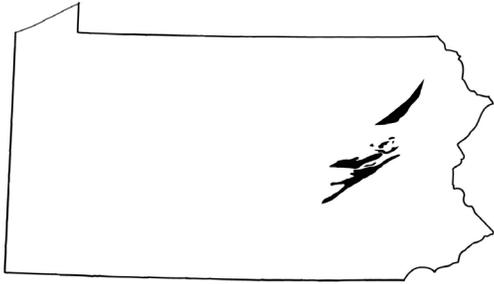
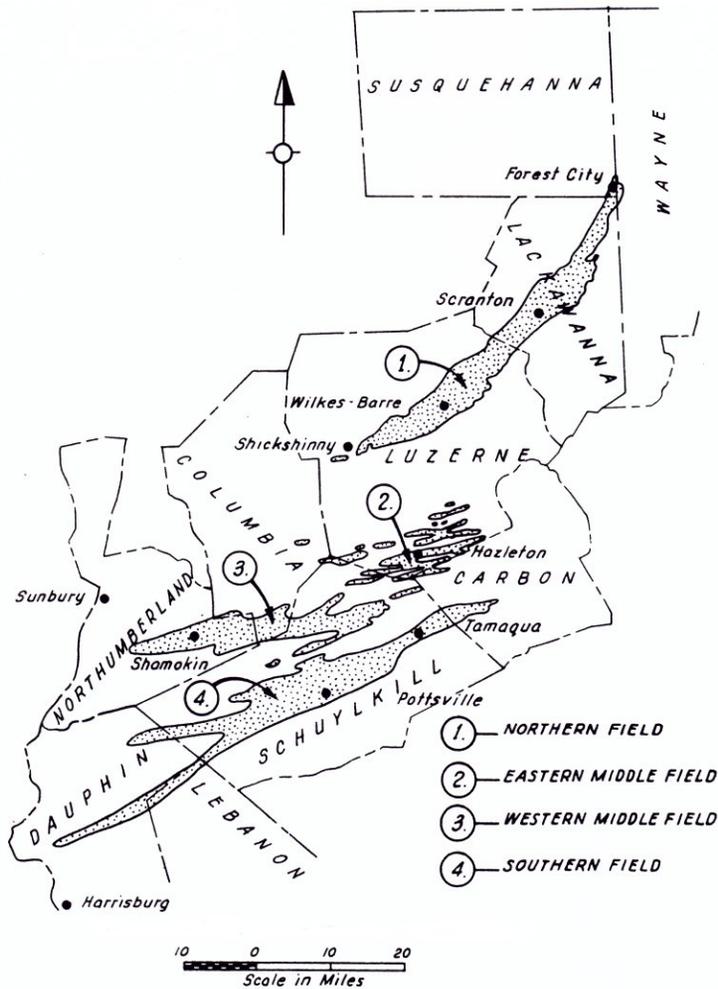
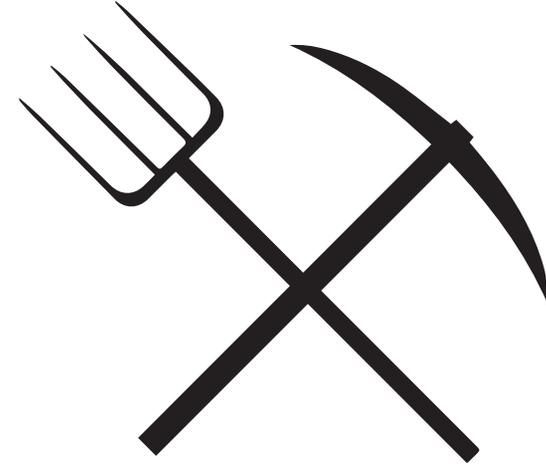


Coal, Corn & Country





Anthraice Coal Region



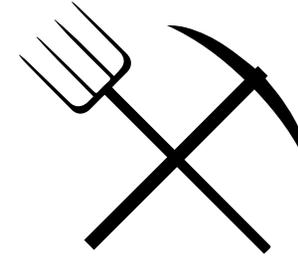
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partment. When they showed up and tested the air, they evacuated the building. They said the Monoxide levels were too high for even temporary exposure. It was a dramatic winter scene, the block filled with fire trucks and the residents being loaded into ambulances to get blood-work done at the hospital.

Turns out, the chimney had been clogged. All the furnace exhaust had been going right back into the building. The landlord had it fixed pretty soon. I'm sure there's plenty other places in town with the same problem.

Part of me, a bigger part than I want to admit, wanted to ignore the sulfur. No one else had said anything. I didn't have the lease signed yet, no back-up place to go live, and didn't want to start a bad relationship with the landlord. But you can't settle for stuff like this, even though people do every day. Every one of us deserves a place to live that's not going to poison us, but sometimes you've gotta stir things up to make that real. That's why I'm an agitator— I stand up for myself and others because it's the right thing to do, not the easiest.

Everybody's blood-work came back good. The temporary symptoms went away.



It's been hard work researching, interviewing and writing to get at the heart of Central PA' and its Coal Region. It's got its good sides and its problems, and I love it all the same. Plus maybe, just maybe, it's raw, tight-knit & abandoned spirit has something to say about the rest of rural America? I really can't say. But I can tell you, these stories ain't anthropology. I didn't write them for people with degrees. They are by, for and about it's people.

I write under a pen name to give it a little bit of myth. My Pappy gave me the nickname Nixnootz when I was little. It's Pennsylvania Dutch for "troublemaker" (roughly). I use the handle to unhinge my words from that whole "what I was like in high school" legacy that follows around anyone who stays where they grew up. I did it to let these stories speak for themselves. It worked, and it's been popular. People around the Region talk about it, without knowing who the author is.

