The Life of a Coal Miner

Course Title & Grade: American History – 11th Grade
Topic of Lesson: The life of a coal miner in the 19th-20th Century

Essential Questions:
Why were the standards of living and the overall life of coal miners so poor in the 19th and 20th centuries in Pennsylvania?

State Standards:
PA.SS.H.8.2.12.B _Identify and evaluate primary documents, material artifacts and historic sites important in Pennsylvania history from 1890 to Present; Documents, Writings and Oral Traditions.
PA.SS.H.8.2.12.D _Identify and evaluate conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations in Pennsylvania history from 1890 to Present; Labor Relations and immigration
PA.SS.H.8.2.12.A _Evaluate the political and cultural contributions of individuals and groups to Pennsylvania history from 1890 to Present;

Lesson Objectives

1. Students will be able to identify the problems facing coal miners in the 19th-20th Century by analyzing primary documents and completing a short writing assignment for homework.

2. Students will be able to evaluate the working conditions and daily life of a coal miner by watching “The Molly Maguires,” answering questions and having an in-class discussion.

Subject Content:
Coal mining in the 19th-20th centuries was an exceedingly difficult task and done by a variety of different workers including immigrants, skilled and unskilled as well as American citizens in the lower and middle class. The job itself was back-breaking and physically draining, the hours were long, the pay was horrendous and there was little to no job security. The conditions were hazardous, dark, cramped and damp. Disease spread often like black lung. Coal miners complained about their working conditions; but owners rarely listened. Owners were not required to improve conditions and if they ever faced a problem from their workers, the owner would replace the workers with other workers who would work without complaints and typically for cheap wages.

Coal miners faced arguably the most hazardous conditions of any job imaginable. The mines were dark. Flooding and fires were a possibilities. Also, miscommunications often lead to premature explosions which caused crippling injuries and sometimes death. Workers were forced in the mines for anywhere from ten to fourteen hours a day, depending upon age or experience. As if the conditions and hours were not enough, the coal miners would often work for an unimaginably low wage. It was not possible for coal miners to raise their families on their wages. Coal owners even charged workers for tools or and supplies which led to child labor.

In terms of labor relations, the worker had no rights. Coal miners were unable to legally unionize or strike. Union members could be blacklisted or fired immediately. Often times, workers were forced to sign yellow dog contracts, promising they would not join a union. If a strike occurred, companies hired strikebreakers and local and state law enforcement sided with owners. Thus workers would typically lose the battles for rights. Workers had no pension, minimum wage, or benefits. Coal miners were paid in script which was only accepted at the company store. This practice inflated prices and made miners even more dependent upon the
company town.

Between 1870 and 1995 there were 31,113 recorded deaths in anthracite coal mining. The majority of these deaths occurred in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Almost all of America’s anthracite coal travel from Pennsylvania, which had over 7 billion tons of mineable coal. Over 2,000 people are employed in anthracite coal mines today, at 274 different locations.¹

Overall, the life of a coal miner was dangerous and often seemed hopeless. There was virtually no way to make a better life for one’s self or children. Coal miners often were injured on the job, with no workers’ compensation benefits and long-term health problems such as black lung were everywhere. The conditions were hazardous, the pay was minimal, and the relations between owners and workers were antagonistic. The life of a coal miner was therefore difficult.

Resources and Materials: The resources picked for this lesson include a variety of different sources picked to enhance the activities for the students. The first resource is the movie, “The Molly Maguires.” This movie was specifically picked because it shows accurate representation of the lives of coal miners. The students would need to be informed that the purpose of the film is to show miner and owner relations as well as the daily life and working conditions of a coal miner. It is unnecessary to show the entire movie for this lesson because it is unknown whether the Molly Maguires actually existed. The only specific scenes that apply to the lesson should be shown. The selected two scenes accurately depict the life of coal miner in the 19th century.

The primary documents show the conditions inside a mine. These documents are photographs that show workers in a coal mine and the mine itself. Students will analyze the photographs to get a better understanding of how difficult the working conditions were. The

¹ Statistics found at, <http://www.myerchin.org/AnthraciteCoalMining.html>
students will use these photographs to engage in a class discussion and complete homework on the lesson.

**Activities for Class:**

**Motivator/Aim Question:** In what ways were mine workers discriminated against by mine owners in the 19th-20th centuries? The teacher would ask the students this question and write the students' answers on the board and come back and finish the list at the end of the lesson.

After students give a few answers out to the aim question, hand out the worksheet on the movie, “The Molly Maguires” (See Appendix A). The students will answer the questions on the worksheet while specific scenes from the movie are shown. The first scene that students should observe is the first ten minutes of the film. This scene shows the miners inside a coal mine, showing damp, dark, and cramped conditions. These first ten minutes give very accurate and detailed visuals that will help students see how bad the conditions were. The second scene is where McParland, the undercover detective is getting paid by the owners. The owner deducts about seven dollars from his salary and it shows how miners had no rights and a poor relationship with their owners. The scene also shows how mine owners utilized police officers during pay outs because of the possibility of a riot.

