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 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, as cotton reigned in the South.

1876 was the centennial celebration of our nation’s birth. The Union Pacific and Central Pacific rail lines had joined together.
in 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah. This meant a person could travel coast-to-coast in just seven days. This was a great difference instead of five months by wagon train or six months if one traveled around the Horn from New York to San Francisco. This brought a lot of 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 we in the valley were no exception. Change was the theme of this era and that thread would continue to knit us together as entertainment and business flourished. The need for workers pulled many immigrants to our borders in the ensuing decade, adding more diversity to the fabric of our valley life.

This was the height of the Victorian era, a time of lavishness, and proper manners. It was a time when the energetic, some would say pushy even ruthless, ingenious characters would make lots of money, and live on large estates like the Rockefellers, Fords, and Vanderbilts. The telegraph and telephone, the lightbulb, vacuum cleaner, phonograph and thousands of other devices all came to fruition bringing welcome convenience to the lives of millions.

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 these days. The enterprising and resourceful were not just on the national scene, however. They made their home in Wilkes-Barre, too, where nearly 30% of the nation’s population was within a radius of 300 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 together 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 the 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 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 business here directly or indirectly used the 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 the 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 lived in elegant homes in what is now the River Street Historic District in Wilkes-Barre. These spacious mansions were a world apart from many of those who labored in the industries represented by such wealth. The Victorian and Queen Anne styles were reminiscent of some of the men who made a fortune on a national scale. 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 give character and variety to the city.

Some of the homes were built by the 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. In addition to homes in Wilkes-Barre, he also built 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 wasn’t 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 of 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).

Despite the 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

Our first men’s clothing store was opened by Simon Long in 1847 (Binkley 57). The Boston Store, also known as Fowler, Dick, and Walker—its founders opened in 1879. These three Scottish immigrants received funding from a group of investors from Boston and named their enterprise, The Boston Store. The Jonas Long Store also began in the latter 1800’s. They also opened a store in Scranton in 1912.

In 1884, Fred Morgan Kirby formed a partnership with C. Sumner Woolworth and opened a five-and-10 cent store in the city at 172 E. Market St. By 1934, Mr. Kirby’s stores increased in number until they reached over 1,900 stores with locations throughout the United States, Canada and Cuba as well as subsidiaries in Great Britain and Germany. Mr. Kirby, of course, 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 the more well-known places that have benefited the public.

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 in the world by 1893. Though the company produced 10,000 curtains a day, the mill could not keep up with the orders even though it employed hundreds of workers. 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. They came from New York in 1886. Over 400 men were employed in the factory turning out nearly 2000 axles for wagons, cars, and mine cars a day. It was the largest axle factory in the country (Binkley 56).

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

While mining often captures our focus, women also spent a lot of their time working in order to supplement the 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 rents were lower than in New Jersey or New York, the valley became an attraction for those industries.
We had a gas company since the 1850’s and our own electric company as well. We also could boast of our own water companies. 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, 11 newspapers, four 18-hole course golf clubs and seven fully equipped hospitals” (59).

By 1877, the first telephone had arrived in the city followed by electric lights a year later. St. 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 Granny Sprague who was a well-known self-taught healer to the General Hospital that opened in 1872, Wilkes-Barre was improving the health care 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 100 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. A doctor from the west side of the river mentioned to him about the inconvenience of traveling across the river to the General Hospital.

In *Wyoming Valley Revisited*, the area also 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). Dr. Coe opened her office on Franklin Street in Wilkes-Barre. In 1890, Dr. Stoeckel, who was a teacher until age 41 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 of 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 a number of 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 5 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 Co. had turned many of the horse-drawn lines to one of the most “extensive electric street railways in the country” (Binkley 57).

Of course trolleys weren’t the only way to get around. We had automobiles, too. Apparently, the first auto in Wilkes-Barre was 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 powered 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).