What you're holding here is the "best of" from the Coal, Corn & Country blog. Dig in. I hope it makes you wanna do something, tell your own story or at least look at life a little differently. If you wanna talk or collaborate, hit me up.

See yous in the Strippins,

-Nixnootz

nixnootz@gmail.com // coalcorncountry.com

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I Love This Town

“The people here are dirty,” it starts. “Just look at them. Does anyone in this town even work? Nobody here wants to work.” It goes on, calling coal regioners all sorts of lazy, dirty, sketchy & poor.

I’ve heard it a million times from working class people that live in nearby farm country. This time, it’s my coworker.

I probably hear it to my face more often than others. People think it won’t phase me because I grew up in another valley. “It’s OK, you’re not really from here”.

You know what? I live here. I love this town. I love these people. And I wouldn’t trade my life for yours.

Yeah, a lot of us are poor. Before you take that as some kind of personal failure, take a look in the mirror. We all live in the same economy- we’ve all had the factories close & Wal-Mart’s kill off our downtowns. There’s not enough work to go around. Poverty is everywhere— just in some places it’s hidden behind closed doors and well-kept lawns.

Please, don’t pretend to be rich. Just be yourself, and don’t judge others to feel better about yourself. All the things you own are no status symbol to me.

There’s towns in farm country that aren’t much better off, but when I’m in them, I feel like I’m being watched. Like the gossip and judgement are hanging thick in the silent air. Its like you have to watch what you’re doing. You don’t see many people in the streets being themselves in those towns.

The coal region is different.

Here, we talk direct. We can BS with the best of them. Here, we help each other out and go through hard times with each other. We’ll give ya a hand, even if we don’t know ya.

There’s not so many people here that just work and work and work to look middle class. There’s a lot of people that have a job or hustle, put in their time, then go live it up.

We’re BBQ’ing every time the sun is out. We’re in bands. We’re at the playground and it’s packed. We’re in the woods like they’re our backyard.

Monoxide

The rent was dirt cheap, but you could smell the sulfur from the front porch. I’d been looking for a place during the winter, and the apartment was in the same building as a few friends.

The smell turned me off, but I’d dealt with it before. Like when I was working at the Onion factory and had sulfur water at home... it sucked, but I lived. This time, though, my family kept telling me, “don’t sleep there until you get a CO detector.” I trust my family, so while I was still unpacking my stuff, I ran to the Wal-Mart a town and a half over and got one for \$20.

Before I go further, let me give you a little history. In the Anthracite Coal Region, and we burn hard coal to make it through the winters. It’s local and relatively cheap.

Anthracite’s been used to heat homes since they figured out how to burn the stuff. At one point, most of America was burning it. And it all came from right here. People immigrated into patch towns (company towns) to mine it. Philly’s economy used to be based around exporting our coal. Now, you might burn your oil or natural gas. But when I look out the window, I still see a huge pile of coal that’s bigger than anything in town. The miners are still on the other side of the mountain working.

With a bad setup, though, coal can put off some bad stuff. Sulfur itself is pretty harmless, but it’s usually a sign there’s carbon monoxide, a poison. It’s got no scent or taste, but it can kill you. Think of the movies when someone kills themselves in the garage with car exhaust... same stuff. One of the worst symptoms is confusion.

On with the story. When I got back to the new apartment, I popped the batteries into the detector. No surprise, it beeped like crazy. The landlord came by and was pissed, trying to come up with all sorts of reasons why everything was fine. Like, “but your apartment is the furthest away from the furnace!”. Well no shit, that makes it pretty bad then, huh? I was clear that he had to deal with it. He said he’d get a detector and check it out later.

My friends had already been living here, and it’d been smelling this way for a long time. They’d just cope with it til winter was over. You could probably.. sorta.. get used to it. But trust me, the smell was overpowering.

The landlord got a detector, and left it beeping in the basement. Someone else in the building, hearing my news and the beeping, called the volunteer fire de-

down the road from 7,000 desperate workers!”

People without college degrees that work there have a hard time leaving because they know they’ll never make \$20 an hour anywhere else.

With some exceptions, the DC’s pay pretty well. Kasey says about Wal-Mart, “it’s the only way to justify doing that kind of labor day in and day out. People without college degrees that work there have a hard time leaving because they know they’ll never make \$20 an hour anywhere else.”

It doesn’t mean all workers are being treated well, though.

- Amazon’s Hazleton warehouse has a temp agency right inside it’s own building. In Luzerne County (Hazleton, Wilkes-Barre), Temp Agencies are some of the top employers.
- “FlexForce” is common. It’s a cool name that means no steady hours (anywhere from 10 – 50 per week), the time of day you work changes, and you may or may not be laid off at any time. A lot of products fluctuate throughout the year.... nobody’s buying bicycles in the winter. Distribution Centers want a workforce just as flexible, whether their workers can pay rent or not.
- Workers compete on metrics. Because computers track your every move, they can generate stats on you, just like baseball. I once worked at a warehouse where they posted rankings on the wall every week, and would fire people at the bottom... usually older people, or those who didn’t drink enough Redbull.
- Some companies take it a step further, trying to get around the minimum wage. They can recruit undocumented workers. Hershey got creative and exploited a foreign-exchange program. International students signed up for a work & travel program, but instead ended up repackaging candy, for as low as \$40 per week. This went on for 10 years, and we only know about it because the students went on strike.

ALL IN ALL

I can’t imagine how much worse off we’d be in this area without all these places to work. It’s a big part of our economy. We need them, but the reasons they need us aren’t all sunshine and roses.



If you wanna talk to someone new in my town, they are gonna talk with you for a good 5 minutes, and it won’t be boring. Nobody’s asking “what’s your job?” It’s more about telling good stories.

