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# **Race, Mines and Picket Lines:**

The 1925-1928 Western Pennsylvania Bituminous Coal Strike

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Oberlin College, Class of 2020

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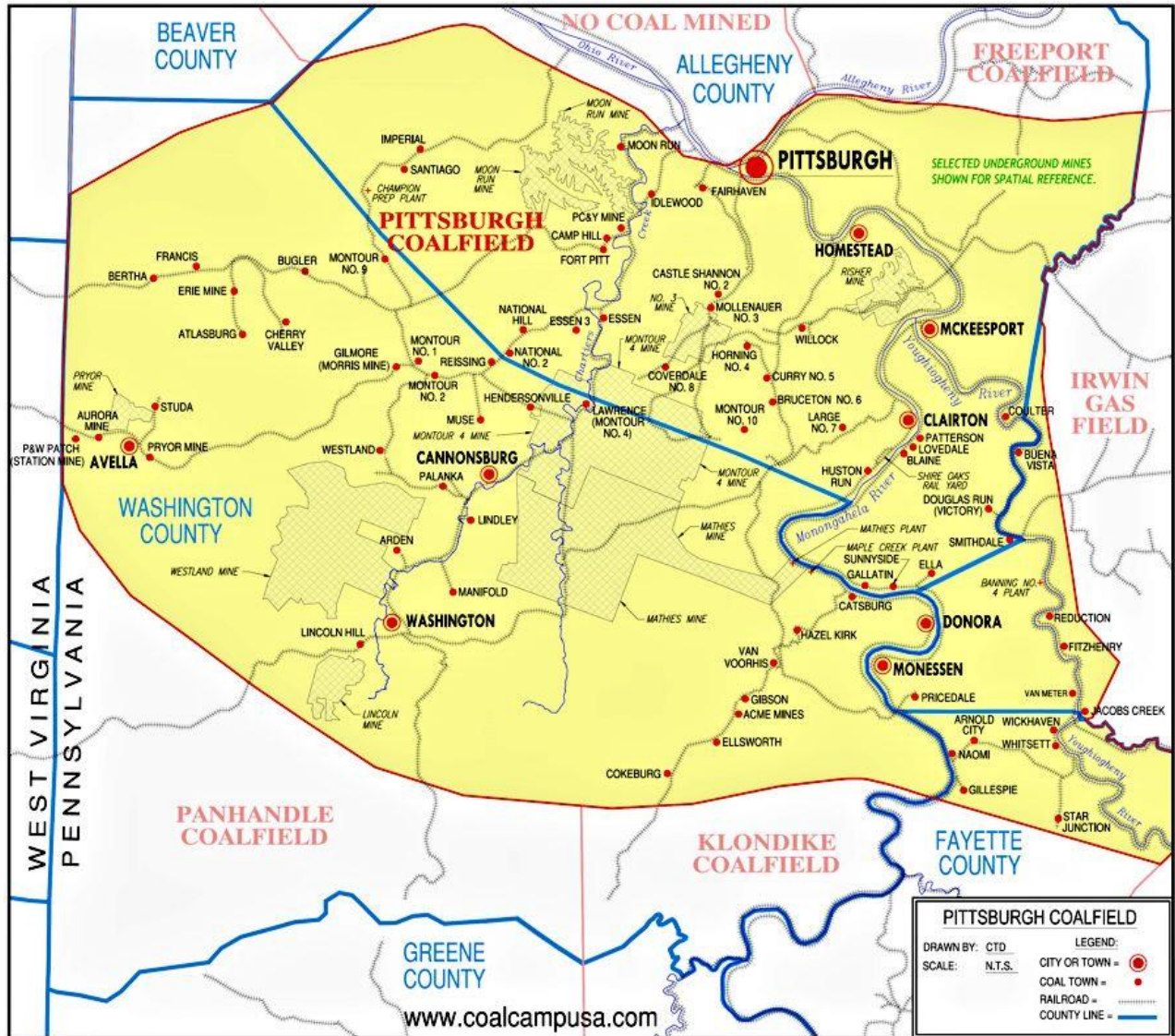
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Map representing the Pittsburgh Coalfield, as of 1916. Created by CoalCampUSA.

## **Preface: Author's journey**

This thesis has its origins in the aftermath of the 2016 election, which happened to coincide with my burgeoning interest in genealogy. At the time, I knew loosely from family stories that some of my paternal grandmother's people were immigrant coal miners in the Pittsburgh area. My grandmama, Diana Bierer, was born in Worthington, Pennsylvania, a town of 661 white people.<sup>1</sup> On her side of the family, I descend from white coal miners. Her grandfather, my great-great grandfather Leonard C. Sarver, was a coal miner and later a coal mine operator in Kittanning, PA. An *operator* refers to someone who was a local mine manager or superintendent, and was in charge of hiring and firing personnel on-site. When researching Leonard's career to learn about my own genealogy, I started thinking about the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and the labor movement during the 1920s and 30s era when Leonard worked.

The January after Trump's election, I conducted an individual academic Winter Term project called "Tracing Whiteness in My Mirror," in which I tried to uncover more about my Western Pennsylvania roots through an analytic lens of race and identity. I spent considerable time reflecting on a photograph of my great-great grandmother, Bertha Sarver. Bertha and Leonard ran a mining town general store in Evans City, 30 miles north of Pittsburgh. The photo features Grammy Bertha posing in the middle of her store, in front of a large collection of blackface and brownface masks on the exterior walls. This image evokes the legacy of blackface minstrelsy and its centrality in the construction of whiteness and popular culture in the United States; it also has prompted me to further explore my own racial identity and family history.

<sup>1</sup> According to 1930 Census, for Worthington, Armstrong, Pennsylvania; accessed via Ancestry Library Edition, compiled by author.



The following summer, I visited the Heinz History Center & Archives in Pittsburgh, which put me on the trajectory that began this thesis project. I stumbled across a 1939 Pittsburgh Coal Company pamphlet which featured images of Pittsburgh Coal Company miners for who were almost exclusively Black. The pamphlet fascinated me, since I had long bought in to the narrative, much like the one used in the 2016 election – that coal mining has been and is a white male profession. I wanted to learn more about the contributions and experiences of African-American coal miners in the United States; in flipping through Ronald L. Lewis' *Black Coal Miners in America* one day on the third floor of the Oberlin College Library, I stumbled across a mention of the 1925-28 strike. This is the round-about way, which I believe was fate, that I came to begin my research process.

And just recently, I found out two more pieces of information that deepen my connection to this strike. In February of 1927, my great-great grandfather Leonard Sarver was superintendent of the Shawmut and Hill Coal Mining Company's mine outside of Kittanning, Pennsylvania. Presumably, my great-great grandfather was one of these mine bosses who preferred employing non-union to unionized miners. And Bertha's brother, my great-great-great uncle Henry Sharpenberg, was killed in a coal mining accident in the mine he worked at, in August of 1926. Not only did this happen during the strike, but the Consumer's Coal Company mine Henry worked inside of was located in Harmarville, a small company town in Allegheny County – right in the middle of the strike zone. It's hard to know whether he was a union or non-union miner, but I hope to further investigate Henry's life and career – which was cut too short by a tragic coal car accident. This thesis represents my own attempt to understand my family's history in the broader context of coal mining, race relations, immigration and nativism, local politics, and community organizing

in Western Pennsylvania in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a conversation I wish I could have with Leonard's granddaughter, my grandmother Diana, who I know is still here keeping an eye on me.



*Figure 1: 15 years prior to the 1925-1928 strike, my great-great grandfather Leonard C. Sarver was a mine superintendent for the Pittsburgh Coal Company, in the McDonald District of Allegheny County.*

Coal mining is dangerous, dirty, backbreaking work. It involves igniting, cutting, shoveling, and loading coal in dimly lit, poorly-oxygenated caverns hundreds of feet underground. I cannot imagine what it's like to be a coal miner, nor what it was like to be a coal miner in the 1920s. Blessings to all who have risked their lives in this profession and continue to do so today. *May all the coal miners laboring underneath the ground today be safe and protected from all harm. May God bless the memory of the thousands of souls who have perished in the mines.*

## Introduction

Early one autumn morning in September 1927 in the Monongahela River valley, just south of Pittsburgh, more than 100 grade school students walked out of school in protest. Many of these students were the children of unionized coal miners who were out on strike. Most of these striking miners and their children were white, from first or second generation Southern and Eastern European families. For example, upwards of 20 per cent of people living in the nearby town of Monongahela City were either born in Italy or born of at least one Italian-American parent.<sup>2</sup> The protesting students, whose parents were affiliated with the United Mine Workers of America union, demanded that the school principal segregate school classrooms. These students refused to go to class with the children of *non*-union miners, many of whom were Black.<sup>3</sup> Although the local school district superintendent refused the students' request on a principle of "no discrimination between pupils of any race, creed, or faction,"<sup>4</sup> the students of Axleton School were not alone: at least two other local schools saw similar walkouts.

This student walkout took place in the midst of the 1925-1928 bituminous coal strike, which became a ferocious industrial battle between the United Mine Workers of America, the nation's most powerful union, and the Pittsburgh Coal Company, one of the nation's largest and most powerful corporations. The strike reveals a complex interplay of race, gender, class, sexuality, and power in the 1920s northern United States. The example of the Axleton School walkout in the fall of 1927 suggests the sweeping effect this strike had on everyday social life in the community. Dynamics of racism and racial politics played out on the ground, including in the

<sup>2</sup> Figure estimated by author's analysis of United States Federal Census, 1930, in Monongahela, Washington, Pennsylvania. 1,552 of 8,678 residents met this criteria, according to author's search in Ancestry Library Edition.

<sup>3</sup> "Over One Hundred Pupils Of Axleton School Join In Strike at Gallatin," the *Monessen Daily Independent* (Monessen, Pennsylvania), September 12, 1927, 1.

<sup>4</sup> "School Trouble in Axleton," *The Daily Republican* (Monongahela, Pennsylvania), September 12, 1927, 1.

form of clashes between school children. In this case, the angry white mob mentality on the picket line carried over into the classroom.

This thesis investigates the 1925-1928 bituminous coal mining strike in Western Pennsylvania through the lens of race. What started as coal miners walking out in protest of wage cuts and union-busting turned into all-out guerilla warfare in the countryside mining counties south of Pittsburgh, particularly as the company brought in an unprecedented number of Black miners to replace striking white miners. Black miners, who had been all but excluded from the lily-white United Mine Workers of America, emerged on the scene primarily as non-union coal miners. The influx of Black mining families and the growth of the Black community in rural Western Pennsylvania outraged whites who viewed it as a racial takeover of *their* communities.<sup>5</sup> White union miners targeted Black miners rhetorically and physically with particular viciousness, despite the fact that most “strikebreakers,” or non-union employees, were also white people.

The 1925-1928 bituminous coal mining strike became a flashpoint of racial, ethnic, and class conflict in the 1920s industrial northern United States. It permeated all aspects of social life in the Western Pennsylvania communities it impacted. Using race as a tool of analysis allows us to see how the 1925-1928 coal mining strike in Western Pennsylvania was a racialized contestation about *who* belonged in a coal mine. To truly understand this labor conflict between a major union and a major coal company, I argue that we must view it against the broader backdrop of racial politics in the 1920s northern United States. An on-the-ground social history of this strike reveals that coal mines were a highly racialized space.

This strike represents northern industrial whites’ fears of a changing coal mining industry and coal community life in the 1920s. White union miners deployed anti-Black rhetoric and used

<sup>5</sup> Which were never actually “theirs” to begin with! White settlers displaced and forcibly removed the indigenous peoples of the Allegheny Valley.

violence as a way to claim that coal mines were a space that belonged to whites. In the 1925-1928 labor conflict, unionized white miners felt that an influx of Black miners posed a threat to their status and power in the Pennsylvania coal mining industry. Union rhetoric illustrates the narratives involved in linking coal mining with white identity politics, a narrative that a committee of United States Senators who investigated the white union miners' complaints accepted. Coal mining is hard work; it involves dangerous, yet also rewarding, tasks that are respected and admired in society as "manly" labor. Both white working-class miners and white elites, namely the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, feared what it might signify if Black men could do this work well and they worried about Black miners gaining a foothold in the Pennsylvania mines. The white miners, and their political supporters, were ultimately fighting to ensure that coal mining would remain a job associated with white men.

This thesis explores how race was deployed as a way of stoking fear and resentment to protect the interests of white union coal miners, as well as how it served as a tool for solidarity and collective organizing among Black non-union miners. I also investigate what working as a coal miner in Pennsylvania meant for a first-generation Hungarian, Italian, or Slovakian immigrant – whose own status as white was not yet solidified. My focus on this one particular labor dispute serves as a window into the larger racial politics of Appalachian coal mining during the 1920s and 1930s. Ultimately, strikes are not just work stoppages. They are rich moments for analysis of how workers and their families stand up for themselves and understand their identities as people.<sup>6</sup>

To understand this strike, we need to get the basic lay of the land on coal mining in this period and region of the United States. The 1925-1928 strike reflected the challenges facing both the coal industry and unionized workers in this era. In 1920, Pennsylvania employed more coal

<sup>6</sup> Erik Loomis, *The History of America in Ten Strikes*, (New York and London: The New Press, 2018), 3.

miners than any other state in the U.S.; and the Pittsburgh Coal Company produced the most coal of any company in the world.<sup>7</sup> In Western Pennsylvania, this was *bituminous*, or “soft,” coal – which was burned into coke, an important fuel for making steel. However, over the next ten years, the market for bituminous coal shrank.<sup>8</sup> Responding to this decline in demand, the Pittsburgh Coal Company lowered its wage scale and closed down all of its unionized mines in August 1925.<sup>9</sup> When they decided to switch to an “open shop” non-union basis, thousands of longtime union miners refused to come back to work.<sup>10</sup> The United Mine Workers of America walkout took place during a time when government had little interest in protecting or promoting organized labor unions. Dating back to before the Civil War, companies found they could exert influence on local, state, and federal judges to issue injunctions against striking workers. In the 1920s alone, courts handed down over 2,000 anti-strike injunctions, aimed at halting the organizing of coal, steel, garment, and other workers.<sup>11</sup>

The 1925-1928 strike took place at a time when coal mining was almost entirely white and male. For example, in the entire state of Pennsylvania there were only about 350 African-American

<sup>7</sup> The southwestern Pennsylvania counties of Fayette, Washington, Allegheny, Cambria, and Westmoreland produced 70 percent of the state’s total coal tonnage in 1920. In this region, the type of coal mined was bituminous coal. There are two types of coal: anthracite (“hard” coal used for heating homes), and bituminous (“soft” coal used for making steel).

<sup>8</sup> Carmen DiCiccio, *Coal and Coke in Pennsylvania*, (Harrisburg, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1996), 155. The price of coal “plunged from a historic high of \$3.75 a ton in 1920 to \$1.78 in 1929” (DiCiccio, 156).

<sup>9</sup> Other regions outside of northern Appalachia were already doing this, most notably in central Alabama. This dynamic put the United Mine Workers of America and their leader John L. Lewis in constant conflict and negotiation with the industrialists. Although they agreed to a \$7.50/day wage contract as part of the 1924 Jacksonville Agreement, the Pittsburgh Coal Company wanted to destroy the union at all costs.

<sup>10</sup> And on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1927, after smaller companies in the Pittsburgh coal vein district decided to follow their larger competitor’s lead and begin employing on a strictly non-union basis, the United Mine Workers of America in District 5 called a strike. Many were subsequently evicted from their homes, and the UMWA had to scramble to construct temporary barracks for members and their families in open fields.

