“Music from Down Below: Anthracite Miners’ Songs”

When we look at old photographs and read accounts of mining life, the mine patches seem like dreary sad places characterized by disaster. This image was certainly true in part. Evidence for the vitality of the human spirit, however, can also be seen in the creative ways (such as music) people found to express their feelings about all aspects of life.

Coal communities were “places of song.” People of every ethnic background who immigrated to the coal regions brought their traditional music and instruments to play. Some music was played privately in the home, some was sung in the churches and schools, while other music was performed by bands at public holiday celebrations and parades.

The music that was most distinctive to the coal region was the music of the miners themselves. These songs emerged from the unique culture that grew out of the industry and the communities of workers that supported it. The music of the coal region was circulated by the miner musician who traveled to patch towns with a fiddle or a guitar. These singers were warmly welcomed in the patches where entertainment had to be created by the people themselves. Because of the ethnic origins of the early miners who were Irish, Welsh, English, and Scottish, many of the songs have a Celtic flavor to them. The musicians drew inspiration from Irish fiddle tunes, Anglo-Saxon folk songs, and popular songs of the time.

Since songs were passed down orally, lyrics and tunes often changed from singer to singer so that often several versions of the same song circulated. Sometimes, too, singers changed lyrics to address a particular situation. Many mining songs are ballads, a traditional Anglo-Saxon song form that tells the story of a dramatic event. Since ballads were often composed in response to actual events, usually tragic, this form made sense to singers performing in a cultural climate where disaster was commonplace.

Songs were sung down in the mines as the men worked. Men often brought instruments into the mines in order to have accompaniment when they danced and sang during breaks from their work. The songs were also sung by the miners, their wives, and children wherever people gathered together in community—whether it was in the bars and saloons, church halls, the village green, or miners’ homes. The workers themselves created some of the songs, while others were written for stage performances. Beginning in the 1870s, miners’ ballads became a form of popular entertainment in music halls in larger towns. Some of the songs written for the stage became very popular among the miners themselves. The themes of the songs reflected all aspects of a miner’s life, including working conditions in the mines.
mining disasters, labor organizing and union activity, events that occurred, and personalities encountered. The tone could be humorous or sad.

Today, thanks to George Korson, an amateur folklorist and newspaper reporter who lived in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, we have an archive of the anthracite miners’ songs. This important collection is housed in Washington, DC, at the Library of Congress’s Archive of Folk Culture. In the 1920s, Korson decided to start a project to record the voices and songs of the anthracite miners. He felt these songs were in danger of being lost because so few people were still singing them and many who had known them were already deceased.

Sources: