

Left: When it formally opened in 1903, the Empire Building was Knoxville's tallest building. It stood at the corner of Church and Market streets until being demolished in 1974. * IMAGE: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

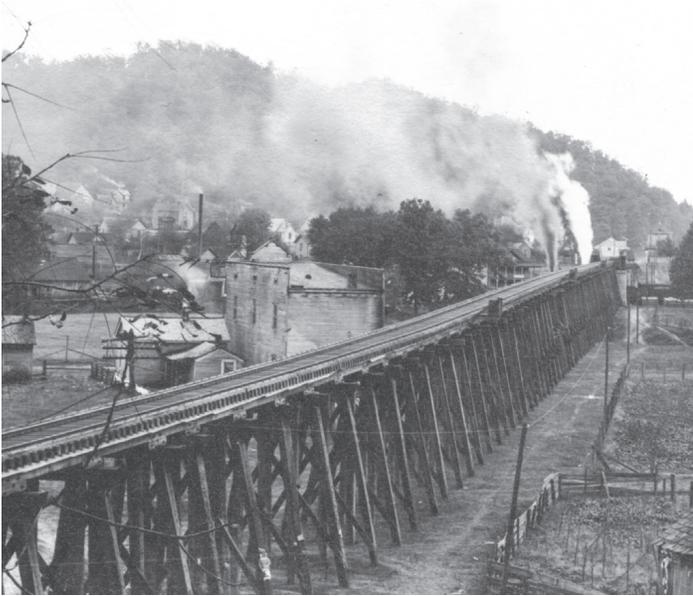
Above: Advertisement listing the lessees of The Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing Company and affiliate Poplar Creek Coal and Iron. * IMAGE: KNOXVILLE SENTINEL, APRIL 17, 1911

Southern, the natural choice for the Cow Creek project, had lost the contract when it "insisted on the coal companies building the road," and instead watched in early 1903 as the Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing and Poplar Creek Coal and Iron companies contracted with L&N "to open up and develop mines in the Cow Creek district to a capacity of 5,000 tons per day in return for the building of a branch road into that territory." Southern responded by filing an injunction against L&N to prevent the rival company from crossing its line at Oliver Springs. Antagonism grew as both companies also feuded over right-of-way access in Knoxville (where Southern filed additional injunctions) and Southern's lawsuit went before the federal court.²⁶

Things came to a head in August 1903, as construction on L&N's two thousand-foot trestle, stretching from the middle of Oliver Springs north toward Little Cow Creek, reached Southern's tracks. The company had supposedly obtained a right-of-way to cross there, and the crew operating the pile driving machine needed to install a temporary piling between Southern's rails in order to support the weight of the machine. When the workers attempted to do so, the Southern crew rushed up to cut down the pilings.

Elmer Sienknecht, whose uncle Henry operated the Sienknecht Department Store in town, watched the events unfold, and later claimed that Southern wasn't opposed to L&N crossing over its tracks, but to "the piles being too close to the Southern's main line—people stuck their heads and arms out the windows in those days," he said. Whatever the case, a few L&N contractors hugged the pilings to keep them from being removed. Soon a Southern locomotive chugged up to the crossing, parked its smokestack directly under the pile driver, and blasted it with smoke and soot until the machine's operator bailed out.

By this time, the commotion had attracted the town's attention, with businessmen, residents, and likely curious vacationers from the hotel gathering at the scene. Viewing the ridiculous spectacle,



Circa 1904 view, looking toward Kingston Avenue, of the L&N Cow Creek Branch trestle spanning Oliver Springs. The bridge over the Southern Railway tracks, where smoke and steam from a Southern locomotive passing underneath are visible, was a major point of contention between the two railroad companies in 1903, during construction of the trestle. ✕ IMAGE: OLIVER SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

segments of the crowd began cheering on their favored crew as if watching two sports teams compete.

To keep L&N from driving the next piling, Southern brought in a boxcar and overturned it along the track where the piling needed to go. L&N, undeterred, drove the piling straight

through the boxcar and into the ground—to hearty laughter and shouts from the onlookers. Southern withdrew from that day’s contest, though an unknown party later sawed down the supports at the crossing.²⁷

The most dramatic confrontation of the so-called “railroad war” was over. A month later, the railroad companies settled their dispute out of court; L&N resumed its work on the trestle and put up a steel bridge over Southern’s tracks. Two coal operators had already signed leases with the Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing and Poplar Creek Coal and Iron companies, and soon would require transportation for their product out of Cow Creek. Southern consented to transport L&N’s coal cars until the KL&J line fully opened. The agreement ended up benefitting both companies, as the new line gave each railroad access to the region’s coal producers and also served as “a valuable feeder to the Southern.”²⁸

Opening Wind Rock

Leasing to two large coal companies instead of several small ones had been Grant Schley’s decision. Doing so, he told stockholders in 1903, would “attract the strongest operators in the South, and thus avoid the confusion which generally follows when a district is crowded with the small and incompetent lessees.”