<sup>11</sup> William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 158. It was not until the Norris-LaGuardia (1932) and Wagner (1935) Acts were passed in the midst of the Great Depression and the New Deal that the federal government began to protect workers’ rights to collective bargaining and prohibit such injunctions.

coal miners in 1920 – out of a total coal mining employment of over 10,000 statewide.<sup>12</sup> That means nearly 97 percent of coal miners across the Keystone State were white. Before 1925, almost all of the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s employees were white men, and most of these miners were members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

When African-Americans did join the United Mine Workers of America and sought out good-paying union jobs and apprenticeships in Appalachian mines, they often faced discrimination and hostility from rank-and-file white co-workers. Although the UMWA rejected race-based workplace discrimination on principle in its 1890 founding constitution, many white protestant miners refused to work alongside African-American, Jewish, Asian-American, and Catholic miners.<sup>13</sup> In the coal mines of the Central Competitive Field (Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois), the Ku Klux Klan had a strong presence among rank-and-file white union miners.<sup>14</sup> Language that specifically targeted Asian Americans frequently appeared on the pages of the United Mine Workers Journal (*UMWJ*). The *UMWJ* warned of the “hordes of black, brown, yellow and striped workers ... who have not the slightest idea of the meaning of organization.”<sup>15</sup> Its own racism – formal and informal, overt and covert – was one of the key reasons why the UMWA failed to organize across racial lines in the industrializing northern states leading up to and during this 1925-1928 strike. Thus, the union’s *de facto* exclusion of most miners of color was one of the main reasons why the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s payroll was so lily-white in the 1910s and early 1920s.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Figure computed using 1920 United States Federal Census, via Ancestry Library Edition, by author.

<sup>13</sup> The United Mine Workers of America was formed in Columbus, Ohio in 1890. Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 104.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Hill, “The Problem of Race in American Labor History,” *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 2 (1996): 197. Accessed August 12, 2019. [www.jstor.org/stable/30030646](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030646).

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that the UMWA had *no* Black members, in fact leadership of union locals in West Virginia and Ohio sometimes had African-American union officials. For more on UMWA constitutional conventions, later

That said, African-Americans had not been completely shut out of the unionized mines. As Peter Gottlieb points out in *Making Their Own Way*, of the small population of Black miners already in the Pittsburgh mining district before the strike, at least half if not more of them were in fact members of the United Mine Workers of America.<sup>17</sup> Black union families, like that of Frank Jones, presumably migrated to the area in the immediate aftermath of World War I, when steel mill and coal mine jobs opened opportunities to good wages. Racial conflict in the mines also experienced a brief lull between 1920 and 1923.<sup>18</sup> Some of these Black union miners crossed the picket line during the strike, as did some white union miners. Black miners who were already in the area and unionized by the time of the 1925 strike may have emerged on the scene as strikebreakers in previous labor disputes.<sup>19</sup> In his 1944 book, *The Black Man in White America*, John G. Van Deusen reported that 8,000 Black miners remained in the Pittsburgh coal district following the 1922 bituminous strike.<sup>20</sup> There is some suggestive oral history evidence that a small, unionized community of Black miners formed after the 1919 and 1922 strikes in the Connellsville Coke District, just a few miles south of where the 1925 strike primarily took place.<sup>21</sup>

This 1925-1928 strike also coincided with the first waves of the Great Migration of Black people from the U.S. South to the industrial urban North, Midwest, and West. Crop failures due to boll weevils, white domestic terrorism, and good-paying mining jobs in the Pittsburgh area were

debates at national meetings on prohibition against KKK membership, etc., see Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 104-107; for specifics on Anti-Asian racism see Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, June, 1996), 197-198.

<sup>17</sup> Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 165.

<sup>18</sup> See Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 65; David Corbin, *Life, Work, Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*, (University of Illinois Press, 1981) 79.

<sup>19</sup> See Gottlieb, for discussion of the 1919 steel strike in Pittsburgh, and the role of Black non-union steel workers

<sup>20</sup> John George Van Deusen, *The Black Man in White America*, (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc. 1938), 56.

<sup>21</sup> See Patch Work Voices project interviews with Helen Banks Brown, John Mitchell, Frank Jones, Howard Dantzler, Dorothy Parnell, for example.



some of the factors that influenced Black men to take positions with the Pittsburgh Coal Company during the strike. Company labor recruitment agents intentionally did not mention the strike when recruiting non-union miners. While many deserted the mines after experiencing the racist and repressive conditions of company towns, some Black non-union miners sent for relatives to join them. Pittsburgh Coal Company employment statistics suggest that, while Black miners made up less than five percent of all miners who worked in Pittsburgh Coal Company mines in 1920, they comprised nearly forty percent of all miners by 1930.<sup>22</sup> The majority of this influx into the mines took place between 1925 and 1928.<sup>23</sup>

Changes between the 1920 and 1930 Federal censuses in Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, just downstream from Pittsburgh, tell a compelling tale. In 1920, coal dominated the local economy, with approximately 809 total miners.<sup>24</sup> At that point, one can reasonably assume these were all union miners. Only nineteen were Black – which translates to just above 2 percent. However, a decade later Black miners made up 34 percent of all miners who lived and worked in Elizabeth, PA.<sup>25</sup> While the total mining population decreased by nearly half between 1920 and 1930, even so the increase in absolute numbers of Black miners is striking.

Coal companies strategically hired Black miners as part of a strategy of controlling and taunting white workers. Companies had long sought to exploit existing racial divisions among workers to prevent solidarity and cross-racial collective action. Industrial employers who sought to maximize production and profit wanted to minimize resistance or rebellion among employees. They did so, in part, by encouraging competition among their workers around who could be the

<sup>22</sup> Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community, 1780-1980*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 113

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> United States Federal Census, 1920, Elizabeth, PA. Created by author through Ancestry.com.

<sup>25</sup> United States Federal Census, 1930, Elizabeth, PA. Created by author through Ancestry.com.

most fit, loyal, manly, and efficient; management believed that this competition would drive up day-to-day production in mills, mines, factories, and packinghouses.

Companies also sought to eliminate workers who they feared had radical ideas. During the Red Scare that followed World War I, employers worried that white European ethnic miners might associate with the communist or socialist parties, or the left-leaning Industrial Workers of the World.<sup>26</sup> Instead, coal and other industry operators began to view African-American and Mexican-American workers as new targets to “manage” and boss around, with the least resistance possible.<sup>27</sup> Some coal operators viewed Black miners as more loyal, adjustable, and docile than some white Eastern and Central European miners.<sup>28</sup> Some managers also believed that Black employees would perform “work white men don’t do.”<sup>29</sup> To management, nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment could outweigh anti-Black racism.

This notion presumably led the Pittsburgh Coal Company to pursue its strategy in 1925 of recruiting and hiring Black miners in unprecedented numbers. Pittsburgh Coal Company personnel director Clyde A. McDowell said of Black miners, “he will do what you tell him; is more easily satisfied than the white worker; does not act in concert; and is submissive.”<sup>30</sup> Coal operators thus reinforced an existing racist narrative that Black coal miners were more servile and dependent than their white counterparts.<sup>31</sup> The Pittsburgh Coal Company was also fully steeped in the era of Jim

<sup>26</sup> Some companies produced newspapers in Slavic languages that labelled striking as un-American and un-patriotic. See David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History*, (United States: Oxford University Press, 2012), 177. Fearing white ethnic working-class revolts, management began to push for immigration restriction following the first World War, and especially restrictions on immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

<sup>27</sup> Roediger and Esch, *Production of Difference*, 177

<sup>28</sup> Roediger and Esch, *Production of Difference*, 188-89

<sup>29</sup> Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930*, (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 162.

<sup>30</sup> Abram Harris and Sterling Spero, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1931), 238.

<sup>31</sup> Joe William Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 116.

Crow, and maintained separate and unequal accommodations, such as dining halls, bath houses, sleeping quarters, and pool rooms.<sup>32</sup>

Coal companies attempted to isolate non-union miners during strikes from evicted union miners on the picket line. Like other coal, steel, and railroad employers before them, the Pittsburgh Coal Company used a private security force to break strikes and violently crack down on worker uprisings.<sup>33</sup> These Coal and Iron Police officers harassed picketing miners, and kept them from socializing with non-union miners; notably, these private guards were not subject to the same oversight or regulation as actual public servants of the Commonwealth, and were able to operate outside the bounds of the law, mostly undeterred.<sup>34</sup> Privately-run company towns were often fenced, with exit-entrance gates, spotlights, and even machine gun towers manned by the Coal and Iron Police. All of these factors – the union’s history of racism, the coal company’s use of race to divide workers, and the Great Migration of African-Americans – made for an environment in which the racial battles of the 1925-1928 strike would play out.

My thesis complicates current scholarship on this strike, most of which was published at least 30 years ago, by bringing in new scholarship on race, whiteness, and on community building and agency among Black coal miners. The existing scholarship on this particular coal mining strike

<sup>32</sup> See historian of coal towns Crandall Shifflett work. Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 60. Shifflett demonstrates that in these privately-run towns, “a common feature of all stages of development was segregation.” During their visit to the dining hall outside the Coverdale mine of the Pittsburgh Terminal Coal Company, the stenographer who came with the Senators made sure to note that there was “a room for the whites on one side of the kitchen, and a room for the blacks on the other side of the kitchen.” United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> As a strategy to quell union organizing, coal, steel, and other industries employed often violent, private police forces dating back to at least the 1870s. For notable use of private company police to break strikes in the Pittsburgh area, see the Homestead Strike (1892) or the 1919 steel strike. Also, see West Virginia Mine Wars, Battle of Matewan (1914), Battle of Blair Mountain (1922); Ludlow Massacre in Colorado (1914). Some of the more notorious examples of coal and iron police violence were killings of innocent women and children at the Ludlow Massacre in Colorado, and the brutal Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency of the southern West Virginia coal wars – which both occurred a mere decade before the 1925 bituminous coal strike.

<sup>34</sup> Coal and iron police were armed with the standard-issue “blackjack” club and a side arm that a regular Pennsylvania state trooper or sheriff’s deputy would carry.

is small and not up-to-date with recent trends in race and labor historiography. Much of the small body of secondary source literature that focuses specifically on the 1925-1928 strike in Pennsylvania was written in the 1980s. This is surprising, considering how this strike encapsulates such rich themes for analysis: race, class, sexuality, agency, resistance, and unions in the 1920s. Most notably, the existing works on the strike do not fully incorporate two key historiographical developments: the agency of working-class Black coal miners, and the advancements in the field of whiteness studies. That being said, these sources – including the select few about Black miners during the strike – have provided me excellent information for my own analysis.<sup>35</sup> Carmen DiCiccio's work on the history of the Pennsylvania mining industry from the colonial period through the 1940s has also been a useful resource for me to understand the terminology of mining, and key strikes in UMWA history in the region.

None of the major scholarly works on the 1925-1928 strike in Western Pennsylvania has been published since recent key developments in the field of whiteness studies. David Roediger, George Lipsitz, Matthew Jacobson, Nell Irvin Painter, and Jonathan Metzl, among others, have all made valuable entries to open this avenue of study.<sup>36</sup> My analysis draws particularly on the insights of both Roediger and Jacobson in order to understand both how white union coal miners

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Paul Nyden, *Black Coal Miners in the United States: By Paul Nyden - New York, American Institute for Marxist Studies, [1974] 73 P.; 22 Cm*, American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1974; Linda Nyden, "Black Miners in Western Pennsylvania, 1925-1931: The National Miners Union and the United Mine Workers of America," *Science & Society* (1977): 69-101; Peter Gottlieb, "Black miners and the 1925-28 bituminous coal strike: The colored committee of non-union miners, Montour mine No. 1, Pittsburgh Coal Company," *Labor History* 28, no. 2 (1987): 233-241; Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987); Carl I. Meyerhuber, *Less Than Forever: The Rise and Decline of Union Solidarity in Western Pennsylvania, 1914-1948*, (Susquehanna University Press, 1987); Carmen DiCiccio, *Coal and Coke in Pennsylvania*, (Harrisburg, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> See for example, David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (Verso, 1991); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*, (WW Norton & Co., 2010); Jonathan Metzl, *The Dying of Whiteness: How the politics of racial resentment is killing America's heartland*, (Hachette UK, 2019).

understanding of their white identity shaped their actions during the strike, and how white European ethnic immigrants navigated their “in-between” position on the U.S. racial landscape. The analytic framework of whiteness is key to my thesis and represents one of its most innovative aspects. Most works on coal mining strikes in the United States only mention race when talking about Black miners, and rarely interrogate white miners’ whiteness. Using whiteness as a lens helps us better understand what was at stake for white miners, especially Eastern and Southern European white ethnics.

Neither does existing work on this strike fully explore the agency of Black miners. Some of the existing literature reinforces the harmful narrative that Black miners were merely passive pawns in a larger industrial battle. Ronald L. Lewis’s *Black Coal Miners in America*, for example, is a groundbreaking work that offers multi-regional analysis of Black coal miners from enslavement through 1980. But Lewis takes a top-down approach and claims that Black strikebreakers only attempted to organize “on occasion,” and were deterred from any further action or resistance when they “received the repression of the coal and iron police” in retaliation for organizing.<sup>37</sup> My third chapter will refute this claim.

Drawing on research done by labor historians like Joe Trotter and Eric Arnesen, I look at Black miners as active agents in shaping their own fates.<sup>38</sup> Joe W. Trotter’s *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32* explores the “proletarianization” of Black workers during this period, and the way in which Black coal miners came to a collective self-

<sup>37</sup> Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 114.

<sup>38</sup> For further exploration of this topic and methodology, these works have all covered Black working class migration and agency during this interwar period of rapid industrialization. Joe William Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); James R. Grossman, *Land of hope: Chicago, black southerners, and the great migration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own interests: Race, class, and power in twentieth-century Norfolk, Virginia*, (Univ. of California Press, 1991); Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30*, (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Joe W. Trotter, and Jared N. Day, *Race and renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since world war II*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

awareness of the intersection of their race and class. Trotter argues that Black miners in Southern West Virginia “largely organized their own migration” and “facilitated their own transition to the industrial labor force” through community networks, and a relationship with a small, but growing, Black middle class of ministers, politicians, and newspaper editors.<sup>39</sup>

Labor historian Eric Arnesen has also emphasized this point in his works on Black waterfront workers, railroad workers, and non-union coal miners. Arnesen writes that “Black workers more often appear as victims of racism, as little more than passive objects manipulated by whites,” and while *agency* is something talked about for white workers, “African Americans’ own responses and strategies are treated as if they were of secondary or even minimal importance.”<sup>40</sup> Trotter, Arnesen, and others inform my analysis of Black non-union miners’ actions during the coal strike of 1925-1928 in the Pittsburgh area, a study that broadens the regional scope of the field since existing literature focuses primarily on Black miners in Eastern Kentucky and Southern West Virginia.

Historian Robin D. G. Kelley’s groundbreaking work on working-class African American resistance politics further informs my understanding of the response of Black miners during this strike. Kelley argues that a political history of African-American workers “cannot be understood without ... the daily confrontations and evasive actions” known as ‘Infrapolitics.’<sup>41</sup> He evaluates the collective influence of a range of everyday actions, from spiritual practices, to music, to dragging one’s feet at work. Drawing on Kelley’s work on “everyday forms of resistance,” this

<sup>39</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Arnesen, “Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History,” in *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 1, (March 1998), 150. Accessed June 25, 2019. [www.jstor.org/stable/30030878](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030878). Eric Arnesen similarly argues in his 1998 assessment of the field of race and labor history that recent critiques of white trade union racism towards African-Americans, while incredibly valid, have taken away agency from Black workers. Eric Arnesen, “Specter of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era,” *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 319-335.

<sup>41</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 8.

thesis looks at everything from gardening to organized retaliations in considering how Black coal miners responded to being in the position of strikebreakers during this strike.

To explore both the racialized experience of white and black miners, this thesis draws from an array of primary source accounts produced during the strike period, the most important of which is the 1928 report of the United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio*. In 1928, a group of five Senators travelled into the strike's hotspots and conducted a wide range of field interviews. Between their multi-week visit to the strike zone and a larger follow-up investigation that the full Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce conducted back in Washington, Senators obtained testimony from nearly 150 individuals. Although the Senators peppered coal mining executives with many of their questions, they also talked to white striking miners of varying ethnicities, to white women and children in the community, to white clergy, to African-American non-union miners, to white non-union miners, and to local witnesses to key events. While the visiting Senators did not document the perspectives and experiences of Black women, some Black women submitted notarized depositions of their views to be entered into the congressional record.<sup>42</sup>

When the five Senators returned to their full Committee in Washington after their tour of the area, they conducted dozens more under-oath hearings with witnesses. The final report that the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce released publicly in the summer of 1928 is more than 3,000 pages long – full of witness statements, notarized depositions, and direct and cross

<sup>42</sup> See for example, “United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields of Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia*, (Washington D.C., Congressional Printing Office, 1928), 2585. Mrs. Grace Bainbridge and Mrs. Georgia Hall were both married to non-union African-American miners at the Montour No. 10 mine of the Pittsburgh Coal Company in Allegheny County. Bainbridge and Hall both submitted sworn testimony to racist abuse and threats they experienced from white women whose family members were on strike.

examination. While the Senate's report reflects the Senators' own racial perspectives, it is sometimes our only window into specific people and events in the strike.

