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Graveyards of Industry – Exploring the effects of a resource-reliant economy on the towns of early Alberta

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Summary

This research focuses on Western Alberta's ghost towns and how resource focused economies have led to the formation, the prosperity, and eventually the demise of these now desolate localities. This project investigates the local geology, socio-economic climate, and broader historical events that has shaped these areas, and how it has impacted modern life and industrial activity. The areas explored were mostly coal-based economies, which include the Alberta Coal Branch, Banff National Park, Crowsnest Pass, Kanaskis, and Southern Alberta. The findings from this research highlight that rapid changes in technology and relying on a sole industry to maintain economic activity will result in the creation of a ghost town, and how these localities have changed in recent years has greatly varied based on its value to locals, industry, and the government.

Introduction

Alberta has always been reliant on its abundant natural resources, such as coal and oil. However, in a fast-changing world with the prominence of modern issues such as climate change and renewable energies, we must look to history to examine what has happened in the past to understand the future. To do this, there must be careful study of the epitaphs of Alberta's rich industrial history to find the warning signs of the negative effects of relying on a few resources. We must understand that ghost towns of Alberta.

A ghost town, as defined by this project, is a locality that experienced a period of economic and population growth that provided access to the amenities required for a healthy municipality, such as hotels, restaurants, general stores, and hospitals. However, following a devastating economic collapse, the town's population drastically decreases and the commerce that once thrived in the town is now extinct. This description satisfies the conditions of many abandoned or sparsely populated areas found in the Alberta Coal Branch, Banff National Park, Crowsnest Pass, Kanaskis, and Southern Alberta. For this presentation I will be focusing on both Banff National Park and the Alberta Coal Branch.

The Alberta Coal Branch is an area that encloses several abandoned or partially-abandoned towns that are shadows of their former selves. These towns include Brule, Pocahontas, Mercoal, Coalspur, Robb, Mountain Park, Cadomin, and Luscar. These towns were fled from in the early 1950's due to the beginning of the modern Alberta oil boom from the Leduc 1947 discovery. When trains began to switch to diesel engines instead of coal powered steam engines, and the coal mines in the area lost their greatest trading partners – the Canadian National Railway (CNR).

Banff National Park's resource economy suffered from a combination of geological limitations and changing attitudes towards resource development in the Canadian Rockies. The three ghost towns studied in this area included Silver City, Anthracite, and Bankhead. Silver City and Anthracite were established due to prospectors looking to capitalize on the demand for coal and rare-earth metals, and both were abandoned due to the lack of resource produced from their respective mines. Bankhead was established by the

Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) itself to secure coal supply for the railroad itself. However, after the coal seam became uneconomic to mine from the way it formed within Cascade Mountain, the town was shortly abandoned and is now a tourist site on the side of the road by Lake Minnewanka.

Theory and/or Method

The most recent authoritative text(s) on the ghost towns of Alberta is by Harold Fryer entitled *Ghost Towns of Alberta* (1978) and *Ghost Towns of Southern Alberta* (1982). However, there has not been a serious academic study of the broader issue of Alberta's ghost towns in several years. Thus, this research project had several methods in understanding the wider geological, geographic, and socio-economic context.

1. **Visiting the sites and mapping out routes:** This allowed for direct observation of these areas to see what infrastructure remains, talk with locals to understand the modern condition of the localities and its local history, and acquire pictures of important artifacts.

2. **Examining historical geological maps and town maps:** These documents give clarity to the percieved resource potential of these areas, as well as illustrate the geographical layout of the developing urban area and how it reflected expectations of success for the locality. These resources were reviewed at the Glenbow Archives.

3. **Literature Review:** Some of the literature used as reference in this research includes historical, geological, and industry focused journal articles, books, and fonds.

4. **Website:** A website was designed in order to publish this research for the general public to access. The website can be found here: http://www.ghosttownsofcanada.com/

Examples

<u>Cadomin, AB:</u>

Cadomin has a rich history in mining as it was the second mine to open up in the Alberta Coal Branch. South of the town there is a very useful map of the many localities within the Coal Branch. Many of these towns are either occupied as hamlets and have current mining operations, or are ghost towns that have derelict buildings and flat grassland where buildings used to stand. If you are looking for a "classic" ghost town Cadomin is not the place to go. However, I define a ghost town as a locality that experienced a period of economic and population growth that provided access to the amenities required for a healthy municipality; such as hotels, restaurants, general stores, and hospitals. Following a devastating economic collapse the town's population drastically decreases and the commerce that once thrived in the town is now extinct. This definition fits Cadomin's history perfectly. When we look at the history of Cadomin itself we find that this definition illustrates clearly two distinct periods within its history: initial development, operation, and closure (1909 – 1960), with a revival period (beginning in 1969). Cadomin not only offers a center for the rich history of the Coal Branch, it offers a nice place to camp, get a coffee, see old mine foundations, and experience old-fashioned western hospitality.

