

Oak Ridge historians get a crash course in Coal Creek history

By Beverly Majors | beverly.majors@oakridger.com

The Oak Ridger

Posted Oct 26, 2011 @ 08:48 AM

OAK RIDGE, Tenn. —

When it comes to the history of Coal Creek -- and its mining community -- not many people living today know as much as Barry Thacker.

Thacker, director of the nonprofit Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, recently taught a lesson in Coal Creek history to members of the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association (ORHPA) and guests.

Coal Creek, called Lake City since 1936, was once a place where miners went to war, and where 300 miners died when there were explosions in mines in 1902 and 1911.

Three historic sites in Coal Creek are now chronicled in the National Register of Historic Places ... and one more is in the works. Those sites include the Briceville Church, built in 1888 by Welsh miners, and the Fraterville Circle and Miners Circle cemeteries.

The one in the works? Fort Anderson.

But getting those markers had its roadblocks. And those roadblocks had to do with the fact Coal Creek changed its name and that it has a history involving “convict” miners.

“The Coal Creek miners turned the tables and said ‘no’ to convicts (working in the mines),” said Thacker, who works as an engineer and donates his time to the foundation he started.

“The state militia built Fort Anderson and went to war with the miners. ... This was a significant event.

“Tennessee was the first to end convict leasing because of the Coal Creek War,” Thacker explained.

The war lasted for about a year before the Tennessee National Guard was called in to restore order.



Barry Thacker, who founded the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, tells his Oak Ridge audience about plans for December's 100th anniversary of the Cross Mountain Mine Coal Explosion

Thacker talked about how the Welsh named most of the cities in the states where they mined “Coal Creek” -- and how only this Tennessee community changed its name.

“Boston didn’t change its name to Bean Town and San Francisco didn’t change its name to Bay City,” he said, describing the unusual circumstances of the re-naming of Coal Creek.

Thacker said many of the miners who first lived in Coal Creek were Welsh -- and “the locals learned from them.” But getting a landmark at the location of Fort Anderson was a challenge. Landowners had to approve it, which was a big problem.

“One said ‘No’ and one said ‘Hell, no,’” Thacker recalled. He said land-owners had particular concerns regarding possible vandalism and liability issues.

“When the landowner says ‘no,’ you buy the land,” he remarked.

Thacker said one owner ended up giving the Coal Creek Foundation about 80 acres ... but that was only half of the fort area. The other half was owned by the Coal Creek Mining Co., which ended up making a land trade.

“We got the site and did an archeological study,” Thacker said. The historic site plan has now been approved at the state level and the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation is waiting on the National Registry’s decision.

The Foundation, however, isn’t just about getting National Registry recognition -- but also about helping the youth in Coal Creek.

“We’re teaching history to others, asking them to help educate younger ones,” Thacker said.

The Foundation works extensively with local schools and has established a scholarship fund to inspire and encourage the students to attend college. So far, the Foundation has 29 students going to college.

And those students are out on historic sites helping clear land and place makers. They are also working with the Foundation on other projects, like the American Chestnut tree planting initiative and the Engineering Better Readers project.

In closing, he reminded ORHPA members of the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Cross Mountain mine explosion on Dec. 9, 2011, and plans to commemorate that century-old event.

On that December day in 1911, the Cross Mountain Mine exploded, killing 84 miners. Only five were rescued.

A decade earlier -- on May 19, 1902 -- an explosion inside the Fraterville mine near Briceville killed an estimated 216 men and boys.