We like to hang out and we like to have a good time. Don’t waste your breath with judgmental insecurities. The only one it hurts is you, because you could be doing what you want with your life instead of hating.

And hey, if you ever wanna give that up, come on out!

We make our own fun. And a lot of it is as cheap as drinks at the bar (\$1.25 a draft). Bonfires, trail rides, pickup sports, camping, fishing, hiking, partying, hunting, playing music, church, gardening. It’s all more fun when there’s more of us.

Did I mention offroading? That’s huge. I know you make fun of our town cus the ATV’s and trucks might be worth more than the houses. But your house isn’t gonna pull your friends up over the mountain at 40 mph.

Why don’t we drop this my-team, your-team stuff? We all gotta do better, together. Let’s have a good time along the way.

Quittin' Time at the Factory

I quit my factory job. Finally. I wasn't there for long; just to pull a paycheck until I found something better. It was an experience, though.

In books, they talk like there's no factories left in the country. They're still around, though. Just not as many. In this case, I was at a pallet factory. See, pallets are cheap and everybody needs 'em, but they're heavy and don't make sense to ship long distances. So all across the country, there's little pallet shops. You buy broken ones, cut 'em, nail 'em back together and sell 'em again.



A couple of people in the place made good money... for dangerous work that leaves their fingers all messed up. Some go "piece rate" – getting paid by the pallet, not by the hour. If you pound Monster energy, you can make up to \$14/hr. For others, it's a bottom-of-the-barrel kinda place. I was getting \$9.50/hr through a temp agency, with a 40 minute commute.

My first day, I got trained by Travis, the most laid-back supervisor ever. He took me into the break room (a dirty, 12 x 8 shed) and told me he wouldn't be there the whole day. "My old lady don't know I stole her car, so I gotta get it back before she gets home." Then he popped in a VHS about nail gun safety.

I started out using a Harbor Freight (re: discount) nail gun, banging together boards for 8 hours a day and stacking 'em 8 ft high. It was pretty boring, and too loud to talk to anyone. It mighta been 3 days before I talked to anyone but Travis. I



This is an armband computer I wore at a warehouse. It tracks all your actions.

Say what you want about the area... but there's a lot of workers who'll bust their ass.

According to Calvin, "Wal-Mart strategically built the place there. They did a lot of research on where to put it. They picked Skook. It's right off of 81 and you can get anywhere. Say what you want about the area... but there's a lot of workers who'll bust their ass. Neanderthal order fillers who'll pick boxes all day."

I got curious about logistics when I was working at a warehouse a few years ago. I started to research the industry. Turns out, our area is pretty special.

From DC to Boston, the I-95 corridor is one of the biggest consumer markets in the world. We've got the highways, rail lines and airports to quickly import goods and ship 'em right back out again. But the same goes for Jersey or Maryland, so what makes PA different?

Three things.

CHEAP LAND

Outside of commuting distance of Philly or NYC, land prices go way down. The economy still hasn't really recovered from the collapse of coal, steel and textiles.

DESPERATE POLITICIANS

In a nutshell, many big companies don't pay taxes. The government has a lot of "tax abatement" programs, meant to make it even cheaper to set up shop here. They call it "smokestack chasing" or "the race to the bottom," setting our standards as low as possible to compete with other places who are playing the same game.

This is part of why schools, counties and our state are having a budget crisis, because the biggest players aren't paying taxes. Ask your local school board about "Keystone Opportunity Zones" and they'll tell ya all about it.

CHEAP LABOR

Industrial Parks actually advertise how close they are to places with high unemployment rates. They basically say, "Hey, move your company here! We're right

Calvin told me. “As a supervisor, I was pulling in proly \$50k in one year. As a boss, [the job] is ‘cases-per-man-hour’. You see how many cases you can ship or receive with the least amount of man power. I was good at my job. “

It drove me insane. Doing the same thing over and over. Calling off nonsense numbers all day to verify I’m in the right spot.

“Working for them was alright in the beginning. When I got promoted, it was probably the worst thing I ever did. You’re better off becoming a drone and keeping your mouth shut, or else get fired. Like I did.”

The DC employs over 1,000 people.

Kasey worked there as a trainer. “I wasn’t a manager. I never tried to become one. I showed new employees the building and the job and would train them on equipment. I started in 2006 at \$16.85. When I got fired in 2012, I was at \$19.85

After years, “I was fed up with the job. I mentally just couldn’t take it anymore. It drove me insane. Doing the same thing over and over. Calling off nonsense numbers all day to verify I’m in the right spot. I had every grocery order memorized. I knew everything before I had to do it. After years of that, it just wears on ya.”

Just about every warehouse tracks their worker’s movements. In some, you wear computers on your arm. At Wal-Mart, you wear headphones and call out the “non-sense numbers” to a computer constantly through the day. Kasey gave an example:

“So the headset would tell you to go to aisle C slot 111. You’d get there and there would be 5 numbers. Say the numbers were 62478. You’d get a pattern in the beginning of the day. So if the pattern was 1-3-5. You’d read the first. Third. And fifth number. So of 62478 was the number.. You’d call off 6-4-8 and the headset would tell you how many cases to pick. After you pick them. You say the number of cases you picked back to the headset and it would send you to the next slot. And you read the new numbers off and do that literally 1,000’s of times a day.”

WHY IS PENNSYLVANIA SO SPECIAL?

The Wal-Mart DC is about half way between Scranton and Harrisburg. There are other big DC’s there— Kellogs, Hillshire Farms, Sara Lee, Wegmans, Lowes. There’s more all up and down I-81, in Wilkes-Barre, Hazleton, Carlise. They’re out I-80 and in the Lehigh Valley, too. Amazon.com runs 10 different PA warehouses, all on this side of the state.

could pop in some headphones to take me through the day, though.

