



# Carson Camp helps bring coke ovens to life



If I gave awards for achievement in Tennessee history, I'd give one to Carson Camp.

He's not hard to track down. If you go visit the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park in Sequatchie County, you'll probably find him — cutting the grass, minding the museum or giving a tour. The park is unique — a veritable outdoor museum of the coal-mining industry located a 45-minute drive from Chattanooga. The story of how it came about is a story of teamwork, luck, persistence and passion — much of that passion being Camp's.

There are others like Camp in Tennessee. In a state whose government does relatively little to honor its history (and very little compared to, say, Virginia), you can sometimes trace the development of a historic site to the passion of one person. I may be wrong, but I don't believe we'd have a Historic Rugby today were it not for Barbara Stagg, a Memphis Cotton Exchange were it not for Calvin Turley. And just when you think you've seen it all, there is a museum devoted to the battleship USS Tennessee in the parking lot of Scott County High School thanks to Paul and Karen Dawson.

I'm not sure how to describe people like this except to say they wouldn't fit in any corporate culture because they are too busy making things happen. These are the kind of people who get things done — who come up with a good idea, and, since they can't come up with a good reason not to do it, they accomplish more than most other people could imagine.

Camp is the first person to tell you that hundreds of people have volunteered along the way to help create the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park, and his wife, Joyce, his mother, Gladys, his broth-

er, Reggie, and his kids are high on that list. But I think it's safe to say that without Carson Camp, there is no park.

Camp first became interested in history around the time he graduated from high school, when they tore down the railroad station in Dunlap. "The railroad offered to sell the thing to the county for \$1, but no one took them up on it," he says. "Instead of seeing something of long-term value, all anyone could think of was how much it was going to cost to upkeep the building." So down the station went, and part of Dunlap history went down with it.

Camp became emotionally attached to the outdoor coke ovens located just outside Dunlap, on a long-abandoned industrial site. The ovens, where turn-of-the-century miners would cook newly mined coal and convert it into coke (which is lighter and more efficient than coal, thus a more valuable export), were common knowledge in the county. But most people didn't see value in them. "Over the years, people had dumped their garbage there, and it was a lot of garbage," he says. By about 1980 or so, Camp estimates that somewhere in the range of 1,000 tons of garbage had been dumped in the small valley adjacent to the coke ovens.

Camp helped organize the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association. When the newly formed association approached property owner Bowater Inc. about the land, they found the company willing to donate it to a good cause (probably because they were happy to get rid of a potential liability). Before long, the association owned 61 acres, which contained 268 historic outdoor coke ovens and an old railroad bed that led to the top of Fredonia Mountain — not to mention all that trash.



**Above, the Dunlap Coke Ovens park is home to 278 historic outdoor coke ovens. At top is a photo of Dunlap's coke oven operation in the early 1900s. Photo courtesy of the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association**



Had a government official been sent to the site to estimate the cost of clearing the land, there is no telling how large a dollar figure he would have come up with and how easily that figure would have scared off every county commission in the state. The Sequatchie Valley Historical Association took care of its garbage problem for almost nothing, thanks to the greatest tradition in Tennessee (that of volunteering). Some of the association's members pitched in, using skills and connections that they had. The International Union of Operating Engineers Local No. 917 in Chattanooga donated men and equipment to the cause. The local national guard unit was looking for a good cause and needed a place to train its soldiers how to use its heavy machinery.

Next thing you know, Dunlap's unofficial dump was crawling with so many people and equipment that it looked like the Seabees building an airport in the South Pacific during World War II. By pitching in, the people who lived in and near the Sequatchie Valley dug a big hole and dumped all the trash into it. Problem solved.

The association turned its attention to building a museum that would be located in the exact same spot as the mining operation's old "company store." In "build it and they will come" fashion, the association, under Camp's leadership, built the foundation on faith even though they didn't have the money to build a building.

About that time, Camp gave a presentation to the Rhea County Historical Society, one of many talks he made during that period. In the audience sat a man named David Henry Gray. Gray was so impressed with Camp's presentation that he rewrote his will, leaving 30 percent of his estate to go to the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association for the construction of a museum at the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park. "I didn't even know who Mr. Gray was until we got a call from a lawyer asking where to send the check," Carson says.

Incredibly, the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association has managed to build its museum with that \$71,000. Again, there has been help from all over the place — from electricians who volunteered to wire the building to many people who have helped paint. Just this spring, Camp's brother, Reggie, volunteered to install central air and heating for the building. "That's a big deal for us — especially the heating," says Camp. "It's pretty hard to have a museum that is unheated in the winter."

Over the years, the museum got filled with all sorts of mining paraphernalia — mining scrip, mining tools, framed documents, artists' renderings of mining scenes — some of it donated and some of it collected by Camp. Along the way, there have been other additions to the place — restrooms here, an amphitheater there and even a donated caboose (If you go to the park's Web site at [www.cokeovens.com](http://www.cokeovens.com), you can see a map of the place; there's quite a bit to it).

Meanwhile, thanks to other volunteers such as Overton Johnson and Ed Brown, the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park has found a fundraising niche in the form of an annual bluegrass festival that takes place the first Friday and Saturday in June (June 5-6 this year). "If all goes well, we raise enough money to pay our utility bills for the year," Camp says.

All of this helps bring to life a small, nearly forgotten chapter of Tennessee business history — a coal-mining and coke-burning operation that provided much of the fuel that went into the creation of cities such as Chattanooga, Nashville and Birmingham.

There are, throughout Kentucky and Tennessee, many abandoned coal mines and coal-mining communities. Most of them are like Wilder, Tenn. — a place where there is almost nothing left to show that there was once a human civilization there except for tombstones. Besides the outdoor coke ovens, one of the things that sets the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park apart is the

photographs. If you come to Dunlap, you will see photographs of the men who mined the mountain during the years that this business was in operation (1899 through 1929). As you see these pictures of the Chattanooga Iron & Coal Corporation, you begin to get some idea of why Camp became so devoted to this cause over the years. These are people whose names are long forgotten and whose living conditions were so brutal that we can't even really understand what their lives were like. It is for these forgotten souls that I'm glad that we have people like Carson Camp willing to devote their lives to their cause. ☺



**Carson Camp, through an organization he formed, the Sequatchie Valley Historical Association, helped save Dunlap's coke ovens.**



**Throughout the Dunlap Coke Ovens Park grounds remain remnants of the area's coal industry past.**



### Tennessee History for Kids

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Don't miss the 2009 Coke Ovens Bluegrass Festival Friday and Saturday, June 5 and 6, at Coke Ovens Park in Dunlap. Besides enjoying world-class bluegrass performances, learn more about the importance of coke ovens used in the early 1900s by exploring the remains of the ovens and visiting the park's museum. Admission is free. For more information, call 423-949-3483 or visit [www.cokeovens.com](http://www.cokeovens.com).