

Ehistory

1. A Miner's Story
A Miner's Story

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Article scanned from *The Independent*, 1902.

This article comes from an American miner, resident all his life in the mining district of Pennsylvania. He has worked in the mines from his boyhood. His comparatively brief education in the public schools of the Commonwealth has been supplemented, like that of many other Americans in his walk of life, by a close reading of the daily papers, and particularly of those portions of the daily papers which bore directly upon his own interests. The facts which he gives about himself are true; the opinions he expresses are those which he, individually, has formed. By temperament he may be said to be conservative rather than radical; by habit he has always been a law-abiding citizen. He is, in effect, the typical American who is employed in the anthracite coal regions in the State of Pennsylvania -EDITOR.

I am thirty-five years old, married; the father of four children, and have lived in the coal region all my life. Twenty-three of these years have been spent working in and around the mines. My father was a miner. He died ten years ago from "miners' asthma."

Three of my brothers are miners; none of us had any opportunities to acquire an education. We were sent to school (such a school as there was in those days) until we were about twelve years of age, and then we were put into the screen room of a breaker to pick slate. From there we went inside the mines as driver boys. As we grew stronger we were taken on as laborers, where we served until able to call ourselves miners. We were given work in the breasts and gangways. There were five of us boys. One lies in the cemetery- fifty tons of top rock dropped on him. He was killed three weeks after he got his job as a miner- a month before he was to be married.

In the fifteen years I have worked as a miner I have earned the average rate of wages any of us coal heavers get. Today I am little better off than when I started to do for myself. I have \$100 on hand; I am not in debt; I hope to be able to weather the strike without going hungry.

I am only one of the hundreds you see on the street every day. The

muscles on my arms are no harder, the callous on my palms no deeper than my neighbors' whose entire life has been spent in the coal region. By years I am only thirty-five. But look at the marks on my body; look at the lines of worryment on my forehead; see the gray hairs on my-head and in my mustache; take my general appearance, and you'll think I'm ten years older.

You need not wonder why. Day in and day out, from Monday morning to Saturday evening, between the rising and the setting of the sun, I am in the underground workings of the coal mines. From the seams water trickles into the ditches along the gangways; if not water, it is the gas which hurls us to eternity and the props and timbers to a chaos.

Our daily life is not a pleasant one. When we put on our oil soaked suit in the morning we can't guess all the dangers which threaten our lives. We walk sometimes miles to the place- to the man way or traveling way, or to the mouth of the shaft on top of the slope. Add then we enter the darkened chambers of the mines. On our right and on our left we see the logs that keep up the top and support the sides which may crush us into shapeless masses, as they have done to many of our comrades.

We get old quickly. Powder, smoke, after-damp, bad air- all combine to bring furrows to our faces and asthma to our lungs.

I did not strike because I wanted to; I struck because I had to. A miner- the same as any other workman- must earn fair living wages, or he can't live. And it is not how much you get that counts. It is how much what you get will buy. I have gone through it all, and I think my case is a good sample.

I was married in 1890, when I was 23 years old- quite a bit above the age when we miner boys get into double hardness. The woman I married is like myself. She was born beneath the shadow of a dirt bank; her chances for school weren't any better than mine; but she did have to learn how to keep house on a certain amount of money. After we paid the preacher for tying the knot we had just \$185 in cash, good health and the good wishes of many friends to start us off.

Our cash was exhausted in buying furniture for housekeeping. In 1890 work was not so plentiful, and by the time our first baby came there was room for much doubt as to how we would pull out. Low wages, and not much over half time in those years, made us hustle. In 1890-91, from June to May, I earned \$368.72 That represented eleven months' work, or an average of \$33.52 per month. Our rent was \$10 per month; store not less than \$20. And then I had my oil suits and gum boots to pay for. The result was that after the first year and a half of our married life we were in' debt. Not much, of course, and not as much as many of my neighbors, men of larger families, and some who made less money, or in whose case there had been sickness or accident or death. These

are all things which a miner must provide for.

I have had fairly good work since was married. I made the average of what we contract miners are paid; but, as I said before, I am not much better off than when I started.

In 1896 my wife was sick eleven weeks. The doctor came to my house almost every day. He charged me \$20 for his services. There was medicine to buy. I paid the drug store \$18 in that time. Her mother nursed her, and we kept a girl in the kitchen at \$1.50 a week, which-cost me \$15 for ten weeks, besides the additional living expenses.

