

Confusion?

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Introducing King County's Small Places

When most people think of places in Washington State's King County, they generally think of the large places in the county. These are places like Seattle or Bellevue, and possibly Redmond or Renton. But King County is home to wonderful small places, too. These are smaller cities and towns that have kept their charm despite the pressures of population growth. Each place has an interesting history and a unique character that makes it stand out and not look like today's faceless suburban communities. So, I decided to write about these small places. Each month, I'll pick a small place, hopefully in logical order! This series will focus on these small places, exploring their beginnings, features and events that make them different and, oftentimes, charming.

Black Diamond, May's Small Place

Black Diamond, Washington is a small city in southeastern King County. Home to almost 4000 people, Black Diamond gets its name from the coal buried in the hills around the town. Located on State Route 169, the town is located in a picturesque portion of the county. Several lakes are just a short drive from the community. Digging its way through a deep, rugged gorge, the Green River runs just north of the community. Black Diamond is on the way to the town of Enumclaw and the Crystal Mountain Ski Resort.

Black Diamond's early history is oriented around the coal deposits in the region. The area was mined as early as 1873 when a

group of four organized the Green River Coal Company. The first coal was actually mined in 1882. Mining continued through the 19th and 20th centuries. The Pacific Coast Company purchased the mines in 1904 and continued to run them until 1946 when they were sold to the Palmer Coking Coal Company. Later on, the mines were shut down as coal mining here became too expensive. Palmer Coking Coal is still in business today, but sells top soil and other landscaping materials.

The town, itself, was originally established as a Black Diamond Company town in the late 19th century. Workers could buy their homes, but had to lease the land back from the company. They also had to purchase their various goods from the company store and worship in the company church.

Labor strife was a common occurrence during the town's history. One retaliatory tactic that the company used was to cancel the miners' land leases, which caused them to lose their homes. The company would then resell the homes. Many of the displaced miners built new homes outside of the company town. The houses were built quickly, but many are still standing today.

The company town was disbanded in 1932. King County provided services to the unincorporated community until 1959. Unhappy with King County services, the community incorporated and held their first city council meeting in March of 1959. Today, the town operates its own police department, but receives its fire service from Fire District 17. In 2006, District 17 contracted with neighboring Fire District 44

to provide fire, EMS and rescue services to the city. An all-volunteer force staffs the Black Diamond station.

The town is a bedroom community for Seattle and Tacoma; however, it still retains many artifacts of its colorful past. One of them is the Black Diamond Bakery.

Established in 1902, the Black Diamond Bakery has been turning out baked goods from its wood fired oven. Burning a half cord of wood every day, the oven is still in use today. The recipes are the same as they were over 100 years ago. The bakery became so popular that on many days, it would routinely sell out its daily output by noon. The bakery increased production, but some items still sell out early.

In the early 1990's the bakery added a restaurant and began serving breakfasts. Many of the items on the menu come directly from the bakery's wood-fired oven. At the south side of the dining room, a large picture window treats diners to a panoramic view of Mt Rainier. The bakery has since added an ice cream shop, espresso stand and gift shop.

Many of the original buildings from Black Diamond's mining days still stand on Railroad Avenue, including the town's train station. One hundred-fifty feet of track is all that is left of the Seattle-bound railroad. The railroad station is now a museum. Other buildings include the jail, a wash house, and a saloon. The jail was in disrepair until 1980 when it was moved to its current location and restored. The wash house was typical of the times, where the miners would wash and change clothes before coming into the main house. The saloon has had a varied history, but today houses both a bar and a family restaurant.

The city boasts several parks located in or near town. The Union Stump Park was cleaned up and is place to rest and view the town's history. There are also three state parks in the Black Diamond area. Water sport enthusiasts can raft the rapids of the Green River Gorge or boat on nearby Lake Sawyer.

Although out of the way, Black Diamond is worth visiting. The best route from Seattle is to drive east on I-90 to I-405. Drive south on I-405 to the Maple Valley Highway. Go east on the Maple Valley Highway to SR 169 and drive south to the town.

Editor's note: Of the places in Southeast King County, Black Diamond is one of my favorites. You can still see the company town influence in the town's older houses. On the other hand, my son doesn't like Black Diamond. It's a speed trap that catches unsuspecting skiers as they head to Crystal Mountain resort!

Next time: We drive down the highway to Enumclaw.

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