

THURBER:70 miles west of Fort Worth

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W.K. Gordon Center for Industrial History of Texas

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--permanent exhibits in the museum is the development of the coal, brick, and petroleum industries
--special collections library and research area permits serious examination of life in Thurber and in other areas of industrial development in Texas and the Southwest

Mrs. W.K. Gordon, Jr., Erath County, and the Texas Department of Transportation.

Mining for coal at the town of Thurber began in 1886 under the direction of brothers William and Harvey Johnson. Harvey died in 1888, and William sold the enterprise to a Scottish cattleman, Robert D. Hunter. Hunter saw a profitable opportunity in the need of railroads to fuel steam locomotives. The Texas and Pacific Railroad, running westward from Fort Worth, required coal to operate its trains. Having purchased the Johnson brothers' coalfields in Erath, Palo Pinto, and Eastland counties, Hunter organized the Texas and Pacific Coal Company to extract and sell coal to the railroad and other customers.

Coal mining was already highly unionized in the United States, and the Thurber mines attracted union organizers. The Knights of Labor began a strike just before the Johnson brothers sold out in 1888. In order to control the work force in the mines, the Texas and Pacific Coal Company fenced off its property at Thurber and constructed an entire community for its workers with "schools, churches, saloons, stores, houses, an opera house seating over 650, a hotel, an ice and electric plant, and the only library in the county." The company then began hiring miners on its own terms, excluding union activists. Because of the relative isolation of the Thurber mines, the company recruited workers from great distances. Though a large percentage of miners came from Italy, Poland, Britain, and Ireland, eighteen nationalities were represented at Thurber.

In order to take best advantage of its resources, the owners of Thurber initiated the manufacture of brick in 1897. During the late nineteenth century, brick making had become a leading industry in Texas, described as second only behind "car building and shop construction by railroads." Company officers knew that they had virtually inexhaustible supplies of shale at Thurber, so they sent samples to brick makers in St. Louis for analysis. When they received a positive response from St. Louis, the firm incorporated a new entity, the Green and Hunter Brick Company. Using the otherwise nearly worthless "nut and pea" to fire the kilns, workers at Thurber produced a reported 80,000 bricks daily. They made several varieties of brick, but specialized in road paving brick. Advertisements in the Texas Almanac reported the use of Thurber paving brick "in Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston, Galveston, Beaumont, and other cities of the South." Furthermore, the ads boasted that structures in Dallas (the Dallas Opera House, among others) and Fort Worth (the Texas and Pacific Railway station and the First National Bank) had been built using brick from Thurber.

Initially workers excavated shale from a hill adjacent to the kilns. Then in 1903 the company laid a rail line from the brick plant to a richer shale deposit about a mile north of the kilns. Workers used electrically operated locomotives and dump cars on the spur line until gasoline-fueled engines came into use during the 1920s. Shortly after World War I the plant producing construction brick burned, leaving the company to concentrate on paving brick.

Economic changes spelled the end for the industrial enterprises at Thurber. As railroads changed from coal to oil as fuel for their steam locomotives during the first quarter of the twentieth century, the market weakened for the bituminous coal extracted by Thurber miners. After the company failed to meet demands for higher wages, the union workers organized a strike in 1921. In response to the diminished market the company continued to mine limited quantities of coal until the company closed the mines permanently in 1926. Changing economic times likewise effected this operation, for increased petroleum production led to expanded use of oil-based artificial asphalt as a paving material. Because asphalt was a far more cost effective material than using paving brick, the brick market declined as well. A reduced market, combined with general economic depression starting in 1929, led to the closure of the Thurber brick kilns in 1930.

Although petroleum development in Texas instigated the demise of Thurber, it insured the survival of the Texas and Pacific Coal Company. The company had hired William Knox Gordon, a native of Virginia, in 1889 as a civil and mining engineer. Improvements to the coal mining operations were among his early contributions. Realizing that coal could not continue to compete with other fuels, especially oil, Gordon began to seek petroleum in the area surrounding Thurber. As early as 1915 he discovered an oil well just west of Strawn which produced a great deal of excitement in the area, but not much oil. President Edgar Marston wrote from New York and told Gordon that the company needed to decrease the cost of coal production and increase production of oil.