In 1897, just a year afterward, I had a severer trial. And mind, in those years, we were only working about half time. But in the fall of that year one of my brothers struck a gas feeder. There was a terrible explosion. He was hurled downward in the breast and covered with the rush of coal and rock. I was working only three breasts away from him and for a moment was unable to realize what had occurred. Myself and a hundred others were soon at work, however, and in a short while we found him, horribly burned over his whole body, his laborer dead alongside of him.

He was my brother. He was single and had been boarding He had no home of his own. I didn't want him taken to the hospital, so I directed the driver of the ambulance to take him to my house. Besides being burned, his right arm and left leg were broken, and he was hurt internally. The doctors- there were two at the house when we got there- said he would die. But he didn't. He is living and a miner to-day. But he lay in bed just fourteen weeks, and was unable to work for seven weeks after he got out of bed. He had no money when he was hurt except the amount represented by his pay. All of the expenses for doctors, medicine, extra help and his living were borne by me, except \$25, which another brother gave me. The last one had none to give. Poor work, low wages and a slickly woman for a wife had kept him scratching for his own family.

It is nonsense to day I was not compelled to keep him, that I could have sent him to a hospital or the almshouse. We are American citizens and we don't go to hospitals and poorhouses.

Let us look at things as they are today, or as they were before this strike commenced.

My last pay envelope shows my wages, after my laborer, powder, oil and other expenses were taken off, were \$29.47; that was my earnings for two weeks, and that was extra good. The laborer for the same time got some \$21. His wages are a trifle over \$10 a week for six full days. Before the strike of 1900 he was paid in this region \$1.70 per day, or \$10.20 a week. If the ten per cent raise had been given, as we expected, his wages would be \$1.87 per day, or \$11.22 per week, or an increase of \$1.02 per week. But we all know that under the present system he

doesn't get any eleven dollars.

Well, as I said, my wages were \$29.47 for the two weeks, or at the rate of \$58.94 per month. My rent is \$10.50 per month. My coal costs me almost \$4 per month. We burn a little over a ton a month on an average and it costs us over \$3 per ton. Light does not cost so much; we use coal oil altogether.

When it comes down to groceries is where you get hit the hardest. Everybody knows the cost of living has been extremely high all winter. Butter has been 32, 36 and 38 cents a pound; eggs as high as 32 cents a dozen; ham, 12 and 16 cents a pound, potatoes away up to a dollar, and cabbage not less than a cent a pound. Fresh meat need not be counted. Flour and sugar did not advance, but they were about the only staples that didn't. Anyhow, my store bill for those two weeks was \$11. That makes \$22 per month. The butcher gets \$6 per month. Add them all, and it costs me, just to live, \$42.50. That leaves me \$17 per month to keep my family in clothes, to pay my church dues and to keep the industrial insurance going. My insurance alone costs me 55 cents a week, or \$2.20 a month.

The coal president never allows his stable boss to cut the amount of fodder allotted to his mules. He insists on so many quarts of oats and corn to the meal and so much hay in the evening. The mule must be fed; the miner may be, if he works hard enough and earns money to buy the grub.

Company stores are of the time that has been. Their existence ended two years ago. But we've got a system growing up that threatens to be just as bad. Let me explain. Over a year ago I was given a breast to drive at one of our mines and was glad to get it. My wife took her cash and went around the different places to buy. When I went to the office for my first pay the "super" met me and asked me if I didn't know his wife's brother George kept a store. I answered, "Yes," and wanted to know what that had to do with it.

"Nothing, only I thought I'd call your attention to it," he answered.

No more was said then. But the next day I got a quiet tip that my breast was to be abandoned. This set me thinking. I went to the boss and, after a few words, told him my wife had found brother-in-law George's store and that she liked it much better than where she had bought before. I told him the other store didn't sell the right kind of silk waists, and their patent leather shoes were away back. Brother-in-law George had the right kind of stuff and, of course, we were willing to pay a few cents more to get just what we wanted.

That was sarcastic, but it's the cash that has the influence. I have had work at that colliery ever since. I know my living costs me from

10 to 15 per cent extra. But I kept my job, which meant a good deal.

Now you must take into consideration that I am a contract miner and that my earnings are more than the wages of three-fourths of the other fellows at the same colliery. It is not that I am a favorite with the boss. I just struck a good breast. Maybe next month my wages would be from two to six or seven dollars less.

In the days of Pardee, Coxe, Fagley, Fulton, Dewees, Paterson, Riley, Repplier, Graeber and a hundred others, men were better paid than they have ever been since the centralization ideas of the late Franklin B. Gowen became fixed institutions in the anthracite counties. It may be true that in the days of the individual operation the cost per ton of mining coal was less than it is to-day. But it is not right that the entire increase in the cost of mining should be charged to the miner. That is what is being done, if you count the reductions made in wages.