The Senate report can be read on many different levels: it provides a good account of the strategy of the United Mine Workers labor union, as well as the Pittsburgh Coal Company's strategy for publicly defending its policies. While these 3,000 pages offer direct insight into the perspective and concerns of the federal government, the testimony and interviews also offer a window into the experiences of miners, Black and white.

Newspaper reports offer evidence about social life during the 1925-1928 coal strike in Western Pennsylvania. I use the *Monessen Daily Independent* in the mid-sized Westmoreland County steel city of Monessen to see how a local white-owned daily covered events during the strike as they pertained to race. To understand the perspectives of white trade unionists, the *United Mine Workers Journal (UMWJ)* reveals some of the rhetoric white union coal miners mobilized to share their viewpoints. I also have incorporated an array of articles in the nationally-printed *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the country's two most prominent Black-owned newspapers at the time.<sup>43</sup> Coverage in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and reports produced by Black non-union miners themselves offer insight into how Black miners understood their interests and their position in this strike. Analyzing the *Pittsburgh Courier* also helps reveal intra-community disputes over the best way to advance the Black community during the strike.

Oral histories from the Penn State University – Fayette's "Patch Work Voices" project in the 1990s have been a truly invaluable resource for understanding Black community life in 1920s and 30s southwestern Pennsylvania. I am immensely grateful to Elaine H. DeFrank and the rest of

<sup>43</sup> Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 126-127.



her interview and transcription team, as well as the miners and miners' family members who shared their stories.

Chapter 1 will show how white union miners mobilized anti-Black rhetoric and violence to make claims about their own white racial and coal mining identities. White union miners who went on strike understood their experience in racialized terms. To them, the Pittsburgh Coal Company's actions in evicting them and bringing in disproportionately Black non-union employees was a direct affront to their whiteness and status.

White union miners and their organization, the United Mine Workers of America, managed to convince the federal government to investigate the strike on their behalf. Chapter 2 will focus on the United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce inquiry during the spring of 1928, and how the Senators saw their own role in policing race relations and defining who belonged in a mining town. This chapter will also explore the racialized dialogue between white elite power brokers, namely the U.S. Congress and the Pittsburgh Coal Company.

And in spite of all of the racist narratives told about Black people and the Black community during this coal mining strike, Black miners and their families took decisive action to counter negative stereotypes and to defend their livelihoods. African-American non-union miners endured tremendous racism, workplace discrimination, Jim-Crow company towns, decrepit housing conditions, and police brutality, not to mention violence and harassment from striking whites. Yet they resisted their oppressive treatment and built community in the coal fields of Western Pennsylvania in both overt and covert ways. Chapter 3 offers an analysis of Black agency and resistance during the strike, and evaluates the class-based differences in approaches that the larger Black community took in response to stigmatization and intimidation from white union miners and industrial repression and exploitation from the Pittsburgh Coal Company.

In this project, I try to bring together the lived experiences, perspectives, and day-to-day interactions on-the-ground that make the 1925-1928 bituminous strike a compelling historical flashpoint for analysis. This coal mining strike was ultimately a conflict over space, belonging, and racial identity. I borrow the overarching methodology of social historian Erik Loomis, in his recent work *The History of America in Ten Strikes* (2018) as a model for my own thesis. As Loomis writes, “the workplace is a site where people struggle for power,” and sites where complicated identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and union-affiliation converge on the ground.<sup>44</sup> Work stoppages, walkouts, and factory floor protests are “special moments,” that halt production, “raise the stakes” and put “poverty and workplace indignity into the public spotlight.”<sup>45</sup>

Studying strikes emphasizes often overlooked moments of working-class struggle in United States history, and allows us to see how the powers-that-be have divided people along lines of identity and status, and how different groups have or have not forged solidarity with each other. Simply put, “the history of worker uprisings shines a light on other issues.”<sup>46</sup> The 1925-1928 coal strike in Western Pennsylvania shines a spotlight of issues of race and sexuality, in particular, and offers a window into racial dialogue, racial politics, and racial solidarity in the period and region. It offers the opportunity to explore different people’s fears and anxieties in relation to class, race, status, and gender. For example, what can this strike tell us about white racial anxiety and white miners attitudes about their own privilege position in this respected and valuable industry? What can it tell us about larger fears in the white community psyche about race relations in the 1920s? What about the strategies of African-Americans to gain access in the industrial economy during

<sup>44</sup> Erik Loomis, *The History of America in Ten Strikes*, (New York and London: The New Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Loomis, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Loomis, 5.

this period? Strikes are not just labor histories. They are social, political, and cultural histories as well. This thesis underscores the importance of why strikes matter as social history flashpoints and why race helps us understand the significance of this strike.

## Chapter 1 | Whiteness on strike

Mrs. Mary Karpy had lived in the mining town of Bruceton for six-and-a-half years before the shooting incident in February of 1928. That winter, when a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Interstate Commerce came to investigate the coal strike, she told the visiting Senators that, “we very seldom have a good sleep any more since” a group of “colored” strikebreaking miners had fired rifle rounds at her two days in row.<sup>47</sup> Karpy appealed to the Senators’ emotions, and their racial anxieties, as she described how the shanty union barracks “don’t protect us” from the violent and “never sober” strikebreakers employed in the formerly-unionized mine up the road.<sup>48</sup> Her story as a Polish immigrant living in barracks that the United Mine Workers put up to house their evicted members and families, closely mirrors that of Mrs. Anne Holmack. Holmack, who was born in Finland and identified as a “coal miner’s wife for 22 years,” explained the horror of bullets whizzing past her head as non-union miners allegedly shot from atop a train trestle down towards the local union-camp schoolhouse. When Senator Gooding asked her “were they colored men?” Holmack was sure of it, for one reason: “*no white people walk on the railroad track.*”<sup>49</sup>

This chapter explores how white miners deployed race and racialized narratives as part of their political and economic battle with coal operators during the late 1920s labor conflict. The racist rhetoric and violent behavior of white union coal miners was a way for them to make claims about their own position and belonging in this industry. Such anti-Black stereotypes, and the anti-Black violence that they promoted, were by no means a new phenomenon of U.S. race relations, or labor relations, in the 1920s or 30s.<sup>50</sup> But the ways in which discourse and actions manifested

<sup>47</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Vol. I, 76.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Vol. I, 77.

<sup>50</sup> See for example, Herbert Hill, “The Problem of Race in American Labor History,” *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 2 (1996): 197; Eric Arnesen, “Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of

during this specific coal strike reflects a time of white uncertainty about maintaining a stranglehold on social power in the mines.

Strikebreaking miners who were Black posed a particular threat to the positionality of white ethnic miners of Southern and Eastern European descent on the American racial landscape. While the labor of digging, dynamiting, and lifting coal in the northern Appalachian coal fields was dirty and exhausting, in the 1920s, much, it was considered “white man’s work.” To incorporate David Roediger’s concept of *herrenvolk republicanism*, when working-class white union miners in Pennsylvania – especially those who were first or second generation white ethnic immigrants – found themselves replaced by Black strikebreakers, it begged the question “*who am I above now?*”<sup>51</sup> The notion that Black men could do this work threatened to degrade white male miners’ sense of position and power over their industry. White union miners’ response to this perceived threat allows us to examine how they saw themselves, as white men and as coal miners.

### **Rhetoric of white resentment**

White union miners’ rhetoric illustrates how they came to understand their experience on strike in racialized terms. Through a discourse of anti-Blackness, white union strikers argued for their own white male citizenship. Whites on strike degraded African-American nonunion miners with racist tropes in newspapers, union journals, speeches, and testimony to Senators, and at the same time deployed pro-union, pro-white rhetoric to prop up their own position and identity. Central to this strategy, white union miners strategically coded strikebreakers as Black, even though only about half of them actually were. This seemingly calculated move both appealed to

Labor History,” *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 1 (1998): 146-74 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030878>; Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African Americans, the labor movement, and the decline of the Democratic party*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 59-60.

the committee of U.S. Senators who investigated the strike and masked the fact that white union miners *also* crossed the picket line.

In the years leading up to the 1927-1928 Western Pennsylvania walkout against the powerful Pittsburgh Coal Company, mostly covert union policies and practices prevented Black people from joining the union. According to Peter Gottlieb, unionized “white miners at times effectively barred Black people from employment at particular mines simply by refusing to work with them,” and if they did, they made sure to insist upon a “racially split job hierarchy.”<sup>52</sup> As a result, whenever Black miners did enter the fold, they were typically in the position of non-unionized strikebreakers when the white union miners went on strike. This is not to say that all strikebreakers – or pejoratively, “scabs,” – were Black. In fact, a majority of strikebreakers of the early 1900s in central and northern Appalachia were of Eastern and Southern European descent.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the proportion of Black coal miners in Western Pennsylvania increased nearly ten-fold between 1920 and 1927 as coal company agents actively began to recruit Black men from industrial northern steel cities and southern coal mining regions to fill the void of white workers who had gone on strike.

The United Mine Workers forged white racial solidarity within the rank and file through its union newspaper. Founded in 1890 in Indianapolis, the *United Mine Workers Journal (UMWJ)* made it possible for leadership of the United Mine Workers of America – the nation’s most powerful union before the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936 – to get the word out to the rank-and-file miners. The *UMWJ* also shared on-the-ground accounts from

<sup>52</sup> Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 164-5.

<sup>53</sup> Judith McDonough, “Worker Solidarity, Judicial Oppression, and Police Repression in the Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania Coal Miner’s Strike, 1910-11,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64, no. 3 (1997): 384-406; see Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 70-73 for immigration patterns that played a role in this.

representatives of union locals across the country, editorials about issues affecting union members, and even cartoons. Although the union was founded on principles of inclusion and fighting for the rights of U.S. coal miners who worked dangerous jobs and faced increasingly brutal management, the pages of the *UMWJ* during the bituminous strike of the late 1920s made it clear that those values applied only to whites.

As the words they penned reflect, white union miners saw themselves as victims of industrial oppression at the hands of the coal operators. At the same time, these miners wanted the public to see them as strong, courageous, and determined. They fought both to get the Pittsburgh Coal Company to employ only on a union basis, *and* to prove that they were the polar opposites of dependent, un-fit strikebreakers.<sup>54</sup> In an October 1926 letter to the editor which officials from the union local in Jacob's Creek, PA wrote to the *UMWJ*, white miners projected their sense of brotherhood, their loyalty, their family values, and most of all, that they were firmly holding their ground against the un-American tactics of the company. Calling work conditions "unbearable," the union officials portrayed themselves as god-fearing family men who were engaged in a "noble fight" against the tyrannical coal operators.

As the United Mine Workers argued in their newspaper, the greatest sin of all was that the coal operators had "imported" 4,000 *Black* strikebreakers.<sup>55</sup> The union miners of Jacob's Creek, who were 99.5% white in the 1920 Census, referred to non-union miners as "scum of the earth shipped into" the Pennsylvania coal fields.<sup>56</sup> While the racial makeup of that "scum" is not defined in the letter, the 1930 Federal Census for South Huntingdon Township (in which Jacob's Creek is

<sup>54</sup> For more on the concept of race, dependency, and fitness for citizenship and self-government, see Matthew Frye Jacobson's work, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

<sup>55</sup> William S. Lytle Jr., "Negroes Duped: The Pittsburgh Coal Company Fools its Strikebreakers," *United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: July 1, 1927), 5.

<sup>56</sup> Lomango et., al, "Conditions in District 5," *United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: October 1, 1926), 14. Census data calculated by author, via Ancestry.com, for 1920 United States Federal Census in South Huntingdon, Westmoreland, Pennsylvania.

incorporated) saw an increase in the percentage of Black coal miners from near zero, to ten percent, in the decade of 1920-30. Based on Pittsburgh Coal Company employment records, approximately 39 percent of miners were Black at the nearby Banning No. 2 mine in May of 1927.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not the strikebreakers in this particular town were majority white or Black, this letter reveals the rhetorical hostility and sharp disdain for non-union miners early on in the strike. It demonstrates how the union framed their rank-and-file as loyal white men who had each other's backs: they would never sellout and fall for the Pittsburgh Coal Company's offers to come back to work. Otherwise, they would "be traitors to [their] fellow men."<sup>58</sup>

Many other letters to the editor of the *UMWJ* were far more explicit in their use of racialized language than that of the Jacob's Creek union officials. Forty miles west, in Glendale, PA, union local 797 representative John Hardrick concluded his August 1926 comments on the strike with the line, "if you pass by a Pittsburgh Coal Company mine you will find it looks just like a convict mine in Alabama."<sup>59</sup> This particular comment served to associate Black non-union miners with criminality, forced labor, and dependency – as opposed to dignified free white labor.<sup>60</sup> White miners writing in to the *UMWJ* accentuated the presence of African-Americans as strikebreakers in previously overwhelmingly white mines, as a way to drive up outrage and resentment. Presented with the circumstances, white unionists pulled the race card out of the playbook as a way to further their own interests.

Other examples from the *UMWJ* demonstrate how a strategy of deploying anti-Black rhetoric was core to white unionists' ability to make claims against what they saw as the racially

<sup>57</sup> Gerald Allen, "The Negro Miner in the Pittsburgh District," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 1927), 31.

<sup>58</sup> Lomango et., al, "Conditions in District 5," 14.

<sup>59</sup> Hardrick, John, "Everybody Happy," *United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: August 15, 1926).

<sup>60</sup> For more on the concept of free white labor and (in)dependence, see "White Slaves, Wage Slaves and Free White Labor," in Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, pp. 65-87.



inappropriate behavior of the coal company, and to shore up their own sense of self-worth, superiority, and power. The dichotomy of loyalty and betrayal emerges quite frequently in conversation around who truly earned their place in the mines and who truly deserved union protection. For example, the *UMWJ* attacked non-unionists as free-loaders who “showered” in the benefits of organized labor activism, but “refused to join in concerted efforts to help the general cause” and instead stole jobs that belonged to other men.<sup>61</sup> This line of reasoning was predicated on the myth that Black miners and other miners of color (namely Asian-American miners) were fully welcome into the brotherhood halls of the United Mine Workers of America to begin with. On the contrary, despite a founding clause against discrimination, local union leaders practiced an informal, yet effective policy of excluding most African-Americans from union organizing drives.

From a close reading of the rhetoric that emerged during this particular strike, white union miners spoke of “strikebreaker” and “Black” as synonymous. While it is true that the percentage of African-American miners rose precipitously from the beginning to the end of the 1920s in the surrounding counties of Pittsburgh, there were, in fact, still a majority of *white* strikebreakers. The Division Manager of the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s Moon Run Mine, Mr. H.M. White, informed the visiting subcommittee of U.S. Senators that before the company stopped following the Jacksonville Agreement, “no colored men were employed in the mine.”<sup>62</sup> By 1928 the mine was operating at under capacity, with 400 men, “40 to 50 per cent of whom” were Black in the spring of 1928.<sup>63</sup> That still leaves at least half of non-union employees as whites. Yet the *UMWJ*, testifying strikers and pro-union community members, emphasized again and again the presence and hypervisibility of Black non-union miners.

<sup>61</sup> “Why the Union?” *United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: October 1, 1927), 6-7.

<sup>62</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Vol. I, 354.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Not all white unionists stayed on strike, either. According to the mine superintendent in Pricedale, half of its employees in the Spring of 1928 were “old miners who had belonged to the union.”<sup>64</sup> In light of the fact that some of their own did go back to work, the United Mine Workers needed a compelling narrative to tell in which they could demonize another group. The fact that a sizeable portion of nonunion miners who temporarily filled their shoes were *Black*, rather than Italian, Jewish, German, or Russian, became a central way for the white miners to make claims about their own industrial worth, masculine strength and virility, and upstanding citizenship.

