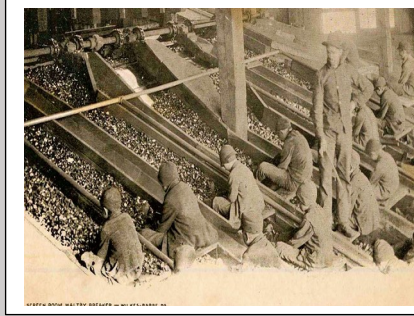


## BREAKER BOYS AND THE BLACK DIAMOND CHUTES

**WHEN?**  
Late 1800s to  
early 1900s

**WHERE?** Wyoming Valley



**EVENT**  
Working in the breaker and  
underground

**VOCABULARY**  
anthracite      bony  
bog              breaker

European families were often recruited by coal companies to come to America where they could escape the grinding poverty of their home country for a better way of life here. The dream was far from reality for most, however. Families soon learned that their children would have to go to work in the mines or the factories to support the family. Life would improve but it might take another generation.

For the girls, some under the age of 10, work would mean 10-12 hours working in hot, dusty, conditions with only a 30-minute lunch break. The machines would dictate the pace of their work. Their young brothers, some as young as 6 but usually around 8 or 9, often went to work in the breaker. (Some worked in the canneries or the cranberry bogs.) The breaker was a large building where the large chunks of coal mined underground would be brought to the surface by coal cars, dumped, and then the machinery would crush the coal into various sizes. Before the machinery had been developed to crush the chunks into various sizes, men would take the chunks and break them up with hammers. Their job as a “breaker” became the nickname for the building.

Young boys worked picking rock (sometimes called “bony”) from the coal. In order to do that they would sit on a wooden bench with their feet straddling a chute that allowed the coal to



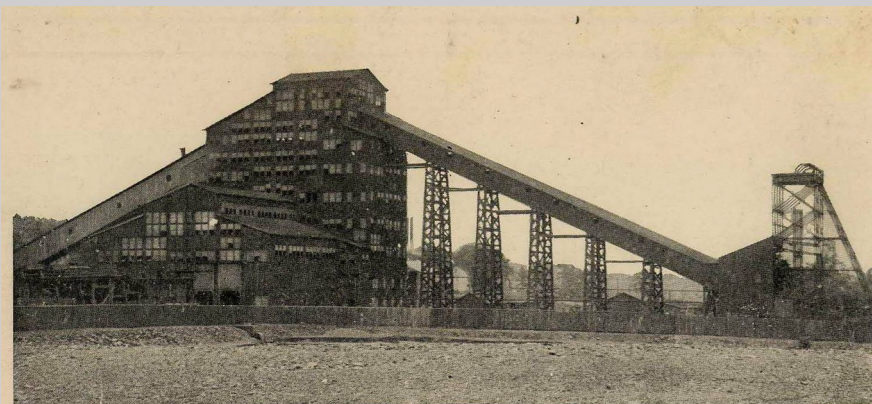
slide quickly between their legs. It reminds one of a playground sliding board with the coal starting at the top and the boys sitting partway down facing the top. The coal moved fast, and the boys had to quickly recognize the rock and pull it from the chute. Most would lose their fingernails by the time they were 10. The older miners called the boys “red tops” as they said you could see

the route boys traveled home by the blood trail. From hunching over the chute, the boys became round-shouldered. The deafening roar of the machinery and the noise from the coal sliding down the chute to the washers meant their hearing would be impaired for the rest of their life. Their foreman would keep a watchful eye on them to poke or hit them with a stick if they weren’t working quickly enough or not paying attention. Some boys would fall into the chute to be picked out later smothered to death. The coal dust they breathed in laid the groundwork for emphysema and what was nicknamed as “black lung.”

The boys would go to work in the depths of the mines as soon as they were able. They might be a mule tender which meant cleaning the mules who pulled the mine cars and their stalls. They might take a position as a switch boy in which case the boy would have to open a door, allow the mule and coal car to pass, and then close the door. The doors would be part of how fresh air would be funneled through the mines. The job was important to not only the traffic but the air flow.

It was lonely however as the boys had only the mules that passed by or a rat that would share their lunch. The boys liked the rats around as they were the first line of defense if there was trouble in the mines. The rats could detect cave-ins or other danger. Older miners told the boys, "if the rats start running, you do too!"

As the boys grew older, they would work as laborers and then, perhaps, miners. Miners had to have a lot of knowledge about how to mine and use explosives. After passing a test, they would work with their crew of laborers. They got paid by the mine carload making \$1.25 a day.



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*The "Breaker", Wilkes-Barre, Pa.*

ILL. POST CARD CO., N. Y.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, some companies paid their workers in company money called "scrip" instead of U.S. currency. The scrip could be used only in the company store where prices for what the miners needed—groceries, blasting caps, and tools were

higher than what the item cost elsewhere. Sometimes the miner ended up owing the company store money so the men were constantly in debt to their work. The constant dangers of roof cave-ins, crawling in small veins as high as 18 inches, blasts gone wrong, electrocution, breathing in the coal dust were never far from the miner's daily life. And when they could no longer work in the depths of the mines, they went back to work in the breaker. That is where the saying came from "twice a boy, once a man."

#### **ONLINE RESOURCES**

[Pioneer Coal Mine Tunnel](#)

[Breaker Boys Youtube](#)

[Anthracite Heritage Museum](#)

#### **PRINT RESOURCES**

Roberts, Ellis. *Breaker Whistle Blows*. Scranton, PA: Anthracite Museum Press. 1984