

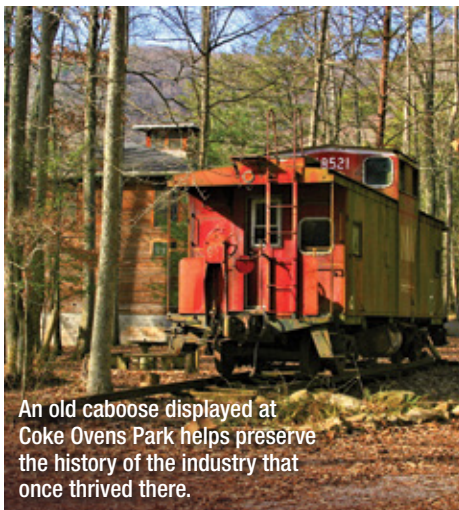
Preserving the past

Coke Ovens play role in Dunlap's history

Story by LISA SAVAGE



The Coke Ovens Park provides visitors a glimpse into the industry that once thrived in Sequatchie County.



An old caboose displayed at Coke Ovens Park helps preserve the history of the industry that once thrived there.



The park's Bluegrass Festival serves as the only annual fundraiser for Dunlap Coke Ovens.



Carson Camp loved exploring near the Coke Ovens when he was young, now works with the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association.

As a young boy, Carson Camp saw the old, abandoned brick structures that were once part of a thriving mining community when he walked in the woods near his home. He heard stories about the coal mining operation and coke ovens. Both his grandfathers had worked in the mines, and one died young from black lung at age 33.

"I had always seen the ruins and chimneys out in the woods," Camp says. "It's like it was forgotten."

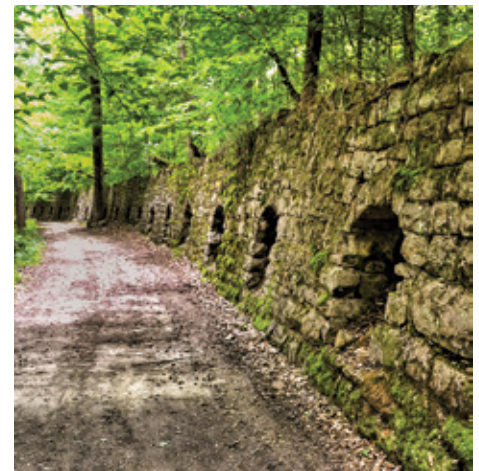
As Camp got older, he was determined to learn everything he could about the history in his community and to preserve it. "This was an important part of the industrial revolution in the United States, and I realized there wasn't anything about it in history books," Camp says.

Camp and others organized the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association in 1984 and set out to shed light on the historic mining operation that thrived between 1899 and 1927 in Dunlap. The mining company went bankrupt in 1927, never to reopen, and the area became a dumping ground for years. Volunteers with the historical association removed a thousand tons of garbage to make way for a park, and the nonprofit group now works to preserve the history of the area's once-thriving industrial complex and of all the Sequatchie Valley.

THE HISTORY

Historic Dunlap Coke Ovens Park, 88 tree-shaded acres in the heart of Sequatchie County, provides a glimpse into the industry that once thrived there. Visitors can explore the remains of 268 beehive coke ovens the mining industry used in the early 1900s to convert mountain coal into industrial coke, a product used to smelt iron ore, Camp says.

Workers mined the ore atop Fredonia Mountain and used a gravity incline to get the product to the bottom of the mountain, where workers washed the coal. The coal lumps easily sold, but the coal dust and fine granules remained. "That's where the coke ovens came in," Camp says. Workers put the remnants in and used mud to seal the oven doorways made from stacked



More About Dunlap Coke Ovens Park

An amphitheater at the park provides an ideal location for its only fundraiser, the annual Dunlap Coke Ovens-Bluegrass Jam Band/Festival, along with other events throughout the year.

There's a fee for the festival, and it's the only time there's a charge for entrance at the park. There's no fee for the museum and parking. However, the association accepts donations.

The park is open during daylight hours, year-round. There's no paid staff. Between 15 and 20 association members volunteer their time, working in the museum, picking up limbs, mowing or doing general cleanup about once a week. The group plans the annual Dunlap Coke Ovens-Bluegrass Jam Band/Festival, which takes place the first weekend in June. This year's event is scheduled for June 5 and 6. For details about the festival, visit www.cokeovens.com or the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park Facebook page.

Dunlap Coke Ovens Park

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loose fire brick. The mud sealed the joints, allowing the dust to slowly convert to coke. The dust burned for 72 hours, and then the workers unsealed the ovens.

About 6 tons of coal dust converted to 3 tons of coke, Camp says. Steel foundries in Chattanooga and Birmingham purchased the coke and used it in steel production.

During the week, workers loaded the mined coal onto the incline railcars to move it down the mountain. On weekends when the mines weren't running, workers would fit homemade wooden bicycle-type seats with steel rollers — called incline horses — to grip the incline's rails at the top of the mountain and ride them down.

"They'd slide from the top to the bottom, with some speeds up to 60 mph," Camp says. "On the weekend, they'd have races."

At their peak in 1920, the mining operation and coke ovens employed about 350 people. Records show only two deaths from accidents at the mines, although Camp figures there were more. Of the original 200 wood-framed company buildings and homes, only three survive today, outside park grounds.

The miners were not employees of the company, but served as contract workers. They even provided their own tools, which

they purchased at the company store, known as The Commissary.

The association set a goal to build an exact, full-size replica of the original Commissary, which went up in 1902. Construction began in 1987 with groundbreaking ceremonies, and a 92-by-46-foot, two-story replica of the store and offices now serves as the Coke Ovens Museum. It contains photos and artifacts from the coke ovens, as well as other Sequatchie Valley history.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Members of the historical association strive to preserve the history of the Sequatchie Valley and provide an educational resource for the area. The group successfully worked to have Coke Ovens Park placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and they continue to expand their collection of artifacts that reflect the area's history.

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail also goes through the park.

"It's one of the few actual pristine trails not buried underneath asphalt of today's highways," Camp says. "People can actually walk on the trail here in the park."

BTC Fiber sometimes uses the park to film Channel 18's "Ed Brown Show" featuring local bluegrass musicians. "It's

a great opportunity for the park," Camp says. "It's a nice backdrop, and it lets people see some of what we have here. We want as many people as possible to learn about this important part of history in our area. We want to preserve it so that future generations can enjoy it." 📍