Of course 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 in late 1887-1888. If the information about the dates could be verified, that would make Reeses' prototype earlier than the Duryea Brothers in 1893—widely considered to be the first horseless carriage.

“Horseless wagons and carriages will throng our streets,” predicted Reese (explore PA history.com). "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"—Sephaniah Reese, October 1899, from a letter to the editor of Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal (explorePAhistory.com).

The Matheson Car Company came to Forty Fort in the early 1900’s. He used his large building complex on Welles Street in Forty Fort to produce his fine 6 cylinder car that sold for $2,500. Mr. Matheson is shown on the left in this photo with J. Hollenback in 1910.

The automobile wasn’t the only mechanized way of travel. In the early days of the 20th century, Frank Martz began to ferry the miners from one place to another with a pony and cart. By 1912, he designed his first wooden-body bus to carry people from one community to another. Until 1952, the fare was just 5 cents.

More common was the use of bicycles. In fact, there were a number of bicycle clubs such as the Ramblers’ Bicycle Club and the West End Wheelman. So many wanted a bicycle that demand exceeded supply. The desire for the high wheeler 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. Of course bloomers, low
shoes, and leggings were the new fad for women riders—something that made more than a few question the appropriateness of females riding with men.

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 circulation (Spear “The Best and Worst 17). However by 1902, the enthusiasm for two-wheel riding was on the way out.

IT’S ONLY A GAME

Cycling wasn’t the only sport to see its popularity rise and wane. According to Sembrat, there were a number of activities in the valley that had quite a following—at least for a short time (Sembrat “Rock Drilling”). Purring, better known as scientific shin kicking, had quite a following for awhile in this area. This was a sport that had simple rules. The opponents locked arms and kicked away at the shins of the other person. Whoever gave in first was the loser. Mr. David McWilliams from Luzerne apparently had kicked himself to victory in 11 matches when he tangled with Robert Lavish from Manayunk near Philadelphia (“scientific shin kicking” nytimes). Apparently, Lavish was not in the best of shape, and after 23 rounds of bloody kicking, McWilliams emerged victorious (scientific shin kicking nytimes).

According to Sembrat, other, less well-known 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. Of course, there were cycling races, walking races that sometimes went on for six days, and swimming. Tennis would also prove to be popular particularly in the 1920’s when Bill Tilden and Helen Willis were the stars.

The 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 be the battleground that produced a number of Hall of Fame players. Ed Walsh won 40 games for the Chicago White Sox in 1908 and ended his career with a 1.82 ERA the best in the history of the game. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1946. He wasn’t alone. From 1891 to 1918, Hughie Jennings established himself as a premier shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles. According to Dr. Zbiek, Jennings led the Orioles to 3 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 there would be 5 semi-pro baseball leagues in play. There would be many others to follow them into the professional ranks.

Wyoming Seminary played in the first night football game. It occurred on September 28, 1892 between the local school and Mansfield State Normal School. The game ended in a tie 0-0 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 as popular as
baseball yet, interest in the game was surely rising quickly. In 1928, over 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 down the barriers that separated immigrant groups. While the ethnic group was still very important, community activities and mixing with other nationalities became much more commonplace especially for the children of the immigrants (Zbiek “Scholastic Football 28).

LET’S RELAX AND JUST HAVE SOME FUN

Business did not include just factories or mills or construction. It also included entertainment. What did people do in the small amount of time available when they were not working? Some went to parks close-by. Mountain Park opened in 1883 as a picnic park about halfway up the mountain on Route 115. It added a ferris wheel and a small roller coaster soon thereafter, but it 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. More well-known parks such as Hanson’s in Harvey’s Lake and Rocky Glen in Moosic also got their starts in the late 1800s.

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 life of families who spent much time enjoying trolley rides to the area, the picnics, and amusement park rides. Rocky Glen boasted one of the world’s largest roller coasters.

Others went to see the latest vaudeville shows at the variety of venues in the city. With a seating capacity of 1400, 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 here. Buffalo Bill and his Wild West show (including the sharpshooter Annie Oakley) made several 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).