In their rhetoric, white unionists turned a blind eye to fellow whites who crossed the picket line and worked for non-union-scale wages in Pittsburgh Coal Company mines. Instead, they found that a more politically expedient solution was to discredit and delegitimize Black miners and to exaggerate the actual racial demographics of company towns. Coding “scabs” as “Black” offered the advantage of denying the reality of whites who crossed the picket line, and painting union miners as victims of a *racial* takeover of *their* workplace, and their communities. This language of racial invasion also applied to the racialized stigmatization of Mexican-American strikebreakers. Around April 22, 1927, UMWA international vice president Phillip Murray alleged that “32 Mexicans have been imported by the Pittsburgh Coal Company ... in violation of our immigration laws, for strike-breaking purposes,” and demanded a federal oversight investigation.<sup>65</sup> However to be clear, the racist rhetoric that came from the UMWA and its supporters explicitly targeted African-Americans – although it must be acknowledged that Latinx, indigenous, and Asian-American communities also worked in the coal mines of the United States, especially in the western states of Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Vol. I, 357.

<sup>65</sup> “Importing Strikebreakers,” *Monessen Daily Independent*, (Monessen, PA: April 22, 1927), 1.

<sup>66</sup> See the Ludlow Massacre (1914) and also see, Yuji Ichioka, “Asian Immigrant Coal Miners and the United Mine Workers of America: Race and Class at Rock Springs, Wyoming, 1907,” *Amerasia Journal* 6, no. 2 (1979): 1-23.

White union leaders deployed racial tropes to stigmatize Black coal miners in the region to offer a broader commentary on masculinity, manliness, and self-control. Strike organizers attempted to emasculate Black miners as part of a project to strengthen the image of white miners. In his piece, “Negroes Duped: The Pittsburgh Coal Company Fools its Strikebreakers,” *UMWJ* staff correspondent William S. Lytle Jr. drew from quintessential minstrel show tropes. Lytle wrote that a Black non-union miner “finds himself a long way from the cotton fields ... [and] shivers through a bitter northern winter ... disease snatches him.”<sup>67</sup> Such language suggests the union strategy was to discredit Black non-union miners as weak and pitiful.

Yet, on the other hand, Lytle also argued that, “if unlucky,” Black miners could pose “a potential menace to the community which unwillingly has received him,” reflecting a racist narrative that Black men could not control their primal aggression and lust in the way that white men could.<sup>68</sup> Lytle played on the resentment and fear of white union families; local whites, fully immersed in the common white racial thinking of the 1920s believed that Black miners presented an existential threat to the social fabric of the community. Existing racist stereotypes of Black male aggression, hypersexuality, and general immorality fueled the anger of economically-insecure, out-of-work, evicted white union miners.<sup>69</sup>

The different racial tropes and narratives that white unionists’ used to appeal to the broader white public and to the committee of white Senators illuminates the particularities of white racial thinking during the 1920s. Calling Black strikebreakers “lazy” and unproductive workers, or drunk

<sup>67</sup> William S. Lytle Jr., “Negroes Duped: The Pittsburgh Coal Company Fools its Strikebreakers,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: July 1, 1927), 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> For a further exploration of views on Black manhood and hyper/hypo masculinity in this period, see Michele Mitchell, “The Black Man’s Burden”: African Americans, Imperialism, and the Notions of Racial Manhood 1890—1910,” *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 44 Iss.7, 77-99; also see Gail Bederman’s chapter on Jack Johnson: Gail Bederman, “Remaking Manhood through Race and “Civilization,” in *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1-44.

and sexually promiscuous in the pages of the United Mine Workers Journal, as slurs on the picket line, or in speeches and rallies was doubly significant for what it implied about *white* miners. Such racialized rhetoric reflects what Mathew Frye Jacobson calls the “dual civic terrain of the ‘fit’ and the ‘unfit’ for self-government” – that white union miners could govern their own morals, and proved so by demonstrating that Black strikebreaking miners could not.<sup>70</sup> This tactic was useful to shore up concerns and fears about white miners’ own worth, civic belonging, moral respectability, and ultimately, their superior opportunities and position in the workplace.

One prominent racial trope that emerged during the strike focused on the alleged superior productivity, grit, and work ethic of whites. The message that union miners received from their International Vice President, Phillip Murray, on the “importation” of Black strikebreakers was painstakingly clear. In the opening round of hearings before the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Murray decried that a Black miner was “just about as efficient in a coal mine as in a cotton field,” suggesting that Black miners were not as industrious as their white counterparts.<sup>71</sup> Murray even argued that Black and white employees of the Pittsburgh Coal Company produced different tonnages in production. Comments like Murray’s, on the “character of the men” – referring to strikebreakers versus strikers – illustrate how questions of industrial worth and human capital were racialized during the strike.<sup>72</sup>

Another often-featured racial narrative during the strike was that Black miners were unfit to belong in coal mining communities due to their immoral behavior, which was contrasted with the decency of the white union miners. Local whites charged that Black non-union miners engaged

<sup>70</sup> Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA), 27.

<sup>71</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Vol. I, 15.

<sup>72</sup> Here, the narrative was not just to be understood that production levels dropped went the coal companies switched to operating on a non-union basis (which was true, due to lower employment levels), but that Black miners were particularly incompetent in the mines, and inferior to the now-job-insecure unionized whites on strike.

in vice, crime, bootlegging, and gambling, which they attributed directly to their Blackness. Reverend Edward A. Glennon characterized the new, more diverse, labor force in Washington County, PA, as alcohol-prone and out of control. Rev. Glennon talked of strikebreaking miners as “riffraff of the country ... bringing in moonshine,” and reported that “there have been scores of men and women lying around the roads drunk.” Linking Blackness to criminality was by no means a new strategy to shore up white interests. Finding ways to do so rhetorically during the strike was a way to make opposing claims about white miners and their families – some of whom themselves engaged in bootlegging and other vice in these Prohibition-era mining towns.<sup>73</sup> As Joe Trotter discovered in an analysis of newspaper coverage of Black coal miners in southern West Virginia, “while the white press ignored discrimination against blacks, it exaggerated black criminality.”<sup>74</sup>

Even several years after the start of the strike, union sympathizers continued pushing a narrative that linked Blackness to “an orgy of crime” in the “otherwise respectable and decent mining communities” of Washington County.<sup>75</sup> The *UMWJ* cites a *Washington Daily Observer* article from the day after Christmas, which tells of a Christmas Eve game of craps at Company House No. 490 at the Avella Mine of the Pittsburgh Coal Company, which resulted in a “major affray” of brawling, stab and gunshot wounds – some fatal – all involving “Negro miners.”<sup>76</sup> As if to suggest that non-union miners were more primitive than union-affiliated miners, the *UWMJ* did not mince words when they printed that “these boll-weevil scabs keep right on killing each other.”<sup>77</sup> The union, through its press, charged that the Pittsburgh Coal Company took no interest

<sup>73</sup> After all, the period of 1925-1928 was in the middle of the era of Prohibition, in which the consumption and production of alcohol was illegal nationwide.

<sup>74</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 133.

<sup>75</sup> “Imported Scabs Are Still Killing Each Other in Pittsburgh District Non-Union Mining Camps,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: January 1930). 15.

<sup>76</sup> “One Dead, Four Wounded Due to Holiday Affrays: Colored Miners at Avella, Hill Station, and Ellsworth Are Involved – Officers Make One Arrest,” in *The Washington Daily Observer*. (Washington, Pennsylvania: December 26, 1929), 1.

<sup>77</sup> *United Mine Workers Journal*, January 1930.

in these alleged issues of gambling, bootlegging, or even murder. Instead, the coal operators were focused on maintaining their bottom line: keeping wages low, and keeping the union at bay.

Whether it was with alcohol, gambling, or prostitution, white miners and their sympathizers juxtaposed a racialized narrative about Black miners with a very different racialized narrative about their own upstanding [white] citizenship. Quite cleverly, the union sent forth local clergy, who were seemingly morally-unimpeachable witnesses, to testify before the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce. Pastors, reverends, and ministers who knew the strikers personally from their small coal town churches and parishes, were able to tell a positive story about white union miners showing remarkable bravery, courage, resolve, and determination “in the face of that brutality and barbarism.”<sup>78</sup> Reverend Charles Fehrenbach assessed that before the labor dispute, strike, and eviction from company housing, the nearly-all-white community was “indeed a very good class of people.”<sup>79</sup> This sort of character praise before the Senators was key to crafting an argument about industrial exploitation by the Pittsburgh Coal Company, and white unionists were quick to stake claims to their longstanding ties to the profession of coal mining as well as local businesses and religious institutions.

These character witnesses for white miners, labelled strikebreakers, on the other hand, as “practically all Negroes” and a “very poor class of people” with a high rate of turnover.<sup>80</sup> The notion of an “unsettled” migrant population was a way to discredit strikebreakers as transitory and not belonging in a white space. Reverend Charles Fehrenbach told the visiting Senators that the striking families were rooted in the community and were not transient “floaters” like the

<sup>78</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Vol. I, 1014. Note: this claim will be unpacked in Chapter 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

strikebreakers were.<sup>81</sup> This approach depicted white strikers as unjust victims of union-busting and subsequent eviction from company housing. And as Father Skrak testified to the Senate Committee, the “riffraff” who came in to fill their absence from the mines were so low in moral character that they were not even religious and had no connections to local churches.<sup>82</sup> Non-union mining families were the diametric opposite to the pious, “peace-loving people” who had belonged to local churches for decades, Skrak implied that the region was becoming a “Sodom and Gomorrah.”<sup>83</sup>

The United Mine Workers of America deployed a number of anti-Black stereotypes in their appeal to the Senate Committee, but the most common and explosive were specifically sexualized ones. White union sympathizers portrayed the Black strikebreaking miners who the Pittsburgh Coal Company had hired as sexually lascivious, deviant, and a potential threat to the purity of white women and girls. If stories of abusive white coal and iron policemen, a debt peonage system of company scrip for supplies, and a coal company potentially breaking interstate commerce regulations didn’t raise the concerns of the U.S. government, the UMWA rhetoric suggests that they thought that these sexual charges surely would.

The very idea of bringing in Black men to break a strike – and supposedly allowing them to interact with white women in company towns – threatened to destabilize existing racial hierarchies. Fears of interracial socializing, sex, and romance ran deep in the white psyche.<sup>84</sup> White anxiety about sexual liaisons between African-American men and white women reached a fever

<sup>81</sup> *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Vol. I, 79.

<sup>82</sup> *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Vol. I, 1020.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Renee Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4-6; Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Werner Sollors, ed. *Interracialism: Black-white intermarriage in American history, literature, and law*, (Oxford University Press, 2000).

pitch during the period of Reconstruction (1865-1877), when the ongoing legacy of white men using violence and terror to prevent these relationships materialized in the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>85</sup>

Union sympathizers exploited the larger white community's worries about the sexual purity of white women by telling exaggerated lurid stories of Black coal miners interacting with white female sex workers in company-owned houses at night. They aimed to vilify the Pittsburgh Coal Company, in the eyes of investigating Senators and the white public, for allowing such cross-racial social spaces to exist after dark. United Mine Workers Vice President Phillip Murray tried to convince the Senators that the coal operators recruited Black strikebreakers as a way to "lower living standards" and drive out the white union families. In that attempt to bust the union, the company superintendents were apparently complicit in hosting brothels on their private property with "prostitutes of every kind... to supply the beastly appetite of the strikebreakers."<sup>86</sup> White unionists therefore staked a significant part of their claim before the investigating U.S. Senate Committee on the idea that Black men were unfit to work in coal mining communities due to their supposed primitiveness and sexual deviance.

White unionists not only levied allegations of consensual cross-racial sex, but also they turned to what is perhaps the quintessential racial trope of United States history: that of the Black male rapist.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps best encapsulated in the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) – released just ten years before the strike – the racist stereotype of Black men raping white women has endured throughout U.S. history.<sup>88</sup> Thousands of Black men and boys have been incarcerated, shot,

<sup>85</sup> Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Special Issue: African American Culture and Sexuality, (Jan., 1993), pp. 402-417.

<sup>86</sup> *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, Vol. I, 20.

<sup>87</sup> See "The White Man's Civilization on Trial: Ida B. Wells, Representations of Lynching, and Northern Middle-Class Manhood," in Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; also see Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50, 138.

<sup>88</sup> An iconic and racist film by D.W. Griffith, based on Thomas Dixon's *The Klansman*, in which the Ku Klux Klan are portrayed as the heroes – riding in to prevent a Black takeover of South Carolina during Reconstruction.



lynched, tortured, dismembered by white mobs, vigilantes, and police for false accusations of sexually assaulting white women and girls.<sup>89</sup> Just a few years after the strike, in 1931, nine Black teenagers were falsely accused of raping two white women during a train trip and were convicted by an all-white jury in Alabama. This grave miscarriage of justice became popularly known as the Scottsboro case. As communication and rhetoric scholar Tracey Owens Patton has written, “since slavery, Black sexuality has been stereotyped as wild, uncontrollable, bestial, and even criminal” and such “stereotypes have reinforced the beliefs that white women must be protected from Black men.”<sup>90</sup>

In the Jim Crow era industrial North, the white community’s obsession with the “Negro rapist” drew on “Victorian ideas about male sexuality.”<sup>91</sup> Historian Gail Bederman has shown that painting a picture of Black men as primitive, savage, and uncivilized actually helped to construct the “white man” as manly and civilized.<sup>92</sup> This context is necessary to frame the ways in which Phillip Murray and the United Mine Workers mobilized this harmful stereotype to stigmatize Black non-union miners, to attract the attention of U.S. Senators, and to frame white miners (on the contrary) as in-control of their sexuality.

The United Mine Workers and their local allies repeatedly deployed this racist stereotype and claimed to the U.S. Senators that Black male strikebreakers were sexual assaulting white women and girls. Union VP Phillip Murray, for example, alleged that a strikebreaker had sexually assaulted a 10-year-old girl at the Coverdale mining town house No. 122, and that another

<sup>89</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this, see N. Jeremi Duru’s work, “The Central Park Five, The Scottsboro Boys, and the Myth of the Bestial Black Man.” Also, for examples of racial scapegoating and false accusations in the 1920s, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2010), 253-254.

<sup>90</sup> Tracey Owens Patton and Julie Snyder-Yuly, “Any Four Black Men Will Do: Rape, Race, and the Ultimate Scapegoat,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 6 (July 2007): 859–95. doi:[10.1177/0021934706296025](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934706296025).

<sup>91</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 48.

<sup>92</sup> Bederman, 49.

strikebreaker who arrived at the coal camp from Georgia, broke into a local farmhouse, and raped and killed a farmer's wife.<sup>93</sup> This stereotype also informed UMWA legal counsel Oscar K. Eaton's question of Pittsburgh Coal Company Vice President C.E. Leshner, when he demanded during a hearing in Washington: "Do you know anything about the 6-year-old girl at Smithdale that was raped by a negro strike breaker?"<sup>94</sup> Eaton's phrasing of questions like this one as well as others exposes the union's racial thinking and its race-baiting strategy.

### **Words turn into actions: 'Justified' racial violence**

While a rhetoric of anti-Blackness was essential to the construction of a white coal mining identity during this strike, even more consequential than just words on a page, were the actions taken by some white striking miners. Rhetoric transformed into acts of terror and physical guerrilla warfare with rifles and dynamite bombs in 1926 and 1927. One can reasonably assume that some of the fuel for this wave of white supremacist violence was the officially published rhetoric of the United Mine Workers of America and that the sexualized narratives that were used to stigmatize Black miners were used by white strikers as justification for their violent behavior. That is, if throwing rocks or shooting at Black "scabs" on their way to work was permissible, it would be so because it was *in defense of* the most sacred part of upholding whiteness: white women.

