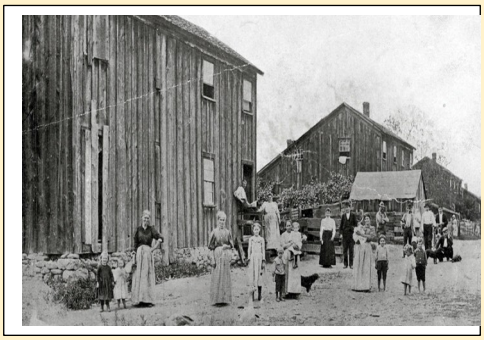
LIFE IN THE PATCH

WHEN?
1880--1930

WHERE? Wyoming Valley



EVENT
Life in the new country

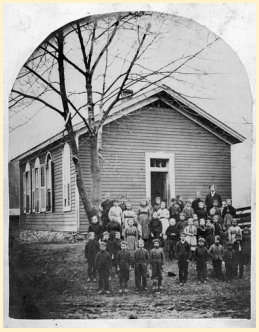
VOCABULARY
animosities ballad
galvanized tub patches

Many immigrants lived near the colliery in small towns called patches. Life around a colliery was dirty, loud, unsanitary, and full of work. It didn't matter your age or gender everyone had a job to do. Eggs had to be collected from the chickens, floors swept, clothes and bedding washed and hung to dry, animals had to be fed and watered as well. Chickens, goats, pigs, and sometimes a cow needed to be corralled and tended to. Gardens had tomatoes, beans, other vegetables, some had grapevines (Bartoletti 88). Weeds had to be plucked, vegetables picked, washed, canned. Water had to be carried from the village water faucet (sometimes shared by as many as 20-25 families) not only for cooking and cleaning but drinking as well. There was no indoor plumbing. Coal had to be collected from the mountainous culm or slag piles so cooking and heating fires could be maintained. Those who picked the coal from the piles had to watch for the security force as picking that coal was considered to be stealing. If caught, your basket or wheelbarrow could be broken up by the police or you could be fined (Bartoletti 77). If you climbed too high on the pile, you might end up covered in an avalanche of the waste rock.

The coal companies advertised in European newspapers and on the large ships that left Europe for America that work was available, and laborers were needed. Some even sent representatives to gather workers. We needed all the labor we could get to fill the jobs that were now available due to new transportation systems and technological advances. We needed a large number of unskilled workers. According to Hanlon's *Wyoming Valley: An American Portrait*, only 1.7% of mine workers were from southern and eastern Europe in 1880 (95). By 1900, that percentage rose to 46%. Nearly 15 million arrived on our shores so it was inevitable that life in the patch included a large variety of traditions, languages (26 languages were spoken in some areas), religions, and animosities.

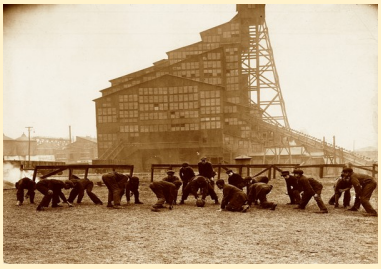
Their differences served to separate rather than become the melting pot in the beginning. Each had a separate house of worship, their own taverns, own social clubs, and in many cases their own schools. Most had their own cemetery. It would take some time, several mining

strikes, and common hardships to realize that all were working and living in the same harsh conditions. Those differences were exploited by the mine owners as men from different countries speaking different languages and living with different traditions were joined together on the same work crews. It was hoped that their differences would keep them from joining together to form unions.



Many families had come so their children could have a better life though many children ended up working to support the family. After working for 10 hours a day for, perhaps 7 cents per hour, their weekly earnings helped their family make financial ends meet. Although many wished to go to school, they knew their families needed their pay and felt proud to contribute. Sometimes the parent would return a few cents to them to spend which was greatly appreciated. Candy cost a penny and you could also buy ice cream at the store or soda. Those who could attend school could usually do so only for a few years before the financial pressure to work became so great they quit.

Most families had to take in boarders for extra money. Of course, that meant more work for the women to wash clothes, prepare meals, and clean. Sometimes there would be 16 people living in the house. That also meant bathing for the miner which was every day for most. Water heated on a stove and poured into a wooden or galvanized tub provided the miner with a bath even it meant only part of their body getting washed a little at a time (Bartoletti 85). Wet, dirty work clothes were hung by the coal stove to dry.



The days were long and tiring but if the miners weren't too tired, they went to the neighborhood saloon if their patch allowed alcohol. Bartoletti relates that the men "spent hours in the pub, singing ballads, playing cards, telling stories, reciting poems, and dancing jigs" (86). Swimming was done in stripping pits where the water was black with coal dust. Coal companies organized football and baseball teams and Sunday afternoon games were looked forward to with great anticipation. Many in the patch turned out to cheer on their teams. Boys, too, organized their own teams and practiced when they could. Baseballs were made of "string wrapped around a rubber ball and covered with black tape. Or sometimes the boys captured foul balls from the men's games (Bartoletti 87). One of the side benefits unrecognized by the coal companies was that the players began to develop friendships. Sports helped to breakdown the divisions between the nationalities.

The years spent suffering together, enjoying life and celebrations together, cemented friendships that would not have happened in the old country.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Old Country in the New Life in the Coal Villages

PRINT RESOURCES

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *Kids on Strike.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1999.

Hanlon, Edward. *The Wyoming Valley: An American Portrait.* California: Windsor Publications. 1983.