

Fred Brown: Coal Creek Miner's Museum to preserve community's cultural history

By Fred Brown

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Last month, the Anderson County Commission, backed by support from the Lake City mayor and City Council, rendered a historic vote.

The vote is perhaps not as important for the history of the vote itself, but rather what it means and what it preserves. It also illustrates with a fine edge what Southern author and Nobel Laureate William Faulkner once said: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

The commission voted overwhelmingly Aug. 19 to purchase the former Bank of America building on Main Street in Lake City and transform it into the Coal Creek Miners' Museum.

That vote will percolate down through time and come to be recognized as the day politicians saved irreplaceable slices of Anderson County's past.

With the commission's 13-1 approval, the Coal Creek Miners' Museum will honor Anderson County's long and illustrious coal mining history.

This action could not have been possible without the expert advice and support of Barry Thacker, president of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation and principal engineer/president of Knoxville-based GeoEnvironmental Associates Inc. of Knoxville.

And, of course, Thacker's indispensable internuncio Carol Moore, Geo manager, majordomo of the foundation and public relations mastermind.

The astounding coal mining history of Coal Creek (modern-day Lake City) dates back to the American Industrial Revolution, when thousands of Welsh miners came to the U.S. and East Tennessee in particular. In the late 1800s, coal helped fuel the South's and the nation's recovery from the devastating effects of a divisive Civil War.

Knoxville and Coal Creek have a symbiotic relationship that dates to that time of rebirth and renewal. Knoxville businessmen needed coal to produce iron. Coal Creek had coal, but needed rail lines to ship from its deep mines that began to spring up dramatically after the war. It was a natural partnership that lasts even to the present

day.

The Welsh were outstanding coal miners as well as businessmen and makers of iron — the Knoxville Foundry is the product of Welshman iron ingenuity. The Welsh were not called “iron masters” for nothing.

Many of Anderson County’s leaders who voted approval of the museum are descended from those miners.

Thacker and Moore expanded the preservation movement single-handedly through the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation. They began by cleaning the trash-burdened mountain stream of Coal Creek to purchasing the very land upon which the Coal Creek Coal Wars were fought by state militia and miners in 1891-92.

Previously, the community-committed foundation worked with the county to establish the Coal Creek Motor Discovery Trail, which winds through Lake City, Fraterville and Briceville and includes more than 25 historical markers.

In addition, the foundation is negotiating with Norfolk Southern Railway concerning its lines leading from Lake City to Briceville. The old rail lines were used formerly to transport coal, and now Thacker and Moore want the narrow gauges for a “rails to trails” addition.

That isn’t all. Thacker says he will not be satisfied until Lake City returns its name to Coal Creek. That, he admits, is going to take some doing. The city’s name originally when founded in 1856 was Coal Creek. After the construction of Norris Dam, the city incorporated and changed its name to Lake City in 1939.

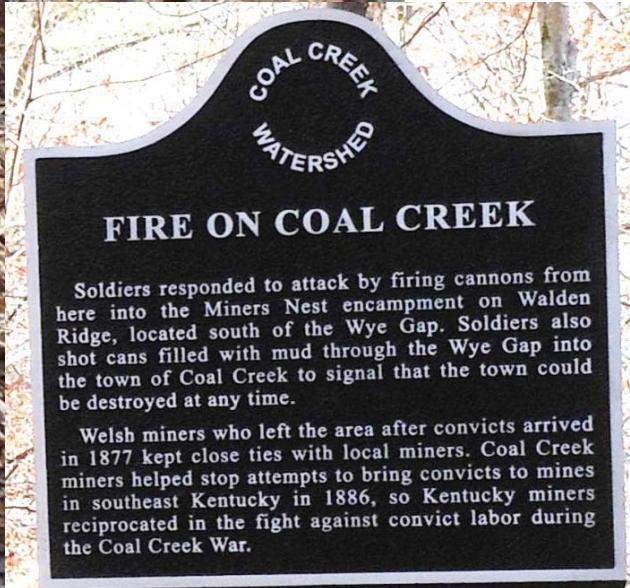
The museum is projected to open around March or April next year.

Thacker has challenged the Coal Creek Miners’ Museum Board to make the name “Coal Creek” part of its title. If they did that, Thacker told them he would purchase not only a cannon for Fort Anderson on Militia Hill, but also a cannon to grace the front of the museum.

The board followed through, and Thacker is now bargaining for two large artillery pieces with Steen Cannon & Ordnance Works in Ashland, Ky. One of the guns would be a replica of the size used at Fort Anderson on Militia Hill to fire cans of mud onto the streets of Coal Creek during the infamous Coal Creek Wars more than 120 years ago.

The act of blasting cans of mud into Coal Creek made a distinct military point at the time when the state militia occupied the high ground above the town. That is also part of the rare history to be preserved for those who want to know what happened here.

History is essential for the cultural health of any community.



COAL CREEK WATERSHED

FIRE ON COAL CREEK

Soldiers responded to attack by firing cannons from here into the Miners Nest encampment on Walden Ridge, located south of the Wye Gap. Soldiers also shot cans filled with mud through the Wye Gap into the town of Coal Creek to signal that the town could be destroyed at any time.

Welsh miners who left the area after convicts arrived in 1877 kept close ties with local miners. Coal Creek miners helped stop attempts to bring convicts to mines in southeast Kentucky in 1886, so Kentucky miners reciprocated in the fight against convict labor during the Coal Creek War.