

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Would you believe ten years from now we may be mining coal within fifty miles of here? Would you believe youngsters now in public schools throughout southern New England may grow up to become coal miners, employed in the same communities where they now live?

While this seemingly far-fetched notion is being noodled as a possible solution to the area's dearth of energy resources, we could find historical precedence for coal mining in New England.

In fact, coal is being strip-mined within the borders of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts at the present time.

To remove some of the mystery, and to clear up some questions you must be asking, I'm referring to a recent article in the Christian Science Monitor. The story tells of coal mining in the part of southern New England that geologists designate as the Narragansett Basin.

This roughly tear-shaped area covers approximately 900 square miles. Its northernmost tip is believed to extend to within ten miles southwest of Boston; its farthest western boundary appears to be somewhere beneath the city of Providence, Rhode Island; and its eastern edge probably comes within fifteen miles of Plymouth, Mass. Between these latter two cities it's at its widest, and from there tapers quite quickly to a narrow strip bordering the Narragansett River.

On top of a coal field lie the mansions of Newport, huddle the tenements of Fall River, Taunton, Brockton, Mass., and East Providence, R.I., spread the dozens and dozens of farms and towns and villages comprising the suburbia and rural farmland that fill the triangle formed by Boston-Plymouth-Providence.

While many of you may have known of these coal mining operations of the fairly recent past, located in our own general neighborhood, it is all new to me. I'm discovering for the first time that as recently as 1959 the last coal mine in the region — located in Cranston, R.I. — closed after an accident in which a man was killed and another injured.

I'm learning that in Portsmouth, R.I., coal was first commercially mined from the Narragansett Basin in 1808. For over 150 years coal was mined within less than a hundred miles from home — and I never knew of it until this week.

Today, however, I learn a geological research institute in Weston, Mass., is surveying, drilling for, and finding coal deposits in Foxboro, Mass. Former coal-mining communities of Mansfield, Mass., and Portsmouth and Cranston, R.I., are sites for future searches.

The money for this study, conducted by Weston Observatory under the direction of the Rev. James Skehan, a Jesuit priest who is also a director of the research institute, is coming from several sources.

Federal and private funds in excess of \$400,000 have been donated. The National Science Foundation has allocated \$226,000, and New England Power Service Company, a subsidiary of N.E. Electric Co., has contributed \$40,000. Coal hunters have received \$75,000 from the New England regional Commission as well as smaller amounts from many other companies.

Also participating by lending equipment is the

Massachusetts Department of Public Works; Rhode Island plans to contribute by drilling exploration holes at that state's expense.

Fr. Skehan, explaining the recent activity and interest in coal mining in Massachusetts, says, "Up to now there's been no economic incentive for test drilling." He estimates there are 400 million tons of minable anthracite coal in the Narragansett Basin, worth somewhere between \$10 and \$20 billion.

Chief of the U.S. Bureau of Mines Liaison Office for New England, William Barton, takes a more cautious view "Nobody knows if there's any economically minable coal in the basin," he says.

He does concede, however, that rock formations could contain the nation's largest anthracite coal reserve, and that for a small investment there could be a possible high return.

To get some idea of the change in values the coal industry has experienced in the last few years, consider that in Plainville, Mass., where coal is stripmined from an exposed vein, the local supply is being supplemented with some trucked-in coal from Pennsylvania at a cost of \$40 a ton. Only three years ago the Pennsylvania coal was priced at \$11 a ton.

Environmentalists' fears and objections are met with promises that the anthracite, an extremely hard coal, can be shaft-mined and modern technology would practically eliminate environmental damage.

Edward King, president of the N.E. Council for Economic Development, points out that mining the coal would provide jobs as well as energy. "What's best for the people must be the basis of whether or not to mine," he says.

Rhode Island's chairman of Public Utilities, William Harsch, believes environmentalists' opposition can be overcome since it would mean escaping from dependence upon the two heat sources now available, gas and oil.

The history of coal mining in Mansfield, Mass., conducted commercially from 1835 to 1925, is a sad story of one financial disaster after another. Not only were the coal beds irregular and narrow, but the miners had a lot of trouble with water. While a few investors made money, most lost their shirts.

One characteristic of the product from these mines that made profits less than anticipated was the high quality of the coal. Since a ton of it weighed more, by volume, than softer coals, it looked smaller — there appeared to be less value in a ton of anthracite and it was, therefore, less popular.

How much coal still lies below the surface of the ground in southern New England and below the waters of Narragansett Bay? This is still an unanswered question.

During the next decade the hungry electric generators may stimulate this area's coal mining industry; we may find out.

Only this week while driving to a meeting in Ashland, Mass., I passed through the heartland of the Narragansett Basin. Approaching Mansfield and Foxboro on Route 106, I saw the pleasant farms, the gentle rolling hills, and tried to imagine the coal fields underlying them.

Where there were large areas of rocks exposed along Route 495, I searched for telltale veins of black coal. None were visible. It's there, they say, just waiting to be mined, brought to the surface, and fed to our ever-energy-starved economy.

As I looked at it, the landscape seemed to change. Superimposed upon the verdure of ranging hill were the barrans of the mining towns of Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Surely, I thought — surely not; not here; they wouldn't. Would they?