

Student Handout 4-Digging in a Dog Hole: Independent Anthracite Mining in the 20th Century

by Patrick Shea

When the stock market crashed in 1929, the impact of the ensuing Depression reverberated throughout the United States, not sparing the anthracite coal region. With the price of coal dropping, coal operators began shutting down the mines to wait out the hard times, throwing thousands out of work. Few of the jobless had skills beyond mining, and so most were left stranded in a region that offered few alternative means to support a family. These desperate times gave birth to bootleg mining, as miners struggled to meet the demands of self-preservation.

It had long been a custom in the anthracite fields for needy families to pick coal for personal use from the piles of waste materials left on company property. Company police would overlook this practice because this waste, called culm, had limited value, but culm picking was by no means encouraged. Two bitter strikes in the 1920s, however, had impoverished numerous families and left the culm banks picked clean. Taking a big, though logical, next step, the unemployed miners of the region began to dig small amounts of coal from their own unlicensed mines, called dog holes, in remote locations on coal company property.

The Depression shutdowns added to distress caused by the increasing mechanization of coal mining, which permanently eliminated thousands of mining and laboring jobs. Bootleg mining became a matter of economic necessity, so, though the coal companies tried to protect their property rights, miners resisted at every turn. Both their impoverished condition and their determination to practice their trade earned bootleg miners the respect of many other workingmen. Even the owners paid enforcers might lean toward the renegades, as in the case of one former Coal & Iron Policemen, who told a reporter, "I left my job; because to have kept it I would have had to arrest men who took coal to keep their families warm." Those who were arrested were usually released by local poor-boards. The few men brought to trial faced juries largely composed of sympathetic citizens in courts reluctant to impose sentences. In a report to the president of Coxe Brothers & Company, Inc., concerning bootlegging on the Oneida property, vice-president H.D. Kynor explained that, "since it is impossible to obtain convictions of bootleggers in the Schuylkill County courts, no arrests for actual bootlegging on the Oneida Property have been made." The breakdown of the legal process reflected both a general sympathy with the bootleggers and widespread fear that mass violence could erupt if courts condemned these men.

As the Depression deepened, bootlegging became a big business, though no single person involved made big money. Bootleggers, unlike the coal company owners, spread their income throughout the community, giving a much-needed boost to the local economy. By keeping stores, theatres, restaurants and saloons in business, bootleggers became a lifeline for small businesses across the region. Though coal companies insisted that by permitting and encouraging stealing, the entire region put its moral character at risk, churches and priests

openly challenged this argument. Father Weaver of Mount Carmel asserted, "Coal bootlegging has no bad moral effect on the people. It keeps them from starving."

When bootlegging accounted for 10% of the anthracite industry's output, the operators changed tactics and moved to bring the bootleggers back into the fold of legitimacy. In fact, most bootleggers would have gladly given up their operations in favor of legitimate work. Since bootleggers lacked proper funding, they usually dug their dog holes without structural support or good mining equipment. Tragedies in dog holes were frequent and left many dead. John O'Brien, who operated one of the most profitable bootleg shafts in the region, proclaimed he would give up his hole in a minute for a job in a legal mine and that "there's not a man of us who wouldn't."

In 1937, Governor George H. Earle appointed the Anthracite Coal Industry Commission to propose solutions to the bootleg problem. Although the commission did not reach a consensus, it was generally agreed that increased relief efforts would not be enough. Not only would relief payments be a financial burden to the state but miners also opposed relief as distasteful to any self-respecting, able-bodied man.

The Commission's findings did stimulate the creation of the Anthracite Industry Emergency Allocation Program, charged with ending the bootleg coal trade. The Commission forced coal companies to co-operate in an attempt to revive the ailing industry, using a plan that allowed each mine to produce a pre-determined percentage of the market's requirement for coal. Hiring a bootlegger could earn the company a bonus allotment of 3 ¼ tons. Companies could also increase their allocation by raising consumer demand for coal. Although the program made gains in closing some bootleg holes, coal companies could not absorb the 50,000 unemployed miners, let alone the new generation growing up and looking for work in the region.

While coal operators worked to bring the illegal miners back into the legitimate industry, bootleggers worked to bring legitimacy to their own cause. They formed organizations such as the Independent Coal Producers and the Independent Miners Association to protect their interests. These groups gained recognition on July 1, 1953, when a state law brought the independent miners under control of the Pennsylvania Department of Mines.

The term "bootleggers" is still used in the anthracite fields today, referring to those who work in small independent holes. "They are definitely a dying breed", says Mike Teretti of the Bureau of Mines and Reclamation, as strict licensing regulations have enticed many to look elsewhere for employment. The Bureau of Deep Mine Safety estimates that their numbers have dropped from the thousands to just over 200 in recent decades. Bootlegging began as a desperate strategy for desperate times. Its birth and development into a legitimate industry tells a story of individual miners and their fight for survival as well as of a pivotal moment in the history of anthracite coal mining itself.

Courtesy the Historical Society of Pennsylvania