SCRATCHING THE SURFACE:
A LOOK AT WYOMING VALLEY HISTORY

CHAPTER FOUR
HISTORY LIVES AROUND US—1865 to 1920

"There are cityscapes that seem some to mourn and some to sing. This was one that sang… Low hanging clouds, yellowish or black, or silvery like a fish, mingled with a splendid filigree of smoke and chimneys and odd sky lines… Wilkes-Barre gave evidences of a real charm."

Theodore Dreiser, *Hoosier Holiday* (1916)

VICTORIAN TIMES

Now that the War Between the States was over, the Wyoming Valley area continued to expand its banking, business, and farming enterprises. The residents would soon be in the height of the Victorian Age with all of its splendor. By 1865, the valley was well-established as an area of commerce and growth. The citizens had seen the height of the canal era and the advent of the railroad along with the excruciating passions of abolition and the violent tumult of the Civil War. Coal was becoming king here, much as cotton reigned in the South.

Jonas Long's store on Public Square [1]

The year 1876 marked the centennial celebration of our nation's birth. Much had changed since 1776. The Union Pacific

and Central Pacific rail lines had joined in 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah. This meant a person could travel coast-to-coast in just seven days. This was a great improvement on the five months required to travel by wagon train, or the six months needed to sail around the Horn from New York to San Francisco. The railroad brought many changes to a country where most people stayed in the towns of their birth. Statistics show that, at this time, fewer than two out of every one hundred Americans went to college. That, too, would change in large part due to the railroad and the connections it would bring.

Industry took off all over the northern part of the country and the valley was no exception. Change was the theme of this era and it held communities together as entertainment and business flourished. The need for workers pulled many immigrants to our borders in the coming decades, adding more diversity to the fabric of valley life.

This was the height of the Victorian era, a time of lavishness, elegance, and proper manners. It was a time when energetic and ingenious—some might say "pushy" or even "ruthless"—characters could make huge fortunes and live on large estates like those of the Rockefellers, Fords, and Vanderbilts. The telegraph, telephone, lightbulb, vacuum cleaner, phonograph, and thousands of other devices all came to fruition during this era, bringing welcome convenience to the lives of millions.

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Now that travel and communication were so much faster, goods and services could be bought, sold, and delivered much faster as well. The "ca-ching!" of the cash register would ring often in those days. The enterprising and resourceful were not just on the national scene, however. They

made their home in Wilkes-Barre, too, where nearly 30 percent of the nation's population was within a radius of three hundred miles.

THE MEN BEHIND THE BUSINESS

Have you ever smelled roasting peanuts? You would smell them all the time if you lived in Wilkes-Barre in 1906, for that is when Amadeo Obici and Mario Peruzzi joined to form the Planter's Peanut Company (Binkley 57).

Although they weren't the first to have a fruit stand and peanut roaster, they became the largest peanut sales company. Obici called himself "The Peanut Specialist" and distinguished his stand with a whistle attached to the pipe where steam escaped. In time, the famous Mr. Peanut with his top hat, cane, spats, and monocle became a recognized symbol throughout the country. In Wilkes-Barre, however, Mr. Peanut actually came to life—in costumed form at least—and walked all around Public Square. He soon began to travel to many of our nation's cities.

Wilkes-Barre was blessed with many entrepreneurs (Binkley 53). The men who began their businesses here directly or indirectly used coal, the so-called "black diamonds," as a path to success. Men like Charles Parrish, Frank Martz, J.C. Atkins, Richard Jones, Charles Stegmaier, Fred Morgan Kirby, Abram Nesbitt, Charles Huber, the Long brothers, and John Hollenback were just a few of

those who built on the foundation of coal, iron ore, and the valley's other natural resources like water and timber. They reached into banking, coal mine ownership, and industries that worked hand-in-hand with coal such as powder mills, timber, and wire rope. They took the risks of investment during a tumultuous economic climate and built an infrastructure of business and industry (Binkley 53). Part of the reward for their risk was the "good life"—racing yachts on Harvey's Lake, touring Europe, and enjoying sumptuous banquets at places such as the Westmoreland Club (Spear "The Best and Worst" 14).

THE BEAUTY OF THE BUILDINGS

More than a few residents lived in elegant homes in what is now the River Street Historic District in Wilkes-Barre. These spacious mansions were a world apart from the humble houses of those who labored in the industries represented by such wealth. Wide porches, gables, turrets, and arched windows gave these elegant homes a beauty of their own. The Romanesque, Art Deco, Neoclassical Revival, Victorian, and Queen Anne styles are some of the different architectural styles that gave character and variety to the city.

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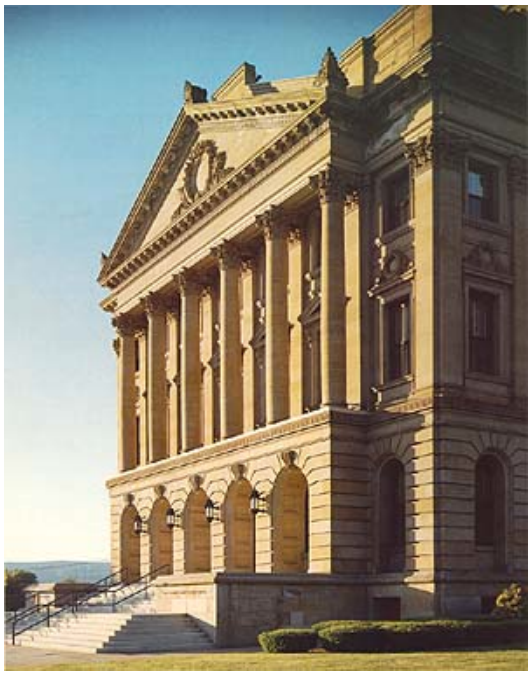
Some of the homes were built by Bruce Price. (His daughter, Emily, married Edwin Main Post and eventually became a world-renowned authority on etiquette.) He resided on South Franklin Street for a few years. He built homes in Wilkes-Barre as well as the First Methodist Church and what is today the Kirby Health Center annex (Beibel 76). He left the area to move to New York where his

architectural work was reviewed, studied, and praised. One of his best-known works is the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec.

During this period, the fourth courthouse was built. The first three were on Public Square, but this one was built on what had been the North Branch canal basins near the river. Controversy surrounded it from the start. It took from 1894 to 1901 just to settle on a site and to quell the criticism that a new courthouse was not even needed (Kashatus 78). Construction began in 1903, but it was not until 1909 that the new facility was ready to use. Though built of Ohio sandstone on a concrete foundation, it became infested with rats and ferrets had to be used to get rid of the rodents (Kashatus 78). By October 1909, "criminal warrants were brought against the commissioners, county controller, architect, and subcontractors. Among the charges were overcharging, kickbacks, and the use of inferior building materials" (Kashatus 79).



