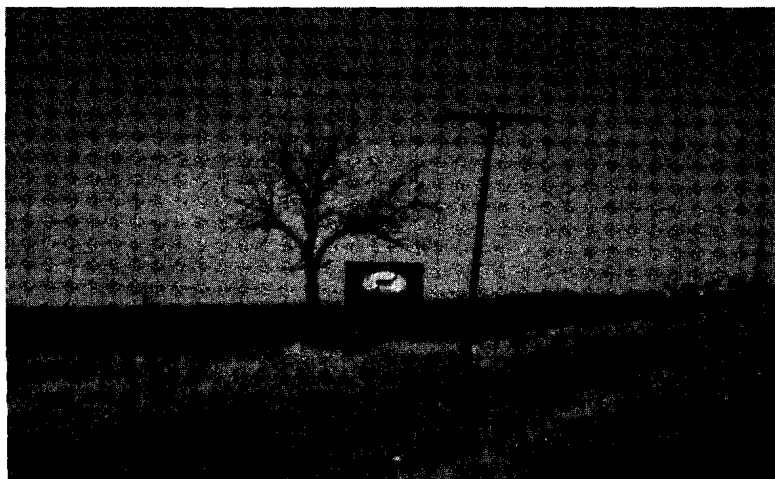


Ransonville: A Coal Mining Company

by Lea Reekie



Picture 1: Sign along 50-Hi-way,
saying Ransom Farm.
Place where spur of R.R. ran.

Few people realize that where this sign (Picture 1) stands today is where a spur of the Kansas City, Burlington, and Santa Fe Railroad once ran. This spur was used to load coal from the Ransomville mines, coal mines which have long-since been sealed up, or are now used by farmers who do some “pick” mining in their spare time.

The town of Ransomeville, located three miles northwest of Williamsburg (see map, Appendix I), was once a hustling, bustling town with a population of around three hundred. The town was named after James H. (“Cap”) Ransom (Appendix III, Picture 1), who came to Kansas from Chautauqua County, New York, in 1868.² He

1. Bill Ransom, Personal Interview, March 13, 1975.

2. Alfred J. Yost, “Ransomville,” *Reflections of Franklin County and Chautauqua Days* (Ottawa, Ks.: Ottawa Chamber of Commerce, 1961).

lived in Yates Center and did some coal mining. Later, he and a crew of workers worked strip mines around Topeka, mainly in the Overbrook and Carbondale areas. Finally, he moved to Williamsburg. He opened extensive coal mines northeast of town and a deep shaft in town. He also built a colony of homes, known as Brooklyn, in the northeast part of town.

There was an abundance of excellent coal in that area and the Kansas City, Burlington, and Santa Fe Railroad had been run through the town about 1876. The two big industries of the town were farming and coal mining. The bituminous coal here was of good quality; it was burned by the local community and a great deal of it was hauled away to be used elsewhere. Most of the mines were independently operated.⁴

On May 25, 1878, J. H. Ransom signed a contract with the Kansas City, Burlington, and Santa Fe Railroad (Appendix II), which states that J. H. Ransom leased the land on which Ransomville was later located from Lizzie Richards of Chicago. Cap leased the coal drift known as the Mort and Leevi Drift situated on sections seven and eight in Franklin County near Williamsburg (Appendix I).⁵ This was forty acres of land in what is now the Homewood township. Here he dug a shaft sixty feet deep and started producing coal for the railroad.⁶ Later on, there were three types of mines located at Ransomville: strip mines, drift mines, and shaft mines.

According to the lease (Appendix II), the coal was to be taken out and shipped at one dollar per car for all that was taken from the drift mines. The lease also gave Cap Ransom the right to strip for coal on the land where stripping had already been done. The fee for stripped coal was to be one-and-a-half cents per bushel. If the railroad rates were then satisfactory, Cap Ransom was expected to take out four to seven hundred bins during the year ending May 1, 1879. The royalty on the coal was to be paid monthly, on the fifteenth, for the preceding month for the load taken out. Eighty-three pounds were to be a bushel.⁷

The Kansas City, Burlington, and Santa Fe Railroad, which also ran through Williamsburg and Burlington, was built about 1876. A spur ran alongside the coal mines and was used to haul the coal to other towns.⁹

3. Bill Ransom.

4. Arza Fogle, ed., *Stairway to the Stars* (Topeka, Ks.: 1973).

5. Land lease, Williamsburg, Kansas, May 25 1878.

6. Yost.

7. Land lease.

As a result of the coal mines and the railroad, the town grew to a population of about three-hundred, with thirty-five small frame houses as the homes of miners (Appendix IV, Picture 3). There are at least four of these houses still around the area. The one in the picture is used by the Ransom family as a garage. Others have been joined together to make houses and are still occupied.⁸

When Cap Ransom first settled Ransomville, he built a Post Office and General Store (Appendix IV and V, Pictures 4, 5, and 6). The building is still there today (Appendix VI, Pictures 7 and 8). In 1882, he was appointed Postmaster. When the town was started and the store built, Cap Ransom, his wife, and two daughters lived in two rooms over the store for the first two years.⁹ With them lived two hired hands, a shopkeeper, and a relative, his wife, and two children. At this time, the store wasn't as large as it is shown in the pictures; only the part of the store with the tall front was there, the other wing was added later.

