

**Minersville, Cloud County, Kansas:
A Seventy-Five Year Mine, 1870-1945**

**Sylvia Martin
Chapman Center for Rural Studies
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This study examines the town of Minersville in Sibley Township, Cloud County, Kansas. It lasted from 1870 to 1945. I used maps, newspaper articles and fieldwork.

Minersville was a small coal mining town located on the border between Republic County and Cloud County in Northern Kansas. This town existed between 1870 and 1945, when the last mine closed.¹ Minersville began in southern Republic County, one mile east of West Creek.² This southern part of the county was described by William Cutler in *History of the State of Kansas* as salt marsh surrounded by high, rolling prairie.³ Between 1885 and 1894 county lines were redrawn and Minersville was incorporated into northern Cloud County, within the Republican Valley.⁴ The soil in Republican Valley is rich and yielded large, plentiful crops, and attracted settlers.⁵ However, since resources such as wood were in short supply, settlers were glad that Heim Nelson found coal deposits in Minersville.⁶ The coal provided an alternative for cooking or heating. The coal in the area was brown, known as lignite, and did not burn as cleanly as black coal but was affordable to settlers in the area.⁷

Families from across the region traveled to Minersville to purchase coal for their homes. In the late 1890s, residents of Minersville recalled times in which people would come from 20 to 30 miles away to buy coal from the mines. While in town, the visitors could buy groceries and anything else they needed in local stores. Early on, the townsfolk also built churches, cemeteries, hotels, saloons, and restaurants to serve visitors and residents. For the mining work, Minersville operated quarries, dugouts, and a kiln. Residents had their own school district, School No. 72 by

¹ "Minersville," *Kansas Historical Society*, February 2017, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/minersville/19930>.

² Melvin D. Bruntzel, "Quick Reference to Kansas: Lost—Found—Missing, Towns and Places with Selected Trivia and Truths," *Quick Reference to Kansas*, <https://kansasquickref.omeka.net/items/show/1>.

³ William G. Cutler, "Cloud County" in *History of the State of Kansas*, (Chicago, IL: A.T. Andreas, 1883), <http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/cloud/cloud-co-p1.html>.

⁴ R.L. Polk, ed. "Minersville, Cloud County, Kansas" in *Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Director*, Volume IV (Detroit, MI: R.L. Polk and A.C. Danser, 1884-1885).

⁵ Cutler, "Cloud County" in *History of the State of Kansas*.

⁶ Bruntzel, "Quick Reference to Kansas."

⁷ "Minersville," *Kansas Historical Society*.

1878, and a Knights of Labor lodge and town hall in 1882. This hall served as the center of Minersville. The Knights of Labor lodge was like a community center where speaking, musical events, and dramatic productions were presented.⁸ The post office opened in 1877 and closed in 1899.

