

EARLY LABOR TROUBLES IN THE SCHUYLKILL ANTHRACITE DISTRICT

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AS early as 1790 Tench Coxe, the noted economist, wrote of the coal regions of Pennsylvania in his *American View*, as follows: "To the time of the Revolution we depended almost entirely upon wood fuel, of which, in the most populous places, we still have a great abundance, and in all interior situations immense quantities: but the increase of manufactures has occasioned us to turn our attention to coal. Of this useful fossil, Providence has given us very great quantities in our middle and western country. The vicinity of Wyoming, on the Susquehanna, is one bed of coal. . . On the headwaters of [the] Schuylkill and Lehi [Rivers] are some considerable bodies. At the head of the western branch of [the] Susquehanna is a most extensive body which stretches over the country south-westerly, so as to be found in the greatest plenty at Pittsburgh. . . It has been lately discovered in the waters of [the] Nescopeck." It is thus evident that before the end of the eighteenth century the existence of large quantities of coal in Pennsylvania was well known, with the chief areas of deposit already marked. Why then, were another forty years to elapse before this domestic fuel came into common use in the chief centers of population along the Atlantic sea-board?

Two answers suggest themselves: first, that the difficulties involved in marketing coal made that product a comparatively expensive one; second, that people simply preferred to use wood. Though the cheap transportation of coal was indeed a very important factor in determining its general use, the great problem of the early miners, even after the completion of the so-called anthracite canals was that of opposition to its use. The primary problem faced by the industry was thus not one of transportation, but rather one of convincing potential customers that the "stone-coal" could be used more cheaply and efficiently than wood, and

also that the cheapness and efficiency of the new fuel would compensate the householder for his sense of loss in not being able to watch the logs burn in the fireplace, as his ancestors had since time immemorial.

This opposition to the use of coal was hard to break down. Though anthracite had been brought into Philadelphia at various times after 1800, it was not until 1812 that it was really successfully used by a manufacturer of that city. Prior to that date blacksmiths in the coal regions had used it extensively in their forges, and it had been burned successfully in a grate in a tavern at Wilkes-Barre. Hand bills in English and German explaining its use had been circulated in Philadelphia, certificates had been obtained from smiths testifying to its use, and interested parties had visited homes to secure permission to kindle anthracite in grates used for Liverpool coal. However, it was not until the War of 1812, when owing to the cessation of shipments of English and Nova Scotia coal to the United States, as well as the inability of coastal cities to secure Virginia coal, that necessity forced into use the fuel of the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania.

The methods used by coal operators in advertising their product were decidedly modern. The Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company constructed an excellent hotel at Mauch Chunk to accommodate visitors to the mines and maintained several tourist cars on its famous switchback railroad leading from that place to its mines at Summit Hill, as well as a canal boat for the transportation of travelers from Easton. In 1831 this company converted a wood-burning steamship into a coal-burner to show that coal could be used successfully for generating steam in boilers. The Delaware and Hudson Company, with its mines at Carbondale also encouraged visitors, who might make the trip from New York City up the Hudson River to Rondout, there taking passage on the company's canal, and completing their journey to the mines over the first railroad in the United States on which a locomotive had successfully run. In 1831 this company further publicized its product by employing an agent to visit the city of New York and other possible markets, to demonstrate the superior merits of Lackawanna coal to all manufacturers using fuel. This agent also gave frequent public demonstrations of the method of burning coal. By that year also various "fuel societies" had decided that

anthracite had come to stay, and advertised for a suitable "apparatus" in which it could be burned, the price to be within the reach of the poorer class of society.

By 1830 anthracite coal was accepted as a fuel and from then on, it enjoyed an expanding market for many years. The chief drawback to the development of the industry even in those early days was the uncertainty of supply, which existed even after transportation facilities were perfected. This was largely the result of labor disturbances in the coal regions. Evidences of unsatisfactory labor conditions in the anthracite fields were first brought to the attention of the Federal government in a striking manner during the Civil War when, owing to the refusal of a minority element among the miners to submit to the draft, the stationing of troops in the regions was necessitated throughout most of the war. It would be quite contrary to fact, of course, to assert that only in the anthracite regions of the Commonwealth was reluctant patriotism found. After all, as one federal officer stationed in Pennsylvania reported to Washington in 1864: "I respectfully call your attention to the rapid increase in non-combatant sects. The Quakers, Dunkards, and Mennonites are having more than a revival." Nevertheless, it seems that the coal counties were most violent in their action against the government, and the restless element in Schuylkill county led all those in resentment towards authority.

