

**"IT'S THE UNION MAN THAT HOLDS
THE WINNING HAND": GAMBLING IN
PENNSYLVANIA'S ANTHRACITE REGION**

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Gambling is everywhere in Pennsylvania. Turn on the television and you are enticed to visit Mohegan Sun, one of the state's casinos. Stop by a convenience store and be lured by the dream of the next big lottery win. Pass by a local church and read a sign that invites you to "Bingo!" Talk of gambling in Pennsylvania made former governor Ed Rendell so heated that he called CBS news staffers "simpletons" and "idiots" after they questioned the extent and morality of gambling in Pennsylvania.¹ Politicians, development professionals, and ordinary Pennsylvanians are betting that gambling will bring the state and its economy some much-needed luck. Throughout history, gambling has reflected major cultural values of a given society. Using the anthracite region in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a case study, this article shows that gambling opportunities abounded in the anthracite coal region, even as the activity came under fire. Coal-region residents gambled because gambling provided them

with leisure activities, it was religiously sanctioned, and it represented a sense of control in their otherwise risky and chance-filled lives.

Pennsylvania's anthracite region lies in the northeastern and north-central portions of the state. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ethnic diversity, class differences, and religious variety characterized the region. The influx of "new immigrants" from eastern and southern Europe to Pennsylvania was immense. Between 1899 and 1914, over 2.3 million immigrants contributed to making Pennsylvania one of the nation's industrial powerhouses. Drawn by the promise of work, many new immigrants made the anthracite coalfields their destination. American-born descendants of English, Welsh, German, and Irish immigrants inhabited the area, as did the new immigrants. The region's economic livelihood depended on anthracite coal mining by men and boys and textile manufacturing by women and girls.² Class distinctions based on where one figured into the coal economy divided residents. The area also was a diverse blend of religions. Catholics outnumbered both Protestants and a small community of Jews. Although men, women, boys, and girls worked hard, they appreciated and took advantage of the leisure time that they possessed. One type of activity in which they readily and eagerly participated was gambling.

The story of gambling in the anthracite coal region will build upon work done by scholars who specialize in the history of gambling, the history of mining, and the history of Pennsylvania. Many scholars who have studied gambling in the United States have presented broad surveys of the subject. When they have concentrated on specific regions of the nation, they have focused on gaming in the West, particularly as a characteristic of the settlement of the frontier.³ Historian of Pennsylvania Anthony F. C. Wallace considered risk seeking when analyzing the Pennsylvania coal town of Saint Clair, but focused his study on mine owners, not miners or other working-class residents.⁴ The connection between mining, gambling, and risk also drew the attention of Gunther Peck, who investigated the class, gender, and racial dimensions of risk-taking in Nevada's silver mines. Peck noted that "[the study of how] miners responded to a spectrum of physical and financial risks . . . remain[s] neglected."⁵ This article works to fill that need by analyzing the ethnic, gendered, religious, and occupational dimensions of gambling in Pennsylvania's anthracite region.

To get at the meaning of gambling for the men and women of the anthracite coal region, theories derived from anthropology, working-class studies, and feminist theory are employed. The field of anthropology looks at gambling in the context of the culture in which the activity takes place. Specifically, anthropologists see gambling as reflecting the values of the people who

participate in the activity.⁶ Similarly, this study shows that gambling in the anthracite coal region displays the ethnic diversity of the area, reflects the gender divisions that existed there, indicates the religious worldview and situation of the residents, and echoes the dangerous work environment of the area.

The article also draws from working-class studies and feminist theory. Specifically, these research areas articulated the importance of considering the multiple identities that encompass individual lives. Gambling and a society's attitude toward it are influenced by ethnicity, class, gender, and religion. Feminist theory and working-class studies also hint at what I call the dual system of gambling in the United States in their analysis of the dual system of welfare that exists in America.⁷ In using these diverse methodologies, I am, appropriately, taking a gamble.