We miners do not participate in the high prices of coal. The operators try to prove otherwise by juggling with figures but their proving has struck a fault, and the drill shows no coal in that section. One-half of the price paid for a ton of coal in New York or Philadelphia goes into the profit pocket of the mine owner, either as a carrier or miner.

We all know that the price of coal has advanced in in the past twenty years. We also know that wages are less, that the cost of living is higher. I remember the time, when I was a wee lad, my father used to get his coal for \$1 per ton. Now I pay \$3. In those days we lads used to go to the dirt banks and pick a load of coal, and it cost our parents only a half a dollar to get it hauled home. We dare not do that now. Then we did not need gum boots, safety lamps or any such things as that; and for all of them we must now pay out of wages that have been reduced.

Our condition can be no worse; it might and must be better. The luxuries of the rich we do not ask; we do want butter for our bread and meat for our soup. We do not want silk and laces for our wives and daughters. But we want to earn enough to buy them a clean calico once in a while. Our boys are not expecting automobiles and membership cards in clubs of every city, but they want their fathers to earn enough to keep them at school until they have a reasonably fair education.

---Pennsylvania

Credits for Information on the American Coal Industry



Avondale Disaster from *The Coal Mines*, by Andrew Roy, State Inspector of mines of Ohio, 1876. pp. 134-137.

Work of a Coal Miner from Andrew Roy, *The Practical Miner's Companion; or, Papers on Geology and Mining in the Ohio Coal Field* (Columbus: Westbote Printing Company, 1885): 108-110.

The Life of a Coal Miner
scanned from *The World's Work* 4 (October 1902): 2659-60

Turn-of-the-Century Coal Mining Machinery from *Cassier's Magazine*

The Coke Region Troubles scanned from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 1891 Vol. 72, p. 240.

Images from *A view of coal mining in 1877* scanned from *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, vol. III, no. 1, Jan. 1877, pp. 116-126.

A view of coal mining in 1877 webpage by C. Gordon Moffat and modified by K. Austin Kerr

Among the Coal-Miners scanned from *Missionary Review* 1902, Vol. 25, pp. 835-39

Anthracite Coal Mines and Mining from *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, November, 1902.

The Boys in the Breakers from *Anthracite Coal Communities*, by Peter Roberts, 1904, pp.174-181

The Anthracite-Carrying Railways was scanned from *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, July, 1902. pp. 66-69.

A General View of the Coal Strike By Talcott Williams scanned from *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 1902.

John Mitchell: The Labor Leader and the Man scanned from *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 1902.

The Progress of the World scanned from *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, November, 1902, pp. 515-527

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A miner's Story questions.

- 1) How old was the author of the story when he dropped out of school?
 - a. 8
 - b. 12
 - c. 16
 - d. 18

- 2) What was the author's first job when he went inside the mines?
 - a. Slate picker
 - b. Driver boys
 - c. Miner
 - d. Supervisor

- 3) The author states that there were five of them, but one lies in the cemetery three weeks after he got the job as a miner. What happen to him?
 - a. Shot in a hunting accident.
 - b. 50 tons of top rock dropped on him.
 - c. Killed in a car wreck on the way to work.

- 4) The author, who is only 35, states the stress of the job makes him look how much older than he really is?
 - a. 5 years
 - b. 10 years
 - c. 15 years

- 5) The author said that "daily life is not a pleasant one." Which one is not part of that hard life as a miner?
 - a. Putting on oil-soaked clothes
 - b. Walking sometimes miles
 - c. Entering well lighted chambers
 - d. Surrounded by sediment that could crush you.

- 6) Did the author of the article go on strike?
 - a. YES
 - b. NO

- 7) How much did the author pay for rent in 1890?
- \$10.00
 - Not less than \$20.00
 - \$33.52
- 8) When the author's wife got sick for 11 weeks the doctor came every day. What is the cost for a daily visit?
- Less than \$10.00
 - \$18.00 at a time
 - \$20.00
- 9) According to the author, who was the person killed they struck a gas feeder?
- His laborer alongside of him
 - His brother
 - The supervisor
- 10) The author tells you before the strike, what was his monthly wage?
- \$10.20
 - \$29.47
 - \$58.94
- 11) According to the author where are you hit the hardest in cost?
- Rent
 - Groceries
 - Fuel for heating
- 12) According to the author, before the late Franklin B. Gowen became a fixed institution, miners were better paid. But after that the cost of mining was charged to the miners. How did the author show this?
- By increasing their wages
 - By reducing their wages
 - By laying minors off