The first operator on the line, the Piedmont Coal Mining Company, opened “veins of coal at the mouth of [Little Cow] Creek,” at an area curiously named Khotan—apparently alluding to the ancient jade- and silk-producing kingdom in Asia. (Perhaps Piedmont’s owner, R. O. Campbell of Atlanta, imagined the Cow Creek line as a latter-day Silk Road.) The company shipped out the line’s first load of coal in early 1904. The mines at that location would remain profitable for little more than a decade.²⁹

Farther upcreek from Khotan, prospectors had found the lower coal veins to be unworkable after several hundred feet of boring. When samples were taken at higher elevations in the mountain, “several large veins were discovered,” including a five-foot-thick seam “of very fine steam coal” at twenty-four hundred feet. This bed of coal would become known as the Wind Rock seam. R. H. Elliott, L&N’s resident coal authority, and George Callahan, builder of the Cow Creek line, opened a

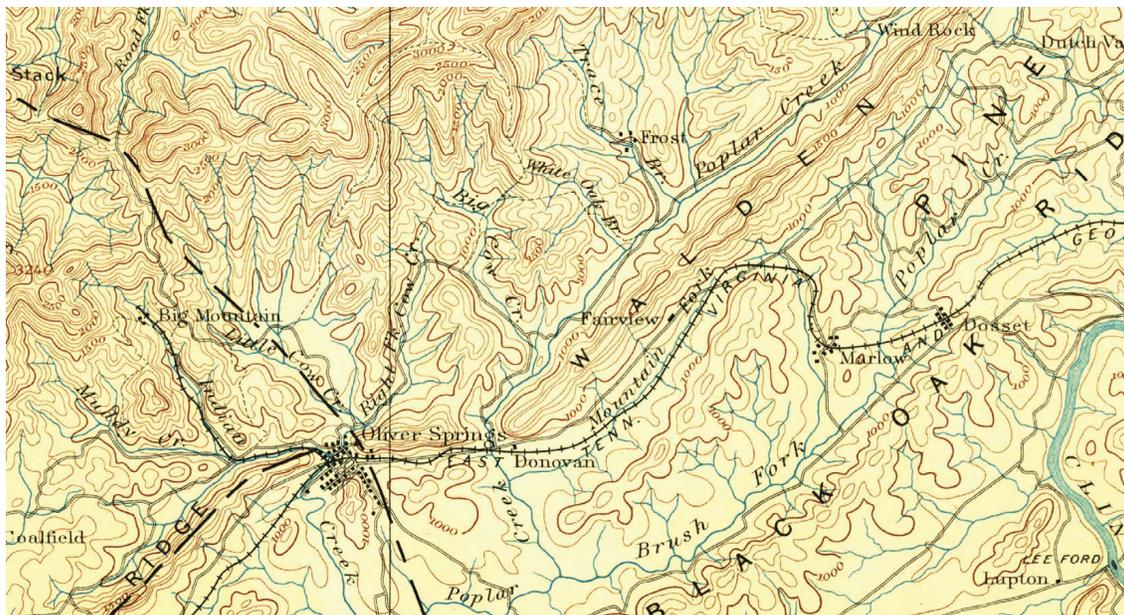
mine there after co-founding the Wind Rock Coal and Coke Company—the second coal firm operating on the Cow Creek line. This company’s lease encompassed “the upper portion of Poplar Creek [Coal and Iron] lands” and the “upper seam of the entire Clark tract,” one of the original eight tracts of The Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing Company.³⁰

Roughly six hundred feet above the seam was a sandstone outcropping, the “Wind Rock,” which some people later claimed had taken its name from the company that mined coal nearby. Actually, the name originated long before the company formed—perhaps a century earlier, when families like the Livelys, Duncans, and Smiths settled the area and knew the sound of the wind moaning through the rock’s crevices. A plat map of the W. B. Clark tract, based on surveys from the mid-1880s, marks the location of said rock at the top of Cumberland Mountain, along with a cabin (possibly built by Jordan A. Lively) that sat two hundred yards or so to the southeast. B. Rule Stout once said that the rock “juts straight up on the north side, and halfway up the east slope of Silvey Gap.”³¹