In addition to considering anthropological, feminist, and working-class studies source material, this article relies on several types of primary sources. Autobiographies written by coalcrackers provide essential information about gambling and the spaces in which it took place. Patrick Canfield's *Growing Up with Bootleggers, Gamblers, and Pigeons* was instrumental in learning about the gambling culture of the coal region. The works of early twentieth-century middle-class reformers documented the variety of gambling activities in which individuals participated and analyzed the different people—men, women, boys, young, old, professional class, and working class—who enjoyed gaming. These reformers clearly worried about the economic, social, and moral implications of gambling. Sociologist Peter Roberts's *Anthracite Coal Communities* is representative of this type of social reform literature. Finally, folk music includes references to gambling activities like dogfights, but also uses gambling as a metaphor for other risky working-class pursuits such as union organization and strikes. George Korson's collection of mining music is the premier repository for these songs.

Before analyzing the history of gambling in the anthracite region, a definition of "gambling" is necessary. As used in this article, "gambling" encompasses betting and risk-taking. It includes using money or personal belongings to place bets with the hope that one's investment might produce financial, emotional, and/or social returns.⁸ Defined this way, gambling encompasses traditional gaming activities as well as risks associated with work and labor organizing.

Gambling was a major form of leisure in the coal region, and leisure was closely tied to the industrial order of which coal mining was a part. Like work, leisure diverged according to gender; in the most general terms, men and boys mined and women and girls worked at home and

in the factories. Leisure broke down divisions that kept workers of different ethnicities apart, and enabled them to see one another as partners tied together in a common struggle. The development of working-class camaraderie via leisure allowed for union organizing, a phenomenon that resulted in additional leisure opportunities by providing space (labor clubs) and time for varied pursuits.⁹ Many leisure activities depended on cooperation between participants, a characteristic that was similar to the shared work in which miners took part. Gambling also mirrored industrialization in that class divisions marked gaming activities especially at pigeon shoots. Economic and social differences affected when, where, and how people gambled. Nonetheless, residents of the coal region embraced the pleasures that their non-work hours provided them. Gambling was one of their many forms of leisure; in fact, most free-time activities were accompanied by wagering.

One key social difference that affected gaming in the anthracite coal region was ethnicity. The ethnic diversity of an area touched by several waves of immigrants over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries impacted the wagering that took place there. First of all, the very identity of some ethnic groups was founded upon their attraction to gambling, for example, the Irish. John Edward Walsh, author of the nineteenth-century study *Sketches of Ireland Sixty Years Ago*, writes, "The intense passion of the Irish for gambling has often been observed."¹⁰ The clover, a key symbol of Irish identity, was, likewise, associated with gambling because of its connotation with luck. One needs only to think of the well-known and well-worn phrase, "the luck of the Irish." The Roman Catholicism to which many Irish adhered sanctioned the gambling in which they participated. American-born Pennsylvanians, including the Pennsylvania Germans, reinforced this understanding of Irish ethnic identity and its accompanying luck by appropriating the clover as a means to good fortune.¹¹

The association of an ethnic group with a particular economic activity also impacted gambling in the anthracite coal region. Specifically, the agricultural work undertaken by Pennsylvania Germans influenced their participation in pigeon shoots. The identification of these birds as pests was used to justify their destruction during pigeon shoots.¹² Pennsylvania Germans not only provided barn pigeons for shoots, but also raised and bred them, as they did other animals. Some of these pigeons were trained for shooting contests; others were raised as homing pigeons and were subject to gaming as participants tried to bet on the animal that completed the trip first.