The white union miners who went out on strike from the Pittsburgh Coal Company's mines channeled their anti-Black rhetoric into anti-Black violence. By 1926 and 1927, in the heat of the strike, what were once words on a page turned to taunts, then to thrown stones, then to bullets and improvised explosives. In order to uphold sole ownership over the profession of coal mining in the region and to defend their privileged place on a racial hierarchy, white miners proved willing to

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> United States Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 475.

go to bloody, violent, terroristic extremes. In those profound expressions of terror and intimidation, they made claims about who belonged in a coal mine. White miners were speaking to their own sense of racial and gendered entitlement, as well as deeper anxieties about their status, their power, and their identity in a diversifying workforce.

The discourse of anti-Blackness during the strike, which was sometimes for strategic ends, undoubtedly shaped racist acts of violence on the ground. This phenomenon is evident even in song lyrics, which began to make reference to physical attacks/or acts. As Patrick Huber has demonstrated, in the heat of the strike, union miners in Allegheny County chanted to a tune called “Red Necks.” Lines in that song included “red necks, keep them scabs away ... fight them every day,” and if “you see a scab passin’ by ... don’t hesitate, blacken both of his eyes.”<sup>95</sup> Folklorist of Appalachian mining George Korson, who transcribed the lyrics to “Red Necks” in 1943, contended that this song – which clearly advocated violence – was first introduced at a UMWA rally with Phillip Murray, during the strike in 1927. Huber points out that the rhetorical strategy of vilifying and stigmatizing the “scabs” as a distant other, and re-appropriating the slur “red neck” as a positive marker of white working-class solidarity and identity, was perfected in this song.

Scholars have pointed to racial violence as an essential component of how whites uphold and construct whiteness and white cultural consciousness. Poet and literary scholar Sheila Smith McKoy argues that: “white race riots have been the primary mechanism” to both mark Black people as the racialized *other*, while at the same time keeping Blackness from “contaminating” whiteness.<sup>96</sup> McKoy’s work challenges the common association between race riots and blacks,

<sup>95</sup> Patrick Huber, “Red Necks and Red Bandanas: Appalachian Coal Miners and the Coloring of Union Identity, 1912-1936,” in *Western Folklore* Vol. 65, ½, *Lessons of Work: Contemporary Explorations of Work Culture*, (Western States Folklore Society: Winter - Spring, 2006), 201-202.

<sup>96</sup> Sheila Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Cultures*, (Madison, WI, and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 24. Much of this comes from the fact that “the definition of whiteness ... needs blackness to exist” (same page).

showing that when whites act violently in mass, it is characterized as a revolt, a protest, or a civil insurrection rather than a riot.<sup>97</sup> The violence that white strikers directed at Black non-union miners in late 1920s Western Pennsylvania served as a “call to arms” in defense of white privilege.<sup>98</sup>

During the strike, white miners found themselves in an unfamiliar crisis which their whiteness and privilege would not shield them from, and in which white women were at risk. They found their status degraded by an aggressive, well-armed, and unaccountable coal and iron police. A prime example of that degradation came from the Senate testimony of Clarissa Englert, a white woman whose husband and sons were striking union miners. Her husband, Joe, mined for the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s Broughton mine. When the union went out on strike, the company evicted the family, forcing them to take up residence in a shanty union encampment nearby. Englert vividly described her experience of a (presumably white) coal and iron policeman knocking her unconscious with a blackjack, handcuffing her wrists, and then “twisting them until the blood ran out.”<sup>99</sup> In the eyes of many whites, this level of violence was supposed to be reserved for policing the bodies of the morally reprehensible, drunken, sexually lascivious, *un-citizen* Black strikebreakers.

Clarissa Englert also recalled a January 1928 afternoon in which “the children came from school ... saw the scabs ... and of course, they yelled at [the scabs]” and called them “‘yellow dogs’ ... as children will under these circumstances.”<sup>100</sup> The alleged response to these taunts was that “several colored fellows in the group shot into the crowd of school children,” terrifying Englert

<sup>97</sup> Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot*, 5. In addition to McKoy, for exploration of white racial violence and working-class whites’ articulation of their whiteness in the 1943 Detroit Riot see John Hartigan, *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*, (Princeton University Press, 1999), 51-61. For more on how African-Americans responded to white violence during this period, see Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*, (New York: Holt Publishers, 2011). McWhirter’s work includes an examination of the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Beach incident and the 1919 race riot in Chicago.

<sup>98</sup> Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot*, 24.

<sup>99</sup> *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Volume I, 88.

<sup>100</sup> “Statement of Mrs. Clarissa Englert,” *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 87.

and other white parents in the union encampment, and prompting their white husbands to take up arms.<sup>101</sup> Englert's testimony suggests that it was customary and completely normal for young white school children to harass grown adult coal miners – especially those who were Black. In addition, she told the story in such a way to elicit a white sympathy from the white male Senators of the Committee on Interstate Commerce: they could perhaps relate to their own fears or imaginations that adult Black men were aggressive, easily-provoked, and a threat to white children.

Even more appalling to the white union community psyche was the infamous train-tracks-incident mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Mrs. Karpy and Mrs. Holmack's accounts of being shot at by "colored men" exposed the belief that the coal and iron police had armed Black strikebreakers to attack encamped union families. H.R. McCrory, a visiting reporter, alleged to the Senators during their visit that the coal and iron police had offered Hampton Matthews, a non-union miner who was Black, \$25 to shoot into the windows of the union barracks down the road.<sup>102</sup>

White union miners decried violence against themselves by the coal and iron police, while at the same time encouraging and perpetuating violence against Black miners. Whites in power have historically condoned, both legally and otherwise, violence and brutality against Black bodies, while limiting forms of acceptable punishment for white bodies.<sup>103</sup> Widespread racial violence during Jim Crow suggests that many whites would have taken no issue with extrajudicial violence against Black bodies during this time period.<sup>104</sup> However, the idea of coal and iron police

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Volume I, 71.

<sup>103</sup> Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 175.

<sup>104</sup> For example, Congress failed to pass repeated attempts at anti-lynching legislation, including in 1918, 1922, and 1934. for analysis of the tireless crusade of Ida. B Wells, Mary Church Terrell, the NACW, and how attempts at passage of a federal anti-lynching (Dyer Bill) was filibustered in 1922, see Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2009), 223, 225, 228-229. Also, on white identity and lynching, see, Cynthia S. Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness Through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2007).

subjecting morally-righteous white mining families to brutality on the picket line was beyond reproach. Thus, to white union sympathizers, resorting to bloody means was absolutely justifiable.

Although white unionists' terror and intimidation strategy, which began in 1925 and 1926, can be seen as an extreme avenue they took to drive out non-union miners, it is critically important to think about *who* those non-union miners were. The fact that a sizeable percentage of those non-union miners were Black, is central to understanding how and why white miners behaved in the way they did. In addition to claiming they alone were entitled to coal mining spaces and the laborious underground profession, striking whites viewed anti-Black violence as an appropriate means to defend white women and mothers from supposedly hyper-aggressive, carefree, and armed Black non-union men.

In sworn depositions that Pittsburgh Coal Company President J. D. A. Morrow submitted to the Senate Committee, Black coal miners and their spouses voiced their experience facing racist harassment and physical assault from white pickets. Arthur McCullum and Jesse Ruffin, of the Montour No. 1 mine, both reported that union pickets routinely called them “n-word scab” or “n-word bastard” and threatened to kill them.<sup>105</sup> Charles Henderson, a miner at Moon Run mine, swore in an affidavit to an incident in which six union sympathizers dragged him from a bus, severely beat him, and threatened that if they saw him working in the mine again they would kill him.<sup>106</sup> Odie May even swore that gangs of union pickets who routinely harassed, chased, and threatened him once shot him in the shoulder on his way to work – he was transported to the Monongahela City hospital by police, and recovered.<sup>107</sup> While we must acknowledge that

<sup>105</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 2579-80.

<sup>106</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 2587.

<sup>107</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 2611.

President Morrow was ultimately trying to put white strikers in a negative light, these accounts are consistent with newspaper articles in the *Monessen Daily Independent* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Accounts from local newspapers such as the *Monessen Daily Independent*, published in the Westmoreland County steel city of Monessen, illustrate how racist rhetoric could quickly turn to countryside warfare. Whites turned to dynamite and other improved explosives, rifles, shotguns, or whatever sticks and stones they could get their hands on, to intimidate and try to force out the Black community. On March 27, 1926 whites attempted to detonate a “dynamite bomb...near the home of a negro miner” at Montour No. 10 mine of the Pittsburgh Coal Company.<sup>108</sup> The blast shattered windows and scattered debris, although no one was injured. In a similar example, from November 24 later that year, union sympathizers attempted to bomb the home of a Black miner at Arnold City No. 2, in Belle Vernon.<sup>109</sup> Again, these newspaper accounts trace a remarkable similarity to the notarized depositions from Allegheny and Washington counties: several deponents swore that union sympathizers exploded dynamite charges or used other improvised explosives on the homes of nonunion miners in the nighttime. While fatalities were rare, the explosions caused fires, shattered glass, damaged homes, and plenty of fear and intimidation. The phenomenon of the “white riot,” which is integral to the articulation of white identity politics, was in full effect in the Pennsylvania coal fields here.

The frequency of skirmishes, beatings, and shootings in the streets – both anti-Black attacks by whites, and retaliation from Black miners – was astounding. Take, for example, one day of stories published in the *Monessen Daily Independent*, on August 11th, 1927. On this day alone, “union men and their sympathizers ambushed the trucks” bringing in strikebreakers with a “barrage of stones,” leading to a clash at Horning Mine No. 4. 10 miles south, three non-union

<sup>108</sup> “Bomb Scare,” *Monessen Daily Independent*, Vol. 23, No. 144, March 27, 1926, 1.

<sup>109</sup> “Miner’s Home Damaged By Explosion,” *Monessen Daily Independent*, Vol. 24, No. 43, November 24, 1926, 1.

men on their way to the Warden mine in Elizabeth, PA, were shot and taken to the hospital.<sup>110</sup> The wave of terror and intimidation tactics during this strike reveals an underlying politics of white resentment and entitlement. For the white miners of southwestern Pennsylvania, and much of northern Appalachia, the coal fields were *their* spaces, and that of fathers and grandfathers before them. To see a group of “green,” “deluded,” “inexperienced” men of color who they deemed mentally and physically “inferior” to themselves living and working in the same towns they were kicked out of, struck a deep white psychological nerve.<sup>111</sup>

Coal companies knew, at least in part, that bringing in *Black* strikebreakers was a proven strategy to break union morale and degrade the white union community psyche. Coal operators took a page from the playbook of race and labor, and specifically revoked the economic wages of whiteness from the union mining families’ pockets. In response, white unionists – especially those of Southern and Eastern European background, whose claims to white American identity were a bit shaky in the nativist 1920s – fought to ensure that they could keep their “public and psychological wages.”<sup>112</sup> This concept was first introduced by W. E. B. DuBois, and later furthered by historian David Roediger. While there is limited direct evidence on how immigrant mining families articulated their thoughts on whiteness, this violent response was part of how white ethnics asserted their whiteness in a time when their position on the racial landscape was uncertain at best.

### **“In-between” whiteness**

The violent actions of white union strikers and their families indicate evidence of their own insecurity and anxiety about their status as whites. This was especially profound for those whose

<sup>110</sup> “Gun Battle”; “Miners Clash,” *Monessen Daily Independent*, Vol. 25, No. 51, August 11, 1927, 1.

<sup>111</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 5.

<sup>112</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in the United States, 1860-1880*, (New York: 1935), 700-1; see in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 12-13.



whiteness was questionable. Scholars such as David Roediger and Sheila Smith McKoy have shown how “participation in the white riot” has been a way for European ethnics to make their white identity more visible.<sup>113</sup> These sorts of mob attacks, riots, and beatings by those seeking to make claims about their whiteness have often been directed towards Black people and other communities of color.<sup>114</sup> Such actions for white ethnic miners (especially for those affiliated with the UMWA) in Pennsylvania were a way to assert their position and gain recognition from native-born white American miners during the strike.

Historians David Roediger and James R. Barrett have approached the racialization of white ethnic immigrant workers during this period from the concept of “in-betweenness.” Whiteness was an “uncomfortable terrain” for these immigrant communities.<sup>115</sup> On the one hand, they did not necessarily espouse the same sort of rigid racist ideologies as native-born whites, and some white ethnics even worked, socialized, and lived with Black and Asian communities. On the other hand, they often found that distancing themselves from non-white groups was an important tool of assimilation. This strike put Southern and Eastern European immigrant miners in a complicated situation, as white ethnic miners found themselves in an uncertain “in-between” space on the U.S. American racial landscape, between Black and native-born white miners.<sup>116</sup> By drawing attention away from their ethnic identities and towards the supposed immorality of Black strikebreakers,

<sup>113</sup> Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot*, 43. This section covers Irish immigrants’ involvement in the 1898 Wilmington, NC, white riot. Caroline A. Waldron, “Lynch-law Must Go!”: Race, Citizenship, and the Other in an American Coal Mining Town Author(s)” in *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Immigration & Ethnic History Society, Fall, 2000), 51. As Caroline Waldron has shown in her work on racial violence and claims of citizenship during an 1895 Illinois mining town riot, white ethnic immigrant miners “used racism to assert their position in the community.”

<sup>114</sup> See Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*. It shocked the likes of Frederick Douglass that an Irish immigrant community in the 1863 New York City Draft Riots, which had experienced religious and other persecution back home, could turn around and “carry prejudice against color” to the “extreme and dangerous.” Roediger demonstrates how in order to win “acceptance as white among the larger American population” antebellum Irish workers “came to insist on their whiteness and on white supremacy” instead of arguing that their ethnic Irish identity gave them rights or entitlement to gainful employment.

<sup>115</sup> Barrett and Roediger, “In-between peoples,” 25

<sup>116</sup> Barrett and Roediger, “In-between peoples,” 18.

white ethnics hoped not only to garner support for their strike effort, but also to make claims about their own citizenship and place within whiteness.<sup>117</sup>

As historian David Roediger and other scholars of whiteness have shown, European immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century were not automatically viewed as white on arrival. Those with non-Anglo Saxon lineage, who spoke Slavic languages, and had different cultural practices from native-born whites, were often seen as inferior races. One white American eugenicist even wrote that immigrants of the “Slavic or Alpine sub-race” were biologically inferior humans: “the habits of a lifetime which allowed him to become dirty and lousy, and those traits of a defective germ plasm ... cannot be changed by soap and water and disinfecting and delousing agents.”<sup>118</sup> Historian of immigrant whiteness Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, whether or not these immigrant “races” – Slavs, Celts, Teutons, Hebrews, etc. – were considered apt for inclusion into whiteness had much to do with their perceived “fitness for self-government.”<sup>119</sup> Throughout U.S. history, white people have regarded Black people as being dependent and incapable of governing themselves. Thus, positioning themselves as far away from Blackness as possible was essential to being seen as white.<sup>120</sup> Exaggerating the number of Black men employed as non-union miners, degrading them with racist stereotypes, and engaging in a campaign of violence against them, reflected the deep anxiety felt by many white ethnic miners, who were well-aware of their precarious “in-between space” on the American racial landscape.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>117</sup> For a further exploration of this topic in the context of Irish immigrant communities and whiteness, see Noel Ignatiev, *How The Irish Became White*, (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 1995).

<sup>118</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1998), 85.

<sup>119</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 42.

<sup>120</sup> See Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*. David Roediger has shown how Irish-American workers in the 1850s sought to advance their interests by distancing themselves from Black workers through anti-Black rhetoric, blackface minstrelsy, and the performance of anti-Black violence (such as the 1863 New York City Draft Riots).

<sup>121</sup> Many of these harmful anti-Black stereotypes were likely foreign to them back in Slovakia, Poland, and Romania, etc.

