“The Breaker Whistle Blows”


The breaker whistle, a piercing scream of steam, once reverberated over the valleys and hills of the anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania. The high-pitched shrill of the whistle started and ended the workday at every anthracite colliery. It was a feature of everyday life, familiar to man, woman, and child. The breaker whistle had a more dramatic use and sinister meaning as well. At any time of the day or night, the penetrating whistle was the telegrapher of tragedy and a call for help. Whenever an explosion, a fall of rock, a threat of gas, or a flood halted the production of coal, the breaker whistle sent a paralyzing shiver of fear through the mining community. In times of discord, during the disputes between the miners and the mine owners, the breaker whistle could be the herald of unemployment or the symbol of solidarity, when it notified the miners of a strike or lockout. The breaker whistle, wailing in the winter wind or in the calm of summer, was at once the town crier and the liberty bell of every anthracite coal patch, borough, or city.

Between 1830 and 1959, more than nine billion tons of anthracite coal were mined by Welsh, English, Irish, Scotch, German, Italian, and Slavic mine workers. These new Americans, in a strip of land only twenty-five miles long and thirty-five miles wide in northeastern Pennsylvania, produced ninety-nine per cent of all the anthracite coal mined in the United States.

The wealth produced by anthracite mining was greater than the total value of the mined gold, silver, lead, and aluminum. It was more than three times the value of copper and two and one half times more than that of iron ore.
The Breaker Whistle Blows describes selected events and personalities of this era. The work has been organized around two interesting observations: each of the three major mining disasters—Avondale, Twin Shaft, and Baltimore Tunnel—sheds light on the ethnic migration to the anthracite region and the ethnic composition of the mine labor force; each of the major mining disasters has been followed by the emergence of a major labor champion.

The victims of the first of these tragedies, the Avondale Disaster, were predominantly Welsh men and boys. Many of them were recent mining recruits from Wales. The labor leader emerging after Avondale was Terence V. Powderly, a president of the Knights of Labor. The Pittston Twin Shaft cave-in suffocated fifty-eight men who were mostly of Irish descent. This tragedy, and that of the Lattimer Massacre, attracted the attention of the young, new United Mine Workers’ president, John L. Mitchell. The Baltimore Tunnel explosion, in the East End of Wilkes-Barre, killed ninety-two men, most of whom were of Polish, Slovak, Lithuanian, or Russian descent. This tragedy was followed by the emergence of a labor leader who dominated the American scene for the next half century, John L. Lewis.

From the end of the Civil War until 1960, a period of approximately one hundred years, the United States became the industrial powerhouse of the world. How and why it did lies in the topical histories of coal, steel, rubber, chemicals, textiles, machinery, and oil. Coal mining was a key industry, and no definitive history of the industrial explosion in the United States can ignore the Anthracite Era between the time of the Avondale Disaster in 1869 and the death knell of the anthracite industry, the Knox Mine Disaster of 1959. While the ethnic tragedies and the biographies of the emerging labor leaders described here are but a small part of the anthracite story, they are by no means insignificant to an understanding of the industrial history of the United States. The chapters on land subsidence caused by the mining of anthracite coal, and the final chapter on the Knox Disaster...
are highlights of anthracite history which surmount ethnic divisions and demand public as well as labor leadership.

As we read of the tragic mine accidents and the emergence of labor leaders, the struggle of miners against their exploitation, and the other problems of the industry, we see a picture of what was once called the anthracite problem. The problem was summarized in this way: Anthracite coal was a valuable national resource concentrated in a tiny geographic area. Millions of consumers depended on it as did thousands of workers. Consumers wanted lower prices. Labor wanted higher wages. Owners wanted greater profits. The coal operators who owned land, mines, and coal-carrying railroads controlled the production and distribution of their products. With monopolistic control over the coal industry, the owner-operators dominated both workers and consumers.

The anthracite industry was a high risk one. Coal was mined at great human costs. In 1907, those killed numbered 918. In 1913, there were 624 mine workers killed out of a work force of 175,310. The mortality rate was twice that of the railroad industry. But the plea of workers and the union for a greater share in the profits was not based solely on the fear of death or accident but also on the desire to survive. The cost of living for a family of six in the anthracite area in 1912 was estimated to be $718.00 per year. If a miner worked every day in 1912, he could earn $800.00. However, a laborer making about $2.50 per day and working his average of 257 days would earn less than $650.00 per year.