Gambling by ethnic groups provided them with pastimes, literally opportunities to pass the time as they worked hard, tiring, and monotonous jobs. A shared gaming and sports activity, its rules, and unique language were understood by immigrants. They passed time in a new country, but harkened back to memories of previous times in distant places. Gambling, in a sense, brought them home—linguistically and culturally. Italian immigrants, for example, continued to participate in and wager on boxing, a sport they had enjoyed in Italy.¹³ Slavic residents enjoyed card games that they had played in Europe. Cards and other gambling devices like dice were easily transported, and, thus, they could be used when there was a break at work.¹⁴

There was a definite interplay between gambling and ethnicity. Gender differences also shaped gambling. Men and boys in the coal region participated in several different gambling activities. First of all, men and boys bet on blood sports. Specifically, they wagered on cockfights and dogfights. The bastion of coal-region masculinity, the saloon, functioned as the destination for many cockfighting matches. Early twentieth-century sociologist Peter Roberts noted the popularity of the saloon for the blood sport, but also reported, "In a town of Schuylkill County, a company of . . . men bought an old school-house for the expressed purpose of cock-fighting and, from November until April, hardly a week passes but a match or two takes place, where on an average about 200 persons assembled." Roberts noted that cockfighting generated tremendous excitement: "Around the pit young boys and old men gather and become roused to a pitch of excitement . . . completely carried away." Similarly, dogfighting also drew gamblers. The dogs that fought are even commemorated in song. The anthracite region ballad, "Lost Creek," written by Martin J. Mulhall, features

. . . a savage looking dog
That his owner wouldn't part with for a fifty dollar bill,
He could lick his weight in lions and would either die or kill
The dog that dared to face him, for he never would give up;
And the owner smoothed the ruffles on the darling little pup.¹⁵

A third type of blood sport that took place in the coal region was the pigeon shoot. These shooting matches produced the highest stakes, ranging from \$100 to \$200. They also drew hundreds of spectators.¹⁶ Good shots became hometown celebrities and remained popular even after moving out of the area. As the shoots often pitted two teams against each other,

gamblers wagered on which side would prevail in shooting the most pigeons. They also bet on individual shots. Gamblers not only wagered on the shots and bet on which team would win, but also actively sought to influence the outcome of the matches by flustering shooters with noise and physical intimidation. In the twentieth century, Big Bill Yeasted, a former professional football player for the Pottsville Maroons, employed such tactics. He bellowed, cursed, and used his massive physical presence to force shooters to miss their marks. As matches progressed, shooters expected to have onlookers breathing down their necks and “accidentally” bumping into them. The gamblers who attended the pigeon shoots had opportunities to wager on the matches and on other activities including, as writer and pigeon-shoot enthusiast Patrick Canfield alliteratively noted, “cards, craps, and . . . chicken fights.”¹⁷ Like other blood sports, men and boys were the primary players at the pigeon shoots. Boys learned to train the pigeons for “match shoots,” or shoots that involved pigeons that had been, as folklorist Simon Bronner described, “‘brushed,’ that is, trained to fly in particularly designed patterns unknown to the shooter.” Trainers also bred pigeons so that they displayed certain physical characteristics. One group of breeders, the Dutch Hill Gang of Schuylkill County, produced the “archangels,” a type of bird known for its large wings and fast speed.¹⁸ A trainer eventually became a trapper who partnered with a shooter to form a team that took on opponents. These shoots were private unlike the public, straight shoots. In straight shoots, like the now-defunct Hegins Pigeon Shoot, shooters targeted untrained pigeons.¹⁹

Although the saloon functioned as the locale where blood sports like chicken- and dogfights took place or where they, especially pigeon matches, were arranged, another destination offered gamblers chances to try their luck. Shooters, trappers, gamblers, drinkers, and spectators gathered at gun clubs to participate in a variety of activities. Gun clubs sold food and drink, were the settings for pigeon shoots, and allowed gamblers to wager on darts, craps, cards, pool, and chicken fights. Privately owned and plentiful in the region, the gun clubs drew a cross-section of coal-country residents. Well-to-do professionals as well as working-class laborers frequented the clubs. Businessmen and professionals patronized gun clubs on Thursday, the weekday when they traditionally took a half day. Middle- and upper-class gamblers had deeper pockets than working-class folk and they wagered more money. Better-off gamblers left gun clubs earlier in the evening than other players, who stayed long past midnight.²⁰