This strike happened at a time in United States history of peak anti-immigrant nativism towards people from Southern and Eastern Europe. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 restricted the immigration of people coming to the United States from most parts of the world that were not northern Europe.<sup>122</sup> Only a decade earlier, Madison Grant had published *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), a racist and anti-Semitic call for the preservation of eugenic blood purity of the white Anglo-Saxon-descended community. The historian Matthew Frye Jacobson contends that arguments for eugenics became mainstreamed into white American culture in the 1920s. Magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Good Housekeeping* published articles that talked about the mental and physical inferiority of Asian, African, and Eastern and Southern European immigrants to the United States, and how these “primitive races” would ruin the American gene pool.<sup>123</sup>

The massive federal Dillingham Commission report (1911), and its conclusions, paved the path forward to the nativist immigration laws of the decade that followed.<sup>124</sup> One particular survey found that a plurality of bituminous coal miners in Western Pennsylvania were of the “Slovak race” – meaning from present-day Slovakia.<sup>125</sup> The Commission found that only 13 percent of recent Slovak immigrant households were union-affiliated, and less than 5 percent of Croatian immigrants were. Trade union membership could suggest the ability to assimilate, and according to the report, a lack thereof might represent the “racial tendencies” of certain groups.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Rep. Albert Johnson and United States Congress, *H.R. 4075: Johnson Quota Act*, (Washington D.C.: The 67<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States, May 19, 1921), First Session, Public Law 67-5.

<sup>123</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917*, (New York: MacMillan, 2001), 162.

<sup>124</sup> This was a massive federal government effort to collect data on immigrants and immigration; it produced its famous 41-volume report after three years of field research.

<sup>125</sup> United States Immigration Commission (1907-1910), and, W. P. Dillingham, *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, (Washington, D.C.: Govt. Print. Off., 1911), 419.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Non-union white ethnic miners had to walk a fine line of making sure that they were not too closely associated with Blackness. Austrian-American non-union miner Stephen Kromet swore in a notarized affidavit that union strikers outside the Warden mine where he worked would repeatedly call him a “scabby bastard,” or “yellow bastard.”<sup>127</sup> The harassers also threatened to kill him if he kept working in the mine as a strikebreaker, and on one occasion they called him the n-word. This is the precarious position of ‘in-betweenness’ for white ethnics: that is, the threat to one’s social position in relation to whiteness when identified too closely with Black people.

For white ethnics, both strikers and strikebreakers, there were real incentives to embrace whiteness. From the perspective of a Hungarian immigrant miner in the late 1920s, just years after the passage of nativist laws by Congress, it would have been particularly threatening to have a *Black* miner take your position. While white ethnic immigrant workers during this time period knew they had to work to gain full whiteness, they could count on being above Black people on America’s racial totem pole. According to a 1926 survey that asked “white American” respondents to rank their preference of forty different ethnic groups, respondents ranked “Serbo-Croatians” close to the bottom, just above “Negroes, Filipinos, and Japanese.”<sup>128</sup> The threat of having one’s already precarious status further degraded made siding with white identity over class alliances or ethnic pride quite appealing.

White union miners saw the 1925-1928 bituminous strike in racialized terms. Their rhetoric, although at times strategic, also reflected their belief that *their* mines, their towns, their spaces, their schools were being contaminated by Blackness. And the violent ways in which white union sympathizers behaved indicates resentment and fear over loss of status. This was especially

<sup>127</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 2591.

<sup>128</sup> James R. Barrett, and David Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (1997), 8.

true for white ethnic immigrant miners, who felt the need to distance themselves from Black people. While white miners were losing an industrial battle to the Pittsburgh Coal Company, when the United Mine Workers got a chance to present their narrative of grievances and concerns to people in power, they found sympathetic ears to their racialized complaints about the strike. White miners expected their story about their degradation and mistreatment at the hands of the coal operators to resonate with a nineteen-member legislative panel of white men: The United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce. And it did

## Chapter 2 | The Racial Policemen Arrive

Just after 10 o'clock in the morning on Thursday, March 15, 1928, Chairman Frank Gooding gaveled the United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce to order. Gooding swore in the day's witness, H.T. Brundidge, a veteran reporter for the *St. Louis Star*. Brundidge had recently conducted an on-the-ground investigation of what he called the "terrible conditions that were existing in the State of Pennsylvania" – the ongoing strife between the United Mine Workers of America and the Pittsburgh Coal Company

To the astonishment of the United States Senators sitting in Senate Office Building 212 that morning, H.T. Brundidge told of story of racial scandal beyond their wildest dreams. Responding to a question about the "race conditions" he observed, Brundidge remarked that when he visited a company house at night rumored to be a site of sex work, he was so appalled to see Black people and white people dancing together to a record player that he had to leave. <sup>1</sup>

In Brundidge's own words, "Negro men who looked like they had not been bathed for years, and who had dirt and filth and coal dust all over them, were dancing with white women."<sup>2</sup> Worst of all, Brundidge recounted to the Senators that he saw "this little white girl go upstairs with a negro."<sup>3</sup> As one might imagine, levelling these allegations before a group of powerful white men in 1928 probably made for audible gasps in the room. Brundidge's testimony struck a deep nerve among the members of the United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce. Committee

<sup>1</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 853. Although he accompanied the visiting subcommittee of five Senators that Chairman Gooding sent to Appalachia in February, H.T. Brundidge took his journalistic technique a step further. Sympathetic with the union cause, he wanted to get a lurid scoop on what went on when the lights went down in the non-union mining town called Moon Run. Brundidge pretended to be the brother of a non-union miner in order to get past the coal company guards at the front gate; he tried to see how much corn-whisky he could buy illegally on company property; and he immersed himself in the houses of prostitution.

<sup>2</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 863.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Chairman James Watson of Indiana was shocked to know that Brundidge had witnessed interracial socializing on *company property*, and Senator James Couzens of Michigan was in awe of the fact that “the occupants of the houses” were employed coal miners and their families.<sup>4</sup>

As the previous chapter demonstrated, white union miners and the United Mine Workers of America deployed racist anti-black stereotypes and sought to justify their violent behavior. In 1928, a group of United States Senators took up the cause of the UMWA and white union miners on strike, and testimony like that of H.T. Brundidge terrified them to the core. Popular fears of interracial mingling commanded the attention of the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce during its investigation. But in a decade when the federal government was largely *laissez faire* and pro-business, why would an institution that has never been particularly pro-union send its members in support of the United Mine Workers of America?<sup>5</sup> I argue that the answer lies in the Senators’ fears that the social dynamics of the 1925-1928 strike threatened America’s racial order.

A close analysis of transcribed questioning of witnesses during the Senate investigation reveals the driving anxieties of white authorities as it pertained to racially diverse industrial communities, and how they should be policed. This chapter also argues that, in spite of the reputation-tarnishing claims of breaches of racial etiquette that took place on their property, the Pittsburgh Coal Company did not seem all that worried. Their dismissive responses to Senators’ questions about possible interracial sex suggest that coal operators did not fear that the U.S. government would actually be able to police them and thwart their strike-breaking tactics.

<sup>4</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 861.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the Congressional reluctance to appropriate funds to investigate the Ludlow Massacre, in David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 407; also, see Hoover Administration’s lack of support for worker’s rights and the decline of the UMWA between 1928-1931, in Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 101-103.

## Intermingling and alarm bells

In order to understand how they viewed social life during the 1925-1928 strike, we need to get a sense of who the Senators on this committee were, and why they were investigating this labor conflict in the first place. Congressional oversight and fact-finding investigations are serious matters that have many moving pieces. Early in 1928, The United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce launched what started as an economic investigation into the major coal strike's effects on Appalachian communities.<sup>6</sup> Senator Hiram Johnson of California introduced Senate Resolution 105, which called for an official government inquiry into the strike after hearing that “the mine workers [were] engaged in a life and death struggle against poverty, starvation, brutality, and suffering inflicted upon them by those large coal companies that are viciously seeking to destroy the Union.”<sup>7</sup> While the newspaper reports of starving union families, and the denial of striking miners' civil liberties by local sheriffs and judges outraged the Senators, they became truly fixated on questions of race, sexuality, sex work, and liquor.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it was the allegations of societally inappropriate race relations that most animated members of the committee.

<sup>6</sup> This was not the first congressional inquiry into labor strikes in the period and region. See for example the *Investigation of Strike in Steel Industries* (1919) by the Committee on Education and Labor, pursuant to Senate Resolutions S. Res. 188, and S. Res. 202. This report includes many interviews that were conducted in the Pittsburgh area (i.e. steel towns of Homestead, Duquesne, Monessen, Donora, etc.), including about local fears around Black men serving as armed, private deputies for U.S. Steel Corp. There are examples of Senators repeatedly expressing concern with this dynamic (see pages 762 and 795 of Volume 2). While other Senate committees before them had conducted extensive reports about major strikes, the United State Senate Subcommittee on Interstate Commerce field investigation marked a specific kind of intervention. Earlier Senate committees had conducted thorough investigations of strikes in the coal and steel industries in the post-World War I period, namely in response to the 1919 nationwide steel strike and the infamous West Virginia mine wars of the early 1920s. From a cursory glance, while some of these reports dealt with issues of race relations, the language within them did not deal as explicitly with race and sexuality.

<sup>7</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 1; “Senator Johnson Asks Senate to Investigate Conditions in the Coal Strike Fields,” *The United Mine Workers Journal*, (Indianapolis: January, 1928), 8. S. Res. 105 established a special subcommittee to conduct a transparent, on-the-ground investigation of whether coal companies unlawfully broke their 1924 wage contract with unionized miners, whether interstate railroad companies colluded to drive down mining wages, and whether the coal mine operators and their private police had violated the constitutional rights of union miners.

<sup>8</sup> The most notorious instance of civil liberties violation was the infamous Langham Injunction (1927), in which Judge Jonathan Langham prohibited union miners from assembling, picketing, walking on public highways, and





*Figure 2: Senators (from L-R) Wagner, Pine, Gooding, and Wheeler, visiting with striking miners in Rossiter, PA, February 1928. Source: Explore PA History; Rossiter Strike Injunction Historical Marker.*

The Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce in 1928 was made up of nineteen white men. After S. Res 105 passed, the committee's chairman, Senator James E. Watson of Indiana, appointed five of them to travel to Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio and get the lay of the land. When the clock struck midnight on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1928, this delegation of five United States Senators left their comfortable abodes on Capitol Hill in Washington and motored towards the scandal-ridden coal fields of Western Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> The travelling subcommittee included Senators Frank R. Gooding of Idaho, W. B. Pine of Oklahoma, Jesse H. Metcalf of Rhode Island,

even from gathering and singing hymns at the Magyar (Hungarian) Presbyterian Church, in Rossiter, Indiana County, PA.

<sup>9</sup> With the Senators, it is important to remember that this strike is *not* one of the famous strikes in U.S. labor history, let alone Pennsylvania labor history. It is not the 1902 anthracite coal, 1910-11 bituminous, 1919 steel strike, or the 1922-23 bituminous strike in Windber.

Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, and Robert F. Wagner of New York – a bipartisan group of former governors, litigators, and even oil tycoons. Senator Gooding grew up in a mining family, Senator Wheeler was an unabashed progressive when it came to worker’s rights, Senator Wagner went on to champion Roosevelt’s New Deal labor reforms, and Senator Pine dealt with accusations in his political life of affiliation to the Ku Klux Klan. The subcommittee of five conducted countless interviews, tours of mines, and inspections of living conditions, in coordination and communication with public relations representatives of both the United Mine Workers and the Pittsburgh Coal Company.<sup>10</sup>

During their week in Western Pennsylvania mining communities, Wheeler, Pine, Gooding, Wagner, and Metcalf found themselves most fascinated with the racial demographics of local mines; if any socialist or communist party activity existed in the area; and the behavior of private coal and iron police. Most of the people they questioned were white men: strikers, strikebreakers, spouses, mine bosses, union leaders, reporters, ministers, and even young children from the area. Senators Gooding, Pine, Metcalf, Wheeler, and Wagner decried what they saw while touring the area – and wrote up a preliminary report for Chairman Watson in Washington. They detested the vermin and lice-infested, decrepit barracks for company employees, and the utter starvation among the encamped union families nearby; they labelled the strike conditions “a most serious nature and dangerous to the best interest of our citizenship.”<sup>11</sup> The Senators also took a particular interest in documenting the statements of white women in the community: they transcribed and reprinted the testimony of Mary Karpy, Anne Holmack, and Clarissa Englert – from Chapter One – who alleged that the coal and iron police beat up white union women and paid Black non-union miners to shoot

<sup>10</sup> A troupe of newspaper reporters, photographers, and even a Senate Deputy Sergeant-at-arms often followed the subcommittee around during their visit

<sup>11</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 365.

at them and their children. In this internal report, the subcommittee wrote that “the splendid courage of the [white union] women was especially noticeable” to them, in the face of the violent white male coal and iron police and supposedly hyper-aggressive Black men.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to concerns about the coal and iron police’s treatment of white, union-affiliated, women in the community, the subcommittee also investigated claims of drinking and gambling among non-union miners. They directed these questions disproportionately to the dozen Black non-union miners whom they talked to during tours of Pittsburgh Coal Company property. The Senators’ tone when asking questions of Black men on site in open-shop mines was highly paternalistic, frequently referring to groups of grown men as “boys.”<sup>13</sup> Most of their questions towards African-American non-union miners were about how long they had been working there, how the conditions were, and how much they were making per week. But the Senators also took a particular interest in the issue of vice. For example, Senators Gooding and Wheeler asked highly presumptive questions like “what is this table down here? To shoot craps on?” and “where do you get your booze?”<sup>14</sup> Black non-union miners such as James Smith and Jesse Daniels refused to give in to this line of coded anti-black questioning and simply responded “no.” These questions reveal Gooding and Wheeler’s racial thinking, and that they believed the rumors about rampant vice and drunkenness that the UMWA was spreading.<sup>15</sup>

Gambling, drugs, and alcohol were one thing for the Senators, but the union’s allegations of rape, illicit interracial relationships, and sex work were the gravest of all. Senator Burton K. Wheeler took the statement of a local white father, Mr. Harkins, who alleged that a Black non-

<sup>12</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 364.

<sup>13</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 58-59, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 61, 86.

<sup>15</sup> This investigation occurred during the era of Prohibition, which heightened accusations that Black non-union miners were illicitly producing and consuming alcohol.

union miner from West Virginia sexually assaulted his 10-year-old daughter, Helen Ruth. Wheeler's matter of fact response suggests he took this claim as a given truth. As the previous chapter shows, the stereotype of the bestial Black man existed long before 1928 and this racist and counterfactual narrative obscures the long history of white men's sexual violence towards Black women. In addition to longstanding white fears about the "Black male rapist," this group of white Senators were obsessed with claims of interracial social mingling, and worse, consensual interracial sex. Mr. Harkins also told Senator Wheeler that "now these fellows run wild... they have a hilarious time at night," and that "blacks and whites mix" and "get drunk together."<sup>16</sup> This was a full breakdown of morality: "the men and women were running wild and that no effort was being made by authorities to curb these immoral conditions."<sup>17</sup> Those "authorities" were the management of the Pittsburgh Coal Company's mines, who were charged with enabling this treacherous and taboo behavior.

While there had been no anti-miscegenation laws on the books in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania since 1780, common understanding and customs around race and sexuality discouraged interracial sex and marriage even in states where it was legal. The specific fears about relationships between white women and Black men have existed since the colonial period, but they were especially potent in the immediate aftermath of Emancipation.<sup>18</sup> As Renee Romano argues in *Race Mixing*, "interracial relationships were attacked as a symbol of social disorder" during that period and beyond. Such attacks intensified during the 1910s and 1920s, as the first waves of the Great Migration brought Black Americans northwards and westwards. Preventing interracial

<sup>16</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 180.

<sup>17</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 359.

<sup>18</sup> See Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Special Issue: African American Culture and Sexuality, (Jan., 1993), pp. 402-417.

marriage has been essential to upholding the binary categories that define the racial hierarchy of “white” people over “Black” people.<sup>19</sup> The white men of the United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce thus saw allegations of race mixing as the penultimate concern when it came to the defense of whiteness and to upholding the 1920s racial hierarchy.<sup>20</sup>

The Senators’ fears about race mixing during the strike are best encapsulated in a testy exchange in Senate Office Building 212 between Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, and Mr. William Warden, the Chairman of the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s Board of Directors. When Warden told the committee that 40 percent of the company’s non-union employees were Black, Senator Wheeler asked about how white non-union families felt about this. Wheeler pressed Warden, “and you have them up there now intermingling with the white miners?”. To Wheeler’s dissatisfaction, the answer was “yes; we do.” Senator Wheeler, asking as if he didn’t hear Warden correctly, followed up: “you will have a colored family living right alongside a white family?”.<sup>21</sup> Even when Warden responded by saying, “we try to keep them separated,” Senator Burton K. Wheeler would *not* let up. He twice more pressed Warden with “you feel that it is all right to have white miners living right alongside colored miners?” and questioned Warden’s own racial manners by demanding, “you would particularly object ... to having your children brought up next door to colored children?”.<sup>22</sup> Probably in his best interest in that moment, William Warden said that he would object to such a breach of Jim Crow etiquette.