Luzerne County Courthouse. 5

Despite its tumultuous beginning, the Luzerne County Courthouse is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful public buildings in Pennsylvania. There are five courtrooms finished in either mahogany or Circassian walnut. The rotunda, steps to the second and third floors, and arches are made of various kinds of marble. Murals that commemorate various historical events are in tile above each archway.

BUSINESS BOOMS

The area's first men's clothing store was opened by Simon Long in 1847 (Binkley 57). Three Scottish immigrants, named

Fowler, Dick, and Walker, received funding from a group of investors from Boston to open a new store in 1879, which they named The Boston Store. The Jonas Long Store also began in the later 1800s. Organizers also opened a store in Scranton in 1912.

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In 1884, Fred Morgan Kirby formed a partnership with C. Sumner Woolworth and opened a five-and-ten-cent store in the city at 172 East Market Street. By 1934, Kirby's stores increased to some 1,900 locations throughout the United States, Canada, and Cuba, as well as subsidiaries in Great Britain and Germany. Kirby is well-known in our community due to his generosity through the Kirby Foundation. The Kirby Health Center, Kirby Park, and the F.M. Kirby Center on Public Square are three of his well-known projects that have benefited the public.

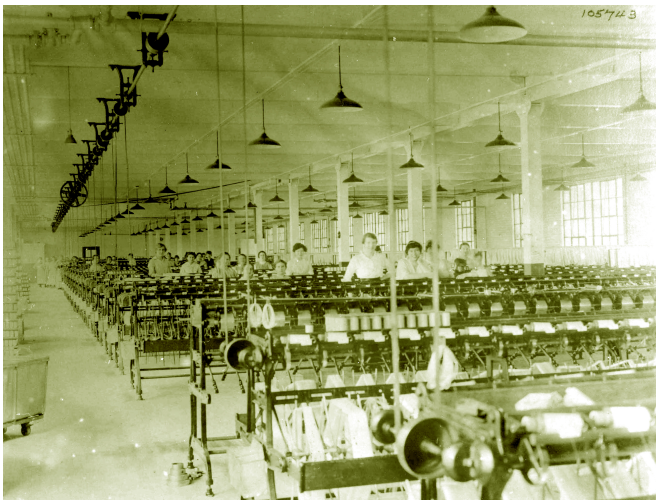
Woolworth's Public Square 7

J.C. Atkin started The Wilkes-Barre Lace Mill around 1884 on Courtright Avenue (Binkley 52–53). The company that started in such humble beginnings grew to become the largest lace mill in the world by 1893. Though the company employed hundreds of workers and produced ten thousand curtains each day, the mill could not keep up with the orders. It was unique because it was the only mill that produced its own yarn from cotton that was later turned into lace.

The Hazard Wire Rope Company moved from Mauch Chunk to Wilkes-Barre. Under the guidance of Fisher Hazard, the wire

rope company grew to be the second-largest in the nation. Sheldon Axle Works also moved to the valley. That company came from New York in 1886. More than four hundred men were employed in the factory, turning out nearly two thousand axles for wagons, cars, and mine cars each day. It was the largest axle factory in the country (Binkley 56).

In 1849 Richard Jones opened a new business, the Vulcan Iron Works. It produced its first steam locomotive in 1874. By 1891, the company joined several others, including the Wyoming Valley Manufacturing Company and the Pittston Engine and Machine Company. These businesses produced large steam engines for coal breakers, pumps for a variety of businesses, and "forgings of every description" (Binkley 54).



Atwood Silk Mill 8

While the men in the mines often capture our focus, women also spent a great deal of time working to supplement their family income. Silk mills and garment factories employed hundreds of females. By the turn of the century, the number of these jobs was increasing. For example, the Bamford Brothers had a silk-ribbon plant on North Empire Street (Spear "The Best and Worst" 14). The factory owners recognized that the wives and daughters of the mine laborers needed the additional income. So, because the labor force was plentiful and the rent was lower than in New Jersey or New York, the valley became a destination for those industries.

The valley had a gas company since the 1850s as well as an electric and water company. A Ford dealership opened in 1910 under the guidance of W. F. Hughes and Elias Yaple (Binkley 59).

At this time, according to Binkley, the Wyoming Valley "had six steam and two electric railroads, eleven newspapers, four 18-hole-course golf clubs and seven fully equipped hospitals" (59).

By 1877, the first telephone arrived in the city, followed by electric lights a year later. Saint Ann's Academy opened its doors in 1878 to join the Wilkes-Barre Female Academy that had opened in 1839. Medical care was improving, too. From the well-known self-taught healer known as Granny Sprague to the General Hospital that opened in 1872, Wilkes-Barre was improving the healthcare of its residents. John Welles Hollenback offered the four acres of land near Mill Creek on River Street for the site of the General Hospital. (He also donated one hundred acres to form what is now named Hollenback Park.) The Sisters of Mercy opened Mercy Hospital in 1898 in South Wilkes-Barre, and Nesbitt Hospital welcomed its first patients in 1912 on the west side of the river. Nesbitt Hospital opened when Mr. Nesbitt bought a Kingston home and had it converted into a hospital to bring modern medicine close to the west side of the river.

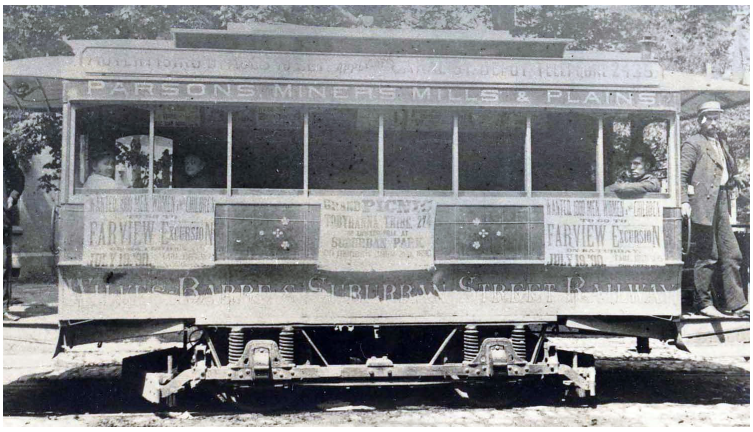
City Hospital 9

According to *Wyoming Valley Revisited*, the area was blessed to have two female doctors, Sarah Coe and Louise Stoeckel. This was very unusual since the only profession deemed wholly acceptable for women was teaching (Spear 79, 80). Doctor Coe opened her office on Franklin Street in Wilkes-Barre. In 1890, Dr. Stoeckel, who was a teacher until age forty-one, when she enrolled in the Women's Medical College, opened her office in Dallas on Huntsville Road.