Games and devices normally associated with casino gambling also enticed men and boys. In the saloons, men gambled on card games. One of the most popular means of gambling, the slot machine, also was found in spaces frequented by male residents. Bars housed the one-armed bandits, but after a campaign to eradicate them from public houses, they moved, as Roberts reported, into "candy and barber shops, cigar and tobacco stores." At these establishments, "boys from ten to twenty years of age, when they have money, cluster around these and, infatuated with the whirl and click of the machine, they stand there until the last penny is spent, and then they curse the machine." Due to the influence that these machines had on the young, they were reviled by middle-class reformers.²¹ Some advocates, especially those concerned with child labor, argued that the numbing and mindless work of boys in the mines led to the leisure activities in which the lads participated. In fact, the spinning of the machines that the boys tended in the mines was similar to the revolving images inside the slot machines. In both the mines and tobacco shops, boys crowded around machines, whether industrial or gaming, and endured a choking atmosphere, whether from coal dust or from smoking tobacco. Owen R. Lovejoy, assistant secretary of the National Child Labor Committee, wrote that the children who worked in the mines "sit all day over a dusty coal chute, fixing the mind solely on the distinction between a piece of coal and a piece of rock or slate, and in the close company of a group of boys." Lovejoy drew no distinction between labor and leisure; his statement about child labor, "the menace to morals is not less than that to health," matched his attitude toward gambling, which he lumped in with "the evils of profanity, obscenity, . . . and various forms of intemperance."²²

Over the course of the twentieth century, the public crusade to ban slot machines actually enlarged the scope of their reach. State police contacted saloon proprietors prior to raids. Bar owners made sure to hide the machines in locked cubbyholes under stairs and in out-of-the-way places. Once they arrived, state police verified that they saw no gambling devices. Supplied with drink and payoffs, the authorities left. In order to save face and flex their muscles, police arranged with the saloon owners to have the slot machines out in the open twice a year. The police then slapped the tavern keepers with small fines, but the slot machines stayed. Eventually, the arrangement between the state police and the bar owners ended in the second half of the twentieth century when the Internal Revenue Service got involved and charged slots owners with tax evasion.²³ In addition to slot machines, men and boys spent their money on craps.²⁴

Activities designed to identify sure shots also drew men, young and old. The pigeon shoots are one example. Darts was another game upon which men and boys wagered.²⁵ Quoits, too, was very popular. In comparison to shooting matches, the stakes for quoits were low, with a maximum of \$25. The sports, however, prized steady hands and sharp eyes. Men and boys with known skills drew large crowds and larger pots.

While women also gambled, the contests in which they participated differed markedly from their male counterparts. Just as they frequented their local parishes' religious societies, women of the coal region supported the churches' charitable gambling ventures. The majority of amusements in which coal-region women participated were affiliated with the Catholic Church. Parishes sponsored summer picnics and winter balls.²⁶ Specifically, women took part in lotteries. Sociologist Roberts decried these activities, stating, "This cannot inspire joyful veneration, and such means of getting money cannot be to the glory of God and the spiritual edification of the contributors." Roberts's criticism fits well into early twentieth-century Protestant America's disdain for wagering, but misses the mark. One can easily imagine the "joyful veneration" inspired by having one's numbers picked, and can picture devout women marching up the main aisle of the church to light candles that gratefully acknowledged "the glory of God" via the dancing flames and plumes of smoke that ascended skyward.

A more somber form of gambling in which women took part resulted from the tragic deaths of husbands. Instead of paying out death benefits to widows, fraternal organizations sometimes opted to hold raffles. This arrangement entailed the bereaved selling chances for an article of value that once belonged to the deceased. Guns, watches, and livestock were most often the prizes. Desperate for money, the widow peddled the chances and the winning number was drawn at a local saloon. Although economically necessary, parting with an object special to the recently dead likely compounded the grief and sorrow under which the woman struggled.²⁷

