Price was the destination for students on the Utah State University Department of History’s first Utah history road trip. The two-day trip last April brought students from Logan to visit several sites important to the history of coal mining in Utah.

“The department has history majors spread out across USU’s many campuses and we were looking for ways to help build a greater feeling of community among our students,” said history department head Tammy Proctor. The students came up with the history road trip idea and picked Price for the first excursion.

“They loved the idea of piling in a van with some faculty and heading off to see history up close and personal,” said Chris Conte, head of the department’s undergraduate committee that helped organize the trip to Price. “Fortunately, USU has regional campuses in some fascinating places and that makes logistics for the road trip idea do-able.”

Eight history majors from Logan and one from Price joined Proctor and USU Eastern history professor Susan Neel for the tour. Colleen O'Neill, co-editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly* and a professor on the Logan campus who specializes in U.S. labor history, also accompanied the group.

“Carbon County has such a rich history,” Neel said. “What happened here is an important part of the history of mining in the American West and the history of the labor movement in America. The students were fascinated by the stories of ordinary people who came from all over the world to work in the coal mines. Of course a lot of those stories are pretty dramatic—two of the worst mining disasters in U.S. history, armed conflict between workers and the mining bosses—it’s an incredible history.”

Guiding the tour were Darrin Teply and Sue Ann Martel of the Eastern Utah Tourism and History Association. According to Martel, coal production in Eastern Utah began in 1870 with mines opening in Scofield. The rich coal deposits caught the attention of railroad magnate William Jackson Palmer, who quickly bought the mine and rerouted his railroad to be closer to the deposits.

As new mines opened, the mining companies built towns, called coal camps, and provided the miners and their families with basic necessities. Sometimes this included a small cottage; sometimes only a canvas tent. It was common for coal miners to work both day and night and Carbon County soon became 12th in the nation for coal production.

Immigrants representing at least 30 nationalities worked in Carbon County’s 98 underground coal mines. The coal camps were hard living, Martel said, but they could also be places of joy. There was a lot of ethnic diversity in the camps and each brought pieces of their country and infused their lifestyles into the camps’ unique cultural brew.

The students visited remnants of several coal camps in Spring Canyon. Six towns with over 3,000 people occupied the six-mile area: Peerless, Spring Canyon (Storris), Standardville, Latuda, Rains and Mutual. Each town had a band, baseball team and shared schools, hospitals and company doctors. Amusement halls, theaters and confectionary stores were also common in these coal towns.

All that remains of the six towns are a few buildings, stone foundations, broken glass, railroad tracks and memories of the bygone era. An asphalt trail alongside the main road runs almost the entire length of the canyon and it makes viewing the remains fairly easy. The USU students were entranced as Teply and Martell recounted Spring Canyon’s folklore, including some of the White Lady ghost stories.
that originate from the Latuda Mine, where many of the mining structures still stand.

USU student Abigail Fritz, a native of Boise, Idaho, loved the ghost stories about the closed mines. “I’m a sucker for ghost stories so I was intrigued with every detail.” It was fascinating to hear about the brothels and culture of the miners and gain an inside perspective of their lifestyles, Nick Gittins from Logan said. He recognized the Gittins name on the plaque at the Scofield Cemetery listing the names of those who died in 1900. “My family is from Wales and came to the U.S. to work in the mines. It’s part of my family history.”

Mining was often a family affair, with men bringing their sons, some as young as 6 years old, to help load as much coal as possible. Since miners were paid by how much coal they brought out of the mine, the contribution of the “bony pickers,” as the boys were called, was critical to a family’s income. Mining was hard work and often dangerous. The mines averaged 1,500 feet below the surface and produced methane gas and coal dust, both highly explosive when exposed to an open flame.

Explosions at the Winter Quarters Mine in 1900 and Castle Gate Mine No. 2 in 1924, are ranked among the top 10 disasters in U.S. mining history. The USU history students visited the site of the Castle Gate disaster, which killed 171 miners.

Standing in front of the Mine No. 2 entrance, now gated and filled in, Teply showed students some of the historic tools used by miners and discussed what is now known about the causes of the 1924 accident. Joanna Dobrowolska, one of the Logan students, commented on how moving it was to stand at the quiet, remote site where so many had died. “I felt it brought me so much closer to the history of this area,” she said.

The students were also moved as they walked through the nearby Castle Gate cemetery where many of the miners from the 1924 disaster are buried. “One can feel a sort of reverence here as you look at the list of names on the plaques of those killed. You can feel it in the air, it’s almost eerie and the silence permeates throughout—this is the kind of history you don’t get from reading books,” Neel said.

“The trip to Price was terrific,” Proctor said. “It was a lot to do in a day and half, but everybody, the students and the faculty, too, really enjoyed it.”

The department of history plans to continue the Utah history road trips with visits to the USU Vernal campus this fall and to USU Eastern Blanding in the spring.

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