The rock also lent its name to a post office that opened on March 29, 1880. But records indicate that instead of being perched atop the mountain, the post office was located down in the Poplar Creek valley, “between Cumberland Mountain and Walden[s] Ridge,” roughly three miles northeast of Frost Bottom. A US Geological Survey map from 1893 indeed situates this “Wind Rock” about halfway between Oliver Springs and Briceville, and probably six miles east, as the crow flies, from the actual rock. The post office closed the following year.³²

However, in 1892, Knoxville’s *Journal and Tribune* published comments that seemed to describe the lofty site of the rock itself, not the postal stop down in the valley. The journalist paraphrased a local resident who called Wind Rock “one of the finest places in the south for a resort enterprise. The

This detail from an 1893 United States Geological Survey map shows, top right, where the Wind Rock post office was then located along Walden’s Ridge, west of Dutch Valley and northeast of Oliver Springs. Other than its name, the locale had little to do with the actual rock formation near Wind Rock Mine opened a decade later. × IMAGE: UNITED STATES GEOLOGICAL SURVEY



wind blows there constantly and no such thing as a mosquito is known there, and of course it is always cool and delightful. But the great feature is the magnificent scenery. The whole valley of the Tennessee river in East Tennessee is viewed from Wind rock at a better advantage than from any point he ever visited.”³³ More than a century later, wind turbines would be erected on a nearby peak to convert the dependable air current into electricity.



The new railroad spur terminated at Big Cow Creek, an altitude about a thousand feet lower than the Wind Rock seam. Before the mine opened in 1904, a road up to the seam had to be cut, wide enough that a “mule train” could haul wagonloads of workers and equipment up to the site. Logs from cleared trees became lumber for “houses and other company buildings,” thanks to a portable sawmill also brought to the top.³⁴

Initially, a three-mile journey on the wagon road was the only way up or down the mountain.³⁵ Wind Rock Coal and Coke needed more efficient transportation for getting coal down to L&N’s cars. The company built a cable railway, just under a mile in length, which transported two 10-ton coal cars, or monitors, on a gravity balance system. As one full monitor made its way down the mountain, an empty one was pulled up; extra rails at the halfway point allowed the two monitors to pass each other. Full monitors emptied at the lower tipple, dropping the coal into waiting railroad cars.

When not loaded with coal and supplies, the monitors also carried people up and down the mountain, particularly in the early years before a passenger “man car” was added. Individuals who couldn’t wait for the next monitor ride down to the bottom employed a sled-type contraption called a “rail horse.” It consisted of a seat on rollers that straddled one rail, a long balancing arm that attached to the other rail, and a handbrake that squeezed against the rail head to slow the rider’s descent. For thrill-seeking miners, the rail horse became something of an alpine coaster. Stories survive of daring individuals making the mile-long descent in a minute flat, but also of at least one miner who couldn’t slow himself, and died after being thrown from the track.³⁶

Company housing constructed at both ends of the incline would develop into the thriving communities of Upper Windrock and Lower Windrock, each with its own commissary, church, school, and doctor’s office. In 1904, a post office branch opened at Upper Windrock, whose mining camp the *Journal and Tribune* described as “beautifully situated, high up in the mountains on a table land ... From this point a beautiful view is commanded and [in] every respect it is an ideal site for a mining town.”³⁷

The company had opened a second mine and was producing, on average, one thousand tons of coal a day, when a large firm out of Birmingham entered the picture. The Bessemer Coal, Iron and Land Company (originally the Bessemer Land and Improvement Company) had been established in the 1880s to develop the planned town of Bessemer, Alabama, but the firm shifted from real estate to mining and iron production in 1895. Bessemer purchased Wind Rock Coal and Coke in May 1905, with immediate plans to invest in modernizations such as “electric haulage” to replace the mine’s mule-driven coal cars. With a price tag of almost \$140,000, the deal included Wind Rock’s “improvements, machinery, houses, inclines, commissaries, coal on hand,” and other assets, as well as its lease of twenty-five hundred acres belonging to the Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing and Poplar Creek Coal and Iron companies.³⁸

Bessemer would own Wind Rock Mine for six decades, and become one of the state’s largest coal suppliers. In the meantime, successful mines in the area producing coal as well as fire clay for manufacturing bricks meant more capital trickling into nearby Oliver Springs. Despite losing its renowned hotel to fire in April 1905, the town would thrive as a distribution and passenger connection point between Knoxville and Harriman.