GETTING AROUND THE VALLEY

If you had to travel out of the valley, you could choose one of six steam railroads: the Pennsylvania; Lehigh Valley; Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western; New Jersey Central; Delaware and Hudson; and the Wilkes-Barre and Eastern. They carried passengers and freight from the valley to the eastern seaboard as well as across the country.

However, for travel within the valley, there were other choices. Wyoming Valley Trolleys, written by Harold Cox, tells the history of the trolleys in our valley (3). Although legislative permission had been granted to Wilkes-Barre to build a street railway in 1859, nothing really happened until after the Civil War. For years, the cars were drawn by horse. The first electric line opened in March 1888 in the north end of the city (Cox 9). Fares were five cents for the city loop, ten cents to Plains, and fifteen cents for the round trip. By the turn of the century, the Wilkes-Barre and Wyoming Valley Traction Company had turned many of the horse-drawn lines to one of the most "extensive electric street railways in the country" (Binkley 57).



Wilkes-Barre trolley 10

Trolleys weren't the only way to get around. More and more automobiles began to appear on local streets. The first auto in Wilkes-Barre was likely owned by Charles Lee of North Franklin Street (Spear "The Best and Worst" 16). His car of choice was a Winton, which had a rear-mounted, gasoline-fueled engine. In

1899, he took a bicycle dealer named Robert Johnston on a trip to New York City. Spear comments:

"Leaving Wilkes-Barre at 8 a.m., they reached Stroudsburg at 1:30 p.m., had dinner, then drove to Milford, where they spent the night. The next day they proceeded to New York by way of Port Jervis, Middleton, and Tuxedo Park. Curious people gathered in every little town through which the Wilkes-Barre motorists passed (Spear "The Best and Worst" 17). Johnston reported that "it was never found necessary to get out of the carriage, even to ascend the steepest hills" (Spear "The Best and Worst" 17).

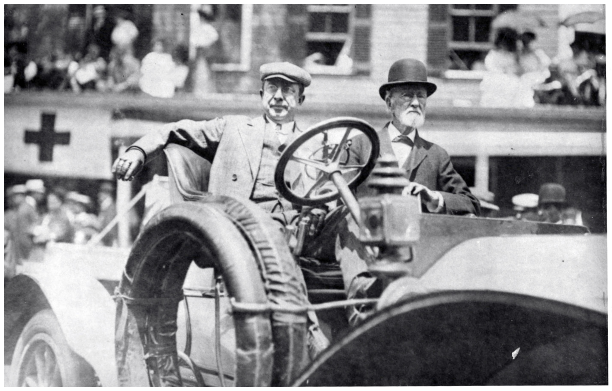
Automobiles were rare at the turn of the century, but their numbers would increase rapidly. Sephaniah Reese reportedly devised a three-wheel tiller-steered car made in Plymouth around the end of 1887. If information about the date could be verified, it would make Reese's prototype older than the model released by the Duryea Brothers in 1893, which is widely considered the first "horseless carriage."

Sephaniah Reese three-wheeled motorcar 11

In October 1899, Reese wrote: *"I was the pioneer bicycle manufacturer here, and I will be the first in the automobile business, too. It is not new for me, as I built a three-wheel auto in 1887–8, which was a success in every way but the public said I was a crank. I told the critics that horseless wagons and carriages*

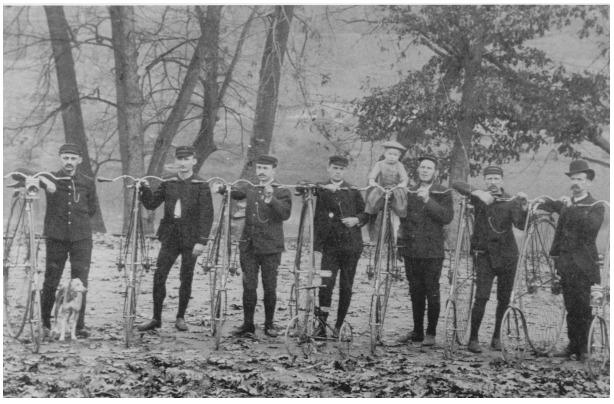
would throng our streets before the twentieth century. I expect to be in the field with the rest of them." (explorePAhistory.com)

The Matheson Car Company came to Forty Fort in the early 1900s. It used a large building complex on Welles Street in Forty Fort to produce a fine six-cylinder car that sold for $2,500. Mister Matheson is shown on the left in this 1910 photo.



Matheson on the left. 12

The automobile was not the only way to travel. In the early days of the twentieth century, Frank Martz began to deliver miners to their destinations via pony and cart. By 1912, he designed his first wooden-bodied bus to carry people from one community to another. Until 1952, the fare was just five cents.



West End Wheelmen 13

Bicycles were also a common sight in the region. In fact, several bicycle clubs formed, including the Ramblers' Bicycle Club and the West End Wheelmen. So many people wanted bicycles that demand exceeded supply. The desire for the high-wheeler model declined as the popularity of the safety bike increased. This bicycle had two wheels of equal size, a lower price, and could be ridden by females. Many women riders took to wearing bloomers, low shoes, and leggings—fashion choices deemed controversial among many at that time.

Many cycling enthusiasts rode in state and national races. Joe Rice placed second in a national race at Madison Square Garden in

1899. That race lasted six days. Hannah James, the head librarian at the Osterhout Free Library, blamed the bicycle for the downturn in book circulation (Spear "The Best and Worst 17). However, by 1902, the enthusiasm for two-wheel riding was on the way out.

The 1900 Olympic Games in Paris featured Ashley resident John Walter Tewksbury. A Wyoming Seminary graduate and University of Pennsylvania Dental School student, he won five Olympic medals during the games. He earned gold medals in the 200-meter dash and the 400-meter hurdles, silver medals in the 60-meter dash and the 100-meter dash, and a bronze medal for the 200-meter hurdles.

