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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 have 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, Kananaskis, and Southern Alberta. The findings from this research highlight that rapid changes in technology and relying on a single industry to maintain economic activity will result in the creation of a ghost town. The extent the localities have changed in recent years has dramatically 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 a careful study of the epitaphs of Alberta's rich industrial history to find the warning signs of the adverse effects of a region relying on one industry. We must understand the ghost towns of Alberta.

A ghost town in the Alberta context is a locality that experienced a period of rapid growth due to the economic advantages of a single-resource based or agrarian economy, which provided access to amenities required for a healthy municipality, such as hotels, restaurants, general stores, and hospitals. However, following a devastating local 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 towns found in the Alberta Coal Branch, Banff National Park, Crowsnest Pass, Kananaskis, 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 coal mining towns that are shadows of their former selves. These towns include Mercoal, Coalspur, Robb, Mountain Park, Cadomin, and Luscar. When trains switched to diesel engines instead of coal-powered steam engines, the coal mines in the area lost their most significant trading partner – 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 by prospectors looking to capitalize on the demand for coal and rare-earth metals, and both were abandoned due to geological or environmental limitations. Bankhead was found by the Canadian Pacific Railway

(CPR) to secure coal supply for the railroad. 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 authoritative text(s) on the ghost towns of Alberta are authored by the historian Harold Fryer, entitled *Ghost Towns of Alberta* (1976) and *Ghost Towns of Southern Alberta* (1982). However, there has not been further research or communication of the broader issue of Alberta's ghost towns in several years. This research project utilized several methods in understanding the broader geological, geographic, and socio-economic context affecting these localities.

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 artefacts.
2. **Examining historical geological maps and town maps:** These documents give clarity to the perceived resource potential of these areas, as well as illustrate the geographical layout of the developing urban space and how it reflected expectations of success for the locality. Some of these resources were reviewed at the Glenbow Archives.
3. **Literature Review:** Some of the literature used as a reference in this research includes historical, geological, and industry-focused journal articles, books, and fonds.
4. **Website:** A website was designed to publish this research for the general public to access. The website can be found here: <http://www.ghosttownsofcanada.com/>.
UPDATE: Website will be updated by June 2019.

Examples

Cadomin, AB:

South of the townsite of Cadomin there is a 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. Since Cadomin was heavily reliant on a coal based-economy and experienced a mass exodus once the coal seam washed out due to a mine flood, it is considered a ghost town in the scope of this project. When examining the history of Cadomin itself, we find two distinct periods within its history: initial development, operation, and closure (1912 – 1960), with a revival period (beginning in 1969). Cadomin not only offers a centre for the rich history of the Coal Branch, but it also provides a nice place to camp, get a coffee, see old mine foundations, and experience old-fashioned western hospitality.

The secondary sources and most comprehensive records of Cadomin's history are from Harold Fryer's *Ghost Towns of Alberta* (1976) and Toni Ross' *Oh! The Coal Branch* (1974), which is summarized in this article. In 1912, prospector Frederick L. Hammond established Cadomin (an acronym for Canadian Dominion Mining) from a coal seam in the area (Ross, 1974, p. 71). Coal mining did not begin until 1917, and by 1918 the mine had produced 153 K tons out of an estimated reserve of 75 MM tons of coal (Ross, 1974, p. 71). Despite the success of the first years of operations, mine disasters were a common occurrence in early Alberta mining operations. In 1920, an underground mine fire had to be extinguished by sealing off the mine (Ross, 1974, pg. 71). 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. One of the accomplishments that Cadomin boasted about was the method of rock tunnelling, which allowed the mine to continue production while a fire in the mine was active (Ross, 1974, p. 72). Both Fryer (1976) and Ross (1974) highlight 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 of coal, the Bank of Nova-Scotia branch, the good relationships between the miners and officials, and the many amenities such as the churches, and businesses in the townsite (Fryer, 1976, pg. 138, Ross, 1974, p. 73). Like other Coal Branch towns, mining and mining-related jobs remained during the Depression to serve the Coal Branch's main client - the Canadian National Railway (CNR) (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139).

There was no road outside of Cadomin until 1934 when the provincial government hired unemployed labourers to build a road from Cadomin to Luscar (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). When driving in the area today, it seems that Luscar and Cadomin are so close in proximity that it does not feel like they should be separate townsites. This emphasizes the isolation the people of Cadomin experienced during their tenure in the townsite. By 1946 a road was built from Edson to Cadomin, giving the people of Cadomin more freedom since the only way outside of the townsite was by train (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). Toni Ross (1974) noted that despite the isolation Cadomin experienced, the town had a prominent arts scene, especially "for having the only symphony orchestra between Edmonton and Vancouver" (Ross, 1974, pg. 72).

The town attracted many 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 (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). There was an output of 350,000 tons of coal per year with 350 workers employed by the Cadomin operation (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). Despite what promotional literature at the time claimed about Cadomin, life in the mines was hardly idyllic. Numerous deaths resulted from operational disasters (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139). Notably, in August of 1942, five men are killed in a mine flood on the evening shift – foreshadowing the end of the Cadomin mine in 1952 (Fryer, 1976, pg. 139, Ross, 1974, p. 139). Despite previous safety shortcomings, in 1948 the John Ryan Trophy, awarded to the company with the lowest workplace accidents, was presented to J.A. McLeod who was the manager for Cadomin Coals Ltd. (Ross, 1974, pg. 150). In 1952, Cadomin hosted a population of 2,500 people, and unfortunately, 1952 was the year Cadomin would see a massive exodus from the townsite due to the McLeod River Flood, which flooded the mine and destroyed local infrastructure (Fryer, 1976, p. 140). Similar to other Coal Branch towns in the 1950s, many of the residents left the townsite due to the closure of the mine (Fryer, 1976, pg. 140).

Even though Cadomin's industry vanished overnight, new mining developments have taken place since the early 1970s, 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 (Devonian Period) (Geological Survey of Canada, 1929). Even though the town no longer has a population of 2,500, Cadomin has its seasonal residents.

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 single industry to maintain economic activity will result in the creation of a ghost town, and how these localities have changed in recent years has dramatically 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 occupied by miners and vacationers. 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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