

Coal History

Coal Miners

Between **1880** and **1920**, southern West Virginia's population grew from **93,000** to **446,000**, due almost entirely to the coal industry.

The region's first coal miners primarily were African Americans, both enslaved and free. By **1850**, approximately half of Kanawha County's slaves worked in the salt **industry-many mined** coal to fuel the **furnaces**. Salt operators eventually hired more white or **free-black laborers** due to the risk of investing money in **bondsmen**, who frequently were killed or injured in the mines. Other **enslaved** African Americans escaped from the salt works to Ohio, a free state only **60** miles away.

The coal industry required more labor than southern West Virginia could supply. Coal operators **enticed workers-many African American-to** move to West Virginia from Virginia and the Deep South. During the first three decades of the **20th** century, African Americans comprised about 25 percent of all southern West Virginia miners. Coal companies also recruited in Europe. In **1907**, West Virginia appointed John **Nugent** as superintendent of immigration. His salary was paid entirely by coal companies. By **1910**, more Italian immigrants lived in McDowell County than anywhere else in the state. Immigrants in southern West Virginia comprised some **25 nationalities**, including **Italians, Hungarians**, Poles, **Austrians** and Russians. Ukrainian immigrant Nick **Gurski** began working in the Boone County coal mines in the **1920s**. Eventually, his sons and **grandsons** also worked in the mines. Meanwhile, his wife Mary operated the **Nellis** boarding house for **foreign-born** miners.

Coal mining is a dangerous job requiring skill and judgment. In the **hand-loading** era, an underground miner's workplace, usually called a ``room," was only as high as the coal seam. A room in the **Pocahontas** seam could be more than **10** feet high, while **workplaces** in the **Kanawha** and New River **seams** often were no **taller** than four feet

Before the **1930s**, many boys worked in mines. Boys younger than **12** often worked beside their fathers underground because, in many communities, it was the only paying job available. Boys learned the mining craft from their fathers and later passed this knowledge on to their own sons. Boys frequently were assigned the **most-dangerous** jobs. Some picked slate and other debris out of the coal on **fast-moving conveyor** belts. Others opened large wooden doors just before speeding cars passed through. Some stopped the cars by **jamming** pieces of wood into the **spokes**. Before the days of electric cars, many boys served as mule drivers.

Coal History

1880

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1920

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93,000

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446,000

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Kanawha

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bondsmen

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American-to

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Pocahontas

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spokes

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