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 famous march, “The Stars and Stripes Forever” became our national march in 1987. Wilkes-Barre’s own pioneer filmmaker, Lyman Howe, also showed moving pictures there. Other theaters like the Luzerne, the Nesbitt, the Irving and later, in 1908, Poli’s were instrumental in keeping the residents entertained with singers, comedians, juggling acts, and plays.

Born in Wilkes-Barre, 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 film (explorePAhistory). He recorded his own newsreels, short bits about current events, such as Theodore Roosevelt’s visit to Wilkes-
The early film industry started in New Jersey where access to New York was easy. However, since the expenses were high, the move was made to Forty Fort for the silent picture shows. For weather related reasons, film companies moved to Hollywood several years later.

Before the move was made to Hollywood, one of the early silent film companies here was the United States Motion Picture Corporation. While they produced quite a number of short films between 1916-1919, 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. The film shows various places in Wilkes-Barre such as the Hotel Sterling and Public Square in 1917.

**WORKING FOR THE BLACK DIAMOND**

During this 50-year stretch, mining reached its peak. This was black diamond country—one of the richest deposits of anthracite coal in the world. Ever since Gore brothers discovered a welcome use for it in their blacksmith’s forge in 1768, men had tried to successfully market the coal, but it was difficult to burn until Judge Jesse Fell was able to show that it could burn easily in his tavern’s grate with a good supply of air. Yet, the high carbon...
fuel was what was necessary for us to run our factories and mills, our hospitals and schools, as well as heat our houses. Natural gas and oil were still in their infancy. It was coal that would fuel the industrial revolution of the U.S., and we were right in the middle of that capitalist adventure.

Still, it wasn’t until the early 1800’s that demand and market came together thanks to Charles Miner, the Smith brothers, and Colonel Shoemaker who took the coal to Philadelphia to demonstrate its fine burning qualities. By 1889, according to Robert Porter superintendent of the Department of Interior, Pennsylvania coal accounted for over 57% of the total output of coal for the U.S. Over 45,000,000 tons were taken out in that year alone. By 1917, the peak year, the tonnage taken would be over 100,000,000.

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 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 % of mine workers were from southern and eastern Europe in 1880 (95). By 1900, that percentage had increased to 46%.
While the English, Welsh, Irish, and Germans had come mostly before the Civil War, the second wave of immigration began in 1880. The “new” immigrants, as they were called, were often from Southern and Eastern Europe. These newcomers were leaving their homeland for a variety of reasons all under the general umbrella of opportunity. During the frequent civil strife that occupied much of Europe, safety, starvation, human rights violations all took their toll on the populace.

American factories and businesses sent agents to recruit or pull people to the U.S. We needed all the labor we could get to fill the jobs that were now needed due to new transportation systems, technological advances, and the need for coal as a fuel. Our factories and mills were in need of large amounts of unskilled labor. Many who 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 15 million arrived on our shores.

According to Dr. Zbiek, the ethnic groups who 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 26 languages were spoken in the coal regions. Most of the ethnic groups centered around their religion. Their church was the center of their life 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.

Ethnic differences of language, customs, and religion all served to help keep the foreigners as a cauldron of stew instead of a melting pot. Each had their own house of worship, their own taverns, their own social clubs, and in many cases, their own schools. In fact, most had their own cemetery.

Religion was one thread that held a group together and they were loathe to give it up. Some in the Roman Catholic Churches did not trust priests if that priest was not of the same ethnic persuasion. If you were German or Italian, you probably did not want an Irish priest. 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 together 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 who was one of those who left the old country for a new start (Stretanski 10). Because of a government that wanted George to change his name, his language, and then control his lands or face arrest, George left for the United States (Stretanski 11). He also had to leave a wife and child whom he would not see for four years.