As the anthracite industry grew and prospered, the concerns for profits and high dividends kept wages down. Whenever labor was able to obtain increases in pay rates, the consumer and not the company paid the increases. The cost of coal to the consumer inevitably increased after any rise in wages.

The outlook for the anthracite coal industry was analyzed...
by economists before World War I. Their opinion was that no industry could continue with such an unbalanced and exploitative philosophy. The discrepancies between some of the highest dividends in America and labor costs were unhealthy, to say the least. The anthracite industry also was condemned by both the executive branch of government in Pennsylvania and by the Federal Trade Commission. Pennsylvania’s Governor Gifford Pinchot noted in 1923 that despite differences in mining costs, the companies' sales prices of coal were uncannily uniform. The Federal Trade Commission found exorbitant profits among anthracite wholesalers. Both wholesalers and retailers in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia worked on profits from $2.50 to $6.25 a ton. And despite the different margins, the price of coal to the consumer remained constantly high. Such arbitrary price-fixing opened the market for competition by other fuels: coke, bituminous coal, natural gas, and petroleum. The argument that unions or high labor costs were responsible for the decline of the anthracite coal industry does not appear to be valid.

The industry flourished in World War I, nearly collapsed in the Depression, was temporarily rejuvenated in World War II, but expired in the 1950’s. In its last days, all too late, the industry adopted some marketing and advertising innovations, but, by that time, gas and oil had replaced coal for home heating and industrial power. Today, in the 1980's, the northern anthracite fields in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area are closed. The deep mines are either worked out or flooded. Some sporadic surface mining is evident. The fields in Carbon, Luzerne, Schuylkill, and Northumberland Counties produce a very limited quantity, about 5 million tons, an insignificant tonnage compared to the 99 million tons produced in 1917.

In several chapters, notably the first on the Avondale Mine Disaster, the two chapters on Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor, and again in the chapter on the Lattimer Massacre, the author has used original material rather than his own paraphrasing. The Avondale quotations gave us the
flavor of the original reporting of the first major tragedy in anthracite history. The rather lengthy excerpts from The Path I Trod, the autobiography of Terence Powderly, are included to give the readers a precise picture of the by-laws of the Knights of Labor, an intriguing organization unlike any other labor body in the history of the American labor movement.

The confrontation between Terence Powderly, as Mayor of Scranton, and the Right Reverend William O'Hara, Bishop of Scranton, is Powderly's version. Acknowledging that it may be self-serving, if not completely biased, it is quoted at length because it reveals the alienation between the church and first organized labor bodies in the United States. This was a problem that was unresolved until the Encyclicals on Labor of Pope Leo XIII changed the official and unofficial Catholic attitudes.

Parts of the court proceedings of the Lattimer Massacre are produced verbatim. Some of the final plea of the prosecution and almost all of that of the defense is included. The records of the case disappeared from the Luzerne County Court House, and are unavailable except as published in one or two books. Therefore, it was deemed useful to have part of the records available in one more current source. In addition, paraphrasing could not possibly reproduce the drama of the trial.

There are pitfalls in the writing of ethnic history. Rowland Tappan Berthoff in his introduction to the volume British Immigrants in Industrial America describes the danger. "In embarking on a history of immigrants of a particular nationality, author and reader may well keep a weather eye out for the shoals on which many books have foundered. All too often their writers, ardent partisans seeking to redress some rankling grievance of their chosen people...have grossly over-stated their case. Impressed by schoolbook emphasis on discoverers...and military heroes, they have frequently filled their books with names of such persons."
The discoverers and military heroes do not appear here. Neither do kings nor prime ministers—only anthracite coal mine workers, their families, their leaders, and their communities.

*The Breaker Whistle Blows* is an account of selected highlights of the anthracite heritage. This is a rich heritage, the very essence of industrial America's complex history. It includes not only the story of technological chance and economic development—the introduction of steam engines and the tons of coal mined or iron produced—but also that of the immigrant workers who came to America to improve their lives and lives of their families, present and future. This work is just a small part of the ethnic saga.