I got to know Gilbert, who worked at the next station down from me. Said he used to be a union president at a sheet metal plant, back in the day. He refused to go to piece-rate on the pallets, and was punished by staying a \$9.50/hr temp for the year he’d been there. He was always trying to borrow \$10 til the next pay-day, saying things like “I put my last 78 cents in the gas tank to get to work today.” After awhile, I learned he never had money because his wife needed expensive medication.

He was 100% friendly to me, but one day gave me a little “I hate niggers” rant. Most racists test the waters a little... they say some shit and look at you to see how you take it. Not Gilbert. He was more like the Korean War generation- didn’t really care how you took it. He’ll probably die a racist.

Now, I’m keen on trying to convert racists. To show them that Blacks, Mexicans, whoever their target—they aren’t the enemy. I’ve even giving it a go with an occasional Nazi. But some people, there’s just no way. All you can tell em to do is shut their mouths.

After just a couple weeks of swinging a nail gun, I started to get Trigger Finger. That’s from repetitive motion; it makes your middle and ring fingers lock up. I’d wake up, make a fist, and couldn’t open my fingers again. I know plenty of people who have this; my brother sometimes uses a wrench to pry open his hand. So, I put paper work on it (you gotta document these things!) and played the workers comp game (20 trick questions and a piss test) so I could talk to a doctor for 2 minutes. He told me to stretch. The owner was freaked out by that, and I got moved to to sorting pallets instead of building them.

Sorting was a lot more social, and I spent a lot of time with Ricky and Daren.

To Ricky, work was just what you had to do to afford booze. He’d come in drunk most days, and he was a miserable little drunk. Most of the day he spent avoiding work, either in the bathroom (another shed, this one with a toilet & sink) or in the dark spaces between the mountains of pallets. He’d start a fight with someone most days, sometimes me, always over nonsense. Needless to say, he pissed me off.

Unlike us temps, Ricky was a factory employee, making \$10/hr, but he lost \$40/week to insurance. Since temps don’t have insurance, he actually took home less than me. It took me weeks to piece it together, but Ricky was homeless, staying on couches and catching rides to work.

Daren was much friendlier. A happy drunk, he would take down 15 pounders on a normal night. He lived in a trailer with his wife and wanted a divorce, but really didn’t know how he’d be able to afford living on his own.

Land of Distribution Centers

After a few more weeks, I got a lead on better work, and I was outta there.

Moral of the story? Maybe there isn't one. But this was my first job after being a staff Field Organizer for a year. I'd done so much to challenge people (especially factory workers) to see the best in those around them, and get them organized.

That's easier some places than others. It wasn't easy to empathize with people at the factory. A lot of days, I'd give up and try not to talk to anyone. Sometimes I wished other people would get fired so I wouldn't have to deal with them.

But then I'd hear the stories about being late on the rent, or not enough gas to get to work. I've been there before.

I'd remember, it doesn't matter if your an alcoholic, a good person, or even if I can stand to be around you. Life is miserable if you can't cover the basics. A lot of us are stuck in shitty jobs that it's hard to care about. You've got billionaires out there setting the rules to an economy that doesn't give a damn about us. So if I'm choosing sides, it's the people who couldn't afford lunch at work today. The Ricky's, Daren's and the Gilbert's. I have no idea how, but maybe one day they'll set down the Natty Ice, clear their heads and join the fight for a better life, a better world.



Distribution Centers are replacing factory, farm & coal mining jobs. Friends put in long hours at mind-numbing jobs, commuting an hour to do it. It's all part of the "global supply system" (Logistics Industry) that found itself a sweet spot in Pennsylvania.

Everything you buy from a store, everything you order off the internet— it all has to come from somewhere. If it was made in China, it had to be transported here, and sorted to get to you. If you don't know any warehouse workers, you'd probably never know this massive industry is here.

WAL-MART DISTRIBUTION CENTER

Wal-Mart Distribution Center (DC) in Schuylkill County is one of the biggest warehouses on the East Coast. A massive white, windowless building, it's one million square feet, and well known for it's long shifts and high pay.

I haven't worked there, but most young people around me have at some point. Kasey Yeager and Calvin Hardy both did, so I asked them what it was like.

"I started when the place opened up, and worked there for a little over 3 years,"



Inside a Wilkes-Barre Nurses' Strike

Try to imagine how hard a strike is. Think of a place you worked... one that treated most people wrong. Imagine you and your coworkers, up late all night for weeks, planning a strike. Excitement, anticipation, fear. Then comes the day. You report to work as normal, but you don't go inside. Instead, you and your coworkers stand right outside, telling the rest of the world what it's like in there. Your boss comes out and looks you in the eye, but you've already gone too far to back down now.

In July 2014, I went to support a 5-day nurses' strike at the Wilkes-Barre General Hospital. Everyone should understand why the nurses are fighting.

There are different kind of unions. You can look at it as 2 categories. The top-down, business-style union, where workers pay dues and union bosses call the shots. Then there's the grassroots, bottom-up type, where regular workers are in charge. Where the word 'union' is literal: unity of the workers.

This was definitely grassroots. I spent nearly 24 hours there, and I saw the nurses taking charge, and the PASNAP* union organizers assisting them. From planning in the "strike house" (a small half-double rented one block away from the hospital for the strike), to coordinating people and materials at the picket line, to speaking at the daily rallies- nurses took charge. Many of them seemed... comfortable. Like this wasn't their first time around the block.

It was hazy-humid, and pushing 90, but the "strike house" had hand-warmers decorating the walls. It was a joke, a reminder that their other strikes have been in the dead of winter.



