



PROJECT MUSE®

## 8. The Castle Gate

### Published by

Thomas, Erin Ann.

Coal in our Veins: A Personal Journey.

1 ed. Utah State University Press, 2012.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15078>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15078>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.  
[148.135.83.86] Project MUSE (2025-08-15 10:07 GMT)

# 8

## The Castle Gate

The section of US Route 6 that passes through Price Canyon is one of the most dangerous highways in America. Semi drivers on their way east lumber along this highway that curves through the mountains, and at night only stars and headlights illuminate the way. On many days in winter it is better to avoid it. Even the elaborate winter snowplow system in Utah is insufficient to remove the danger of ice that accumulates at Soldier Summit, the road's high point. From Provo to Price, the drive is seventy-four miles, a journey to my parent's home that I never looked forward to.

While I was finishing my education at Brigham Young University, my father had been offered the presidency of the College of Eastern Utah—a small college that serves Price and the surrounding towns, largely populated by the descendants of coal miners from Carbon County. The coal mining industry has gradually been replaced by other means of energy production, although there are still members of these communities who mine or drive coal trucks. The college and the public school system provide most of the jobs in Price. In his formal acceptance statement, my father mentioned that his father and grandfather had worked in the mines in Carbon County, a fact that largely influenced his decision to move with my mother Ann and my younger siblings to a home overlooking the college and surrounded by tawny colored cliffs, flat-topped and sandy.

Despite the dryness of this landscape, central Utah has a particular sort of loveliness. Even now, I dream of a time when I can come “home” to the mountains there and spend a summer exploring with a backpack full of brushes and oil paint and a canvas under my arm. With a boulder for a stool, I would squint my eyes to probe out the color that lurked over bare rock, the hues changing according to the time of day. Near the mouth



Courtesy of the Western Mining and Railroad Museum

The Castle Gate

of Route 6, the tall peaks covered with pine look violet in their gullies at dusk. Farther south, the mountains are remarkable in their treelessness, covered with short brush. Here the dark sandstone bluffs are carved into shapes that, when one squints, take on the character of droopy-faced hill trolls. Past the level plain of the Price River that winds in wide meanders, the Castle Gate reigns, marking eight miles to Price. The *Guide Book of the Western United States*, commissioned by the US Department of the Interior in 1922, describes this structure as a “peculiar gatelike passage 2 miles above the town, the sides of which seem to be walls or dikes of sandstone projecting from the sides of the canyon. When viewed from a point directly opposite it the rock wall on the right looks like a thin finger, but when seen from a point farther up the canyon the walls on the two sides

seem to project so far into the canyon as almost to obstruct it and to bar the railroad from further progress.”

In 1922, one wall of the Castle Gate stood 500 feet tall, and the other 450 feet, the two nearly equal in length. On the path of the old railroad, the two sides would converge from a distance and open as the engine huffed around the bend. In 1966, one side of the gate was destroyed to make way for Route 6. Where the 450 foot gate once stood, the side of the mountain has been shaved off and tapered, but the 500 foot wall still towers over the road, solitary and magnificent. When I was a four-year-old child waking up from a nap on a drive to central Utah, my mother told me, “We are in Price Canyon.” I thought she said *rice* and was confused because the canyon did not look like rice, but I remember distinctly that last remaining gate, a landmark also inscribed in my grandfather’s childhood memory.

Not far off Route 6, deeper into the canyon, are the remains of the town of Castle Gate—a graveyard with several hundred occupants. No Thomases are buried there, but it is the resting place of many of Zeph and Maud’s friends. There are also likely many of my Grandpa Thomas’s kindergarten classmates buried in that cemetery, the boys who followed their fathers into the mines and the girls who married them. In 1978, the town was dismantled and the remaining houses moved to Helper, three miles down the canyon. Now the Utah Castle Gate Power Station is all that remains of coal operations there. The plant is set off in a canyon below a curve in Route 6, where the road cuts through a tall wall of sandstone. Every time I whirl around the bend I note the three foot thick coal seam in the face, making one magnificent black stripe in the surrounding tawny colored rock. At night the smoke of industry clouds the lights of the power plant, an effect that is almost dreamlike, a mirage in the thick darkness. Here the road becomes more precarious, narrowing to one lane with no passing. Being stuck behind a semi guarantees adding an extra ten to twenty minutes onto the trip to Price.

It was just three years after the Winter Quarters mines opened in 1888 that the shaft of Castle Gate Coal Mine No. 1 was sunk. This mine took preeminence over the other mining operations in Utah when a seam twenty feet thick was discovered in the newly tunneled Castle Gate No. 2. This coal was determined to be the best in the region. In an old photograph, tall metal columns hold up the ceiling of a coal face that dwarfs the miners below, who beam into the darkness with their carbide lamps. Almost ten years later, in 1897, Castle Gate entered the history of cowboy lore as the site of one of the most daring holdups in the American West.

One hundred miners from the Pleasant Valley Coal Company waited for their salary around the tracks of the Castle Gate money train, among them fourteen-year-old Zeph Thomas, whose family was currently working



Courtesy of the Western Mining and Railroad Museum

Castle Gate miners handdrilling to set dynamite, 1920

in Winter Quarters. Just as the paymaster, E. L. Carpenter, carried the sacks of silver and gold coins fifty yards to the company store, two outlaws in overalls and cowboy hats emerged from the crowd. One put a gun to Carpenter's head. When the clerk didn't turn over the money bags fast enough, the outlaw pistol whipped him with the butt of his gun. Firing shots overhead, the two thieves galloped off on their horses, pausing to cut the telegraph wires as they left town. Leaving a twisting getaway trail that ended in Robber's Roost, an outlaw hideout in the desert of central Utah, Butch Cassidy and Elzy Lay cleared seven thousand dollars in gold that day, in broad daylight, without much ceremony or even strategy.