In the years following the Civil War and perhaps even during the war, there developed in the anthracite regions a secret society called the Molly Maguires, which instituted a reign of terror that was ended only by the execution of its leaders. As one writer states: "The murders by the Molly Maguires in the coal regions of Pennsylvania have been revolting, brutal, and cowardly; perpetrated in cold blood, aimless, and without justification, and must be ever so regarded." Why did such turbulence, lack of patriotism, violence, and murder, occur in the coal regions? Why particularly in Schuylkill county? The most convenient explanation is to place responsibility on the type of labor found in the Schuylkill district, but this is only a partial explanation. This paper, in a survey of the course of the anthracite mining industry from 1825 to 1860, emphasizes two phases in its development. First, the boom years of 1829 and 1830 in the Schuylkill region,

which resulted in the emergence of too many operators and too many workmen. Second, an account of labor disturbances in the district in 1842, which plainly bring out the weaknesses in the industry which were largely responsible for the restlessness in the region. Above all, however, this paper is an attempt to show that conditions, rather than men, made it almost inevitable that the Schuylkill district should harbor a population filled with bitter resentment at the existing order.

Upon glancing back through the files of the *Pottsville Weekly Miners Journal* one finds a notice of the arrival at Pottsville in the early summer of 1827 of a party of sixteen experienced English coal miners, equipped with the tools of their trade, and heralded as a great acquisition to the industry.¹ These men had not simply drifted into the region, but had been brought there by an enterprising group of operators, who wanted to introduce the latest mining methods. Accordingly, the operators had sent an agent to England with a fund of one thousand dollars, for the purpose of paying the "passage and expenses of miners who had been brought up to that business . . . under an agreement that they would repay the advances made, by a weekly percentage from their pay." As soon as these early contract laborers learned, however, that they could not be held to the agreement, they left their employers and secured work at higher wages with other operators in the region. "But," philosophically remarked one of those who had paid their passage money, "their practical knowledge of mining, and that of many others who were induced to follow on their own account (from seeing that miners were in such demand in this country), were of great service in introducing most of the subsequent improvements in the business."²

At the time these miners arrived, the Pottsville district was enjoying a period of prosperity, for not only was the Schuylkill canal in operation, but the great market at Philadelphia was rapidly

¹ *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, June 16, 1827. The editor commented on the new arrivals as follows: "We take this opportunity to remark it is high time our mining operations were reduced to something like a methodical system of working. We have been bungling, making shift, and skimming the surface of our coal fields long enough; and much too long for the advantageous prosecution of the trade."

² "Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Subject of the Coal Trade," in *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 1833-34, II, 529-530. (Harrisburg, 1834.) S. J. Packer was the chairman of this committee and the report is cited below as the *Packer Report*.

overcoming its prejudice to anthracite coal, and all that could be mined was readily sold. This prosperity did not pass unnoticed in Philadelphia. In 1829 capitalists and others of that city decided that the time had come for action and the Schuylkill region experienced two years of tremendous boom, similar in some respects to the California gold rush of 1849 and in other respects to the recent period of speculation in Florida real estate. One of the fortune seekers of 1829 wrote: "Rumors of fortunes made at a blow and competency secured by a turn of the fingers, came whispering down the Schuylkill and penetrating the city [of Philadelphia.] Fortune kept her court in the mountains of Schuylkill county, and all who paid their respects to her in person found her as kind as their wildest hopes could imagine."³

New towns sprang up almost overnight. So great was the scarcity of homes that during the winter of 1829-30 business men at Philadelphia had houses made and at the opening of canal navigation in the spring shipped them in pieces to Pottsville "all ready to be placed in the most eligible situation, complete in all their parts," and requiring only "the aid of a few nails to place them in perfect order."⁴ One energetic citizen ordered a number of tents from the city, for the accommodation of visitors to the mines. Advertisements for workmen appeared in the Philadelphia and New York papers; immigrants from England and Ireland arrived in considerable numbers almost daily. Still the cry was for more men.

As might be expected under the circumstances, lawlessness and rioting were quite common, with those old enemies the English and Irish engaging frequently in brawls, often with fatal results.⁵ A distinctly western touch was added by advertisements of a play entitled "The Pottsville Mail Robbers," based on an actual occurrence, which appeared in Philadelphia in the spring of 1830. To complete the picture, there arose at Pottsville in 1830 a reform

³ Joseph C. Neal, "Charcoal Sketch," in Eli Bowen (ed.) *Coal Regions of Pennsylvania*, pp. 27-31. (Pottsville, 1848.) For some figures on the rise of land values see *Hazard's Register* (November 7, 1829), IV, 303, quoting an article from the *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*; see also *Packer Report*, pp. 455-457 for a very interesting and concise account of the boom period.

