

Ellen Webster Palmer

and the Breaker Boys • 1839 -

HISTORICAL ERA: EARLY 1900'S

Ellen Webster was born in Plattsburg, New York, on October 20, 1839. In September 1861 she married Henry W. Palmer, who had been admitted to the Luzerne County Bar in August 1861. In 1879, age 40, he was appointed Attorney General for Pennsylvania by Governor Henry M. Hoyt (from Kingston and buried in Forty Fort cemetery.) When Palmer's term expired, he resumed his law practice in Wilkes-Barre.

Eight years after their return to Wilkes-Barre, Mrs. Palmer initiated her work with the breaker boys. On March 9, 1891, she met with a hundred boys employed chiefly as slate-pickers by the mines. (The usual age for entering the mines was about eight or nine, and the entry job was sorting coal in the breakers.) A second meeting drew an even larger crowd and led to a series of Saturday evening entertainments that became so popular that it was "necessary to close the doors promptly at 7:30 to prevent overcrowding." Classes in reading, writing, and arithmetic were instituted at meetings held in vacant stores. Activities expanded to include a singing class, a debating club, and a junior literary branch. It even had its own band. The organization became known as the Boys Industrial Association or the BIA.

Although Pennsylvania made it illegal in 1885 to employ children under fourteen inside the mines or children under twelve in surface jobs, younger boys continued to be exploited. The mine operators wanted a continuous

Historical Significance:

Students will learn about the work of a courageous woman who worked to better the lives of those boys caught in child labor.

Related Vocabulary:

breaker boys
reformer
exploit
labor

supply of cheap labor, and parents desperately needed the additional income, small as it was (forty-five cents a day for ten-hour day, six days a week.)

The breaker boys, wrote Stephen Crane, "live in a place of infernal dins. The crash and thunder of the machinery is like the roar of an immense cataract. The room shrieks and blares and bellows. All the structure is atremble from the heavy sweep and circle of the ponderous machinations. Miller and Sharpless describe the bleeding fingers - "redtops" - that were the common condition of the boys and say that the "oldtimers claim that the paths the boys took home after work could be followed by the drops of blood in the snow."

The B.I.A. provided opportunities for the boys to prepare for a livelihood outside the coal mines under Palmer's leadership. It gave those who participated a chance to improve their quality of life. The above information was taken from *Bridging Change*, pp. 173 to 177.

Her daughter, Countess Elena Dandini de Sylva, had the sculpture (now near the Luzerne County Courthouse) carved in Italy, and later installed in Wilkes-Barre because it was the center of the anthracite coal mining industry.



Suggested Activity:

Ask students what chores they might have around the house. If they get an allowance, ask them how they spend their money. Compare the amount of money a breaker boy might earn per week to how much each student might earn. In addition, discuss how long each of the students work in hours compared to the breaker boys.

CD/DVD References:

1. PA Academic Standards
2. Available materials in print compiled for GPHS.

Related Themes:

Immigration
Child labor
Reform movement
Women's History
Mining

Sources:

Secondary Sources:

Bridging Change by Sally Teller Lottick

Kids at Work by Russell Freedman

Growing Up in Coal Country by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

