



The mineral trona, also known as soda ash, was first discovered in the Green River Basin in 1938 during oil and gas exploration. However, it wasn't until 1959 that Stauffer Chemical employed a core drilling service that determined it was, in fact, the world's largest deposit of trona. In 1962, Stauffer opened the Big Island Mine and Refinery (this location), building a 16-foot shaft and several refinery units. By 1964, the mine was producing over 400,000 tons of soda ash per year using the "drill and blast" mining method. Over the next two decades, Stauffer expanded, adding more refinery units, increasing soda ash production to 950,000 tons per year. In 1984, Stauffer purchased its first continuous miners — machines with a large rotating steel drum equipped with carbide teeth that scrape trona from the walls of the mine. The new machinery could continually mine trona, increasing the overall production of soda ash. From 1985-2015 the mine and refinery changed ownership and upgraded operations several times, most recently in 2015 when Ciner Group's subsidiary, Ciner Resources, acquired the mine and refinery.

The Ciner facility is served by a branch line that runs 10 miles north from the Union Pacific (1869) transcontinental line near Westvaco, Wyoming, to the Ciner mine and refinery (visible in the left distance of this photo). Like many mining spurs, especially those along the UP (1869) in Wyoming, it is hard to find information on its history. I assume this railroad was built in or around 1962, when Stauffer opened the mine and refinery and began production on an industrial scale. The railroad is currently operated by the UP (see below signage) and I assume it was built by the UP. There is information on the UP webpage that soda ash is the second highest-volume product shipped out of Wyoming, second only to coal, but no specific information about this (or any) branch line. I'll call this line the UP Stauffer Branch, since the line was probably built specifically to serve Stauffer's Big Island Mine and Refinery when it opened in 1962.

Northeastward view of the UP Stauffer Branch (c1962) at its crossing of Wyoming Highway 372. The Big Island Mine and Refinery, now the Ciner Resources mine and refinery, is in the left distance; the track ends there. The valley in which the facility lies is the valley of the Green River, which runs on our side of the facility.





Southward view of the UP Stauffer Branch (c1962), in the foreground, same location as previous. The paved road on the far left is Wyoming Highway 372. The ore cars are on a car storage spur, which switches to the UP Stauffer Branch (c1962) 4,000 feet southwest (to the right) of this location. From that switch, the spur runs northeast, makes a 90-degree turn (seen in this photo) to a southeast alignment, and then ends after a total length of 2.5 rail miles.



Southwestward UP Stauffer Branch (c1962), same location as previous. The switch for the car storage spur is out of sight in the distance but the grade and tracks of the spur are barely visible in the left distance.