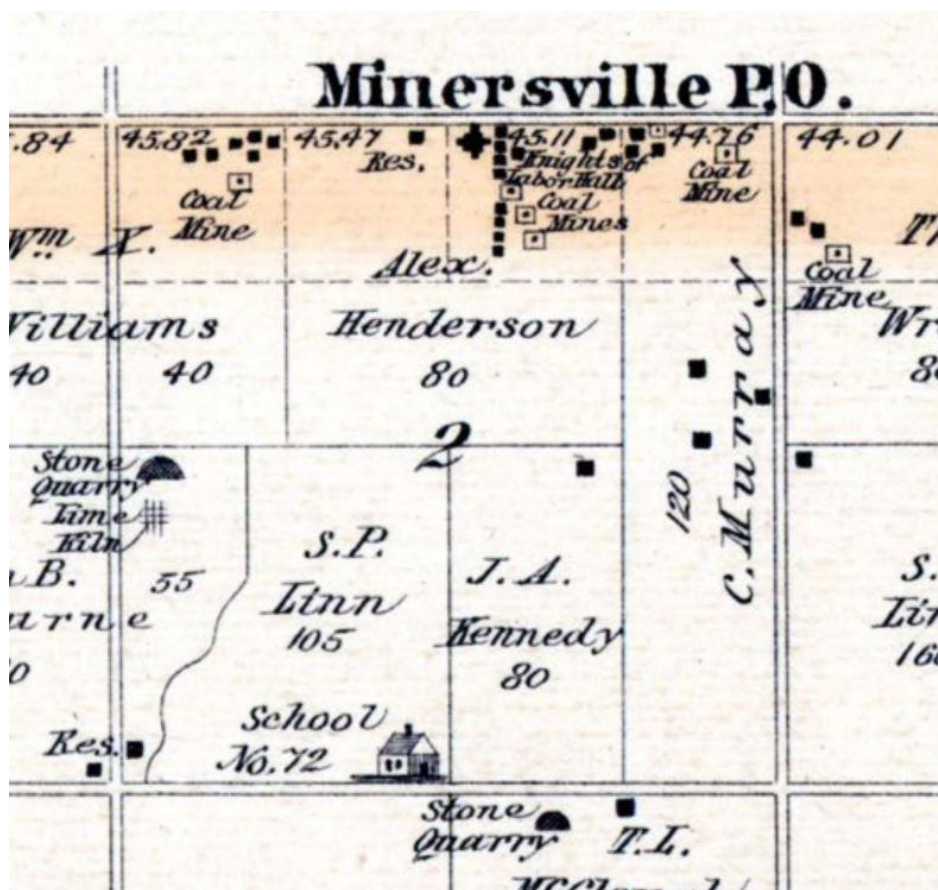


Figure 1: SOURCE: Plat Map published by author, John P. Edwards, in 1885 The plat map below shows the location of The Knights of Labor lodge, School No. 72, a stone quarry and several coal mines.

⁸ Ibid.

Family Life in Minersville

Many miners in Minersville were also farmers. During the spring and summer months they would grow crops in the rich soil of the Republican Valley. After the harvest, they would open their mines and begin production.⁹ The peak of coal production around Minersville occurred in 1894 and 1895. More than 13,000 tons of coal was produced between Cloud and Republic Counties in these two years. Minersville's coal continued to supply the area until railroad transportation made shipping coal from other places cheaper than buying from the town.¹⁰ The peak years of Minersville offer an interesting look into the values of late-nineteenth century rural values.

One way to learn what people of a community value is by studying their children. In 1913, the *Concordia Blade-Empire* published a segment showing letters to Santa from local children. The children of Minersville asked for items such as a new doll, a watch, and toy cars. Several of the children also mentioned what their younger siblings wanted for Christmas. Children learn many of their values and beliefs from their parents. These letters show how important family was to those in the Minersville community. In addition, several of the children asked for nuts for Christmas. Although today nuts are common, it appears that it was once a treat to the children of Minersville.¹¹

One of the most successful mine operators in Minersville was Alexander Henderson. His family was typical of Minersville residents. Henderson was born in 1841 in Scotland. Henderson married Janet Doctor, who was also born in Scotland. Alexander and Janet Henderson had five

⁹ "Minersville," *Kansas Historical Society*.

¹⁰ Monta Eldo Wing, "Economic Resources" in *The Geology of Cloud and Republic Counties, Kansas*, (Topeka, KS: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1930), http://www.kgs.ku.edu/General/Geology/Republic/05_econ.html.

¹¹ "Letters to Santa Clause," *Concordia Blade-Empire*, Concordia, KS, December 20, 1913.

children: David, Margaret, Jean, Alex and Pete. The oldest of their children, David, Margaret, and Jean, were born in Scotland. Alex was born in New York City when the Henderson's first came to the United States in 1870. The youngest of the Henderson children, Pete, was born in Minersville.¹² The Henderson family settled in Cloud County in 1873, where Alex Henderson bought land to join the coal mining business.¹³ Like most mine operators in the area, Henderson opened his mine only after the harvest was complete. When the mine was opened at the beginning of the season, Henderson's first task was to clear out the water that had collected within the mine during the farming season. Once this was done, production could begin.¹⁴

Henderson commonly had problems with his mine when it came time for the annual inspection. In 1892, for example, the inspector found the shaft was "not in a condition for any man to work." Henderson's shaft lacked ventilation and a second opening. This made the mine dangerous for miners and posed several potential health risks. It also meant that if the opening of the mine collapsed, the workers would be trapped with no other way to get out. In addition to these problems, the inspector found that the hoisting cable was only an old hemp rope that was almost broken in several places and that there were no gates at the top of the shaft. The rope was fixed and a gate was installed during the inspector's visit.¹⁵

Although Alexander Henderson may not have always met regulations with his coal mine, he left a large impact on Minersville. In 1878, Henderson built a stone house for his family to live in. This house was so large that it was often referred to as the "Scotch Castle of Alexander

¹² "Kit Carson County Pioneers," <http://cogenweb.com/kitcarson/Histories/6S43W/Henderson.htm>.

¹³ John P. Edwards, "Cloud County, Kansas: 1885 Patrons List," <http://genealogytrails.com/kan/cloud/1885patrons.html>.