A few miners hanging out at the 25th Annual Independent Coal Miners Picnic (2009)



DEMANDS

This was really cool because you've got a regular people, fighting a giant that has it out for them. They weren't all on the picket line at once, but ~400 of them were on strike. So what were they fighting for? To get a contract; they want changes, and they want them in writing. Here's some of the big ones:

- **Ratios.** That means, how many patients is each nurse caring for. For safety, it should be 4-to-1 in the day, and 6-to-1 at night, max. In profit-driven hospitals, they're in charge of 7 – 10. This isn't enough time per patient, which hurts everyone (except stockholders).
- **Mandatory Overtime.** It's illegal in Pennsylvania to force overtime on nurses. CHS continues to break the law, and has never been penalized. When one person calls out, they call it an "emergency" and mandate everyone else to overtime. Think about that- when your mom is in the hospital, do you want the nurse taking care of her to be working overtime against their will?
- **Health Insurance.** The nurses have terrible insurance. Don't care much? Look at it this way, they are constantly exposed to diseases, and if they can't afford to treat them, then they can potentially spread them to others. Regardless, do we really live in a world where nurses can't afford to go to the hospital??

While I was there, I interviewed Fran Prusinki (RN). She explained the seriousness of the nurses.

"Our region, this is where coal mine unions came from. My grandfather worked in the mine. You have that history, and we're very serious about our history. You had the garment workers, railroad workers, the coal mines here, where the 8 hr day came from. My mother said that when the bell rang for the mine, everyone went down there to see if their loved ones had survived. She'd talk about seeing bodies put on the porch of neighbors.

This is our heritage and we take it very seriously.



Fran Prusinki, RN. Photo courtesy of Media Mobilizing Project.

This is where you got the right to take lunch and to take breaks. Take it. People died for this. They died for unions. They died for 8 hour workdays. They died for workers' rights.

essary to the war effort and therefore exempt. The older men, the women, and the children were left to hold their ground as best as they could. And hold it they did.

– We Stood Our Ground

THE END?

The Independents didn't die. They eventually become legitimate in the eyes of the law.

By the mid 1940s, local governments had seized a lot of land from Reading because of unpaid taxes. They leased it to Independents. Other lands were sold to investors, who also leased to the Independents.

Then, in 1953, the state brought the Independents under regulations and taxes, fully legalizing them.

There are still Independents in the mountains. There are less of them than there used to be though. They've been struggling with federal regulators who want them out of business to make room for bigger companies. There was a documentary made in 2006 about the current struggles of the Independents, available for free on the internet, called Hard Coal: The Last of the Bootleg Miners.

We still don't much respected Reading. We treat the strippins like they belong to us. They're a great place to offroad, party, camp, or hunt. The police won't really go there, and people ignore the occasional Reading guard who shows up. Some families still keep an old bootleg hole for their winter heat.

This is our history. We needed work... when no one gave it to us, we took it ourselves – property rights be damned. When they attacked, we organized and fought back. And won. It was us against the company, not just miners but the whole community.

We're due to remember that – today it seems like us against us. We blame our neighbors or people from the next town.

When the collieries closed, we didn't call the miners lazy. We blamed the company for shutting down, not the miners. When families had to break the law to make a living, we supported them. Let's remember that spirit.

more shovels showed up in the morning, and the miners flooded in to block them from moving.

Key leaders among the Independents were also arrested. Another mass meeting was called, so large it was held outdoors in February. There, they condemned the arrests, voted unanimously to defy the Committee's plan, and organized round round-the-clock pickets of the strippin shovels in the West End.

Summer came, and the blockade had stretched six months. Desperate, the strippin company brought in armed guards from outside the area. The night they arrived, some of these guards ran their mouths at a local bar. Before the sun could rise, 1,000 miners had shown up to the blockade. Word spreads fast in the Coal Region.

After guards fought the miners with billy clubs, they broke out their guns and shot at the crowd. Two had shotguns and two had revolvers. Thirteen people were wounded.

The crowd charged the guards, who fled into the bucket of the shovel and called for a truce. The guards were disarmed and promised safe passage out. Before they had made it to their cars though, a new contingent of miners showed up and, seeing their wounded friends, "beat [the guards] all to hell." The state police arrived and took the guards away. Meanwhile, the enraged miners set the shovel on fire.

They were seeing red.

"One of the miners said, 'Hey, there is a shovel moving in at Good Spring.' Hundreds of cars drove up to Good Spring. Somebody took the oil plug out and left the diesel engine run until it froze up. Then somebody said, 'There are shovels in the Bear Valley,' and we stopped those."

"We thought we had them on the run."

- Leon Richter

By the end of the day, several more shovels had been burnt and state police had deployed all over the area.

The violence worked in the companies' favor. State police maintained a heavy presence, stopping the Independents from blockading any more strippins. This demoralized the Independents, and their organizations started to fracture.

It was the same year that the United States entered World War II. Soon, the draft began.

Local draft boards filled southern anthracite induction quotas with boot-leggers since miners employed by "legitimate" companies were considered nec-

There's bloody history here and you're part of it. Respect it and honor it."

WHY NURSES?

Most unions are shrinking, but nursing & healthcare unions are growing. Why is that?

- The healthcare industry is growing.
- They are not easily replaced, so they have power.
- Healthcare unions have been aggressive about new organizing.

It's more than that, though. Nurses want unions. An organizer from another PA healthcare union told me, "If you go and ask every nurse in a hospital, 'do you want a union?'; without buttering it up, you get 80% yes's. From then on, it's about fighting the boss's fear tactics".

Why do nurses want a union so much more than other workers, though? A lot of workers are mistreated, and nurses make a better wage than most blue collar workers. I asked around about this, and one answer stood out to me- nurses put themselves through school, and expect to be treated like professionals.