Convinced that West Texas held oil, Gordon used his knowledge of both geology and the local terrain to continue his search. Professional geologists sent to the region to search for evidence of oil failed to find any, but Gordon was persistent. His enthusiasm unhindered by the low production of the 1915 well near Strawn, he conferred with a committee from the town of Ranger. They offered to exchange a lease for oil that might be produced from 80,000 acres in exchange for drilling four exploratory wells. Gordon convinced company directors to risk \$20,000 on the venture. The first well at Ranger produced millions of cubic feet of natural gas, worth almost nothing on the market at the time, but it hinted at the presence of oil.

The second well, the J.H. McCleskey No. 1, blew in as an oil gusher in October 1917. The discovery opened the great Ranger Oil Field, which after expanding into other areas eventually produced almost four million barrels of petroleum and opened oil production in West Texas. As a result, the firm altered its name to Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company the next year. In 1923 the company relocated its headquarters from New York to Thurber to be closer to physical operations.

The income from oil produced on company leases could not save Thurber. After the mines and the brick kilns ceased operating, the company permitted workers to live rent-free in Thurber until they could relocate to other jobs. In 1933 the firm moved its corporate offices to Fort Worth. Some company businesses continued for a while, including the company store, which did business until 1935. Though Thurber once claimed to be the largest town between Fort Worth and El Paso, boasting 10,000 residents, it was little more than a ghost town by the 1930s. Many of the workers' homes and other buildings were sold and moved to surrounding towns where they survive today, while other structures were dismantled and their materials salvaged for reuse elsewhere.

The former town site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Texas Historical Commission has placed several markers at the site, but only a handful of buildings remain. Among those are the general mercantile, the ice house smokestack, and many foundations all of which are located on private property. The Thurber Historical Association has moved a miner's residence, the Catholic Church, and the top of the bandstand to an area adjacent to the museum which is open to the public for special events.

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The New York Hill Restaurant, at I-20 Exit 367, in Thurber, Texas, has a wonderful panoramic overview of Thurber. The restaurant also has Thurber information and merchandise and displays historical pictures and artifacts.

Nationwide, there are several hundred thousand people whose roots go back to Thurber. Thurber preservation projects to date include RESTORATION of the century old Thurber Cemetery with over 1000 graves; MOVING back to Thurber and restoring historic St. Barbara's Church; RESTORING and furnishing a typical coal miners house; BUILDING two bocci ball courts where a State Championship Tournament is held each year; RESTORING a train car which carried miners to work; ERECTING eight State Historical Markers within a one mile radius of Thurber; DISPLAYING on New York Hill a large bronze plaque overview of Thurber's significant buildings and sites; PRODUCING the VHS tape A Boom Town To Ghost Town which has been shown several times on national TV.

Thurber is picturesque, particularly as viewed from surrounding hills: New York Hill, Stump Hill, Polander Hill, Italian Hill, and Graveyard Hill. Thurber has eight State historical markers, all within a one mile radius of downtown Thurber. These markers include the Snake Saloon, Hotel Knox & Mining Office, New York Hill, the brick plant, the cemetery, St. Barbara's Catholic Church, Big Lake & Dairy, and Thurber's first coal mine.

Thurber (located midway between Fort Worth and Abilene on Interstate 20) was a company owned town, founded and controlled from around 1888 through the 1930's by Texas and Pacific Coal Co. (after 1933, Texas Pacific Oil Company). At its height, it was the largest town between Fort Worth and El Paso. Every building and inch of ground was owned 100% by Texas and Pacific Coal Co. Every resident lived in a company house, shopped at company stores, drank at the company saloon, attended a company school, danced at the company opera house, and worshiped in company churches.

1. Coal

Thurber was the most important mine site in Texas for 30 years. 3,000 tons of coal were produced daily. This coal provided fuel mainly for the Texas and Pacific Railroad, but a dozen other RRs also used Thurber coal. By ensuring a plentiful coal supply, Thurber helped railroads open up the great southwest.

2. Brick

Thurber had the best equipped brick plant west of the Mississippi. Manufactured from the area's rich deposits of shale clay, Thurber brick paved hundreds of miles of Texas highways and streets: Congress Avenue in Austin; the Galveston sea wall; the Bankhead Highway; Camp Bowie, Main Street, and the stock yards in Fort Worth, etc.