⁴ *Hazard's Register* (May 15, 1830), V, 311; *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, February 6, 1830.

⁵ *Ibid.*, July 31, 1830.

party that demanded the election to borough offices of "efficient persons, who will attend to the due enforcement of the laws, and prevent the many riots and other nuisances which have of late been tolerated."⁶

This period of mushroom development in the Schuylkill region furnished the real background for labor troubles that were to plague the region for the next fifty years, for when the frenzy of speculation came to an end at the close of 1830 the district and the industry had been seriously affected economically. First, those men who held title to land when the bubble burst, desiring to realize on their investments, turned to actual mining, usually with insufficient capital. Secondly, there existed an oversupply of labor; and thirdly, the district had gained an unsound reputation in financial circles. Added to these difficulties there was also the general distrust of large companies and corporations that existed during the period—a sort of anti-monopoly, anti-bank, anti-big business mania that was particularly active in the coal regions, where private individuals insisted on carrying on an industry that required a large capital.

During the 1830's there were only two brief periods of prosperity in the Schuylkill district. The first of these came as a result of the severe winter of 1831-32 which exhausted the supply of coal at the market. The second was a reflection of the general good times of 1836, followed by a collapse in 1837, due to the panic. The next three years were very poor ones, with the administration at Washington being held responsible by many. In 1840 the hero of Tippecanoe was elected to the presidency not only on a log cabin and hard cider slogan, but also on the more material catch phrase of "Two Dollars a day and Roast Beef." Nevertheless, prosperity did not return. Unemployment, low wages and distress were quite common, but in the coal regions of Pennsylvania, where the one industry was mining, hard times existed to a great degree.

In the Schuylkill district conditions were at their worst in 1842. As the year advanced and the coal season really opened, hope was expressed that the miners might expect some degree of steady employment and at least a living wage. When, however, the price of coal at market was quoted at a lower figure than in the preced-

⁶ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1830.

ing year the situation became acute, and murmurs of discontent were heard in the region.⁷ This discontent took concrete form when on the night of May 14th, the barn of one of the operators at Pottsville was burned by incendiaries—the reason given for the outrage being that the wife of the operator, in discussing the hard times, had suggested that if the workmen were unable to buy better food they could eat “dry bread and potatoes.”⁸ From this time on the region was in a state of unrest, with unemployment estimated at about twenty per cent of the working population, which increased during the summer through the arrival of about five hundred immigrants.⁹

Meetings were frequent among the miners, for reasons arising from the fact that those who were employed received their wages not in money, but in orders for goods. Store orders, however, were by no means confined to the Schuylkill district but were in general use throughout the country at the time for the payment of wages. A typical store order consisted of a piece of paper about the size of a bank note, having a serial number and a date, with the denomination of the order printed in large figures in the upper right hand corner. It was drawn on a particular merchant, and usually read about as follows: “Please let the bearer have groceries to the amount of [a specified sum] at the customary retail cash price at the time of delivery, and charge the same to my account.”¹⁰ The obvious reason for such an order was the fact that the employer who issued it had no cash; obviously also, the store owner who honored the order expected that at some future time the employer would have currency with which to redeem it. So far the system does not appear to be particularly vicious. In actual practice, however, it often worked great injustice upon the workmen, and in no part of the country was this injustice greater than in Schuylkill county.

⁷ A communication from Pottsville to the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, July 19, 1842, states that “ferocious threats towards individuals have been for some time past affixed to stores and trees in public places.”

⁸ *Public Ledger*, May 18, 1842; the charge is denied in the *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, May 22, 1842.

⁹ *Public Ledger*, July 19, 22, 1842. A charge against the operators was that they had advertised for workmen in Wales during the spring of that year. *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, July 23, 1842. The operators stated that this was a “base and malicious lie,” and that the advertisements had been circulated by packet agents in Liverpool. *Ibid.*, July 23, 1842.

¹⁰ *Public Ledger*, May 5, 1842, reproduces such an order—not, it might be mentioned, drawn by a coal operator.

