

## Alberta Coal Branch—Making the Collection

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I was born and raised in Calgary and visited the Alberta Coal Branch as a young adult (1966) with another model railroader, returning on a number of other occasions with other friends and colleagues. The Coal Branch was in transition at that point. The old mines (underground and open pit) had essentially closed, their towns were mostly deserted, and only a few carloads of coal a month were being loaded, often using semi-manual technologies. The need for coal had not ceased, however, and leases were being reopened as open pit mines using modern drag lines, heavy haul trucks, and the single commodity predecessors of unit trains.

This project started in the early 1970s as a labour of love. Schools in Alberta were beginning to use resource-based teaching techniques and the Coal Branch seemed an ideal topic to showcase the skills of my fledgling multimedia production company. Through the kind cooperation of the Secretary Luscar Limited I obtained access to their of photographic collection (a mixture of professional images and snapshots) and newspaper scrapbooks, revealing a treasure trove of historical information. Additional information was provided by academic papers, written as new strip mines began to revitalise the area, as well as visits to provincial and national Archives. To this information I added my own colour slides and several hundred feet of original black and white 16mm film footage, shot with the assistance of work colleagues.

Unfortunately for the project, I became involved in fee-paying activities and the project languished. When I immigrated to Australia in the late 1980s the 16mm film stock was donated to the Alberta Government Archives, although I retained the slides and other materials. The project was resurrected again in 1996 as I became more involved in model railroading and a video copy of the film was obtained from the archives.

This NTSC video, likely reproduced from the work print rather than the original film stock, was then converted to PAL format for digitising and editing. Almost 100 slides were digitised for the project using Kodak Photo CD technology and other materials (black and white negatives, still photographs, and copies of newspaper clippings) were scanned using flatbed and transparency scanners.

The still and motion images were then packaged into a simple 'web site' format and burned to CD for use and distribution. Copies of the complete research collection were donated to several libraries and archives (Coal Branch Museum, Alberta Archives, National Model Railroad Association, etc.) and a subset was uploaded onto a publicly available web site ([www.zelmeroz.com/archives](http://www.zelmeroz.com/archives)). The materials also formed the basis for a 1997 paper and conference presentation in Australia.

The photographic originals ranged greatly in size and quality. Most of the purchased images (Geological Survey of Canada, Provincial Museum and Archives of Alberta, Glenbow Archives (not used for copyright reasons) and Canadian National Railways) were original prints from professional photographers. The Luscar images, on the other hand, were reproduced from copy negatives shot from prints.

The variety of photographic sources was both a blessing and a curse. Some images came from more than one source, making identification somewhat easier, except when the identification was contradictory. For the most part, however, the exact location and date of the scenes is unknown. Among other things, the two decades plus delay in using the materials means that I no longer know what my notes on the Luscar Ltd scrapbooks and photo albums mean, particularly since Luscar Ltd operated at several locations in the Coal Branch.

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### Making the NMRA Presentation & CD/web site

Developing the final presentation was relatively quick once the still and video images had been digitised. Since the package contains both specific materials for the NMRA Convention presentation (the tour) and data on other times and localities within the Coal Branch, there are two ways to access the collection. First, the "guided tour" of Coalspur c 1970, then the "reference" approach using the index to select general topic areas or specific images.

The display format is frameless html so that it can be easily viewed on a variety of platforms. Client side mapping and an in-depth tour through one community (Coalspur) was used for some links but most of the materials were included in an indexed resource format so that the collection can be used as a reference tool. Ideally, it would be possible to search the whole collection for specific items using a simple "find" command, however, this will have to await installation on a web server with scripting capability.

The basic page design is intended to provide a consistent size and layout of pages. While the first priority was a projected image for the group presentation, the design also seems quite acceptable for a single user. Fortunately, most of the visuals have a horizontal (landscape) format, fitting well to the computer screen.

Most tour pages have "back", "next", and "tour" buttons, the latter providing access to a linked list of all the tour pages in presentation order. Some have a "+2" button which allows the viewer to skip the next page, a larger version of the current page. The single video in the tour is available from the Coalspur panorama with its image map for access to photos of specific building and other features.

Most of the reference pages, like the video pages, display without navigation tools. It is, therefore, necessary to use the browser's "back" button to return to the calling index page.

### Acknowledgments

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- \* Academic articles written by A A den Otter and others
- \* Canadian National Railways, Public Relations
- \* Luscar Ltd, particularly (in 1972) G D Coates, Vice-President Administration, and R J Weaver, Corporate Secretary.
- \* Geological Survey of Canada
- \* Rev C D (Dwight) Powell
- \* Provincial Museum and Archives of Alberta
- \* The recollections of J Roberts, formerly of the Coal Branch

The video resources were digitised from 16mm film located in the Provincial Museum and Archives of Alberta, deposits number 88.634/5, 88.634/7, and 88.634/8, and shot by A C Lynn Zelmer with the assistance of Amy Elliott Zelmer and Robert N Christie.