IT'S ONLY A GAME

According to Sembrat, many other activities in the valley gained quite a following—at least for a short time (Sembrat "Rock Drilling"). Purring, better known as scientific shin kicking, had quite a following for a while in this area. This sport had simple, and rather brutal, rules: opponents locked arms and kicked away at each other's shins. Whoever gave in first was the loser. David McWilliams from Luzerne apparently had kicked himself to victory in eleven local matches when he tangled with Robert Lavish from Manayunk near Philadelphia ("Scientific Shin Kicking" *New York Times*). Apparently, Lavish was not in the best of shape and, after twenty-three grueling rounds, McWilliams emerged victorious.

Other, less-violent games were popular in the area as well (Sembrat "Rock Drilling"). Done by hand, rock drilling was actually drilling into rock. Alley ball, a forerunner of handball, was played in the valley, too. There were also cycling races, walking races that sometimes went on for six days, and swimming contests. Tennis would also prove to be popular, particularly in the 1920s, when Bill Tilden and Helen Wills were national stars.

Local football, basketball, and baseball games were well-attended for many decades. The Wilkes-Barre Baseball Club was

formed in 1886, though games had been played since the end of the Civil War. Baseball was a very popular sport and the valley would produce several Hall of Fame players. Ed Walsh won forty games for the Chicago White Sox in 1908 and ended his career with a 1.82 earned run average (ERA), a long-standing record. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1946. He was not the only valley resident in the top ranks of sport.

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From 1891 to 1918, Hughie Jennings established himself as a premier shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles. According to Zbiek, Jennings led the Orioles to three straight National League pennants and managed the Detroit Tigers to an American League pennant. He, too, would be elected to the Hall of Fame. By 1921, five semi-pro baseball leagues would be active, and many others would follow them into the professional ranks.

Middle Federals 15

Wyoming Seminary played in the first night football game, which occurred on September 28, 1892, against Mansfield State Normal School. The game ended in a zero-zero tie at halftime when the lights went out. Sem's football schedule included prep schools as well as collegiate squads such as Pennsylvania State College and Lafayette College (Zbiek "Scholastic Football" 26). Although football was not yet as popular as baseball, interest in the

game was rising quickly. In 1928, more than fourteen thousand people witnessed Nanticoke High School defeat the Plymouth Shawnee Indians for the Wyoming Valley Championship (Zbiek "Scholastic Football" 28).

Baseball and football were instrumental in breaking the barriers that separated immigrant groups. While ethnicity was still very important, community activities and mixing with other nationalities became much more common, especially for the children of the immigrants (Zbiek "Scholastic Football 28).

LET'S RELAX AND HAVE SOME FUN

Business did not just include mines, mills, stores, railroads, or factories. It also included entertainment. What did people do in the small amount of time when they were not working? Some went to local parks. Mountain Park opened in 1883 as a picnic area about halfway up the mountain on Route 115. It added a Ferris wheel and a small roller coaster soon thereafter, but closed in 1904 due to fears that the mining going on under the site would cause surface subsidence. The rides were moved to Valley View Park, located in Jenkins Township. Better-known parks such as Hanson's in Harvey's Lake and Rocky Glen in Moosic also got their starts in the late 1800s.

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These parks were just a few of the nearly two dozen that eventually were built in the area. They were an important part of the social lives of families that spent much time enjoying trolley rides to the area, picnics, and amusement park rides. Rocky Glen boasted one of the world's largest roller coasters.

Other locals went to see the latest vaudeville shows at the variety of venues in the city. With a seating capacity of 1,400, the Music Hall was built in 1871 as a wonderful venue for watching shows. Isaac Perry, who also planned several homes in the valley including one for John N. Conyngham, was the architect. Popular entertainers such as Marie Dressler and Edwin Booth (brother of John Wilkes Booth) played there. Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show, including the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley, also made some appearances. According to Spear, "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was at West Park on at least two occasions—May 10, 1895 and May 19, 1899. The later show attracted approximately 20,000 people" ("The Best and Worst" 19).

Music Hall 17

The venerable Mark Twain also took the stage there along with other popular lecturers. Twain reportedly enjoyed staying at the Wyoming Valley Hotel on South River Street, which was just a short walk from the Music Hall. After the Grand Opera House opened in 1892 on South Franklin Street, the attendance at the Music Hall dropped significantly. It was torn down in 1897 to make room for the Hotel Sterling.

Myers Opera House opened in 1872. Many vaudeville performers graced the stage as well as the band of John Phillips Sousa. He was widely considered to be the most famous band leader of the day. His most celebrated march, "The Stars and

Stripes Forever," became the national march in 1987. Other theaters, like the Luzerne, Nesbitt, Irving, and Poli's, were instrumental in keeping residents entertained with singers, comedians, juggling acts, and plays.

Born in Wilkes-Barre, pioneer filmmaker Lyman Howe created his own moving picture camera that he dubbed the Animotoscope (forgottenmovie YouTube). This was an improvement on Edison's camera as it had a second reel that allowed Howe to show longer films (explorePAhistory). Howe recorded his own newsreels, short bits about current events such as Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Wilkes-Barre and the city's parade of

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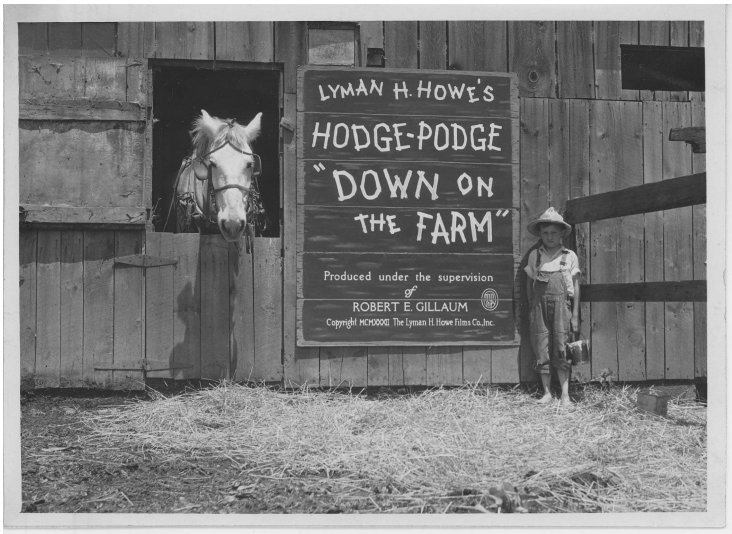
18

1906. Since early films had no sound, Howe hired workers to create sound effects, such as galloping horses. Other sound was provided through a phonograph. These were all pioneering acts in the fledgling film industry. Howe began his own film company in 1901, which was centered in Wilkes-Barre.

The early film industry started in New Jersey, where access to New York was easy. However, since expenses there were high, many silent-picture shows moved to the local area, such as Forty Fort. For weather-related reasons, film companies ultimately



Lyman Howe movie advertisement 19

moved to Hollywood several years later.