This is a controversial idea to union activists. After all, the point of unions (to a lot of people) is that non-professional deserve good jobs too. But in organizing, you can't underestimate the power of people's own expectations. If someone thinks "this is all I deserve", they'll never fight for something better. On the other hand, if someone thinks "I deserve so much more than this", then they are ready to do something about it.

"COMMUNITY HEALTH SYSTEMS"

It helps that nobody likes Community Health Systems (CHS), the Fortune 500 company from Tennessee that bought Wilkes-Barre General in '09. It had been a community hospital, but CHS is all about profit. They've been cutting staff, and coming straight to your room to collect copays.

They run 206 hospitals in 29 states. They buy up hospitals, often targeting poor rural areas, where people have very few options. They have a standard playbook, downsizing and shutting down departments to maximize profit.

The union has been really smart about fighting them. They send news from Wilkes-Barre to run in the Tennessee papers, and have toured to other states where CHS operates.

WILKES-BARRE SUPPORT

It was awesome seeing how many people are on their side. Doctors gave kind words and food in public, making sure to be seen by the hospital. Patients talked to the nurses and signed petitions at the doors. Car after car that went by laid on the horn. All three local newspapers gave great, front-page coverage. Union drivers refused make deliveries. To top it off, train operators stopped an engine on a nearby overpass, laying on the air horn while the crowd screamed in excitement.

Bill Cruice, the staff director, summed it up. "There's a lot of pressure to cut costs. Instead of cutting CEO pay, cutting into insurance company profits, or pharmaceutical profits, they're going to cut where they think it's easiest- from you, your family and your patients. Unless we fight back."

I think that's the basic message. Whether it's at work or with the government. Unless we can be like the nurses, we're the easiest pickin's.

*PASNAP is the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses & Allied Professionals. www.pennanurses.org

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The coal companies had lost all control of the situation. Desperate, they went to the state legislature.

In 1935, a bill was pushed through requiring coal trucks to have receipts from state-licensed weigh stations. It was aimed at busting the Independent truckers when they were on delivery.

Four other anti-bootlegging bills were scheduled and a special committee was created to investigate bootleg coal in the market.

Responding to the threat, the bootleg unions united, creating an executive committee. Clergy, civic groups, and town councils gave statements of support. Sixty delegates met in Shamokin for the first convention of the united bootleg unions. They called for a public hearing and a march on the capitol.

10,000 Independents flooded Harrisburg in the back of coal trucks.

They marched through the streets to the capitol. Their dirty work clothes left the capitol covered in coal dust. The public hearing was quickly moved to the much larger farm show building, but still only 7,000 miners could fit in the arena. When coal company officials attempted to speak, they were driven from the platform, and the miners took over the meeting.

It was a powerful show of force. The miners had defeated the companies again. The anti-bootlegger bills failed. The weigh station bill was already law, but Independent breakers simply had their scales certified, and then issued documents to the bootleg truckers.

The Independents established themselves in state politics. For the next four years, they maintained their power. Governor George Earle, a New Deal Democrat, didn't openly endorse them but did regularly consult with them. He ordered state police to stay neutral in the future, unless the miners got violent. (The Coal & Iron Police had recently been abolished.)

THE SHOWDOWN

The companies and Arthur James, the next governor, went at them hard. There were nine unsuccessful anti-bootlegging bills. The company began leasing to strip miners, and the governor sent in the state police.

At first, the strippins didn't interfere with the bootleggers. But in 1941, a company brought in a massive new shovel, and the Independents quickly organized. They called a mass meeting and asked the governor not to send state police. Six

After driving the police out of the mountains, the victorious crowds would hold parades through town, cheered on by the town. Being unsuccessful, Reading slowed down attempts to blow the holes shut.

In Gilberton, the community dynamited the car of a Coal & Iron police after he'd blown shut some bootleg holes. In Shamokin, on the Edgewood bootleggers' tract, miners blew up a steam shovel.

The company easily picked off lone bootleggers. There was incentive to join the unions.

By this time, there were 13,000 Independent miners, truckers, and breaker operators. They were responsible for 10% of all anthracite being sold in the US, an equal share as the largest companies still operating.

The coal companies demanded that PA Governor Pinchot intervene. The Independents had already convinced him it would be a bad political move to harass them. Being a smart politician, he refused to intervene, suggesting that companies could stop bootlegging by reopening their mines.

Coal companies in other regions were settling strong union contracts elsewhere so they could stop bootlegging from spreading.

STRIPPIN

Shut down in the government, the companies tried a technological strategy: strip mining. If they could strip the bootleg fields, they would make underground mining impossible.

One of the first shovels was brought into Minersville and was set near the mines outside of town.

A large bootleggers' union meeting was held that night, and the union came up with a plan to stop it. Steve Nelson was there:

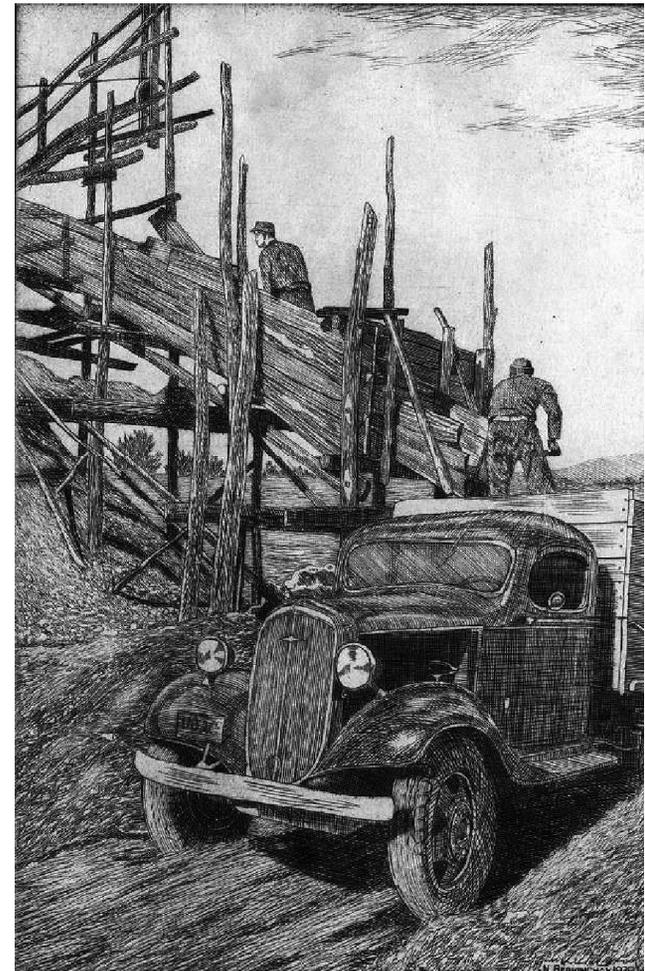
"The next day, I heard a fire whistle blow and drove out to observe the situation... State police were protecting the shovel... Hundreds of miners had gathered and got into arguments with the police to divert their attention... While all this was going on, someone put dynamite under the shovel... and blew it up."

Through the Great Depression, dozens of power shovels, drag lines, and bulldozers were blown up, set on fire, or sabotaged.

The Bootleg Coal Rebellion

"My brother had a coal hole, on the Reading ground. They blew his hole shut. That was it! Things got rough then... They had to let the people make a living or there would have been a civil war. Reading bought that ground for four dollars an acre... How in the hell? ... Four dollars an acre! ... It was the people's ground. That's the way we figured. We were digging our own coal. We owned the land! Land of the free!"

– Joe Padelsky, Primrose, PA



This story comes from one place more than any other. In the 1980's, Mike Kozura interviewed over 100 bootleg miners and wrote an essay called "We Stood Our Ground." When he did, they told him something over and over again: if you want to understand the bootleggers, you've got to understand the Molly Maguires. They were outlaw miners who violently fought the company over terrible working conditions.

The Philadelphia & Reading Coal & Iron Company is called Reading Anthracite today. They are the same company that hung the Molly Maguires. By the time of the great depression, they owned a full third of the anthracite coal region. It was the southern end, from Trevorton over to Minersville and back down to Lykens. They owned the land, the collieries, and the railroads.

The towns had little other industry and were totally dependent on the mines for work. The area was the coal region mix of Irish, Lithuanian, Polish, and other Eastern European immigrants. The southern end of the region was home to a lot of Pennsylvania Dutch, as well.

In the late 1920s, the company started consolidating their operations, putting communities out of work. They shut down many collieries and started investing heavily in two centralized coal breakers: St. Nicholas and Locust Summit. The timing of this couldn't have been worse for people of the region – constructions on the St. Nicholas breaker started in 1928, just months before Black Tuesday and the start of the Great Depression. Over the next few years, tens of thousands of miners were thrown out of work.

PICKIN' COAL

Coal banks are a landmark of the anthracite coal town. The companies dumped their waste coal there, but the miners were the ones who paid for it.

When a miner sent up a car of coal, the company deducted any waste (dust or other rock) from their pay. There was usable coal mixed in the piles, and naturally, the community felt they had a right to it. In cold winters, women and children would pick through it to heat their homes. If they picked extra, they'd barter it around town. The companies didn't much care. This was tradition going way back.

Things changed with a long strike in 1925 that went all through the winter. The story goes that the coal banks were picked clean. Some miners started digging coal from company land in order to outlast the company. Many of them were arrested by the Coal & Iron police. The strike ended in a stalemate, and the miners went back to work.

Once the unions started, miners no longer accepted small fines in court. They now pled "not guilty" and demanded jury trials. Juries, made up of local people, would find them not guilty. This made it expensive and fruitless for the companies to arrest miners.

Some unions held mass meetings, inviting activists to speak.

Akulauckas, a bootlegger from Minersville, recounts the message delivered by the widely respected local socialist Con Foley: "Where did the company get the deeds? Did God give them the deeds? Go and mine the coal! They don't own the land. Don't run. Let them take you to jail. Send your wife and children to the courthouse and let them feed them." According to Akulauckas, speakers like Foley "put nerve in the people."

–We Stood Our Ground

Feeling proud and legitimate, bootleggers didn't like the term "bootlegger." Instead, they called themselves "Independents".

The company was being defeated on all fronts. They began bringing larger groups of armed police to dynamite holes in pre-dawn raids. Hundreds of people, often lead by women, would actually march right into the holes and to stop the detonations. Though people were sometimes injured in these confrontations, locals did not get violent.

News spread fast, and it might not seem possible, but the region grew even more militant and organized. Towns would set off fire whistles, waking people who would come by the thousands to defend the mines.



A crowd gathered around a bootleg coal mine in Shenandoah where an accident has just occurred. A policeman is at the scene. People are looking into the mine.

Another clergyman quoted Leviticus: “And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleanings of thy harvest. Thou shalt leave them unto the poor.”

Bootleggers kept the local economy and dignity alive. The public, including magistrates and judges, sided with the bootleggers. When arrested, local courts often let miners go for “lack of evidence,” or gave them \$1 fines. When word spread about this, the industry spread like wildfire. The Coal & Irons could blow bootleg holes shut, but they couldn’t keep up with how fast it was spreading.

People wanted work, not welfare, and now they had a way to get it themselves.



Men loading a truck with coal at a bootleg mine in Schuylkill County.