¹⁴ "Minersville," *Kansas Historical Society*.

¹⁵ John T. Stewart, *Fifth Report of the State Inspector of Coal Mines, to the Governor of the State of Kansas for the Year Ending December 31, 1891*, (Topeka, KS: Hamilton Printing Company, 1892), 28.

Henderson". Miners were frequently allowed to board at the Henderson house during the mining season. The walls of the home were approximately two feet thick. A stone barn on Henderson's property housed stallions and hosted community dances. Not only did Henderson allow the community to use his barn, he also donated some of his property to the Minersville store. Alexander's wife, Janet, also contributed to the town and was the second postmaster of Minersville. While Janet was the postmaster she operated the post office from her home, possibly so that she could watch her children as she worked. After Alexander and Janet Henderson passed away, the west half of their land was given to their son, Pete while most of the east half was given to their daughter, Margaret. The remaining portion of the eastern property was given for the construction of the town hall. The Henderson family have a large plot in Zion Cemetery where several members of the family are buried.¹⁶

Trouble in the Mines

Working in the mines was not always the best job. In January of 1903, the miners of Minersville went on strike. The miners received \$1.60 per ton of coal mined. The miners refused to return to work unless they received a 40-cent raise, or \$2.00 per ton of coal mined. The mine operators refused the raise, stating that with 70 to 100 men working the mines and 90 to 100 tons of coal being surfaced per day, they would not be able to meet this request and still make a profit. The operators stated the only way to increase wages would be to increase the price of the coal to make up the difference. The operators were angry with their miners for staging their strike during the winter, the busiest time of the year, and expressed that if the demand for a

¹⁶ Cynthia Sheer, "Set in Stone: Scotch Castle / French Chateau – Minersville," *Republic County Kansas Economic Development*, <http://www.republiccountykansas.com/set-in-stone-scotch-castle-minersville>.

raise had been made before the mining season began it could have been granted without any trouble.¹⁷

After almost a week on strike, the miners were offered over half of what they requested, in the form of a raise of 25-cents. The operators made a public announcement outlining why they refused the full raise, stating that unless the operators sold the coal at three dollars per ton, they would not be able to afford to pay the miners what they demanded and cover the costs of upkeep to the mine. The miners declined the offer of a 25-cent raise and insisted that their work was worth at least two dollars per ton.¹⁸ By the end of January, many of the miners had lost their jobs.¹⁹ In October 1903, eight months after the strike began, the miners who had not quit in protest or been fired, were still on strike. The miners still demanded two dollars per ton and the operators refused to meet their request.²⁰

Conclusion

At its peak, Minersville had 28 mines in operation that employed up to 500 men. In 1937, coal mining appeared to be doing fairly well in Minersville despite the strike earlier in the century. The mine operators published an advertisement in the newspaper looking for ten more workers.²¹ Unfortunately, this prosperous coal mining town was not able to compete with other fuel options that became available. As railroads began to be laid in the area, locals were able to find other fuel sources to cook their food and warm their homes, including the more expensive but cleaner burning black coal. Many people sought black coal for their homes as it was brought

¹⁷ "Miners Ask More Money," *Concordia Blade-Empire*, Concordia, KS, January 15, 1903.

¹⁸ "The Minersville Troubles," *Concordia Blade-Empire*, Concordia, KS, January 28, 1903.

¹⁹ "Local Mention," *Concordia Blade-Empire*, Concordia, KS, January 29, 1903.

²⁰ "Still on a Strike," *Concordia Blade-Empire*, Concordia, KS, October 10, 1903.

²¹ "Activity is Renewed at Coal Mines, Busy in Pioneer Days," *The Belleville Telescope*, Belleville, KS, November 14, 1937.

into the area.²² The mine operators of Minersville also struggled to compete with company owned mines in other towns. The company owned mines of southeast Kansas were able to afford better equipment for their mines, such as an electric hoist. Coal mine operators in Minersville, such as Alexander Henderson, had to rely on horse power to hoist the coal out of mines.²³ Although farmers still used the cheaper brown coal for their farms and industrial purposes, they were not buying enough for the operators to be able to afford to keep their mines open, and the last mine to close in 1945.²⁴ Without its main source of jobs and investment, Minersville soon faded back into the prairie.

²² "Minersville," *Kansas Historical Society*.

²³ Stewart, *Fifth Report of the State Inspector*, 20.

²⁴ "Minersville," *Kansas Historical Society*.

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