Before the move to Hollywood, one of the early silent film companies here was the United States Motion Picture Corporation (USMPC). While they produced many short films between 1916 and 1919, one of their most famous is Her Fractured Voice (youtube.com). It starred Leatrice Joy, who later went on to star in Hollywood. Her character named "Sue" supposedly had such a bad singing voice that even the cows left when she started to sing near the barn. The comedy was part of what was known as the Black Diamond Comedies, put out by USMPC and distributed by Paramount Pictures. Another film, *His Neglected Wife*, shows various places in Wilkes-Barre such as the Hotel Sterling and Public Square in 1917.

WORKING FOR THE BLACK DIAMOND

During this fifty-year stretch, mining reached its peak. This was "black diamond" country—one of the richest deposits of anthracite coal in the world. Ever since the Gore brothers discovered a use for it in their blacksmith forge in 1768, men had tried to successfully market the coal, but it was difficult to burn. This changed when Judge Jesse Fell discovered that the coal could be burned more easily on a grate that allowed air flow. Demand for coal grew after entrepreneurs such as Charles Miner, the Smith brothers, and Colonel Shoemaker took coal to Philadelphia to promote its uses starting in the early 1800s.

This high-carbon fuel was soon seen as necessary for running mills and factories, as well as heating hospitals, homes, and schools. Natural gas and oil were still in their infancy. It was coal that would fuel the Industrial Revolution in the United States, and Wyoming Valley was right in the middle of that enormous capitalist venture.

Wilkes-Barre 20

According to Robert Porter, superintendent of the Department of the Interior, by 1889, Pennsylvania coal accounted for more than 57 percent of the total output of coal for the United States. More than 45 million tons were taken out that year alone. By 1917, the peak year, the tonnage taken would be more than 100 million.

Small towns called "patches" appeared all over the valley. Places like Coaldale, Minersville, and Ashley are just a few of them. Other patch names have slipped into obscurity. The book *When Coal Was King* adds Jackson's Patch, Fidler's Green, Shanty Hill, and Goose Hill (Miller 182). The houses there were usually hastily built, drafty in the winter and without indoor plumbing. They were usually placed near the entrance of the mines.

The claptrap houses would be filled with impoverished immigrants who were enticed from their homes in Europe to work in the coalfields. According to Dr. Hanlon's *Wyoming Valley: An American Portrait*, only 1.7 percent of mine workers were from Southern and Eastern Europe in 1880 (Hanlon 95). By 1900, that percentage had increased to 46 percent.

IMMIGRATION AND MINING

While the English, Welsh, Irish, and Germans had come mostly before the Civil War, a second major wave of immigration began in 1880. These "new" immigrants, as they were called, were often from Southern and Eastern Europe. These newcomers were leaving their homelands for a variety of reasons, including civil strife, poverty, starvation, and human rights violations commonplace throughout Europe at the time. They hoped to find better lives and opportunities in America.

American factories and businesses sent agents to recruit or pull people to the United States, which needed all the labor it could get to fill jobs opened by new transportation systems, technological advances, and fuel production. American factories and mills were in need of large amounts of unskilled labor. Many came tried to escape the harsh life in the old country where governments repressed freedoms, forced young men into the army, or murdered villagers in pogroms. Lured by the promise of a better life, nearly fifteen million immigrants arrived on our shores.

Immigrants on Ellis Island 21

According to Dr. Zbiek, the ethnic groups that arrived in Luzerne County, in approximate order of their numbers, were Polish, Italian, Slovak, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Ruthenian, Hungarian, Lebanese, Syrian, Greek, Slovenian, Croation, Serbian, and Tyrolian (Zbiek 52). He also cites Peter Roberts, who found that at least twenty-six languages were spoken in the coal regions. Most of the ethnic groups focused their new life arouns their religion. Their church was the center of their lives as it brought them a sense of belonging as well as hope.

Unfortunately, great distrust developed between the groups because of their tight-knit traditions. It would take several mining strikes and many hardships before the groups began to work together for the benefit of the whole community.

At first, ethnic differences of language, customs, and religion kept the foreigners separated, rather than intermingled into the so-called "melting pot." Each group had its own houses of worship, taverns, social clubs, and in many cases schools. Most groups had their own cemeteries as well.

Religion was one thread that held a group together and they were loath to give it up. Some in the Roman Catholic Churches did not trust priests if that priest was not of the same ethnicity. For example, a German immigrant would probably not want to worship under an Irish priest, even if they were technically of the same religious denomination. According to Hanlon: "Between 1883 and 1929, the bishops responded to intense ethnic pressures and established 22 Polish, 11 Slovak, 8 Lithuanian, 6 Italian, and 5 German parishes in the Valley" (115).

These ethnic differences were exploited by the coal mine operators for decades. Men from different ethnic groups were forced to work together underground. Since they had different customs and only a rudimentary understanding of each other's language, they distrusted each other. That distrust would keep them from joining to form unions.

Matthew Stretanski's independent study, *A Flourish of the People, A History of Slovak Immigrants in the Anthracite Mine Fields*, tells of his great-great-grandfather, George Stretavsky. Stretavsky left his homeland (Stretanski 10) because its government wanted him to change his name and language, and surrender control of his lands, or face arrest. Instead, he left for the United States (Stretanski 11). He also had to leave behind a wife and child whom he would not see for four years.

It was not an easy trip in steerage, the bottom of the boat where as many as two thousand souls were crammed for their

voyage to America. Though recruited by the coal companies, many immigrants were in debt to the company before they even got off the ship. Stretanski writes:

Young miners; notice one-armed miner 22

A ticket displayed at the Eckley Miner's Museum in Eckley, Pennsylvania, from 1914 tells the story of its owner: Upon arrival, the traveler owed the immigration agent $62 for ship fare, $8 for head tax, and $5.09 for inland transportation. The person would have to work off that debt (Stretanski 12).

That was just one way to keep the miner tied to the company. The company sometimes paid the miner in scrip that was redeemable only at the "company store." The prices there were often at least 10 percent higher than in other stores. The miner or laborer had to buy his groceries, tools, and work supplies at the store. What he produced in coal would be subtracted from his bill at the end of each month. Sometimes he would end up with zero; sometimes he would still owe the company; and sometimes he would be able to make a modest profit.