Whether undertaken by men or women, gambling flourished in the coal region for a number of reasons. First of all, the Catholic Church sanctioned it. In fact, the church provided opportunities for residents to engage in gambling. As we have seen, the church organized lotteries. Sociologist Roberts stated, "Catholics resort also to unworthy means to secure money for church purposes . . . and appeal to the gambling instinct and the craving for amusement in order to keep the institution alive."²⁸ The church permitted gambling because church doctrine did not consider it sinful unless it was excessive, jeopardized a family's welfare, was fraudulent, and was not

freely undertaken. Catholicism, instead, defined gambling, as T. Slater of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*’s entry on “Gambling,” wrote, “The staking of money or other things of value on the issue of a game of chance.” In his entry on “Betting,” Slater went as far as to say “it follows that the avocation of the professional bookmaker need not be morally wrong. It is quite possible to keep the moral law and at the same time so to arrange one’s bets with different people that, though in all probability there will be some loss, still there will be gain on the whole.”²⁹

The Church argued by definition that some business activities constituted a type of gambling. Slater wrote,

Time bargains, difference transactions, options, and other speculative dealings on the exchanges, which are so common nowadays, add to the malice of gambling special evils of their own. They lead to the disturbance of the natural prices of commodities and securities, do grave injury to producers and consumers of those commodities, and are frequently attended by such unlawful methods of influencing prices as the dissemination of false reports, cornering, and the fierce contests of “bulls” and “bears,” i.e. of the dealers who wish respectively to raise or lower prices.³⁰

Slater’s commentary documents behavior in which mine companies and industrial corporations participated regularly and which the entry identifies as evil. The use of animal imagery and the fact that Slater described the fluctuations of the stock market as “the fierce contests of ‘bulls’ and ‘bears’” bring to mind the real blood sports popular in coal country.

The Church, instead, regarded as harmless the minor acts of gambling, like raffles and lotteries, that residents engaged in and that the church sponsored. Likewise, the Church endorsed deeds, like strikes, that constituted major risk. The appearance of clergymen, like Monsignor John Curran, in the photographs (see fig.1) of the major coal strikes of the early twentieth century and the church’s support of other chancy measures, such as bootleg mining during the Great Depression, show that the Catholic Church was consistently betting on the side of the miner. During the 1930s, coal-area priests rationalized bootleg mining by explicitly noting the risk involved. Father Weaver of Mount Carmel stated, “They risk their lives every minute they work in these holes, and they deserve everyone’s respect and admiration. They have mine.” Weaver recognized that the bootleg miners were gambling with their very lives. His reasoning matched the Catholic Church’s attitude toward gambling, that it entailed “the staking of . . . other things of value

on the issue of a game of chance.”³¹ Bootleggers chanced life and limb entering a small contraption, often a steel barrel rigged to an engine and hoist, which deposited them in the earth with little more than their buddies’ help at the openings of the bootleg holes. Safety precautions were less common in bootleg mines, and accidents, like cave-ins, occurred. The longer hours that miners worked in bootleg operations meant that miners often labored while fatigued, thus increasing their risk of injury or even death.³²

Catholics and their church were more open to gambling, whether they were waging on a raffle or risking life and limb in a bootleg hole, due to Catholicism’s belief in an immanent God, a divine being who is present in the world, interacts with human beings, and affects human events. Catholic devotion to patron saints is one example of this otherworldly association. Catholics believed that pleas to St. Anthony might help to uncover a lost object, appeals to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, might reverse the misfortune of disease, and faith in the healing intercession of St. Blaise might keep the believer from falling victim to diseases of the throat. The banks of altar candles that lined area churches, likewise, were opportunities for special requests or for gratitude for a wish fulfilled. This notion of divine intervention and its relationship to fatalism correspond to notions of luck associated with gambling.³³



FIGURE 1: Father John Curran and UMW president John L. Lewis seated before a picture of Theodore Roosevelt. (Standing) Thomas Kennerly. Curran was instrumental in coal disputes in the twentieth century, especially the 1902 Coal Strike. 1930. Courtesy of the Luzerne County Historical Society.