These two scenes were specifically picked to show poor labor relations in the coal mines as well as how hazardous and dangerous conditions for workers. Students will answer the questions during the film, then discuss what they have seen after the second scene is over. Any students' questions are to be answered at this point, the teacher can also ask questions to the students. (See questions section below).

After the class goes over the questions, students will break into groups of three or four for a primary source analysis. Photographs can be found in the appendix. Each group will receive
some photographs taken in the 19th and 20th centuries from coal mines showing the working conditions. The teacher will monitor the group work. Students will analyze the photos and the class will discuss what they see in each photograph.

**Closure:** To close the lesson, the class can go back to the original question and re-answer it. Any answers not said prior can be written on the board and students will hopefully have a better understanding of the hazards of working in a coal mine as well as the nonexistent labor relations between workers and owners. This should not take more than three minutes prior to the bell.

**Fact Sheet**

See “Subject Content” section for facts and content.

**Assessment:**

1. **Homework writing activity.** Students will answer the following question: In two to three paragraphs, based off of the primary sources in class and the movie, “The Molly Maguires,” what were the major problems facing coal miners in the 19th-20th centuries? How did miners react to these problems?

2. **In class group discussion:** Students will get primary documents of coal miners, and the mine itself and analyze them in groups. Students will ask questions and answer teacher questions during this activity.

3. **Movie questions:** Students will be required to answer questions while watching the movie to be discussed in class. The sheet can be collected for points if necessary.

**Questions for Class: Answer in Essays**

1. Why were coal miners unsuccessful in gaining rights during the 19th and early 20th
2. Design a plan coal miners may have used to gain more rights in the work place.

3. Did coal miners have any other options or engaging in other types of revolting unionizing, employment? Explain you answer.

Appendix A – “The Molly Maguires”

1. List three hazardous or unhealthy working conditions seen in the first ten minutes of the movie.

2. What type of welcoming did McParland receive in the bar? Why did the miners act this way toward him?

3. In what ways does the movie show the owners having total control over the miners?
   Cite specifics such as the company store, deductions in pay check, and the company town houses.

4. Why did the mine owner deduct a large portion of McParland’s pay check?

5. What is the movie’s main theme?

6. If you were a coal miner, knowing unions and strikes are illegal, what form of action would you take to rebel again unfair labor practices of coal owners? Why or why not?
   If you answered yes what form of action would you take?

Appendix B (photo below)

Perlitch, William. Published October 1942. Found at Library of Congress Prints & Photographs
Appendix C (photo below)

Perlitch, William. Published October 1942. Found at Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

Appendix D (photo below)

Hine, Lewis. “Breaker Boys” Found at
Appendix E (photo below)

“Anthracite Coal Miners” Author Unknown. Found at

<http://www.suite101.com/content/anthricite---pennsylvanias-king-coal-a260675>
Appendix F (photo below)

Annotated Bibliography


Runtime 124 minutes.

This movie was picked for the two specific scenes that accurately show the hazardous mine conditions and poor labor relations between workers and owners. The movie is easily accessible for teachers via internet or DVD. It should be used in-class with students following along answering questions.


The Library of Congress, American Memory section has a variety of great photographs dealing with anthracite coal mines. They have photos of breaker boys, adult males, the mines and more. These photographs should be used in class with students analyzing and interpreting them. They will benefit a class discussion and students can reference them when doing writing assignments or group presentations.


This website, created by John Myerchin, a former anthracite coal miner was helpful for subject content. All statistics came from this website and it also produced accurate and insightful
photographs. In a classroom, this website should be used for graining background information and photographs.


This website provides good photographs of a coal mine as well as background information about the anthracite region. The photographs can be used in class and the content is helpful if a Power Point or lecture was given. It also provides accurate, interesting background information on the subject.

Rhone, Rosamond. “Anthracite Coal Mining.” Found at, <http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/mmh/gildedage/content/AnthraciteRhone.cfm>

Rosamond Rhone’s article, published by The Ohio State University gives great content information about anthracite coal mining. It should not be used with students because it is very long and wordy but is an excellent source for information for the teacher. It provides statistics and insight into a coal mine that could be used to form or answer questions and used for subject content for a lesson.
Perlitch, William. Published October 1942. Found at Library of Congress Prints & Photographs

William Perlitch took a variety of photographs from anthracite coal mines in the early 1900's. They photos accurately represent a coal mine, the hazardous conditions, and are great for a classroom. Students should use these photographs for analysis and question answering.

Hine, Lewis. “Breaker Boys” Found at

<http://www.uiowa.edu/policult/politicalphotos/Hine3.html>

Lewis Hine took a lot of photographs of “Breaker Boys” or young men working in anthracite coal mines. These photos are great for a classroom to see how young these boys were working at and to compare them to today. Some of the photos show boys of eight or nine in horrendous conditions. The photos should be used in a classroom, with students, to work of analytical skills.