

Local ties to Labor Day

Blog tells history of local mining

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a celebration of the American worker. The holiday was created at the end of the 19th century to honor and appease labor unions. It was a time when relations between management and labor were extremely strained.

Violence and bloodshed were not uncommon as workers held strikes to protest low wages, long hours, and poor, often dangerous, working conditions. Company owners would bring in hired goons and even government troops to break strikes by force. There were injuries and fatalities on both sides, but the workers usually suffered the brunt of confrontations.



KEVIN O'NEILL

InSites

While labor strife was happening all around the country, Scranton played a pivotal role in changing the nature of negotiations between labor and management. Our area was a center for anthracite coal mining and railroad operations at the turn of the last century. The legendary labor leader John Mitchell — his statue graces Lackawanna County's Courthouse Square — organized a massive, Scranton-based strike of 150,000 coal miners in 1902. It lasted for months, severely damaging the national economy, until President Theodore Roosevelt had to step in. He created a commission to resolve the impasse peacefully. Clarence Darrow, the most famous lawyer of the time, argued for the miners in our county courthouse. The owners made some concessions but did not meet all the miners' demands. But it was a turning point that raised the status of unions and allowed them to negotiate better terms in a non-violent manner.

Pennsylvania native Jake Wynn grew up in what used to be anthracite coal mining country. He has degrees in history and communications and writes the Wynning History

blog (wynninghistory.com). The site is full of interesting stories about the history of labor during the region's industrial heyday. He also writes about the Civil War, with many of the stories focused on events in Pennsylvania.

The home page features a large illustration of miners and mules working in a mine. A link over the picture takes you to the blog posts which are in chronological order starting with the most recent. Each post has a headline and a piece of art that act as links to the full post. The art is either a photo or illustration from the time period. There are some beautiful drawings of area towns, like Tamaqua, Shamokin, Mauch Chunk or Harrisburg. Most of the posts are a combination of Mr. Wynning's writing and articles or letters written during the time the post is covering. The period writing offers a fascinating glimpse back in time.

The site is full of interesting posts, but it's a bit like a scavenger hunt. There's no menu listing all the posts by subject and date, so you have to poke around to find what you're looking for. There is a word cloud on the home page listing the many subjects covered, such as anthracite, coal mining, Miners Journal, Civil War and more. Clicking on a word takes you to a series of posts on that subject. It's helpful, but it doesn't take the place of a good index.

There are posts about the 1918 influenza outbreak that sound very familiar in today's COVID-19 crisis. Old photos of people wearing masks show us that we haven't progressed very far in our pandemic fighting capabilities.

If you're interested in the history of labor, mining and our area, this is a great site to spend some time on.

Kevin O'Neill is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites with him at koneill@timeshamrock.com.

