COALSPUR 0.6	D CS YA RD			L 11:05	L 13:15	A 18:30	
F 14:10		9:15	43.2		DISS 4.1		37		F 12:35	F 18:05		
F 14:35		9:35	47.3		STERCO 1.1		40	185	F 12:15	F 17:50		
S 15:00		10:10	48.3	Y Z W	COAL VALLEY 2.3	D AY YA RD			S 11:55	L 17:30		
A 15:20		A 10:25	50.0		FOOTHILLS 0.1		15		L 11:15	L 16:50		
			50.8		END OF TRACK							
Thurs	Mon	Fri							Tue	Fri	Thurs	
317	381	383							382	318	384	
MOUNTAIN TIME												

WESTWARD TRAINS				Miles from Parkhill Jct.	Symbols	MOUNTAIN PARK SUBDIVISION	Train Order Office or Telephone	Office Signals	Car Capacity	EASTWARD TRAINS	
THIRD CLASS		THIRD CLASS								THIRD CLASS	
381 Mixed	317 Mixed	382 Mixed	318 Mixed							382 Mixed	
Mon	Thurs			Tue	Thurs						
L 13:30	L 13:30	0.0		PARKHILL JCT. Jct. with Foothills Sub. 0.5							
S 13:55	A 13:35	0.5	KWYZ	COALSPUR 6.4	D CS YA RD	A 10:40					
S 14:15	To Foothills Sub.	6.9		MERCOAL 1.3	D MC 29 10	S 10:18					
F 14:25		8.2		STEEPER 3.6		F 10:13					
F 14:35		11.8		SHAW 6.2	P	F 10:03					
F 14:55		18.0		FIDLER 22.3		F 9:43					
A 15:10		22.5	RWYZ	Jct. with Lussac Sub. 1.2	D AN 43 74	L 9:30					
		23.7	Z	LEYLAND 7.9							
		31.6	YZ	CADOMIN 7.9							
Mon	Thurs			Mountain Park	YA RD	From Lussac Sub.					
381	317					Tue					
MOUNTAIN TIME											

WESTWARD TRAINS				Miles from Lussac Sub.	Symbols	LUSCAC SUBDIVISION	Train Order Office or Telephone	Office Signals	Car Capacity	EASTWARD TRAINS	
THIRD CLASS		THIRD CLASS								THIRD CLASS	
381 Mixed	317 Mixed	382 Mixed	318 Mixed							382 Mixed	
Mon	Thurs			Tue	Thurs						
L 15:15		0.0	RWYZ	Jct. with Mountain Park Sub. 5.3	D AN	A 9:20					
A 15:35		5.3	CWYZ	LEYLAND							
				LUSCAC	P	YA RD	L 9:00				
Mon	Thurs					Tue					
381						382					
MOUNTAIN TIME											

—Employee Timetable 54, April 24, 1955, Leslie Kozma Collection



Plan of Coalspur Yard, circa 1950s, drawn by Leslie Kozma from CNR plans

Early Scenes on the Alberta Coal Branch



—Glenbow Archives photo NA-3240-76, 1912

GTP Temporary Trestle, Alberta Coal Branch

Development of collieries on the Coal Branch commenced before construction of any rail lines. Thus, there was great urgency to lay the steel to the mines. This temporary trestle built of rough timber in 1912 was all that was required to get the track across a gully. Judging by the spoil at the base of the structure, work has already started on filling the trestle to create a permanent embankment. Surprisingly, few such structures were required on the ACB. Most of the permanent bridges were standard timber pile or pile and frame trestles. Many of these were filled in the 1920s. The largest timber bridge crossed Beaverdam Creek (Mile 9.0 MP Sub.): 58 bents, 823 feet long, 45 feet high. There were also five steel bridges, four were comprised of 80-foot deck plate girders with trestle approaches. The largest steel bridge spanned the McLeod River, two 150-foot deck truss spans—just south of the station of that name.



—CNR Photo 7686, Lorne Perry Collection, 1920s

CNR Train somewhere on the Alberta Coal Branch

The Grand Trunk Pacific lacked suitable equipment for handling the coal business. When not in ballast service, 40-ton-capacity Hart Convertible cars were used. But GTP coal shipments on the Coal Branch were handled principally using 33-ton capacity boxcars, despite a ten-cent premium per ton to load these enclosed cars. There were never enough open-top cars available, and both the CNR and CPR continued to use boxcars in western coal service into the 1960s. This was the view from the cupola of the caboose on the tail end of a CNR train somewhere on the Coal Branch in the mid-1920s (the boxcar in the foreground—numbered 428634—dates this photo as sometime after 1923). Northbound—almost anywhere on the line—was downhill. Twenty-two cars ahead of the caboose, the two locomotives were likely struggling to maintain control, even with the retainers set on the cars. Note the predominance of enclosed cars, including one stock car.

The Mine

The King Coal mine opened at Coalspur in 1949, which was very late in the initial coal-producing era. Its production was relatively small, totaling 31,638 tons over eight years, with five different owners from 1949 to its closure in 1964:

- 1949–51 King Coal and Lumber Ltd.
- 1951–60 Long Coal Co.
(no production 1953–59)
- 1960–62 Blackstone Collieries Ltd.
- 1962 Coalspur Collieries Ltd.
- 1962–64 McLeod River Hard Coal Co. Ltd.

Its small size and rather ramshackle appearance make it an excellent subject for the modeller. Coal was shipped out in boxcars, as seen in Ray Matthews' photograph in the previous issue. There were tracks on both sides of the tipple but in the picture from the Alberta Archives it appears that the inner track may not have been used near the end of its operating life. The site of this mine is clearly evident today, with portions of one track still in place, a tailings pile, and an assortment of mine cars and other equipment scattered throughout. When Al Lill visited the site in 1999, he noticed recent survey flagging, and some test pits had been dug in the area.

Some pictures of present-day Coalspur can be found in "Canadian National Makes the Grade" by L.S. Kozma and C.W. Bohi, *Railfan and Railroad* (December 1998), pages 34–41.

Coalspur was the heart of a coal-mining district in Alberta that produced "good coal". In a future article in this series on coal and railways, we will talk about coal that wasn't so good. ♣