

Marking Time

East
Tennessee
Historical
Markers
and the
Stories
behind
Them



FRED BROWN

Not only were the Clinch River pearls plentiful but they were also of such quality that buyers from New York and from around the world came to the small East Tennessee town from May through September to purchase the mussels.

In fact, money was so good from selling pearls that everybody got in on the act of dredging for them: bankers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and the unemployed as well as young boys playing hooky from school.

From politicians to pearls, Clinton has always possessed a colorful history. Today, Clinch River pearls from more than a century ago are rare treasures, just like the town on the banks of one of the state's most scenic rivers.

THE COAL CREEK WAR, 1891-92

THC Marker 1 D 32: Coal Creek Valley was the scene of an armed rebellion against the state by free miners seeking an end to the common practice of leasing convicts to coal companies. On Oct. 31, 1891 the convict laborers at Briceville were freed by armed miners. The revolt was subdued by the state militia, but led to the eventual abolition of the "convict lease system" and the establishment of Brushy Mountain State Prison in 1898.

How to get there: The historical marker is located at Briceville Elementary School at the junction of Slate Stone Road and State Route 116 in Anderson County.

Tillman Cadle, an old Tennessee and Kentucky coal miner who died years ago, remembered this story from his father, Joe Cadle, who took part in the Coal Creek Wars. During the troubles in Briceville, some of the convict miners were being fed a thin concoction that resembled soup. "My soup has a rat in it," complained one of the convicts. "What's the matter?" responded the miner ladling out the soup. "Did it eat too much?"

Times were lean; attitudes and feelings were inflexible. A coal miner's life was about as difficult as it could be, reminiscent of Wales, which many of the Briceville miners had once called home.

Joe Cadle was one of the founders of the Knights of Labor, a group organized specifically to combat Tennessee's practice of leasing convicts to replace miners. These were men whose bellies were hard, their hands callused, and

their minds narrowed by grinding poverty. They meant business. Their families were on the line, and they were hungry as wolves, a condition that can make a man unrelenting in his quest for fairness.

The convict lease law in Tennessee took food from their tables and reduced miners to homeless paupers. But to understand that law and how it arose, one must go back to the Civil War in Tennessee.

At the end of the great conflict of states, Tennessee's treasury was running on fumes. The state, the last to secede from the Union, had been through an ordeal by fire. The only state to suffer more fighting on its home soil than Tennessee was Virginia. The state was practically bankrupt by 1865.

Coming out of the war, Tennessee had to rely upon its natural resources. Anderson County was blessed with coal, a viable economic source since the 1830s, and other natural resources. Men such as Caswell Bowling and James Kirkpatrick had been pulling coal from the hills and moving it to The Clinch River and to Clinton even before the rebellion began.

By 1888, Coal Creek (now Lake City) boasted a population of three thousand people. It was situated perfectly for coal to be moved by railcar. Two years after the end of the Civil War, Knoxville Iron Company (KIC) began a rolling mill operation in Coal Creek. By 1873, KIC was mining enough coal to fill about ten railcars per day.

Early in the 1890s, other coal companies moved in. Boys as young as nine years old were put to work in the mines.

Trouble began in the hot July days of 1891, some three decades after the convict lease law was passed by the Tennessee Legislature.

The Tennessee Mine Company brought in forty convicts the day after Independence Day. Convicts began tearing down miners' dwellings and other buildings and erecting a stockade for the housing of even more convicts.

On July 15, three hundred starving miners marched to the stockade. They opened the gates, freed the convicts, and burned the structure to the ground. They ordered the convicts and their guards to the trains and sent them to Knoxville. Joe Cadle was in the thick of that struggle.

That was the first blow in the conflict that would be covered by "war correspondents" as the Coal Creek Wars and by European journalists as the "Tennessee War."

A beleaguered Anderson County sheriff hurried off a message to Nashville. He needed military help to keep peace. Governor John Buchanan not only sent in troops, he arrived in Briceville himself to attempt to calm the incident that was now on the verge of spreading.

Buchanan's speech did little to placate the angry miners—especially when they found out that three companies of militia stationed in Knoxville

were on their way. Three days later, fifteen hundred miners overpowered the militia and set more convicts free.

The governor sent in more troops, but they, too, were surrounded and forced to retreat.

With this, the governor agreed to meet with the miners and told them he would work to rescind the hated convict lease law, but it would take time. The miners agreed to see what the legislature could do. Some three months later, the miners got their answer.

When word arrived that the legislature had basically given the state some six years to work out the convict lease agreement, the miners exploded like a shell. All the politicians did, the miners said, was "to pass a military bill getting the troops ready to fight."

On October 30, 1891, twenty-five hundred armed miners arrived in Briceville. Edgy as frightened cats, the miners liberated prisoners in the stockade and set twelve buildings ablaze. They freed unruly convicts, who immediately headed for coal company stores and hoisted out thousands of dollars in goods.

The exact same scene was repeated in Oliver Springs. And in fact, there were more revolts over the course of the next several months. Miners as well as military men were killed.

A little over a year later, a truce was thrashed out between the miners and the state. But it was a bitter victory for the miners. The state said the convict lease system would have to run on until it played out in 1896, when the leases expired. In that year, the system was legally abolished.