It wasn’t an easy trip in steerage, the bottom of the boat where as many as 2000 souls were crammed for their voyage to America. Though recruited by the coal companies, sometimes
immigrants were in debt to the company before they even got off the ship. Stretanski writes,

*A ticket displayed at the Eckley Miners’ 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% higher than other stores. The miner or laborer had to buy his groceries, tools, and supplies to work 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 money.

The miner usually was paid not by the hour, but by the number of mine cars loaded. From the book *Kingdom Of Coal*, we learn that depending on the year, the mine worker could earn from 75 cents to $1.25 cents a day (Miller ??). Boys as young
as eight 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, become round-shouldered, and breathe the enveloping coal dust day in and day out six days a week. Lewis Hine chronicled the misery of child labor in his photographs.

Many families depended on the pay of their children to supplement the family income in order to pay the bills. Few boys entered school to stay until graduation. Ellen Webster Palmer formed what became the Boys Industrial Association in 1891. Married to a lawyer and who had 8 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. She worked tirelessly to end child labor.

Though child labor would not end, 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 and writing, singing, debate, and play in a gymnasium. The organization, under Palmer’s tutelage 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, 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, and the daily breathing of the coal dust made life difficult. Cave-ins were not uncommon. Our first major disaster was at Avondale, Plymouth, on September 6, 1869. Now considered to be an act of arson, 108 men and boys lost their lives when trapped underground. (Two more lost their lives on the way to assist with the rescue.) There was only one way in and one way out. A newspaper described it:

“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 they had laid them down to pleasant dreams.”

On June 28, 1896, 58 men and boys were killed at the Twin Shaft disaster in Newton Township adjacent to the city of Pittston. They died when over 200 acres of roof caved 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. This 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 o’clock in the morning of 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. There were 31 widows and 101 orphans left.

From the disaster, new mine laws dictated that pillars of coal should remain to support the roof to avoid the calamity that occurred. 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.

Different ethnic groups mistrusted each other. The Irish and the English did not get along. The Italians and Slavs and Polish harbored ill feelings toward the Irish and English and Welsh. It was easy for the company to keep unions from forming due to the animosity between the 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 20 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 2000 men stopped work (Jaklevic 42).

The mine owners alerted the sheriff James L. Martin about impending trouble. He deputized 87 men to confront about 300 unarmed marchers carrying two American flags on Sept. 10, 1897. When the two groups faced off, someone shouted “Fire!”
marchers were wounded, and 19 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 19 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 age 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 800 immigrant laborers working near Miners Mills on the railroad (Kashatus “Murder”). His wedding suit was in the carriage alongside of 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 that were used to set off controlled explosions in the “face” or front of a coal seam. According to John Hepp, professor at Wilkes University, a squib factory was common in the anthracite area (Kellar “Lives”). The blast killed 12 people. Ten of
the twelve were young girls at least 12 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 the factories.

The February 26th edition of the Wilkes-Barre Record that year reported “Burned to Crisp” as the title of the article about the deaths (Churcher “1889”). George Reese was the foreman and escaped from the building.

“I, at that time, stood beside the stove, and Katie was sorting the squibs at the table," Reese told the coroner as reported in the Wilkes-Barre Record. "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 from his injuries. It is reported that the roof was lifted 5 feet in the air before coming down and the sides of the building blew out.

A tornado came on August 19, 1890 and wrecked a coal breaker, and the Susquehanna River crested in yet another flood at 31.3 feet in 1902.

Residents could read about these disasters as well as enjoy reading at the new library provided for them by Isaac Osterhout. He left part of his estate monies dedicated to 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 decade of the 1890’s was postmarked by severe economic downturns, and ended with the American victory in the Spanish-American War fought between April and August, 1898. Colonel Ernest Smith was cited for gallantry during the conflict. He would also be decorated for actions taken while in the Great War. Quite a number of our valley residents were involved in this conflict.

At the moment, however, the focus for us in the valley at the turn of the 20th century was not war, at least not between countries. It was trying to resolve the increasing tensions between labor and the coal owners. Those issues were not resolved easily. Troops and 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 that occurred in 1902.