It has been shown, that as a result of the speculation in the region in 1829 and 1830, as well the distrust of large companies throughout the period under discussion, the producing units in this region were small and numerous. The operators were carrying on business on the proverbial shoestring, and could effect none but the most necessary payments in cash. A glance at the lists of sheriff's sales is evidence enough that the region was not on a very sound economic basis; hence, to pay his men the operator was forced to bargain with a store owner for an advance in credit, against which he would write orders for merchandise. His employees received the orders in lieu of cash wages, and the operator redeemed this paper when he received cash for the sale of his coal. Since the merchant was taking a risk that the settlement in cash would be made, he proceeded to protect himself by charging high prices for goods given for the orders. Another form of the system, and the one about which most has been written, was where the operator owned the store on which he wrote the orders, sometimes exacting a great profit. This type is usually referred to as the "Company Store," and caused the greatest dissatisfaction at a later date.¹¹

Resentment at the system came to a crisis on July 7th, 1842, when a number of workmen laid down their tools and decided to cease work until operators agreed to pay cash wages. The movement spread rapidly throughout the region, and on Saturday afternoon, July 9th, a number of the strikers marched through Pottsville armed with clubs, and drove away the laborers engaged in loading coal at the canal landings. The same evening word was sent to the sheriff of the county that the strikers at Minersville were making threats to burn the town. That official immediately called upon the Pottsville militia companies to hold themselves in readiness to relieve the situation. At midnight the militia led by the sheriff marched to Minersville only to find the town quiet. By Monday all work in the region had been suspended. The active spirits in the movement, made up largely of miners who had been out of work when the strike started,¹² apparently did not know

¹¹ For an article on the order system from the operators' point of view see editorial "The Turnout—Order System, etc.," in *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, July 30, 1842; for a violent attack on the system see "Store Orders in Schuylkill County," in the *Public Ledger*, May 10, 1842.

¹² *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, July 23, 30, 1842.

what to do next. Accordingly, on Monday morning they began to drift rather aimlessly to a meeting place near Pottsville, under the watchful eye of the militia, and towards noon proceeded to the town. They were met at the town limits by the sheriff, who advised them to throw away the sticks and clubs they were carrying, and then led them to a nearby grove. Arrived there they were informed by the district attorney of the county what steps they might take within the law. Acting on his advice the men selected a chairman, drew up a list of grievances, and named a committee to confer with the operators in order to seek an agreement.

The next day the burgess of Pottsville offered all who wished to pursue their occupation full protection from attack. This was followed by a similar declaration from the sheriff and some men returned to work. Due to the prompt action on the part of the authorities and also to the fact that the operators were in no particular hurry to reopen their collieries, the "rebellion," as one resident put it, soon "settled down into a demonstration of hard times."¹³ Scattered cases of violence were reported, and about a half dozen of the strikers ultimately served terms in the county prison for their part in the affair. The operators refused to meet the committee, but did go on a cash basis for a time. This meant, however, that unemployment in that region was increased and poor relief had to be extended to many of the miners.¹⁴

The course of the industry from 1842 to the Civil War can be quickly told. It was the story of small operators working with insufficient capital attempting to compete with the large companies of other regions. In 1849 an attempt was made by the operators to control the supply of coal and maintain prices by declaring a suspension of shipments. This lasted for seven weeks, but when

¹³ Pottsville correspondent "A B C", in *Public Ledger*, July 22, 1842. For an account of the strike from the operators' point of view see *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, July 9, 16, 23, 30, 1842; from miners' point of view see items, chiefly by "Anthrax," in *Public Ledger*, July 14, 15, 19, 1842. For a dramatic account, *The Pennsylvanian*, July 13, 1842, quoting *The Evening Journal*.

For the miners' charges and the operators' denial of the charges, see "Extract from Thomas Brady's Address to the Public," and "A Base Slander," in *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, July 23, 1842. For a concise statement of immediate grievances see communication by "Shakespeare," entitled "Turn Outs," in *Ibid.*, July 23, 1842.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, July 30, 1842.

the mines reopened the miners went on strike, demanding higher wages as well as cash payment. Due to the depressed condition of the trade the strike was unsuccessful, and the union that was formed broke up when the leader in the movement left the region, taking the treasury with him. In 1857 the Schuylkill operators called in a former president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad to head their organization in an attempt to control the supply from the region, but the panic of that year defeated the attempt. A strike in the following year resulted in the failure of the miners to defeat the order system and secure higher wages.

Temporary prosperity finally came to the region with the Civil War. By that time, however, the miners had behind them a background of resentment and a feeling that anyone in authority was their natural enemy, whether operator, mine foreman, or federal officer. Thus, when the Civil War was being waged many saw no reason for fighting either to relieve the condition of someone else, or to support a country from which they had received a precarious livelihood at the best.

Even today the industry has not yet solved its problems. The conflict between capital and labor in the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania has resulted in, and to a certain extent been intensified by the loss of markets in recent years. Perhaps there is no cause for alarm. Still, one feels that a warning uttered in jest by a journalist more than a hundred years ago contained some very sound advice. And this article may be concluded by repeating that somewhat mixed metaphor of the editor of the *Pottsville Weekly Miners' Journal*, who in 1829 stated, "A House Divided against itself will never Warm its Neighbor."