These hearing questions reveal the powerful white male Senators’ anxiety that the strike was undermining the racial order – that the Pittsburgh Coal Company had broken the social

<sup>19</sup> Renee Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4-6.

<sup>20</sup> These two fears were often linked, since communists do not follow racial hierarchies this would undermine the racial order, and supposedly weaken the country through interracial mingling.

<sup>21</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 569.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

boundaries of race in bringing in significant numbers of Black miners, and creating an atmosphere of interracial interaction. Even the idea of a racially diverse community of non-union miners and their families, Black and white, women and men, gathering at night and “sitting down drinking home brew” together raised alarm bells of inappropriate cross-racial socializing, especially during the Prohibition Era.

As reporter H.T. Brundidge testified to the committee, even more heinous was the prospect of young white women engaging in sex work with a clientele that included “dirty” Black men coal miners. This represented a direct violation of the social, gendered, and sexualized boundaries of race in 1928 United States. In response to Brundidge’s salacious charges of “dirty” African-American men sleeping with young white girls after their mining shifts, the Senators were outraged that Pittsburgh Coal Company could turn such a blind eye and allow Black miners to solicit sex with white women sex workers in brothels *on their private company property*. As Gail Bederman has written, even in the arena of sex work, “racial etiquette held that *all* white women were too ‘pure’ for liaisons with Black men.”<sup>23</sup> When it came to interracial interaction, the Senators argued that the Pittsburgh Coal Company had abdicated its responsibility to police the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality in their privately-run towns.

### **Brushing off the Senators**

Facing down the U.S. government, the Pittsburgh Coal Company tried its best to dodge, evade, and deny. For the most part, William Warden, C. E. Leshner, J. D. A. Morrow, and other company executives categorically denied the union’s charges. They informed the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce that there were no brothels and speakeasies on their property.

<sup>23</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 3.

In their sworn affidavits, local mine superintendents assured the Senators that, upon thorough inspection of the “moral conditions,” there was no gambling, no prostitution, and no bootlegging going on in their mining towns.<sup>24</sup> Most importantly, however, the company’s executives insisted to the Senators that no interracial mixing and romantic or sexual interaction of any kind between white and Black people was taking place. Moreover, they reassured the Senators that any instances of such mixing had been dealt with promptly. The Superintendent of the company’s Warden mine in Elizabeth Township, Litell Snively, wrote that “I know of no cases where white and colored people live together as man and wife or otherwise mingle improperly.”<sup>25</sup> These assurances were essential to maintain their credibility within the social boundaries of whiteness.

The 1928 investigation of the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce put the Pittsburgh Coal Company in the hot seat. It forced the company to defend its reputation, and to assure investigators that they were upholding racial customs. By “importing” Black strikebreakers at unprecedentedly high numbers for the Pittsburgh district and employing a newly racially mixed non-union workforce, the Pittsburgh coal company pushed the acceptable boundaries of capitalistic exploitation. They opened themselves up to allegations of allowing Black people and white people to gather, cohabitate, drink, have sex, gamble, and engage in other social activities that were considered racial taboo. Although their official perspective and internal communications are hard to access, the Pittsburgh Coal Company likely knew full well that their actions in

<sup>24</sup> Conditions in the Coal Fields, United States Committee on Interstate Commerce, 2601. This was a particularly important charge to refute since the strike occurred during the Prohibition Era (1920-1933). Liquor Laws were strictly enforced in Western Pennsylvania, given a perusal of the *Monessen Daily Independent*’s coverage of the strike, appeared to disproportionately target Black people and white ethnics. Coverage in the *Monessen Daily Independent* suggests that fears of the illegal production, distribution, and consumption of liquor prompted the federal Prohibition Commission to launch raids to “padlock speakeasies” in Pittsburgh-area non-union mining towns in the Spring of 1928. “Conducting Raids,” *Monessen Daily Independent*, March 27, 1928, 1

<sup>25</sup> Conditions in the Coal Fields, United States Committee on Interstate Commerce, 2607.

diversifying the racial demographics of their mining towns would further enrage striking white miners, and trigger white racial panic in the broader community.

***To all mine superintendents:***

**The United States Senate Investigating Committee is now visiting the Pittsburgh district. Clean up all unsightly conditions; keep our police in the background; avoid all arrests; instruct our men to keep out of trouble. If the committee desires to question any of our employees, see to it that you present men you can trust and who can be depended upon to give the right kind of answers. If you are examined by the committee, do not answer any questions you think might be harmful to our interests. The company will protect you.**

*Figure 3: A letter from Pittsburgh Coal's executives to local mine bosses, urging non-compliance with the ensuing Senate inquiry.*

As one can imagine, the Pittsburgh Coal Company<sup>7</sup> was not too happy with Senator Frank Gooding's subcommittee coming to visit and tour the strike zone; they allegedly called it a "four-ring circus" in which "continual flashes from the photographers at night supplied the pyrotechnics."<sup>26</sup> The above letter from company executives to the two-dozen-or-so local mine superintendents, was leaked to a visiting member of the press. Instructing superintendents to "keep our police in the background" is a clear indication that the company was fully-aware of the abusive and lawless behavior of their private coal and iron police. This memorandum demonstrates that the Pittsburgh Coal Company did actually fear questions that "might be harmful to [their] interests," and wanted to orchestrate their response. If Senators poked around too closely, they might witness "unsightly conditions" such as gambling, sex work, and interracial relationships – and desire to reprimand the coal company for it.

At the same time, the Pittsburgh Coal Company's executives were awfully brazen in some of their under-oath responses. This was most surprising, considering that they were facing a powerful government entity. Pittsburgh Coal Company executives evaded questions and

<sup>26</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 486-487.



responded at times in a dismissive and impudent tone to complaints about their racial etiquette. At times, these white male captains of industry seemed to be almost taunting the United Mine Workers, as if to remind them that despite this investigation, there was little the Senators could or would do to help the union.

Although there are few primary sources that reveal official company internal strategy during the strike, we can make suggestive conclusions about the tone of their answers to certain questions. In a full committee hearing in Washington, Senators and Oscar K. Eaton, chief legal counsel for the United Mine Workers of America, grilled Pittsburgh Coal Company vice president C. E. Leshner.<sup>27</sup> Eaton peppered Leshner with questions like, “what do you know about the conditions of these colored men as to living in your [company] houses with women not their wives?”<sup>28</sup> As for the company’s failure to prevent the “public dances at [company] camps where whites dance with the blacks and the blacks dance with the whites and intermingle freely,” Leshner responded concisely that, non-union miners were “*not required to do that.*”<sup>29</sup> Leshner’s comment suggests that he and other company executives refused to accept any blame for possible inappropriate behavior, and fundamentally did not take the Senators and the UMWA that seriously.

In the same vein, Pittsburgh Coal Company board chairman William Warden deflected the company’s liability with regard to the allegations of immoral social conditions, rape, illegal and violent behavior of the coal and iron police. When asked about this by Oscar K. Eaton, Warden responded: “naturally we could not control the morals of every policeman we had ... we did our best ... we chased them up.”<sup>30</sup> And when pushed further, Warden retorted in a dismissive tone,

<sup>27</sup> Similar to many congressional hearings of the era, counselors representing the parties in question were permitted to question witnesses just like the Senators were. In this case, those two people were Oscar K. Eaton, and Don Rose – representing the UMWA and the Pittsburgh Coal Company, respectively. Eaton and Rose were both able to call witnesses before the committee in Washington.

<sup>28</sup> United States Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 479.

<sup>29</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 479.

<sup>30</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 560.

“we could not stop the [rapes and murders] before they happened, could we?”.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, when Senator Burton Wheeler obsessively pressed the board chairman on the subject of race mixing, and implied “but you do make it so that they have to intermingle?”, Warden replied that while “things have happened” to allow “intermingling,” that the Pittsburgh Coal Company “was trying to correct it.”<sup>32</sup> Warden’s phrasing and use of the passive voice displaced blame from the company’s own hands. Warden and his company refused to take responsibility for the interaction of Black and white non-union families living and working in close proximity in their mining towns. While Warden was well-aware that this level of proximity between white and African-American residents was societally unacceptable, and agreed that future steps to segregate the company’s mining towns were necessary, he followed Carl E. Leshner’s lead in brushing off these claims. Confident that they were winning the bitter strike, the Pittsburgh Coal company all but dismissed concerns that their strategy of exacerbating racial tensions to spite white union strikers had gone too far.

Although the Senators were not able to do more than give Pittsburgh Coal Company executives a slap on the wrist, they used their platform to officially decry that the coal operators had pushed the boundaries of labor exploitation too far, and that their failure to police Black-white ‘mingling’ was unacceptable. Interview questions and back-and-forth dialogue show the Senators’ attempts to intervene in this labor strife and chastise the coal company for degrading the status of white miners and allowing Black and white miners and their families to socialize.

While “intermingling” was far and away the clearest alarm bell that the Senate Committee rang in their inquiry, the Senators also worried that the strike was degrading the white mining community more broadly. Seeing the increase of African-American coal miners in Western

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Pennsylvania during their visit, the Senators must have feared that white men were losing their grip on coal mining – an all-important sector of the industrial economy. This strike situation was particularly precarious since so many of the “white” striking miners were either foreign-born European ethnics or first generation immigrants. At one point during his testimony, UMWA Vice President Phillip Murray had to reassure Senator Hiram Johnson of California that the white race was *not* in peril. When asking about the state of the coal mining strike in Western Pennsylvania, Senator Johnson directed to Murray, “and I imagine that there is no race suicide there.” Murray replied: “no sir; the most of them have large families.”<sup>33</sup> Senator Johnson’s question reflected popular fears among white elites about the influx of Southern and Eastern European immigrant workers. Gail Bederman writes that the proud refrain of “no race suicide here!” – much like Phillip Murray’s response to Senator Hiram Johnson – was meant to reassure native-born white American men of their prowess, virility, and civilized manliness.<sup>34</sup>

Connecting the Senator’s concerns about interracial interaction was a deeper question: who belongs in a coal mine? With Black miners gaining something of a new foothold in Western Pennsylvania mining jobs, what would happen to “coal miner” as an identity – especially one that was previously coded as white? The white male Senators on this committee appeared to believe that diversifying mines, specifically the unprecedented influx of African-Americans into the heart of the U.S. coal producing region, would destabilize the industry that powered the country. This strike took place just after the height of employment in United States coal mines, in 1923, with

<sup>33</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, Volume I, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 204.

more than 862,000 men and boys working across the country.<sup>35</sup> Coal powered more than two thirds of all energy consumption at this time.<sup>36</sup>

Coal mining is dirty, smelly, and dangerous – something that could easily be seen as degraded work. Miners work in tight, pitch-black spaces hundreds of feet under the earth’s surface, and emerge at the end of a shift covered in soot. Years of coal mining can easily lead to serious health complications such as Black Lung Disease. In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, many “dirty” jobs involving garbage, sanitation, scrap yards, and toxic waste saw a transition from a primarily white ethnic (Southern and Eastern European) workforce to one increasingly comprised of Black and brown workers.<sup>37</sup> As historian of race and waste Carl Zimring argues, “leaving waste behind was an important facet of achieving whiteness” for many in-between groups (e.g. Jews working as scrap metal and junk collectors, then becoming managers).<sup>38</sup> Thus, if coal mining were to remain a white-coded, dirty yet masculine and empowering profession, it could not be too closely linked with Black people and blackness. Keeping coal mining coded as white, hyper-masculine work was the deeper goal of the United Mine Workers of America and, evidence suggests, the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce. To this end, they were largely successful.

With all of this talk of interracial interaction were deeper concerns about the strike’s possible effects on the white community. There was the possibility that striking whites would become disillusioned with their union and turn towards more radical forms of organization. During the subcommittee’s visit, they were shocked with accounts of coal and iron police brutalizing white strikers on the picket line. They noted the potential dangers of more leftist-leaning groups

<sup>35</sup> DiCiccio, *Coal and Coke in Pennsylvania*, 150.

<sup>36</sup> DiCiccio, 151.

<sup>37</sup> Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*, (United States: NYU Press, 2016), 184-186.

<sup>38</sup> Zimring, 183.

organizing disaffected striking (and strikebreaking) miners. Local clergy and community leaders warned of radical elements making an appearance and spreading their message in the strike zone – namely, the Industrial Workers of the World (I. W. W.) and the Pennsylvania-Ohio Relief Society.<sup>39</sup> Policing white union strikers too harshly could foster radicalism and revolution; striking union whites might ditch their shared racist consensus with management, and join with Black non-union miners. This is why Reverend W. Gilbert Nowell, a local white episcopal pastor, explicitly emphasized that it was the job of the coal and iron police and local mine officials to “prevent the mingling of strikebreakers and the strikers.”<sup>40</sup> While it was never articulated, one can imagine the worst case-scenario for the Senators would be that whites, especially white ethnics, would join together with African-Americans and develop a sense of cross-race, working-class consciousness.

As this chapter has shown the Pittsburgh Coal Company did not meet the racial expectations that the Senate and other stewards of the existing racial order had of them. Democrat or Republican, pro-injunction or pro-union, there was no way these Senators could support the company’s irresponsibility on enforcing the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. But since the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s wage scale reduction was truly weakening the United Mine Workers by the end of the decade, the company paid little interest to racial critiques which the UMWA and Senators levelled against them.

While the Senators bought the argument about race and morality that the United Mine Workers of America presented, the Pittsburgh Coal Company was ultimately not deterred from its plan to break the mining union by exploiting race to make organizing more difficult. The company was more focused on their own economic standing and viewed worker exploitation as acceptable,

<sup>39</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 361.

<sup>40</sup> Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 1035.

as long as it meant keeping their corporate profits and subduing worker organizing. The Pittsburgh Coal Company was confident that the Senators would not really be able to curtail their goal of breaking the UMWA, and was at times cavalier in their response to racial complaints that were forced by the union and taken up by Senators.

Yet the racist, paternalistic narrative that victimized and minimized Black people, which the UMWA, Pittsburgh Coal Company, and U.S. Senators peddled, did not go uncontested. Chapter 3 will explore the agency of Black mining families. The final chapter asks the critically important question: how did Black miners respond to the racist and reductive narratives that the United Mine Workers, Pittsburgh Coal Company, and Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce constructed about them, and what did the Black experience during this strike look like?

## Chapter 3 | Black miners, resistance, and community

In her affidavit to an Allegheny County notary public, Georgia Hall swore to the frequent harassment she faced in public from white women. Hall, who was Black, wrote that whenever she left the house it seemed like the wives and children of striking union miners were waiting to call her epithets, and even to throw rocks at her the size of a “fist.”<sup>1</sup> Georgia Hall had been born in Alabama, but in March 1928, her husband, John, was employed at the Montour No. 10 mine of the Pittsburgh Coal Company.<sup>2</sup> In her affidavit, she recalled one particular day when she walked past a group of white women who were inside a store. They called her the n-word, berated her as a scab, and jeered, “look at the dark cloud rising.” But when they taunted her, “do you want to fight?” Georgia Hall responded, “*hell, yes; come on out and fight.*”<sup>3</sup> They never came outside.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 4: Montour No. 10 mine company town, in Library Township, PA. Circa 1927. From CoalCampUSA.

<sup>1</sup> United States Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce, *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 2585.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., United States Federal Census, Year: 1930; Census Place: Pittsburgh, Allegheny, Pennsylvania; Page: 25A; Enumeration District: 0026; FHL microfilm: 2341704.