Cadomin (an acronym for Canadian Dominion Mining) began with the coal discovery in 1912 by Frederick L. Hammond. Development lagged, but by 1917 wartime demands allowed the company to roll out greater output with projections of a total potential reserve of 75 million tons. By 1918 the mine at Cadomin Mountain was producing 150,000 tons a year (Fryer, 1976, pg. 137). However, just like many early settlements disaster eventually struck. In 1920 a mine fire brought the entire operation to a halt. The underground fire had to be extinguished by sealing off the mine (Ross, 1974, pg. 71). Despite the delay in resource development, this mine fire created a revolutionary way of mining called "rock-tunnelling", which became the safest way to mine at the time. The company divided the mine into

separate sections, so if there were a cave-in or a fire it would not affect the other mineshafts and halt operations. The town of Cadomin of course had the bragging rights for creating this new method of mining (Fryer, 1976, pg. 137). In an age of boosterism where towns would compete in attracting settlers, investors, and businessmen into the municipality, the town of Cadomin would use many media outlets to advertise their accomplishments. A largely promotional 1928 article in the Edson-Jasper Signal not only described the method of rock-tunnelling, but also the daily output of 5,000 tons, the good relationships between the miners and officials, and the many amenities such as a community hall, churches, and businesses. It even showcased the Bank of Nova Scotia branch under the management of a Mr. R. Hickson (Fryer, 1976, pg. 138).

Like other Coal Branch towns, there was steady employment throughout the Depression years as well as steady business with their main client the Canadian National Railway (CNR). However, even with a railway into Cadomin, there was no road to the outside world until 1934, when the Federal Government's relief work camps for the unemployed, paid workers 20 cents per day to create a road from Cadomin to Luscar (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). By 1946 there was a road built from Edson to Cadomin. With the spur line from Coalspur to Mountain Park, the line went through Cadomin and residents would visit neighbouring communities for social activities, gambling, and for the single men - womanizing. Cadomin was noted for having a prominent arts scene, especially for having the only symphony between Edmonton and Vancouver. Musicians were encouraged to take up jobs in the mine. The crowds were plentiful, and the ticket money was collected through the payroll (Ross, 1974, pg. 72). In 1921 the Mountain Park Coal Company opened a 5.3-mile spur from Leyland, which is just north of Cadomin, to the Luscar mine (Kozma, 2001). In 1924 the Luscar operation was expanded to coordinate the efforts of Mountain Park with a single crew train. It continued to run between Luscar and Leyland, with frequent stops at Mountain Park.

Despite what promotional literature at the time claimed about Cadomin, life in the mines was hardly idyllic. Numerous deaths resulted from gas, gas explosions, and mine floods. In 1942 the steady work in the mine came at a cost of 5 men killed. However, the town still attracted workers and by 1933 there was a population of 1,700 people (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). In 1941, as a result of World War II, the demand for coal increased immensely. There was an output of 350,000 tons of coal per year and a payroll of $500,000 (roughly $7.7 million in 2015 dollars), which was distributed among 350 workers (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). In 1948 the John Ryan Trophy for the company with the lowest workplace accidents was presented to J.A. McLeod who was the manager for Cadomin Coals Ltd., who accepted his prize at the Canadian Mining Institute meeting in Vancouver (Ross, 1974, pg. 150). In 1952 the town peaked at a population of 2,500 people, yet despite the years of prosperity 1952 was the hardest year for the town of Cadomin. In June the McLeod River flooded, washing out the rail line and the coal seam where it was being worked on 4,800-foot level. The mine closed after this devastating flood and miners were left without work. Some 2,000 residents left, thinking the town would die out (Fryer, 1976, pg. 140). However, some of the miners refused to leave and decided it was the perfect place to retire.

Even though Cadomin's industry vanished overnight, new mining development has taken place since the early 1970's under the Cardinal River Coals joint-venture. Now the town's permanent residents can have work that is close to home. On the local general store there is a sign that proclaims "WE SUPPORT CHEVIOT", solidifying their support for the coal mining still taking place at the Cheviot Mountain near Mountain Park. But the operation most immediate to Cadomin is an entirely different type of resource extraction, a limestone quarry. The limestone quarry exploits the Palliser formation, a unit of late Devonian age, and a formation not previously exploited by early mining companies (Steward, 1929). Even though the town no longer boasts a population of 2,500, Cadomin has its seasonal residents and active commerce. Leyland, a mile to the west, is now occupied by the CNR as a yard for equipment and train servicing.

Pictures:

Picture: Bridge Foundations (Aaron Lang, Caroline Thomas, 2015)

Picture: Old Unused Building (Aaron Lang, Caroline Thomas, 2015)

Picture: Old Cadomin Sign (Aaron Lang, Caroline Thomas, 2015)

Conclusions

The findings from this research highlight that rapid changes in technology and relying on a sole industry to maintain economic activity will result in the creation of a ghost town, and how these localities have changed in recent years has greatly varied based on its value to locals, industry, and the government. Ghost towns such as Bankhead are utilized as a historical resource, while areas like Cadomin and Mercoal are used for squatters or vacation homes. Other towns, such as Anthracite and Silver City are left without a trace as they became an obstacle for local development.

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