Despite prohibitions against gambling, Protestant churches in the coal region sponsored gambling events, too. Religiously affiliated organizations that catered to the poor, likewise, participated in beneficent, charitable gambling. This situation differed markedly from American Protestantism's condemnation of gambling on the basis of biblical principle. Citing Scripture, Protestants regarded gambling as akin to idleness and idol worship. Instead of applying themselves and working hard, gamblers turned away from God's providence toward the god of fortune. Protestant America's attitude toward gambling supported capitalism. The strength of American Protestantism as a majority religion influenced the disdain for gambling displayed by many in the nation. Conversely, the minority status of Protestantism in the anthracite coal region explains why wagering was a means of supporting churches and providing for the poor. The membership of the small Protestant churches was often too small to meet the financial obligations they incurred. Their desire to help the poor also was impeded by small numbers and small financial returns. As a result, the churches turned to gambling as well as other leisure activities such as concerts, dinners, and socials to support themselves and the needy.³⁴

A second reason gambling flourished in the coal region was because it provided participants with a sense of control. Boys and girls, women and men learned early and frequently that they controlled very little in their lives. Children and wives lost fathers and husbands to mine accidents and to black lung. A consistent wage was not guaranteed. The tunnels in which men and boys worked gave way, flooded, and exploded. Gambling, on the other hand, offered a feeling of control. With the bet properly wagered and some skill, the gambler had the potential to beat the system and control fate.³⁵

A related explanation why residents gambled was because their lives and work epitomized risk-taking and chance. Men and boys risked their lives on a daily basis. The risks that mining presented—the movement of the earth, the kick of a mule, the steady, slow creep of dangerous gases—were multiple and ever-present. Of course, mine workers developed skills and procedures to deal with these dicey circumstances.³⁶ Women faced hazards, too—childbearing and the complications that arose after not taking sufficient time to recuperate from their labors debilitated many women. Whether they were factory laborers or housewives, women worked and the care of large families fell largely upon their shoulders. Many women did not or could not stay away from their economic and domestic obligations.³⁷ In order to ease the risk of overwork, women developed strong networks of female relatives and neighbors on whom they could depend. Some risks proved more difficult to deal with—the ups and downs of the mining

business, the layoffs, the slowdowns, and the greed of big business. In order to combat these facts, miners and their families became die-hard (sometimes literally) union folk. They recognized that the strikes in which they participated were a gamble; a folksong from the coal region composed by Edward Craig encourages, "It's the Union Man That Holds the Winning Hand." The chorus states,

"I told you," said John Mitchell, "there soon would come a day
When a scale of Pauper wages would have to pass away.
I told those operators, too, who ruled the great coal fields
That the miners were in a union, and would hold the winning hand."

Craig's song compares the battle between the mine bosses and the United Mine Workers Association to a game of cards. He continues his use of the gambling metaphor by telling his listeners what they might win if the union sticks together:

If you only pull together, boys, like men, and not like scabs
You soon can eat and drink best, and wear good clothes, not rags;
You can tell all those millionaires that they cannot wrong you.

The songwriter understood the close connection between masculinity and gambling when he told "boys" to "pull together . . . like men." The same measures, like developing skills, relying on their senses, and joining together in good times and bad, that they took to beat the odds that characterized their work, they applied to gambling. They got good at cards, they became good shots, and they trained their dogs, cocks, and pigeons well.

So what does the story of gambling in the coal region teach us about gambling in the United States? First of all, gambling in the coal region exemplifies "dual gambling." This term relates to the idea that the attitude toward gambling differs depending on the class of the gambler and the activity in which he or she is participating. The Catholic Church's acknowledgment that business speculation is a form of gambling and a type that easily leads one to commit wrong helps to get at dual gambling. The term indicates that participating in games of chance and risk-taking by members of the working class has historically been subject to criticism by American society, in particular by some religious groups, and subject to oversight by the law, while economic risk-taking by entrepreneurs and investors has been applauded as embodying the American spirit. A major difference in these