Taking a break while posing for photo 23

The miner usually was paid not by the hour, but by the number of mine cars loaded. From the book *Another Civil War,* we learn that, depending on the year, a mine worker could earn from 75 cents to $1.25 per day (37). Boys as young as six, but usually eight or nine years old, would work for 25 cents for a ten-hour day in the breaker picking slate or rock from the pieces of coal as it rushed by them to the washers. Most would lose their fingernails by the age of ten. Those fingers were often bloody, which is why they were called "redtops" (Miller *Kingdom* 121). The older men often said an observer could tell where the boys lived by following the blood trails. The boys became round-shouldered and breathed the enveloping coal dust day in and day out, six days a week. After spending a lifetime that started in the breakers, then in the depths, older men who could no longer work underground went back to working as a "breaker boy." That raised the saying of "twice a boy, once a man." Lewis Hine chronicled the misery of child labor in his photographs.

Ellen Webster Palmer 24

Many families depended on the pay of their children to supplement the family income and pay the bills. Few boys entered school to stay until graduation. Ellen Webster Palmer formed what became the Boys Industrial Association (BIA) in 1891. Married to a lawyer and having eight children of her own, she knew of the great financial need of families for the wages derived from the hard labor of their sons and daughters, but also the suffering of the children. She worked tirelessly to end child labor.

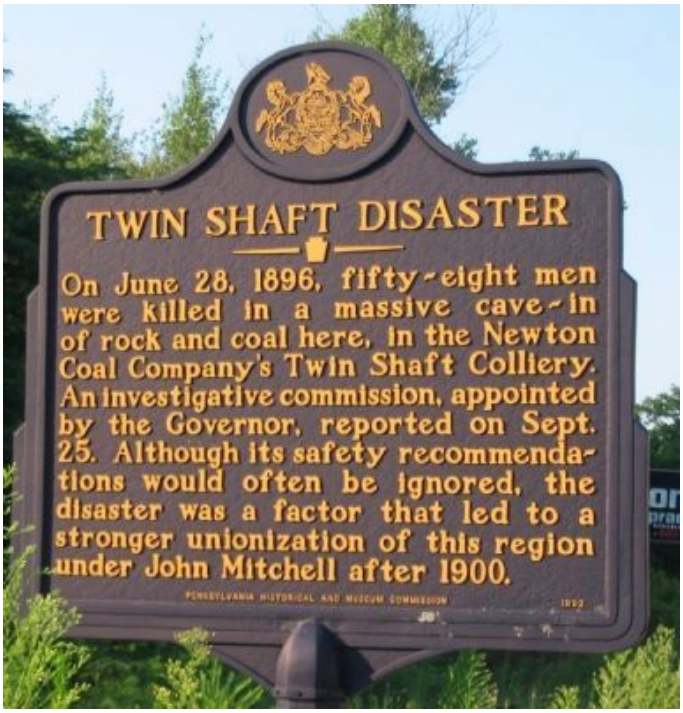
Though child labor would not end for some time, Palmer recognized that education would be a way out of the grinding poverty experienced by these children. Assisted by Luzerne County's first woman lawyer, Mary Louise Trescott, the BIA hired teachers to work with the boys so they could continue their education at night after a full day's work in the breakers. They had a chance to learn math, writing, singing, debate, and gymnastics. The organization, under Palmer's oversight, improved the lives of hundreds of boys.

This was part of the Progressive reform movement that was sweeping the country. A rejection of Social Darwinism, in which only the "fittest" survive, Palmer and Trescott embraced the ideas that the upper class had an obligation to help those less fortunate improve their lot in life. So she undertook the task to provide her boys with a place to "learn 'proper English,' good manners, personal hygiene, and trades other than loading coal" (Hanlon 113).

DISASTERS ABOVE AND BELOW GROUND

Mine accidents, explosions, injuries, and the daily breathing of coal dust made life difficult. Cave-ins were not uncommon. The first major mine disaster was at Avondale, Plymouth, on September 6, 1869. In what is now considered to be an act of arson, one hundred and eight men and boys lost their lives when trapped underground. (Two more lost their lives on the way to assist with the rescue.) The mine had only one way in and one way out. A newspaper described it this way:

"*It is noticeable that nearly all the bodies found clustered together exhibited a spirit of devoted friendship in that hour of terror and dismay. Friends were found folded in each other's arms or with hands clasped were overtaken by the grim messenger of the grave. A father was found with one of his sons on each arm, calmly resting as though he had laid them down to pleasant dreams.*"



25

On June 28, 1896, fifty-eight men and boys were killed at the Twin Shaft disaster in Pittston. They died when more than two hundred acres of roof caved in, in what was called a "squeeze." Props used in the mines had been cracking, or "talking" as the miners would say, for about two weeks prior to the disaster. That was a sure sign that the mine was unstable.

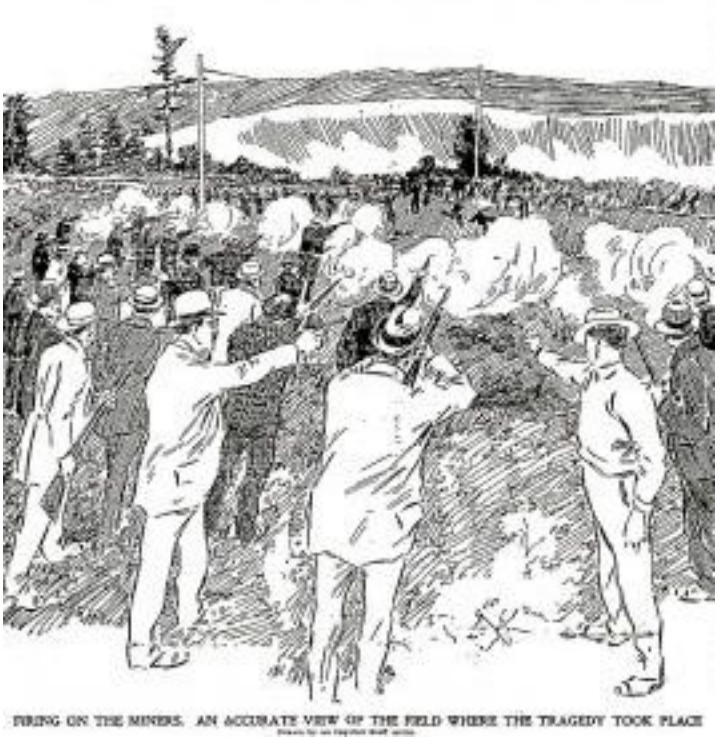
Edward Hughes left the mine the night of the cave-in before the roof fell. He said that the shaft had gangways, or mined out areas, that were too wide and the support was too narrow. He said he was scared something bad was going to happen. Work continued until about 3 a.m. on June 28, when the roof gave way. At that time, no insurance covered those family members left behind. The mostly Irish and Lithuanian families were dependent on the kindness and generosity of neighbors. The disaster left thirty-one widows and one-hundred-and-one orphans.