It was called the Great Strike as it involved more than 150,000 men and boys for 163 days who wanted an 8 hour work day and a 20% 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 store were going up. But there were other factors, too: poor working and living conditions, safety concerns, and massive profits of the companies. Take note of the one-armed coal miner top right in this photo.

Trouble had been brewing in the coal fields for decades especially since the Lattimer Massacre in 1897. Yet to get cooperation of 26 ethnic groups who not only distrusted each other but fought each other in the patch towns 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 exhorted the men that they didn’t mine Polish or Irish or Slavic coal but simply coal. The commonalities of poor living conditions, poor working conditions where some miners worked in chambers 18 inches high or in ones more than 40 feet high that were susceptible to cave-ins and rock falls, safety issues AND the massive profits being taken by the coal companies finally outweighed the distrust between the groups and they went on strike. The disparate ethnic and religious groups found that in unity there is power. It set an example for other groups across the country in the decades to come.

The mine owners, led by J.P. Morgan and other railroad tycoons, were determined to not give into the 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.

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 injustice miners faced when it came to wages and working conditions. He was responding to Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical on the condition of the working class. The Pope called for greater economic and social justice and sharing the tremendous wealth that capitalism produced. To do this, the Pope realized that workers would have to organize into unions just as capitalism had organized into corporations.

An arbitration board split the demands of the workers and awarded them a 10% pay increase along with a nine-hour day. Official recognition of their union was not to be though the owners were forced to use an arbitration board that included members of the union so for all practical purposes the union did win on that point as well. The strike ended soon after.

**OVER THE AIRWAVES**

One of the most important inventions of the 20th century, the radio, had its roots here in Wilkes-Barre. Father Murgas, a Slovak priest that 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 over a dozen patents including those for wireless communication. 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 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, the Great War broke out with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary. The U.S. had to ask itself one question: What is our role? The answer involved choosing between isolation and intervention. For two years we wavered trying to stay out of the conflict despite the sinking of the Lusitania, the Zimmermann telegram, and the withdrawal of the Russians due to the communist revolution that swept their country.

In April, 1917, Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war. Victory gardens were planted, liberty bonds purchased and 6,000 of our Luzerne County residents volunteered. When the draft was enacted, an additional 22,000 signed with some branch of the military or naval services (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 of 1918 (Harvey 2213). Though the war would end in November, the men saw combat at Oise-Aisne, Ypres-Lys, Meuse-Argonne, Champagne, Lorraine.

Originally, the unit was infantry but it was converted to horse-drawn artillery.
as the U.S. entered the war. Its leader was Asher Miner. He 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 that necessitated it being moved to another place, 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 be over 100,000,000 tons. That, however, would be the peak year. Two mining strikes in the mid 1920’s hastened the demise of the once-proud king. 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 20’s, our population grew. In 1910, the census numbered us at 67,105, while in 1920 it was over 73,000. The county was at more than 390,000 making it the third most populous county in the state. Wilkes-Barre grew to the eighth largest city in Pennsylvania.

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

With the amount of people in the area, two challenges presented themselves: the lack of new housing and transportation. It will be awhile before a construction boon would ease the housing shortage. Transportation would be handled sooner as state planners confirmed that our winding streets and trolley lines were hampering our growth especially with the increase of auto and truck traffic. So our streets were broadened and straightened with new traffic light systems installed to ease the congestion.

On top of that, we were short on houses. We had old
houses and older house but not enough new houses. It would be some time before a construction boon would help to ease the supply and demand.

Though the houses are in disarray now, one new innovation in housing occurred in Nanticoke. Called the Concrete City, the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Coal Division built the housing project in 1911 on a thirty-nine acre parcel. Forty families could live in the new houses that contained 7 rooms each. They were used to house the supervisors and critical mine workers at the Truesdale Colliery. These newly constructed homes made entirely of concrete, surrounded by trees and shrubbery, were the wave of the future at that time.

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