3. Oil

Thurber was headquarters of the Texas and Pacific Coal Company which, under the leadership and persistence of W. K. Gordon, brought in the McCleskey discovery well at Ranger (16 miles west) for the company. Troops in World War I, which had been at a standstill, were given the "go-ahead" when this news was received abroad, as Russia had cut off oil supply to the Allies. Ranger yielded in one year twice the wealth of the best years in the California and Klondike gold fields. It was the key that opened the door to West Texas oil production and made the University of Texas the richest university in North America. Every Thurber home had running water and electricity. In fact, Thurber was the first totally electrified city in the United States. A power plant was erected in 1895, as well as an ice plant with a 17 ton capacity, the largest ice plant in the southwest. By 1915, each home also had natural gas for heat.

4. Labor Unions

The Thurber coal miners' strike of 1903, which ended when a contract was signed by John L Lewis and Edgar L. Marston (for Texas & Pacific) in the old Worth Hotel in Fort Worth, was the beginning of the labor movement in the southwest. Thurber became the only totally unionized town in the world, and had two UMW Locals; the English Local and the Italian Local.

5. Ethnic Diversity

Hundreds of European immigrants, representing eighteen ethnic groups, began working as coal miners and brick makers. The priest at the Catholic Church heard confessions in six languages. Thurber was a "melting pan" for Eastern European immigrants, providing an interesting and colorful cultural and ethnic mix. OTHER FACTS Thurber was the site of the last regularly scheduled stage coach in America. It ran from the Hotel Knox to Thurber Junction (now Mingus, Texas). The Metropolitan Opera troupe stopped in Thurber en- route from the east coast to the west coast. (The Italians loved operas.) Famous voices were heard in the Thurber Opera House, where ceiling fans had been installed (a rarity at that time). The Opera House seated more than 650 people, and VIP's had their own box seats.

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<http://www.texasalmanac.com/history/highlights/thurber/>

Thurber, Texas Coal Town

In the mid-1880s, William Whipple Johnson and his brother Harvey, Michigan-born land, lumber and livestock speculators, discovered deposits of bituminous coal in extreme northwestern Erath County east of Ranger. Their discovery completely transformed that part of West Central Texas from a rural backwater into the leading coal-producing area of the state by the end of the century.

The Johnsons proposed to exploit their discovery themselves: They bought several thousand acres and contracted with the Texas & Pacific Railway Company to supply coal for its locomotives.

Shaft No. 1 was opened in the fall of 1886. Employees from the mines at nearby Coalville, which had been shut down in a labor dispute, moved en masse to the new mines. Unfortunately, the Knights of Labor union moved with them. By 1886, mining was underway, but union agitation caused a repeat of the Coalville experience. Johnson's mines closed in 1888 when the company could not meet its payroll obligations.

Eastern investors, headed by Col. Robert Dickey Hunter, bought the mines from Johnson late that year and formed the Texas & Pacific Coal Company. They renegotiated the contract with the T&P Railway. With the strike still on, the new owners fenced part of the property and began building a town, which they named Thurber for New York grocer and T&P investor H. K. Thurber. They imported miners from mining regions throughout the United States.

A Company Town

By 1900, the town had over 200 houses, more than 30 stores and shops, a waterworks, churches, schools, offices, stables, an opera house seating more than 650, a dairy, a meat market, a 200-room hotel and an ice plant. The Thurber electric plant furnished power 24 hours a day, making Thurber one of the first towns in the state to have full electric service.

The opera house was the first building in Texas used for public entertainment to have ceiling fans. The company's ice plant had the largest storage vault in the state; frozen meat, prepared to the different national tastes of Thurber's ethnically varied citizens, was kept there.

Bricks from the Thurber brick works were used in buildings, streets and other heavy construction throughout the Southwest, including the Galveston seawall and Congress Avenue in Austin. Thurber was virtually self-sufficient: Machine shops kept the machinery running, painters and carpenters maintained buildings and houses, and tinsmiths, blacksmiths and plumbers kept the city water system operating.