two types of gambling is that in traditional gambling the gambler stakes his own money, while in investment the gambler plays with his or her money and, more often, with money belonging to someone else. Yet, working-class gambling and financial investment in the stock market share similar qualities.³⁸ Gambling studies have shown that numbers games in small neighborhoods were investment strategies for bettors—playing the numbers invested economically and socially in the neighborhood and in the space in which the betting took place.³⁹ In the coal region, gambling supported various businesses and organizations. The neighborhood bar sold alcohol and food, served as a post office, and provided opportunities for gambling. Most gambling activities in a local saloon ensured the bar owner with a cut of the proceeds. The proprietor usually received 10 percent of the wagers in dice and card games. Chicken fights scored the owner a fee for every cock entered. Likewise, privately owned gun clubs raked in money from gambling by hosting dice games, poker games, and cockfights, and supplying the facilities for pigeon matches. The pigeons killed during matches were collected by the owners of these establishments and made into soups and hors d'oeuvres, which were then sold to customers. Winning and losing by gamblers also led to the sale of more food and alcohol—whether to drown one's sorrows or celebrate one's victories. And more alcohol consumed meant more money wagered.⁴⁰ Gambling revenues helped to sustain local churches, too. Parish budgets depended on the raffles and other games of chance that the churches sponsored. Like other forms of investment, gambling paid off.

The history of gambling in the coal region also speaks to the myth of luck that pervades the American class and economic system. The realization of the American dream is supposedly made possible through hard work, merit, and a little bit of luck. When individuals fail to make that dream a reality, the conclusion is that those who failed did not work hard enough and had bad luck. The very real limitations placed on people by class, ethnicity, race, creed, and gender play little role in this myth.⁴¹

Related to this myth of luck are the folk ideas of unlimited good versus limited good. According to folklorist Alan Dundes and anthropologist George Foster, "unlimited good" is a folk idea that prevails in American culture while "limited good" is a folk idea that exists in what Foster calls "peasant cultures."⁴² Unlimited good means that good fortune is available to all members of a society—the success of one person does not negate or preclude someone else's achievement. Limited good, on the other hand, signifies that fortune is finite—there is only so much good to go around.

The history of gambling in the anthracite region provides a corrective to unlimited good being the dominant folk idea in America. The area was a meeting ground for native-born Americans and immigrants from across Europe. Many of the immigrants had journeyed from peasant economies, and the mine companies, by and large, kept these men and boys peasants despite the industrial economy. Foster points out that the folk idea of limited good not only relates to the economic order but affects “social institutions, personal behavior, values, and personality.”⁴³

The treating that took place at the saloons where gambling also occurred is just one example of how an individual worked to equalize his position within the region so as not to be thought better than the next man. The religious devotion displayed by women when they hit is another example of what Foster calls “ritual extravagance.”⁴⁴ The desire to minimize praise and achievement even extended to folk medical practices in the anthracite coal region. Mothers fretted over the excessive admiration of their newborn babies—they worried about the envy and jealousy that resulted. These negative feelings, they believed, ultimately put the child in danger of physical illness, the evil eye. Similarly, the laborer who worked too hard was an object of derision, not celebration. The folk song, “The Celebrated Workingman,” pokes fun at barroom blowhards who pride themselves on hard work. Foster says that the hard worker “emerges as a positive fool, a clod who not knowing the score labors blindly against hopeless conditions.” Most significantly, Foster notes, “The gambler, instead, is more properly laudable, worthy of emulation and adulation. . . . He looks for the places in which good fortune is most apt to strike, and tries to be there.” As this article shows, the gambling and the men and women who participated in it were welcome members of the coal-region community.⁴⁵ In coal country, gambling and the luck on which it depended were practical in spite of mythmaking. Miners and their wives hoped, even prayed, to win big via their gambling, but prized the social riches that gambling provided more than the prizes promised. In fact, their investment of time and sociability in gambling pursuits promised greater returns—help in time of need, sorrow, and grief—than the bets themselves. Similarly, coal-region residents gambled their money in the form of dues and their time in the form of strikes and union membership when they supported benefits insurance programs and union dues. Like all good gamblers, inhabitants of the coal region knew that sometimes you create your own luck.