All of the shopkeepers at the General Store kept ledgers with each day's customers and what they purchased.¹⁰ It was very interesting to note, while looking through these ledgers, what was purchased and how much according to the time of month and year. Things weren't nearly as expensive as they are now. Back in the "good old days," milk was 5¢ a quart, eggs were 10¢ a dozen, and sugar was 3¢ to 5¢ a pound. A housewife could buy out of a barrel in the store as much oatmeal as she could conveniently carry home for 20¢.¹¹

This ledger, dating from the year 1888, showed that people bought everything from strawberries and soap to muslin and blueing. All of the people had accounts and their own account number. Most of their bills totaled no more than 30¢ for three or four items. It was also interesting to note that towards the first of the month, after everything had just been paid, everyone stocked up on things for the coming month. At these times their bills would be as high as \$9.00 or \$10.00; some were even \$20.00 or more. That sounds like quite a bit, but when you think that that bill was for the entire month and grocery bills nowadays are \$40.00 a week, they managed fairly well back then. One example of a month's groceries is Hugh Fergeson's account. He had the largest bill in the month of May. On May 2, 1888, Hugh bought:

flour 3.90	coffee .70	salt .10	eggs 1.20
sugar 2.25	matches .10	washboard .30	prunes .25

8. Ann Ransom, Personal Interview. March 13, 1975.

9. Bill Ransom.

10. Ann Ransom.

11. Fogle.

butter .28	yeast .15	dress goods 1.80	guide harness .60
thread .10	tobacco .40	shoes 1.40	hair 1.31 (?)
potatoes 2.00	blue .10	corn .25	raisins .25
tea 1.50	currant .25	crackers .70	cheese .72
soap .50	tomatoes .25	corset 1.00	oil .40

Right before Christmas, the people bought a few extra things. They bought some candy, chocolate, and more material than usual.¹²

Eventually a school was opened at Ransomville and the children from the town and the nearby rural areas attended the school. Willard Ransom, the man who now owns Ransomville, went to school there. It wasn't closed until 1945.¹³

During the 1890's, Cap realized the limitations of the comparatively thin vein of coal in this area and that it could not be mined in competition with the deeper veins in southern Kansas. He then turned his attention to a construction business and to agriculture. He bought more land and engaged in the business of buying and selling grain and livestock.¹⁴ At this time, he almost went broke and lost everything.¹⁵ He built a new grain bin (Appendix VI, Picture 9) and started raising more livestock. All of the farm work was done with a horse and wagon (Appendix VII, Picture 10). In order to put hay in the barn, since modern machines were not available to do the job, the farmers used a rope and a pulley. There is a hook in the hay attached to a rope that is run through a pulley. Someone stands on the ground and pulls the rope away from the wagon, then the hook raises the hay to the loft (Appendix VII, Picture 11).¹⁶

Later, Cap opened the Ransomville Creamery Company. This was a skimming station to which farmers from many miles around brought their milk; the cream was sold and the skimmed milk hauled back to the producing farms for livestock and poultry feed.

In 1906 Cap brought the first registered Guernsey cattle to this area and the herd he built from this foundation continues today.¹⁷ Three generations of the Ransom family developed this herd—the oldest such herd in Kansas. Show animals have been exhibited all over the Western part of the United States and two Ransom bulls have won national grand champion honors at Memphis and Chicago.¹⁸

12. Ledger, 1888, Ransomville general store.

13. Bill Ransom.

14. Yost.

15. Bill Ransom.

16. Ann Ransom.

17. Yost.

18. Fogle.

In 1905 the new Ransom home was built (Appendix VIII and IX, Pictures 12, 13, 14, and 15). The Ransoms still live there today (Appendix IX, Picture 16).

At the time of Cap Ransom's death in 1914, the mines were closed, and the store and post office discontinued shortly afterwards. Production of coal continued in parts of the Ransomville area in varying degrees, mostly from drift mines operated by individuals to supply local needs, through the thirties and forties.¹⁹ Mr. and Mrs. A. L. Cook (Appendix IX, Picture 17), the wealthiest couple in Franklin County at the time, were good friends of the Ransoms. By virtue of a monumental gift to the hospital by the Cooks, the hospital in Ottawa is named for the family—Ransom Memorial Hospital.

Today, Willard G. Ransom, Jr. operates the big dairy enterprise. Hereford bulls are also raised there. Besides the Ransom family, there are two families living there. The men work on the farm, milk the cows, and just generally do everything that needs to be done.

Ransom was once a booming town. The people there made their living from the coal mines. As the mine ran out, so did the people. There is the story of Ransomville—it's as simple as that. The resources of the town didn't last so the town didn't either. Cap Ransom's town died out just as many other towns did at this time, leaving only a shell of the town which once was there.

19. Yost.

20. Fogle.

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