In 1919, Zeph and Maud, with their four-year-old son Bill and one-year-old Bobby, moved from their home in Sunnyside to Castle Gate. Castle Gate, according to Maud, was a *coal camp*, a term, perhaps even a slight pejorative, that she applied to all the coal towns they lived in, revealing her hopes that mining would be a temporary family occupation. In the early 1900s, Castle Gate was not a sizable town and "camp" was not so far off. One main drag constituted its downtown, which was surrounded by a couple hundred cottages the Pleasant Valley Coal Company had begun to build in 1912 to attract workers. Each had a living room, two small bedrooms, a little kitchen, and a back porch. There was room on each housing plot for a tiny lawn, and the mining families would plant flowers in summers when there was sufficient rain. Some were ambitious enough to plant apple and peach trees.

*Courtesy of the Western Mining and Railroad Museum*

The town of Castle Gate

The Big Hall provided the community with most of its entertainment, hosting picture shows, orchestras, and dances. The meetinghouse was another gathering place, and the various religious congregations would organize the celebrations that, according to my grandfather, were enjoyed with “intensity”: “From the shattering sound of dynamite strung between the sides of a small canyon and set off to greet the Fourth of July to the pomp of Easter and the exuberance of Labor Day, no occasion for celebration was ignored or underplayed.”

Christmas was my grandpa’s favorite holiday, during which the native-born and foreign-born of Castle Gate and the surrounding towns would come together. The mines would operate to capacity during the winter months, a result of the spike in the demand for coal, and this provided a little extra cash for gifts.

Castle Gate was a diverse community inhabited by Greeks, Italians, Austrians, Scots, various Americans of European and African descent, and a few Japanese. This town was characteristic of Carbon County, which contained more than twenty-six national and ethnic groups who left behind relics now collected in the local Western Mining and Railroad Museum in Helper. Over a thousand Italians lived in the area; they brought kitchen amenities from the Old World, such as a ravioli rolling pin, a gnocchi strainer, and a white enamel lasagna pan, all of which are now displayed in a thick glass cabinet. The golden silk threads of Teresa Stella’s



Processing facility at Castle Gate, circa 1924

long-tasseled bedspread are still brilliant, woven into the purple and pink. The Greeks opened coffee shops in every mining community, providing moustache cups to prevent Greek men from dampening their facial hair. One man left behind one such cup—an ordinary porcelain mug, except for the moustache-shaped barrier with a little round opening for the coffee to flow through.

A photograph of the Tamburitza Band in Sunnyside, Utah, playing for the christening of the flag of the Croatian Fraternal Union and Slovenian National Benefit Society attests to both the diversity of the region and the focus on entertainment. Lodges were commonly founded to protect the interests of ethnic and national groups and help in their process toward achieving American citizenship. These Croatians and Slovenians performed with stringed instruments brought from Yugoslavia. In the forefront of the photograph of the Tamburitza Band, a girl with a mop of curly black hair and a poofy white dress poses holding a banjo, and a small, wide-eyed boy holds an instrument shaped like a mandolin.

Williard Craig, an inhabitant of Castle Gate from my grandfather's generation, insisted in his oral history that there was no segregation between miners of these various nationalities and races. In 1974 he claimed: "There is one thing I will have to say about a little town like Castle Gate ... The majority of us are pitch engineers, retired coal miners. No matter what happens, we are just like one big family ... I remember one time a person's house burned down. In less than forty-eight hours they had another house and it was all finished. That is the kind of people that coal miners usually are."



During Craig's years living in Carbon County, miners of different nationalities and ethnicities gradually assimilated, learning to deal with and even embrace their diversity. Back in the 1920s, however, coal houses were small and closely packed. Miners from that period tended to congregate with their countrymen, developing urban networks based on national loyalties. Southeastern Europeans and African Americans were brought in by companies in response to strikes, and they took over the mining jobs of white Americans and immigrants from the British Isles because they were more desperate for employment and would accept inferior salaries. Many of them likely met with a welcome similar to the treatment of the Chinese and Finns in Winter Quarters.

Even so, there were instances that justify Williard Craig's assertion of a brotherly and tolerant society. The Japanese who worked in Castle Gate were usually single men and among those most discriminated against. Still, in 1923 when the 7.9 magnitude Great Kanto Earthquake hit Japan, killing 140,000 people, the town planned a benefit concert and dance, with the profits dedicated to a Japanese earthquake relief fund. What was most remarkable about the earthquake fund is that only a year before, there had been a significant uprising in Castle Gate during the nationwide strike of 1922. Many of these pit miners from Castle Gate who scraped up cash to send to the Japanese had just returned to their homes from the strikers' tents and were pulling from the meager resources of only half a year's pay.

Maud and Zeph's family would have had an advantage in this coal camp of so many nationalities. With lineages primarily from the British Isles and their Mormon religion, they would have belonged to the majority in a town slivered into at least half a dozen significant minorities based on nativity and faith. I don't know the extent to which Zeph and Maud interacted with their diverse neighbors, only that fairness was a principle Zeph valued, and as a supervisor, he refused to privilege his co-workers of his own race and religion.