New Cash Crop in Dolet Hills

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Of The Times Staff

There's a new ledger book in the office of the clerk of court of DeSoto Parish.

In large, block letters, a deputy clerk has scratched the word "COAL" on the fabric of its cover.

Inside the ledger are copies of more than 70 lease agreements for coal mining rights on nearly 5,000 acres of land in DeSoto Parish.

All of the recorded leases — and there are many yet to be recorded — are to River Rouge Minerals, Inc., a company headquartered in Shreveport.

The tracts of land involved range in size from five to 340 acres.

All the leases are in the rugged Dolet Hills area of DeSoto Parish a few miles southeast of Mansfield.

The Dolet Hills, named for a Pedro Dolet (or Dolette), a Creole who founded a nearby settlement on Bayou Adames in 1795, have been known to have rich deposits of lignite, a soft, intermediate form of coal, since the area was settled.

In the early part of this century, some farmers in the Dolet Hills area gathered the fuel from natural outcroppings for use in blacksmith work.

The late Mack Nabors of Mansfield later attempted to develop a market for the fuel through the railroads.

However, apparently as the result of more readily available and better-quality fuel elsewhere, Nabors was unsuccessful and the lignite deposits were all but forgotten for more than 50 years.

Central Louisiana Electric Co. (CLECO) did consider the possibility of using lignite to fuel its electrical generating plants a few years ago but abandoned the idea as economically unfeasible.

That was before the fuel crisis ushered in by the 1970s.

With the fuel crisis came higher prices — and shortened supplies — of natural gas.

As a result of the fuel crisis, Southwestern Electric Power Co. (SWEPCO), represented by River Rouge Minerals, began exploring the possibility of tapping the lignite deposits of the Dolet Hills about three years ago.

The earliest leases on file in the courthouse at Mansfield are dated November 1972. All of the leases acquired by River Rouge for SWEPCO apparently have not been filed.

R. T. Montcalm, a geologist with River Rouge, disclosed last May that his company had acquired leases on more than 10,000 acres in the Dolet Hills and had an agreement with a large paper company for mining rights on an additional 76,000 acres.

Montcalm at that time indicated that River Rouge planned leasing of an additional 30,000 acres.

CLECO also has moved back into the Dolet Hills area and has been competing with SWEPCO for leases.

In addition, a major national coal company purportedly has attempted some leasing activity.

A CLECO spokesman said CLECO has "a considerable amount" of acreage under lease in the Dolet Hills coal country and in addition has title to some lands acquired when the company first considered using lignite.

No estimate of acreage held by CLECO was available.

Representatives of both SWEPCO and CLECO agree that use of the lignite from the Dolet Hills will be economically feasible only if the company using it can acquire a block of the coal lands large enough to fuel a generating plant for many years.

That's why the competition for leases in the area is so keen between the two companies. However, it appears that SWEPCO is easily the winner in the leasing race at the moment.

SWEPCO officials are reluctant to discuss the company's plans regarding the DeSoto Parish lignite.

When first questioned about the company's plans, one SWEPCO spokesman asked that nothing be published about the company's coal leasing activity.

When the request was refused, SWEPCO officials released a prepared statement acknowledging that the company is considering use of the fuel.

"Lignite is one of the possible fuel sources under consideration for use in the mid-1980s," said the statement.

"We have not made a decision on a fuel source for units (generating plants) which would be constructed beyond 1983," it said.

"We are aware of lignite deposits as a possible fuel source and we are making some studies of their possible utilization as part of this study. We have taken some lignite leases in this (DeSoto Parish) area.

"SWEPCO has not made any plant/site selection in DeSoto Parish and any statement concerning plans by our company during the mid-1980s would be

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