ORGANIZATION

By the early 30’s, dozens of towns organized “bootleg unions.” Their purpose was to spread information and coordinate actions. They began setting coal prices, promoting the industry, organizing rescue teams, running safety trainings, and hiring lawyers for legal defense. Weekly meetings were held at fire companies and union halls, with elected officers and voting on decisions.

“As soon as we got a union everything was going our way. All the men stuck together. We had a guy going from coal hole to coal hole with buttons, ‘independent miners’ buttons... Everybody that was in a coal mine got a button. If you were in trouble and you had a button, you were okay. We fought for you! ... If you went to jail or were told to get off the ground, we were right there fighting for you.”

– Pat Sanza

THE CRASH AND THE SPARK

Reading had already been closing mines by the time the Great Depression came around. Their badly timed investment also put them into bankruptcy.

Because of that, the depression hit the southern end of the coal region the hardest. Unemployment was near 50%. In Shamokin, 4 out of 5 collieries closed. In Mahanoy City, 6 out of 7. Lykens lost the only colliery they had, along with virtually every job.



A man stands with explosives at the entrance to a bootleg mine in Lykens, PA.

“Branchdale was reduced to a state of shock and denial. They shut the thing down altogether. They shut the boiler house... there was no steam to run the generator or pumps. They shut everything down... We thought the end of the world was coming.”

– Mike Lucas, Branchdale, PA

This is when miners took things into their own hands. Thousands of miners dug illegal holes on company land. For nearly a decade, bootleg output rivalled the largest coal companies.

WE WANT WORK – AND WE’RE GOING TO TAKE IT.

Local charity and relief couldn’t keep up with the crisis. Dignity was nowhere to be found.

Starvation was a real concern. The closings created desperation and also triggered a deep, old anger against the company.

“There was hate for the company... We couldn’t understand why all the mines were shut down. The companies came in, they raped the land and pulled out... It was their way of punishing the people [after the strike]. We were very bitter. That’s when the bootlegging started... Since the coal was in the ground and we all knew where it was at... people started digging their own coal holes.”

– Jack Champion, Greenbury, PA

The company tried to stop them at first, but it didn't take long before there were thousands of bootleg shafts. For every the company blew shut, a miners opened a dozen more.

“Equipment was minimal. Typically, a hand windlass and a metal bucket were employed to lower miners into their holes and to bring the coal up to the surface. As operations went deeper and became more substantial, bootleggers would often place an old car or truck up on blocks, attach a rope over a wheel, and use the car engine to power an improved lift.”

– *Face of Decline*, by Thomas Dublin & Walter Licht

In the beginning, bootleg holes were guerilla operations. They were disguised and camouflaged; the coal usually only being transported at night with lookouts clearing the way. They were family operations, and women widely worked right alongside the men.

“I know a little bit about bootleg coal. In those days, that was the only thing... to survive. Even my mother and my sisters and I used to go into the drift. We used to scoop the coal after my father would fire. We'd scoop it on a wheel barrow and wheel it out and... scoop it on a truck and my brothers would haul it home... We used to scoop it on different screens to size it... stove coal, nut coal, pea coal, buckwheat. I know a little bit about coal!”

– *Mary W.*

The bootleg coal was bartered and sold locally. Since there were a lot more goods to go around than money, bartering replaced the cash economy in some towns. Local shops were generous with credit to help people get items not produced locally.

“There was no such thing as money. We bartered.”

– *Pat Sanza, Branchdale, PA*

“It was people helping people. People who had cows, they shared milk. People who had pigs, they shared their meat.”

– *Jack Champion, Heckscherville, PA*

“I traded flour or potatoes for coal... and I sold the coal in town”

– *Mick Kozak, delivery driver for his father's grocery store, Minersville, PA.*

In short time, Mick would be one of the first to save up money and buy a dump truck. Others did the same and within a few years, there were thousands of “bootleg truckers.” They could take the coal to markets in Philadelphia, New York, New England, New Jersey, and Maryland. It was easy to find buyers when they sold coal for less than the companies.

Lookouts would help truckers evade the “Coal & Irons,” but once they made out of the region, they were home free.

Demand for bootleg coal shot up. With real money coming in, depressed towns were revitalized. Miners were making more money than they had working for the companies. Communities became totally reliant on the expropriation of coal from company lands..

“The money you made, you spent. You didn't hoard it... like the rich guy hoards it... You had to spend it. You kept the wheels turning in this county.”

– *Joe Padelsky*

“Bootlegger cash supplanted barter, but the ethics that governed the exchange economy – mutual obligation, sharing, solidarity – remained deeply ingrained in the practices of the illegal industry.”

– *“We Stood Our Ground,” Michael Kozura*

With new markets, bootleg operations outgrew families. Partnerships started between friends and neighbors. Acting as cooperatives, they would share in the decisions, risks, and profits. They worked with other bootleggers, sharing roads and access to the coal lands and even building ventilation shafts shared between mines.

“The bootleggers... we were all neighbors, so to speak. We all had a lot in common. No one resented the other person. Everybody tried to help each other. We shared equipment, new ideas... a new technique in mining.”

– *Jack Champion*

Reading mines hadn't totally disappeared, but legally employed miners would often leave work and go right to a friend or family's bootleg hole. The coal miners' union, the UMW, officially opposed bootlegging, but more than once, company miners struck in solidarity with the bootleggers.

NO TRESPASSING: COMMUNITY SUPPORT

When the coal company fell apart, so did its systems of patronage and power. The businesses were with the miners – they kept the local economy alive. And without a doubt, they had the support of the churches, both Catholic and Protestant.

The clergy were often asked about the morality of bootlegging. Pastor Butkofsky of St John's Reformed in Shamokin gave an answer similar to many priests and pastors: “No human being will condemn another when a man who is out of work and hungry will walk along a road, see an apple on a tree, and take that apple. We call it stealing, but morally the man is justified.”