Public History—Workers’ History:  “For Our Own Good”

There will be recessions and progressions of the trade union movement, like the ebb and flow of the tide . . . There can be no doubt, however, that the movement is onward and upward. The workingman who once crawled upon his knees is now on his feet, and though he may suffer buffets in the future or may be temporarily cast down, he has at least learned to walk and will no longer crawl. It takes generations to implant dignity in the human breast, but once implanted, it is ineradicable.

John Mitchell, Organized Labor (1903), p. 435

The year 1990 marked the centennial of the formation of the United Mine Workers of America. The union was created by the merger of the Miners’ National Progressive Union and District Assembly #25 of the Knights of Labor in Columbus, Ohio on January 25, 1890. For the workers of Pennsylvania’s Anthracite Region organizing labor was nothing new. As early as 1849 the Bates’ Union, a mine worker’s union, was established in Schuylkill County. But this organization, along with its successors, was ultimately unsuccessful due in part to the fluctuations of the anthracite market, as well as to the changing ethnographic composition of northeastern Pennsylvania, and the geographic divisions of the region. By 1890 the anthracite mine workers were disillusioned with the idea of a formal, region-wide union. It was not until the strikes of 1900 and 1902, and the charismatic leadership of UMWA President John Mitchell, that the anthracite men were convinced of the advantage of supporting a national union.

In comparison with bituminous mining fields, which are found across the country, the area encompassed by anthracite fields is quite small. Although it contains only 436 square miles of workable coal deposits, northeastern Pennsylvania boasts the largest concentration of high grade anthracite in the world. However, because of the size of the region, anthracite mine workers have been outnumbered in the UMW. This fact caused tensions within the Union which waxed and waned and varied in severity from the outset of the anthracite men’s association with the national organization.

The struggles and contributions of the anthracite mine workers were recounted in a public history forum held at Eckley Miner’s Village Museum on October 5, 1990. The event, entitled “For Our Own Good”: Anthracite Mining Unionism and the UMW, coincided with the centennial of the UMW, but focused on the experiences of the men of the Anthracite Region.

Admittedly, the Eckley Museum, and the other Museums in the Anthracite Museum Complex, never focused much attention on the history of organized labor in the Anthracite Region in their fifteen year history. “For Our Own Good” was intended to correct that shortcoming and at the same time allow the District an
opportunity to take a day and share its reflections on its significant past as it forged ahead to a different future.

"For Our Own Good," funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which administers the Eckley, was an experiment in public history programming. The day-long event began with presentations of scholarly papers, and a tour of the Village, followed by a panel discussion with members of District 25 in which the audience was encouraged to participate. The Forum concluded with a performance of regional mining songs by a local folk music group. Several of the strongest formal papers, revised for publication, excerpts from the transcripts of the panel discussion, and the lyrics of one of the songs composed by the folk group are included in this issue of Pennsylvania History.

By providing a historical context for the ensuing dialogue between members of the UMW and the audience and the poetic expression of the miners' experiences through song, it was hoped that an environment for the exchange of ideas and opinions and the recounting of work experiences would be created. The intent was to make "For Our Own Good" truly a forum for the discussion of the participating public's own history. Only time will reveal the long term effect.

There is one final and ironic note. In February 1991, less than six months after the Forum was held, the UMW announced that it initiated discussions to plan the process of merging anthracite District 25 and District 2, a bituminous coal mine workers' district in central and western Pennsylvania. Although this action could strengthen the voice of the members of the resultant new District within the international union, it does signal the end of a chapter in the history of the Anthracite Region.

Mary Ann Landis, Director
Anthracite Museum Complex
LAST DAY OF THE NORTHERN FIELD (Ballad of Myron Thomas)

The morning calm was shattered on that day in fifty-nine
The whistle blasts meant there had been disaster in the mine.
And blood ran cold for they all knew that lives again were lost
The price of coal was set in blood and miners bore the cost.

Myron Thomas ran to see what he could do
For a foreman has a duty to the welfare of his crew
He found the ashen motorman, who said "I just don't know,
If we can hope to rescue those, poor souls trapped down below."

The Susquehanna's broken' through, the water's rising fast
The Mine's a churning cauldron, the pockets just won't last!
The timbers are all giving way, the roofs are coming down
Your crew's still in the river shaft, I fear they'll all be drowned!

Myron rode a car down to, the tunnel where his men,
Were loading coal that morning, not knowing if or when,
He'd see the light of day again, or die down in that hole,
But he must try to free them from, that prison made of coal.

In darkness he assembled, thirty-one of his lost men,
The water soon claimed seven who, were never seen again
But twenty-four stayed with the man, they trusted with their lives
He offered hope they'd see again, their children and their wives.

They made their way back to the shaft, where they had all come in,
But rising water claimed it and, it looked like it might win,
They prayed the psalm that strengthened and fought for every breath,
As they walked through their valley, in the shadow of black death.

They fought back to the Eagle shaft, closed forty years ago
It was to have been sealed back then, but bosses were quite slow
To spend their fortunes for such things, that brought them no return
Such safety regulations, met with disdainful scorn.

They found an air shaft one foot wide and twenty feet in length
And thru this void they crawled and clawed and dug with all their strength
Not one man lost his courage though, their chances were but slight,
Then Myron breached the old main shaft, "My God, I see some light."
The rescue team soon heard their cries and lowered down a line,
And one by one delivered them, out from that dying mine.
Myron was the last one out, and turning he did say,
"You'll never claim another life, for this is your last day!"

Words: Ray Stephens  Music: Joseph P. Jones ©1988
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