

PRIMARY SOURCE

Child Labor in the Coal Mines

In 1919 the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor studied child labor in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal-mining region. As you read this excerpt from the study, think about why progressive reformers sought to end child labor.

These breakers which tower above the town of Shenandoah to the east and the south and the west are great barnlike structures filled with chutes, sliding belts, and great crushing and sorting machines. Around these machines a scaffolding was built on which the workers stand or sit. The coal is raised from the mine to the top of the breaker and dumped down the chute into a crushing machine, which breaks it into somewhat smaller lumps. These are carried along a moving belt or gravity incline on each side of which men and boys stand or sit picking out pieces of slate and any coal which has slate mixed with it. The latter is carried into another crusher, where it is broken again and then carried down chutes to be sorted further by slate pickers or by sorting machines. After the coal has been broken and cleaned of slate or other alien materials, it is sorted by being shaken through a series of screens.

The work in the breakers might be described as disagreeable but much less hazardous than underground mining. As it is not heavy and does not require skill, young boys or the older men are employed. "If you don't die, you wind up in the breakers," one man said. Another remarked, "You begin at the breaker and you end at the breaker, broken yourself." These older men and boys worked in the constant roar which the coal makes as it rushes down the chute, is broken in the crushing machines, or sorted in the shakers. Black coal dust is everywhere, covering the windows and filling the air and the lungs of the workers.

The slate is sharp so that the slate pickers often cut or bruise their hands; the coal is carried down the chute in water and this means sore and swollen hands for the pickers. The first few weeks after a boy begins work, his fingers bleed almost continuously and are called red tops by the other boys. Slate picking is not itself dangerous; the slate picker is, however, sometimes set at cleaning-up jobs, which require him to clean out shakers, the chute, or other machinery. . . .

Accidents that had occurred to boys in the breakers as well as underground were recounted to the Children's Bureau agents. One boy told of a friend who had dropped a new cap in the rollers and how, in trying to pull it out, his arm was

caught, crushed, and twisted. The older brother of another boy, a jig runner, slipped while at work and his arm was caught in the jig [a sorting machine] and mashed. One boy told of the death of another while watching the dam beneath the breaker. He and some of the other breaker boys had helped to extricate the mutilated body from the wheels in which their companion was caught; he himself had held the bag into which the recovered parts of the dead boy were put.

As reported by the boys, 42 percent of these accidents kept them from work less than two weeks. . . . According to the reports made to the Children's Bureau, no compensation was paid forty-four boys who were incapacitated for a period of two weeks or more as the result of injuries received while they were employed in the mines, although the Pennsylvania Compensation Law entitled them to receive it.

It would be superfluous to point out that in view of the hazards of mining, young boys should not be employed in the mines or around the breakers. Public opinion had already prohibited underground work in Pennsylvania and in most other states, and the federal government had imposed a penalty in the form of a tax if children under sixteen were employed in or about a mine. The real problem here, as in many other parts of the country, was how to secure the enforcement of the child labor laws that had been enacted.

*from U. S. Department of Labor, *Child Labor and the Welfare of Children in an Anthracite Coal-Mining District* (Washington, D. C.: Children's Bureau Publication No. 106, 1922).*

Activity Options

1. Imagine you are a boy who works in the anthracite coal mines. Write a diary entry in which you describe your work life and then share it with classmates.
2. As a progressive reformer in the 1900s, write a letter to a newspaper editor. State your opinion on child labor in the coal mines based on your reading of this excerpt. Then read your letter to classmates.