Following the disaster, new mine laws dictated that pillars of coal should remain to support the roof to avoid future calamities. In addition, mine maps with the location of air shafts should be provided to mine inspectors. At the time of this disaster, no such renderings were available.

In the early years of mining, different ethnic groups mistrusted each other. The Irish and English did not get along. The Italians, Slavs, and Polish harbored ill feelings toward the Irish,

English, and Welsh. It was easy for a company to keep unions from forming due to the animosity between the labor groups. Nonetheless, strikes for better wages, shorter hours, and safer working conditions did occur.

One mile from Hazleton is the small coal town of Lattimer. One year after the Twin Shaft Disaster, miners went on strike to try and improve their $375 annual wage that had not gone up in twenty years. The company had recently imposed a three-cent tax on daily pay. From the *Times Leader Profile '91* we learn that when mule drivers at the Honey Brook Colliery refused to do more work for no extra pay, the mine boss attacked one of them. Nearly two thousand men subsequently stopped work (Jaklevic 42).


FIRING ON THE MINERS. AN ACCURATE VIEW OF THE FIELD WHERE THE TRAGEDY TOOK PLACE

Lattimer shooting near Hazleton 26

The mine owners alerted the sheriff, James L. Martin, about impending trouble. He deputized eighty-seven men to confront about three-hundred unarmed marchers carrying two American flags on September 10, 1897. When the two groups faced off, someone shouted "Fire!" Thirty-two marchers were wounded and nineteen were killed. Though a trial was held, no one was convicted of murder in what has become known as the Lattimer Massacre. The state militia was sent in to keep the peace.

"Red-Nosed Mike," otherwise known as Michael Rezzelo, was just nineteen when he was hanged on February 11, 1889. He

died for his part in the robbery and murder of a Lehigh Valley Railroad paymaster and his bodyguard in 1888 in Miners Mills. The paymaster, J.B. McClure, aged 21, picked up the payroll from the bank and left with his bodyguard and driver, Hugh Flanagan. He was looking forward to delivering the money to the nearly eight hundred immigrant laborers working near Miners Mills on the railroad (Kashatus "Murder"). His wedding suit was in the carriage alongside him when shots rang out, and both men fell dead. While Rezzelo supposedly confessed to the murders, no one else was brought to justice and only $251 of the $12,000 was recovered. While some rested more easily after Rezzelo was hanged, what actually happened remains a mystery (Kashatus "Murder").

In 1889, the Powell Squib Factory in Plymouth exploded. Squibs were fuses used to set off controlled explosions in the "face," or front, of a coal seam. According to John Hepp, professor at Wilkes University, squib factories were common in the anthracite area (Kellar "Lives"). The blast killed twelve people. Ten of the twelve were young girls at least twelve years of age. Since men could not support their families with their wages earned in the mines, boys typically worked in the breakers and girls in factories.

The February 26, 1889, edition of the *Wilkes-Barre Record* used "Burned to Crisp" as the title of the article about the deaths (Churcher "1889"). George Reese was the foreman; he escaped from the building, but with serious injuries. He reported in the article:

I, at that time, stood beside the stove, and Katie was sorting the squibs at the table… Katie came from the tables and said to me, "These are all bad, and I'm going to burn them."

She had some of the refuse in her apron. She took the lifter to lift the lid off the stove and threw the refuse in. But before she had time to put the lid back there must have been a squib filled with powder in the refuse which flew out of the stove and into the rear of the building. It dropped on a sheet of paper that covered a case of

squibs. As soon as it dropped on that it exploded like a cannon." (Churcher, "1889").

Reese later died of his injuries. Reportedly, the factory roof was lifted five feet in the air before coming down, and the sides of the building blew out.

A tornado on August 19, 1890, wrecked a coal breaker, and the Susquehanna River crested in yet another flood at 31.3 feet in 1902. Local newspapers reported the details of these harrowing events.

Valley residents could read about these disasters as well as more enjoyable topics at a new library provided for them by Isaac Osterhout. He left part of his estate monies for the building of a first-rate facility. In 1887, Hannah James was appointed as the first head of the Osterhout Free Library. She proved to be a very capable leader, well-spoken and well-read.

TENSION IN THE COALFIELD

The 1890s were marked by several notable tensions. Severe economic downturns occurred in the decade, which then led into the Spanish-American War, fought between April and August 1898, and resulting in a U.S. victory. Colonel Ernest Smith was cited for gallantry during the conflict. He would also be decorated for actions taken in World War I about twenty years later. Many valley residents were involved in this conflict.

At the time, however, the focus for people in the valley at the turn of the twentieth century was not war—at least not war between countries. It was on trying to resolve the increasing tensions between labor and the coal owners. Their disagreements were not resolved easily. Troops and security men hired by the coal owners to protect their collieries were not an uncommon sight. Small strikes occurred between then and 1902, winning some concessions for the miners but not recognition from the owners for their union, the United Mineworkers Union of America, led by

John Mitchell. The stage was set for a large strike, which would occur in 1902.

It was called the Great Strike as it involved more than 150,000 men and boys. These strikers continued for 163 days, calling for an eight-hour workday and a 20 percent increase in wages. They had seen their wages reduced from 1870 levels, but the price they paid for rent and for items in the company stores were going up. But there were other factors, too: poor working and living conditions, safety concerns, and massive profits of the companies that were not shared with its workers.

Trouble had been brewing in the coalfields for decades, especially since the Lattimer Massacre in 1897. Yet, to get the cooperation of some twenty-six ethnic groups that not only distrusted each other but fought each other in the patchtowns would take no less than a miracle. That came in the form of John Mitchell, who cobbled the men and boys together by gaining the trust of their respective parish priests and ministers. Mitchell reminded the men that they didn't mine Slavic or Irish or Italian coal, but simply coal. No matter what the ethnic group was, they shared the same problems: poor living and working conditions.

Marching to Lattimer 27

Safety hazards were the norm. Some miners worked in chambers only eighteen inches high while others labored in chambers more than forty feet high that were susceptible to cave-ins and rock falls. Laborers facing these life-threatening risks did not share in the massive profits being taken by the coal companies.

The disparate ethnic and religious groups found that in unity there is power. They came together and went on strike in 1902. This set an example for other groups across the country in the decades to come. Their task would not be easy, however.