William Knox Gordon, a young railroad engineer from Virginia who had come to Texas in 1888 to make a survey for the railroad between Thurber and Dublin, accepted the post of mining engineer for the coal company in June 1889. He advanced quickly to the post of general manager of the coal company and held that position for almost 20 years.

Thurber was completely a company town. Only company employees and their families, schoolteachers and members of the clergy could live there. Since the company owned everything in town, there were no taxes. There was no city government, and T&P paid for law enforcement, furnished the school building and supplemented state and county funds for teachers and school operating costs.

Thurber -- an International Town

Thurber was one of the most ethnically diverse towns in West Central Texas, with nearly 20 different nationalities or racial groups represented, including Italian, Polish, English, German, Austrian, Irish, Chinese and black. By 1910, 500 Italian and more than 100 Polish coal miners -- some from the old countries, others from the Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio coal fields -- worked there at the height of the coal boom.

Both Poles and Italians lived on Hill Number 3. The railroad tracks to the mines bisected the hill, with the Poles living on the south side, Italians on the north. The Italians even segregated themselves within their own community according to their place of origin in Italy. The Italians were said to be the best musicians in Thurber, and touring opera companies appreciated the enthusiastic Italian audiences.

With the adoption of Prohibition in 1919, the Italians in Thurber imported grapes from California to make wine. Since it was illegal even to teach someone how to produce alcoholic beverages and many neophyte wine-makers needed instructions, the labels on the bricks of dried grapes circumvented the law by giving detailed instructions on how not to produce wine: They warned the user that he would be violating the law if he put the grapes in so many gallons of water, added so many pounds of sugar and kept the concoction at a specified temperature for so many days. For those who preferred their liquor hard, clandestine stills turned out corn whiskey, known locally as "white mule."

Mining the Coal

All the mining was underground, through 15 different shafts. By 1900, there were more than 800 men producing between 1,500 and 2,000 tons of coal a day. Two work trains transported miners each day to the shafts.

Burros pulled the coal cars in the mines at first, but by 1910, electric motors replaced the animals. Electric lights strung throughout the long underground passageways supplemented the carbide lamps attached to the miners helmets.

Statewide, coal production reached 804,798 tons in 1901, growing to 1,247,988 tons by 1913. At the close of the 19th century, the value of the state's coal output exceeded the combined value of all other mineral products.

Life in Thurber

As the mines prospered, Thurber grew, reaching a population of about 4,000 in 1910. And as Thurber thrived, the farming community for 50 or 60 miles around also benefited. Although the T&P Coal Company discouraged free-lance produce dealers, probably because the company owned the grocery stores in town and the free-lancers cut into their profits, local farmers hauled in produce and sold it to the residents of Thurber, Mingus and other neighboring towns. The Thurber area was a ready market for beef, both fresh and on the hoof; fruits; melons; vegetables; hay; corn; oats; and homemade lard and sausage. The only product the farmers could not sell around Thurber was cotton, and for several years just after the turn of the century, a company gin even processed that for the farmers. In turn, the farmers bought their necessities at the company stores: clothing, dry goods, groceries and an occasional bottle of liquor.

Miners also needed entertainment. Several independent saloons operated profitably in the area surrounding Thurber and Mingus. One of the owners of the coal company, seeking to cash in on liquor-sale profits, built several company-owned bars in Thurber itself. When Erath County voted dry in 1904, the company built a big saloon just across the county line in Palo Pinto County. Called "The Snake," it boasted what some said was the longest horseshoe-shaped bar in the world, manned at peak hours by as many as 25 bartenders. Beer sales averaged seven carloads a week. The Snake closed with the adoption of Prohibition and was never reopened.

After years of labor agitation, the United Mine Workers organized Thurber's miners in 1903, and by 1907, the community was one of the first 100 percent union towns in the United States. UMW president John L. Lewis was an occasional visitor.

The Demise of Thurber

After 1910, the T&P Railway began converting its locomotives to run on oil rather than coal, and the coal chutes along the tracks were replaced with tanks holding several thousand barrels of oil. The Texas & Pacific Coal Company became the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company and turned its attention more to oil production after a 1915 oil find near Thurber. The mines operated on a reduced scale until 1921, and Thurber died a lingering death. The site is marked today by the old electric plant smokestack and a couple of old administration buildings on the north side of Interstate 20 about 16 miles east of Ranger.

