

PLIGHT
OF THE
COAL MINER

BY

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INTRODUCTION

In the last few months many articles have been published concerning the "plight of the coal miner". Many of the authors of such articles seem to have only a slight acquaintance with the actual miners and there families. In this article I shall attempt to recount some of the difficulties of their life as observed from personal acquaintance.

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Survival has been the coal miner's excuse for numerous strikes. Is this excuse justified? Many articles have been written on both sides of the question but little seems to have been definitely established. My object in this paper is to relate some of the seamy facts that the miner must deal with. Such facts as I present shall be drawn from my own experience.

My first contacts with the living conditions of the miners and their families came with grade school. The observations recorded are definite facts though conclusions were reached at a much later date. The children from mining families were conspicuous because of their thin and shabby clothing and their often inadequate lunches. These lunches often consisted of two slices of bread, butter and jelly minus any vestige of butter. Lack of butter in these days might be due to rationing but at that time it was due to lack of money.

Upon entering high school I lost contact with most of my grade school friends among the miners' children. You may ask if I high-hatted them? No, it was merely due to the fact that their parents could no longer afford to feed them. They must now earn their own way. Some of these started work

in stores and on farms. Many others started in the mines with the aid of falsified birth certificates. Such conditions would seem intolerable if a means of rectification were at hand.

As time passed controversy over the miners' position became so wide spread that nearly everyone seemed to have formed an opinion. The chief consideration in any discussion of the miner seems to be his wages. There would seem to be no need of discussing working conditions as they are necessarily poor. Therefore I too shall concentrate upon this consideration of money.

The "truck system" of paying wages in goods or credits was practiced in the mining industry until 1871. Never-the-less there are many miners at the present time who do not draw more than \$2.00 per month. The mine owners control their water and fuel supplies as well as owning the homes they rent. The local grocery store and therefore the food supply is also company controlled. If the miner does not desire to trade at the company store he may find that he has a very poor job or in a few isolated cases no job. The money for rent, water, coal and food is deducted from the pay envelope leaving in many cases a deficit rather than any actual cash.

During the early months of the war effort when other work became plentiful many workers, especially the younger men, flocked from the mines to other industries. The man who had spent two years apprenticeship in learning the skilled or at least semi-skilled trade of coal mining found it profitable to become a laborer, or even a sweeper, in some other industry. This would not seem to be any indication of a happy or well paid industry.

The bulk of mine labor is engaged in digging coal at a fixed rate per ton produced. This large percentage seem to be the ones who suffer the most hardships. In mining piecework does not function with the same efficiency that it does in the manufacturing plant. The wage of the man digging coal does not depend entirely on his efficiency but in a large part upon the number of mine cars that have been brought in for him to fill. In many mines the miner will spend a large part of his day sitting and waiting for the electric tram or the mule driver to bring him empty cars. It would seem quite impossible to raise the rate per ton enough to give such workers a fair living. In many cases the company at a reasonable expense could redistribute men and equipment so as to alleviate such conditions.

The operator of the cutting machine should probably be placed in a separate class even though he is engaged in piecework. His wages may run as high as \$125.00 per week. His wage is the outstanding exception in the mining industry. In spite of this fact his high wage was characterized as being representative in a recent article published by one of our leading weekly magazines.

Immediately above the "digger" and his piecework is the "day man". The "day man", as one might surmise, receives a fixed daily wage. The daily wage amounts to about \$1.00 per hour. However, in most cases he works only 35 hours weekly. These short hours are partially due to the men's unwillingness to work longer hours and partially to the coal companies' unwillingness to pay overtime. Repairmen are quite often required to work overtime in a rush period and to take the time off in a slack period the following day or the following week.

The wages of the salaried men are usually quite in line with their capabilities and responsibilities. The lowest of the straight salaried men is the assistant foreman whose salary varies from \$200.00 to \$300.00 per month. This assistant foreman will have from 50 to 75 men under his supervision.

Throughout this article I have been attempting to present the miner's point of view. There are undoubtedly many things in support of the mining companies' position. Those arguments, however, are beyond the object and the scope of this paper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The facts presented in this article were drawn from my personal association with members of the mining industry in Western Pennsylvania.