Mine owners, led by J.P. Morgan and other tycoons, were determined to not give in to the laborers' demands. They had seen their costs go up, too, from $10,000 to start a mining operation in 1837 to more than $670,000 by 1897. However, the country depended so much on coal that when the supplies dwindled, factories started to shut down, throwing thousands out of work. Railroads were fearful about running out of fuel, as were hospitals and schools. Something had to be done.

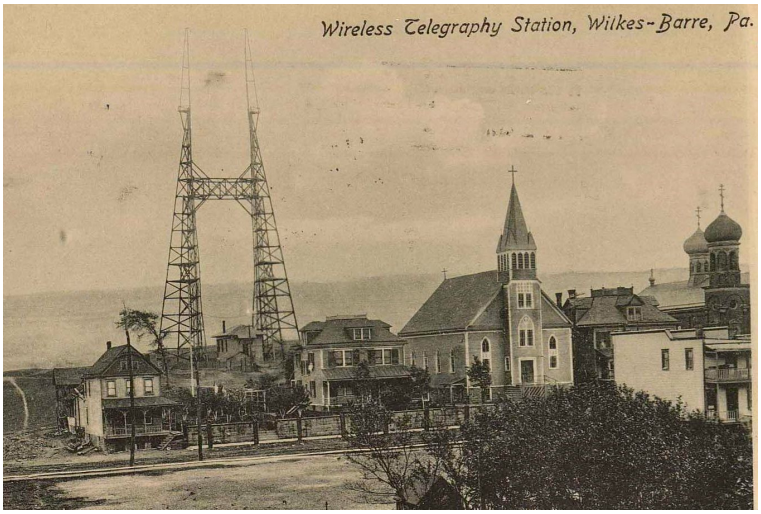
Lewis and Curran 28

In an unusual move, President Theodore Roosevelt stepped in to try to force the two sides to the bargaining table. He said that this was the most severe crisis since the Civil War. Father Curran from Wilkes-Barre was one of his closest advisors on this matter. Curran had once been a breaker boy and knew the dangers of mining first-hand.

What really motivated Father Curran was not just the dangers, but the economic and social injustices miners faced when it came to wages and working conditions. He was responding to Pope Leo XIII, who saw the dreadful condition of the working class. The Pope called for greater economic and social justice, and for sharing the tremendous wealth that capitalism produced. The Pope realized that workers would have to create unions just as capitalism had created corporations.

An arbitration board split the demands of the workers and awarded them a 10 percent pay increase along with a nine-hour workday. Although owners refused to officially recognize the union, they included members of the union on the arbitration board. This action proved a small symbolic victory for the union. The strike ended soon after.

OVER THE AIRWAVES



Father Murgas wireless towers 29

One of the most important inventions of the twentieth century, the radio, had its roots in Wilkes-Barre. Father Murgas, a Slovak priest who headed Sacred Heart Church on North Main Street, was a well-known artist and internationally known as a Slovak patriot. He was also an inventor—he had more than a dozen patents, including some for wireless communication technologies. Though Marconi was the first to send his voice over water, Murgas solved the much more difficult problem of sending a voice over land. On November 23, 1905, he became the first person to send his voice over land when he transmitted from Wilkes-Barre to Scranton.

Although Marconi received worldwide recognition, those in the Wyoming Valley credit Murgas with the invention of the radio. In fact, during a court case wherein one of Marconi's assistants sued him for patent infringement, the federal judge told the men that neither claim was valid as Murgas was the

first. However, because of ill health and lack of funds, he gave his work and patents to Marconi.

THE GREAT WAR

In 1914, World War I, then known as the Great War, broke out with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary. The United States was challenged to decide what, if any, role it would take in the overseas conflict. The answer involved choosing between isolation and intervention. For two years, Americans wavered, trying to stay out of the conflict despite the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the Zimmermann telegram, and the withdrawal of Russia due to the communist revolution that swept that country.

In April 1917, Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war. "Victory gardens" were planted, liberty bonds purchased, and six thousand Luzerne County residents volunteered for service. When the draft was enacted, an additional twenty-two thousand signed up with some branch of the military forces (Harvey 2214).

One of the units that was organized was the 109th Field Artillery. The men boarded the ship *Justicia*, arriving in France in early June 1918 (Harvey 2213). Though the war would end that November, the men saw combat at Oise-Aisne, Ypres-Lys, Meuse-Argonne, Champagne, and Lorraine.


Asher Miner 30

Originally, the unit was made of infantry but it was converted to horse-drawn artillery as the United States entered the war. Its leader was Asher Miner, who received the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism during an

attack at Apremont, France. While one of the batteries under his command was being shelled by the enemy, necessitating its repositioning, Miner was wounded so severely that his leg had to be amputated.

READY TO RETURN TO NORMALCY

Due to the demands of the war and other factors, coal production by 1917 would exceed 100,000,000 tons. That, however, would prove to be the peak year. Two mining strikes in the mid-1920s hastened the demise of the once-proud king of industry. Many customers did not want to be placed in a shortage situation again, and they converted to alternative fuels.

Though coal production would decline during the 1920s, the region's population still grew. In 1910, the census numbered residents at 67,105, while in 1920 the number exceeded 73,000. Luzerne County, with more than 390,000 residents, was the third-most-populous county in the state. Wilkes-Barre grew to the eighth largest city in Pennsylvania.

Even though immigration had slowed, 25 percent of Wilkes-Barre's children had foreign-born parents, while nearly 20 percent of the general population was not native.

With the number of people in the area, two challenges presented themselves: the lack of modern transportation and new housing and transportation. Transportation would be addressed soon, as state planners confirmed that our winding streets and trolley lines were hampering our growth, especially with the increase of auto and truck traffic. Subsequently, streets were broadened and straightened with new traffic light systems installed to ease the congestion.

The housing shortage took longer to resolve. The area had old houses but not enough new houses. It would be some time

before a construction boom would help to ease the divide between supply and demand.


Concrete City, Nanticoke 31

One experimental innovation in housing occurred in Nanticoke. This was a housing project called the Concrete City. The Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Coal Division built it in 1911 on a thirty-nine-acre parcel. Forty families could live in the new houses, which contained seven rooms each. They were used to house the supervisors and critical mine workers of the Truesdale Colliery. Many people believed these newly constructed homes, made entirely of concrete and surrounded by trees and shrubbery, would be the wave of the future. However, the experiment was short-lived, and the project was abandoned.

By 1919, the Treaty of Versailles had been signed and the Great War was over. Though the United States would sign a separate agreement with Germany later, the valley residents turned their attention to domestic affairs. They embraced new voting rights for women and looked forward to a new president, Warren G. Harding.