Gambling in coal country also reflects the gendered division of gambling activities by women and men. Male gamblers tend to favor gambling that incorporate skill and luck. In the coal region, men and boys participated in card games, blood sports, and shooting pastimes. Even their attraction to slot machines reflected this idea of skilled play—men and boys sought to rig them in order to win jackpots. The stress placed on athletics in the United States and in the coal region translated into an emphasis on other skilled games and on the ability to wager on sporting victors. Mining itself was a skilled occupation—men and boys appreciated workers who were good at their jobs. They, likewise, respected accomplished gamblers. Scholars of gambling argue that this behavior upholds prized masculine traits, including competition, independence, and being sure shots (and, thus, good economic and sexual providers).⁴⁶ Adopting a Freudian approach, folklorist Alan Dundes interprets cockfights and the gambling that accompanies the contests as unconscious forms of male sexual release.⁴⁷ Dundes elaborates on this idea by seeing the cock as a phallic symbol; similarly, folklorist Simon Bronner interpreted the guns used in shooting matches as representative of the penis.⁴⁸ Furthermore, gambling activities preferred by men—preparing cocks for battle, pulling one-armed bandits, and blowing on and rolling dice—have been likened to masturbation. The physically confining nature of mine work, the emphasis that miners put on being a man or a boy, and the constant criticism by mine bosses and middle-class reformers of the rough masculinity that coal-region men exhibited support the contention that gambling was sexually as well as physically, psychologically, and socially fulfilling.

Women, on the other hand, favor games of chance. Gambling by women relied on socializing, religious devotion, and acceptance of one's fate; lotteries and raffles were their preferred pursuits. Women's participation in masculine forms of gambling depended on their intimate relationships with men and their ability to enter and work in masculine spaces. When the spaces that separated the genders blurred, women enjoyed masculine forms of gambling. Women who ran bars with male relatives, especially husbands, enjoyed masculine betting. Ellie McClure of Locust Gap took great pleasure in and profited from dice, cockfights, and pigeon shoots, activities that either took place in or were organized within the bar she owned with her husband, Billie.⁴⁹ In the anthracite coal region, domestic and feminine spaces like the home served also as

masculine destinations of fellowship and refreshment. The front rooms of homes sometimes served as bars and, thus, also provided the space to wager. Due to laws that prohibited saloons to be open on Sunday, neighborhood men pooled their money and bought alcohol in bulk, usually a keg of beer, which they consumed at one of the buyers' homes. The close connection between alcohol consumption and gambling in public houses likely continued in people's private homes. Therefore, women and boy and girl children had the chance to witness and participate in more masculine forms of gambling.⁵⁰

Gambling in the anthracite region clearly demonstrates the relationship between gaming activities and the culture in which they take place. In coal country, ethnic identity impacted gambling. Men and women gambled as part of their leisure time and this play affirmed gendered expectations. Religious tradition as well as the economic and social circumstances of local churches also promoted wagering. The risk-taking that characterized life in the mines and the surrounding communities lent itself to gambling. Even now, gambling remains a mainstay in the anthracite coal region and the deindustrialization that depressed the area has shaped the gaming that takes place. Depopulation has led to the shrinking as well as the aging of the population. As a result, the Catholic parishes that struggle to stay open depend greatly on the money made through a variety of gambling forms including raffles, bingo, and lotteries. Old women and old men get up early to ride local buses to one of the many local casinos. The mines as a space of masculine bonding have gone away, but other manly destinations remain the meeting places for men and boys and the locales where wagering flourishes. One site of masculine camaraderie is the local volunteer fire company. The fire engines housed there and ridden to local blazes are funded in great part by games of chance. Gun clubs and hunting camps also endure. The demise of public pigeon shoots, like the one in Hegins, Pennsylvania, due to animal rights activism means that blood sports take place at gun clubs or at hunting camps, a fact bemoaned by organizations like the Humane Society of America.⁵¹ Since the nineteenth century, gambling has flourished in the anthracite coal region because it offered residents leisure activities that affirmed their identities, it was religiously sanctioned, and it represented a sense of control in their otherwise risky and chance-filled lives.

NOTES

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