— **Written by Mary G. Ramos and first published in the *1990-1991 Texas Almanac*.**

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/print/TT/hnt21.html>

THURBER, TEXAS. Though it is a ghost town today, Thurber once had a population of perhaps as many as 8,000 to 10,000. At that time (1918-20) it was the principal bituminous-coal-mining town in Texas. The site of the town is seventy-five miles west of Fort Worth in the northwest corner of Erath County. The coal deposits were discovered in the mid-1880s by William Whipple Johnson,qv then an engineer for the Texas and Pacific Railway. He began mining operations there in December 1886 with Harvey Johnson. Isolation forced the operators to recruit miners from other states and from overseas; large numbers of workers came from Italy, Poland, the United States, Britain, and Ireland, with smaller numbers from Mexico, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria, Sweden, and Russia. Black miners from Indiana worked in the mines during the labor troubles of the 1880s. The force of predominantly foreign workers, many of whom spoke little or no English,

enabled the company to maintain a repressive environment for many years. Following inability to meet a payroll and a resulting strike by miners, the Johnsons sold out in the fall of 1888 to founders of the Texas and Pacific Coal Company, including Robert Dickey Hunter,qv who became president of the new company, and H. K. Thurber of New York, for whom the town was named.

Colonel Hunter chose to deal with the dissident miners, who were affiliated with the Knights of Labor,qv with an iron hand. The new company fenced a portion of its property and within the enclosure constructed a complete town and mining complex, including schools, churches, saloons, stores, houses, an opera house seating over 650, a 200-room hotel, an ice and electric plant, and the only library in the county. Eventually the strike ended, and the miners and their families moved into the new town. In addition to the mines, the company operated commissary stores. As in the typical company town, low pay, drawn once a month, forced employees to utilize a check system between pay periods, whereby the customer drew scrip, reportedly discounted at 20 percent, for use at the company's commissary stores. In 1897 a second industry came to the town, a large brick plant; Hunter was also a partner in this operation, which, although it was separate from the mining company's holdings, used clay found on company property. A stockade, armed guards, and a barbed wire fence, which restricted labor organizers, peddlers, and other unauthorized personnel, regulated access to the town.

Despite the retirement of Colonel Hunter in 1899, Thurber remained a company-dominated community. William Knox Gordon,qv the new manager of the Thurber properties, at first continued the established policy of suppression and antiunionism. Continuation of such activities resulted in a concentrated effort by the United Mine Workers to unionize the Thurber miners. Following the induction in September 1903 of more than 1,600 members into the Thurber local of the UMW and the organization of locals of carpenters, brick makers, clerks, meat cutters, and bartenders, the company opened negotiations with the workers and, on September 27, 1903, reached an agreement resulting in harmonious labor-management relations. Thurber gained recognition as the only 100 percent closed-shop city in the nation. The victory at Thurber indicated what unions might accomplish with effective leadership and more congenial opponents than employers like Colonel Hunter, even when confronted with problems as difficult as organizing diverse ethnic groups. Despite occasional strikes, basic labor-management harmony prevailed, and Thurber remained a union stronghold until the demise of mining operations in the 1920s, after railroad locomotives began to burn oil rather than coal. Gordon's discovery of the nearby Ranger oilfield in 1917 stimulated this conversion, and the change of the company name to Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company in April 1918 signified shifting company interest toward oil production, which yielded large profits from 1917 to 1920. The conversion to oil-burning locomotives led to Thurber's demise; declining use of coal and a resulting wage cut led to labor unrest lasting through much of the 1920s and to a strike in 1926 and 1927. Many miners accepted UMW assistance and moved to mining areas in other states. Numerous Italians returned to Italy rather than work in nonunion mines, and in 1926 the union chartered two railroad cars to return to their homeland 162 Mexicans, who likewise refused to scab. By the end of 1927 no union miners remained in the state. The company maintained operation of the brick plant until 1930, a general office until 1933, and commissary stores until 1935. By the late 1930s Thurber had become a virtual ghost town. See *also* COAL AND LIGNITE MINING; LABOR ORGANIZATIONS; UNION REGULATION.

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