<sup>3</sup> *Conditions in the Coal Fields*, 2585.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to recognize the culpability of white women in perpetuating racial violence and harassment during the strike. See for example “White Women Assault Miner; Boy Is Killed,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1927; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 10. In this instance, white women repeatedly harassed Ellis Burns, a 26-year-old Black non-union miner in Washington County. On one occasion they threw pepper in his face and eyes, and on another, they stoned and clubbed him. Burns was later charged with first-degree murder for allegedly fatally shooting a white teenage boy in the crowd. There is debate as to whether he actually fired the shot.

Some accounts of the 1925-1928 bituminous coal strike in Western Pennsylvania cast Black miners and their families as having no voice, as merely victims of a crossfire between white industry and white labor.<sup>5</sup> Such accounts miss Georgia Hall's response to the harassment from those white women. In actuality, primary source evidence like Hall's affidavit complicate characterizations of Black strikebreaking coal miners and their families as passive, pitiful, powerless victims or dupes. It is true that industrial exploitation, mining town segregation, racialized police violence, and racist discrimination in labor unions ran rampant in the coal fields south of Pittsburgh in the late 1920s. However, non-union African-American coal miners and their families were no "pawns" in a game of labor-versus-capital. This chapter explores how Black non-union miners and their families experienced the strike and how they constructed their own identity and community, as well as the range of responses within the Black community to the situation.

Many Black mining families in the southwestern Pennsylvania countryside during this strike were recent migrants who faced a racially hostile environment. But as this chapter shows, they insisted on their right to work in the mines and demanded a space for themselves. They made meaning in navigating their own experiences, and harnessed both formal *and* informal tools of resistance to organize and fight back. Some of these strategies included establishing community networks and institutions, and planting down roots as a way of finding a sense of belonging. Another was to focus on a politics of respectability and public behavior. And finally, Black miners also responded in more assertive and direct ways – including with the use of violence to defend their interests and their livelihoods.

This chapter explores agency of Black union miners and their families. African-American non-union miners faced a wide array of challenges including workplace discrimination, housing

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the rhetoric of *UMWJ* articles and Senate testimony mentioned in chapters 1 and 2.



segregation, random attacks and threats on the streets from resentful white strikers, and an exploitative wage-debt system in the mining town. They also encountered a divided Black community. In particular, this strike illuminates tensions between Black working-class miners, and middle-class and upper-class figures within the existing Black community in the Pittsburgh area about what form of politics would be most effective for the economic and social advancement of Black people in Western Pennsylvania. Black non-union miners and Black newspaper editors of *The Pittsburgh Courier* differed over the best strategy for gaining a place in the industrial economy. But even as Black miners faced criticism from their own community and violence from whites, they resisted and forged their own paths by building community and by insisting that whites respect their rights. This is a story about African Americans seeking a place for themselves in the industrial economy and imagining a better life for themselves against the evil face of white supremacy.

### **Agency in migration**

As previously stated, the strike period saw an unprecedented influx of Black migration into the southwestern Pennsylvania coal fields. While some accounts describe this migration process as an “importation of Black miners *by*” the coal operators to break the strike, it is important to question the passive voice in that phrasing. The Pittsburgh Coal Company did actively recruit Black men from northern industrial cities and southern Appalachia to fill their labor shortage, and they did offer prospective employees rail tickets and mining jobs in Pennsylvania without ever mentioning the ongoing strike with the United Mine workers.<sup>6</sup> Operators sometimes partnered with

<sup>6</sup> Dennis C. Dickerson, “The Black Church in Industrializing Western Pennsylvania,” in *African-Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives*, ed., Joe Trotter and Eric Ledell Smith, (State College: Penn State University Press, 2010), 392-393; Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 81.

middle-class Black community leaders, ministers, and newspaper editors to act as recruiters. But, there were genuine economic incentives for Black families to move from rural southern communities into Appalachian coal mining towns. When migrating to the coalfields of Southern West Virginia or Western Pennsylvania, Black miners could sometimes make close to \$5.00 for an eight-hour day, compared to \$2.50/day in southern factories, or less than \$1.00/day on southern farms.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, as Joe Trotter argues in his groundbreaking work, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32*, Black miners facilitated their own migration through family and kinship ties.<sup>8</sup> Black women, as spouses, sisters, and daughters, played a key role in migration into the northern coalfields, “desiring to hold their families together, escape rural poverty, and gain greater control over their destinies.”<sup>9</sup> As Isabel Wilkerson demonstrates in her influential book about the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, these factors appeared as common trends across African-American migration northward and westward in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Even as Black coal miners faced the double-edged sword of discrimination and racism from both the United Mine Workers and coal companies, they shaped “their own experiences under the onslaught of industrial capitalism ... to a substantial degree,” suggests Trotter.<sup>11</sup>

For the Western Pennsylvania miners, perhaps the most underappreciated aspect of Black agency in the strike period came the decision to migrate to the Pittsburgh coalfields itself. Black miners and their families came from as close as the northern industrial steel and auto cities of Pittsburgh and Detroit, the coal fields of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Alabama, as well as

<sup>7</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 181.

<sup>11</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 95.

Georgia and North Carolina. According to a sampling of Black non-union miners that the Pittsburgh Urban League conducted in 1928, many Black miners had recently moved from northern steel or auto cities, or other northern coalfields. For example, 25 percent reported their most recent residence as Pittsburgh, another 25 percent as West Virginia, and 18 percent from other parts of Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup>

Frank Jones' father came up from Alabama in the late teens to work in the mines, and soon after brought the rest of the family north to southwest Pennsylvania. Similar to the pattern of sons apprenticing with their fathers inside the mines of West Virginia that Joe Trotter talks about, Frank Jones recalled his father taking him into the coal mine at age sixteen or seventeen, and that, "I went right in and loaded with him."<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, migration was seasonal. Like other migrant families, Josephine Mickens' father worked in the Pennsylvania mines in the winters while spending the rest of the year with his family in Virginia. After moving as a child to Fayette County, Mickens herself returned to Virginia in the summers, and worked on the family farm.<sup>14</sup> Migration was not always permanent, and family and kinship ties were equally important to recruitment from the Pittsburgh Coal Company in Black miners' decision to move to the region.

One of the central critiques that the United Mine Workers levelled against Black miners was that they were "transient" and "unsettled." The *UMWJ*, in particular, made the charge that Black miners were lazy and not cut out for difficult mining work. This, apparently, was meant to explain the high rate of labor turnover among non-union miners during the 1925-1928 coal strike. However, Joe Trotter explains that Black coal miners – especially those in the position of

<sup>12</sup> Alonzo C. Thayer, *The Causes of Labor Turnover among Newly Employed Negro Miners of the Pittsburgh Coal and Pittsburgh Terminal Companies*, (Pittsburgh: Urban League of Pittsburgh, February 1928) *Op. cit* Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker*, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Jones, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 1998, transcript, page 3, Patch Work Voices oral histories collection, Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus.

<sup>14</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine DeFrank, February 27, 2002, transcript, 4, Patch Work Voices oral histories collection, Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus.

strikebreakers – had good reason to be “transient,” and to sometimes quit one mine and move to another one. As Trotter lays out, Black coal miners moved around to obtain safer workplaces, higher wages, and win a “greater recognition of their humanity as workers and blacks.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this “transience” was actually evidence of agency. While this moving around was a common practice of coal miners of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in unstable times, Black non-union miners at this time had to navigate the unique terrain of wanting to secure gainful employment and provide for their families, *and* refusing to be pawns in a game of racial and economic exploitation.

### **Unions, industrial morality, and respectability**

As Black miners and their families moved into the region and began working in non-union positions, they faced racial hostility from white union miners affiliated with the United Mine Workers of America. Black miners and the larger Black community in the Pittsburgh metro worried about the constant threat of anti-black violence from white pickets, as well as from the company’s coal and iron police. Respectability politics was one way of attempting to reduce the hostility they faced.<sup>16</sup> Most notably, the Black-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* encouraged Black non-union miners to join with union white pickets and the United Mine Workers of America. Although never explicitly articulated this way, the idea was that if African-Americans sought membership in the union they would not face the same sort of relentless stigmatization as “scabs” and “job-stealers” that they were experiencing. Middle-class and upper-class Black community leaders who were already living in the Pittsburgh area, such as newspaper editors and ministers believed that unionization was the best way to seek racial advancement in the mines.

<sup>15</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

The *Pittsburgh Courier* exemplifies one approach to advance the interests of Black coal miners: that they should play by the traditional rules of unionization. Both news articles and editorials reveal a belief system around respectability printed in the *Courier*, which at the time was one of the most prominent Black newspapers in the United States.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the *Courier* wrote about the unique set of experiences of Black miners during the strike. This was especially true when it came to reporting stories of the formal – sometimes spontaneous – actions of insurgency, protest, and resistance to the Pittsburgh Coal Company’s oppressive labor tactics. On the other hand, the tone in editorials could often be critical and condescending towards working-class Black coal miners in the Pittsburgh area. The *Pittsburgh Courier*’s coverage of the strike reflected a message from Black elites to working-class Black miners to adhere to certain moral standards and expectations about the proper “work ethic.”<sup>18</sup>

Black-owned newspapers in Appalachia sometimes reinforced and reinscribed negative stereotypes about working-class Black coal miners.<sup>19</sup> In “Migrants And Miners,” the *Courier* argued that while Black migrants, especially those from the South, had attained better wages, health care, schools for their children, and voting rights, migrants had “adversely influenced health and morals” in the community and had weakened the union through accepting lower non-union mining wages.<sup>20</sup> In a 1926 article titled “Coal Miners Band Selves Together Against ‘Barons,’” the *Pittsburgh Courier* expressed a markedly pro-union perspective. The *Courier* held the attitude that the best way for Black miners to advance their interests would be to become “full-fledged members” of the United Mine Workers of America. In what is a fascinating twist, this article makes

<sup>17</sup> Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 126-127.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of The Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 69. This book explores the newspaper’s editor, Robert L. Vann, in particular. It features accounts of Vann’s criticism of Black “scabs,” or non-union workers.

<sup>19</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 118.

<sup>20</sup> “Migrants and Miners,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov 27, 1926; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A8

it seem as if “the [white] union men have attempted no violence, offered no threats . . . to the strange workmen coming from other parts of the country.”<sup>21</sup> Rhetoric like these blamed Black working-class miners for not joining a union where they were often not welcomed, and instead taking lower-paying, but nonetheless paying, non-union jobs.

Yet as Eric Arnesen has argued, Black “strikebreaking” must actually be seen as a form a working-class agency and activism.<sup>22</sup> The immediate goals of migrants were to find jobs, even if they were non-union. Strikebreaking, in fact, is a misleading term, when considering that Black workers were routinely shut out of the halls of labor prior to union strikes. Thus, working in open-shop stockyards and mines was an “opportunity to prove their competence to skeptical managers” and to advance their own interest outside the boundaries of racist white unions. As much as trade unionism was a strategy for (mostly) white workers during this period, so too was entering a workplace that was so often a closed door for African-Americans. Working in these contexts, even if not at the union scale, was an opportunity for Black people to gain access to areas of the economy that had been closed to them. Black workers were *workers*, not *strikebreakers*; they were seeking employment in labor that they had previously been denied access to.

Nevertheless, the *Pittsburgh Courier* argued that the best way for African-Americans to gain a foothold in the coal industry was through demanding space for themselves *within* the UMWA, in spite of its rank-and-file racism. Union mining work was marked as valued, dignified work. The *Courier* saw coal mining as an opportunity for Black men, in particular, to make gains in the Pittsburgh-area industrial economy; however, this progress would only happen if Black miners unionized – working in non-union positions would only be defeatist in the end. Moreover,

<sup>21</sup> “Coal Miners Band Selves Together Against ‘Barons,’ : Race Men Discover That They Are Able to Join Unions,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov 20, 1926; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Arnesen, “The Specter of the Black Strikebreaker,” 332.

the *Courier* pushed back against the concerns of Black miners who had tried to unionize within the existing UMWA, and did not feel included. They argued that “as deplorable as [racism within the union] is,” that Black miners were too “quick to attack ... the principle of labor organization.”<sup>23</sup> And perhaps even more bluntly, that same article made the charge about migrants that “when ignorant, inexperienced labor with a lower standard of living enters a community, it constitutes a serious menace to resident labor until it develops a standard of living equally high ... out of such material grow race hatred and conflicts between groups.”<sup>24</sup> Here we can see that the core belief system that the *Courier* held was one of assimilation, proving one’s worth to the white union man, and working to gain approval within the existing structure of organized labor. The *Courier* believed that union whites would be less racist and violent towards Black people, if Black non-union miners went on strike and joined them in their fight against the coal operators. Of course, neither before or during this particular strike were Black miners readily accepted into the lily white United Mine Workers of America.

In spite of the racist realities of unions, editorials in the *Courier* unequivocally refuted the complaints of Black non-union miners that they did not feel recognized or included in the UMWA. The *Courier* offered a sharp critique of those Black non-union miners who would question union membership on the grounds of discrimination by white unionists: “there is no flowery bed of ease for any man in any kind of work. He must take his bitter in order to get his sweet.”<sup>25</sup> In a powerful rhetorical appeal, A. W. Johnson, a union local secretary writing in from West Virginia, invoked the Thirteenth Amendment to argue that Black miners needed leave the “slavery of ... the bull-

<sup>23</sup> “Migrants and Miners,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov 27, 1926; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A8  
<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> A. W. Johnson, “Urges Coal Miners to Join United Mine Workers’ Union: If They Would Protect Wage Scale and Working Conditions, Says Officer,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28, 1928; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 3.

pens of Pennsylvania and West Virginia and be free American citizens.” He followed with the profound statement, “racial equality begins with racial self-respect.”<sup>26</sup> Johnson’s rhetoric mirrored other articles in the *Courier* during the strike that called on Black miners to join the union, expressing concerns about shame and embarrassment for the larger Black community if they continued as strikebreakers.

With the *Courier’s* editorials often adopting a “bootstraps” mentality that ignored the structural racism within the halls of labor, these articles reflect both the alliances and tensions between Black miners and Black elites. The tension shines through most clearly with issues of morality and respectability. In 1993, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term “respectability politics” when analyzing how middle and upper-class Black women in the Baptist church pushed for “the Black lower-class’ psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals.”<sup>27</sup> The goal, according to Higginbotham, was to “earn their people a measure of esteem from white America.”<sup>28</sup> A similar trend emerged in the *Pittsburgh Courier’s* treatment of the strike situation. And as Higginbotham points out, such attitudes can easily exacerbate class tensions, but also suggest a political approach coming from Black middle-class leaders.

The *Courier* adopted a patronizing tone towards non-union Black coal miners in the Pittsburgh area, calling them “illiterate,” “foolish,” and “ignorant.”<sup>29</sup> They seemed embarrassed by Black miners in an article which implied that intra-racial fighting between union and non-union Black miners “[was] enough to shame the whole race... to permit other men to set us against each

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> “Migrants and Miners,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov 27, 1926; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A8.



other.”<sup>30</sup> As James Grossman lays out in *Land of Hope*, Chicago’s Black middle-class did not fully embrace southern Black migrants in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and pushed for respectability politics among the newcomers, “fearful that the migrants... would disrupt the community and embarrass the race.”<sup>31</sup> Echoing the rhetoric of the *UMWJ* in 1926 and 1927, *The Pittsburgh Courier* raised the concern of what would happen when the coal operators “let all those green miners and non-union men out in the cold with no job.”<sup>32</sup> Specifically, if Black non-union miners would not join the union for financial protection in case of layoffs, they would become “prey for the police” and “a charge upon” the Black middle-class and Black elites of Western Pennsylvania.<sup>33</sup>

However, Black working-class miners did not necessarily agree with the prognosis that the *Courier* set out. Although we seldom hear their own voices, their work and actions demonstrate a desire to survive and make progress outside of the union. There is suggestive evidence that even some of the small group of Black *union* miners already in Pennsylvania did not trust the union to have their backs. Some likely crossed the picket line during the 1925-1928 period, as their union experience earlier in the 1920s did not convince them that going on strike with a racist union would best serve their interests.<sup>34</sup> James Grossman has shown that in the Chicago stockyards following the first World War, white union leaders blamed their inability to effectively organize Black workers on Black migrants’ supposed “lack of understanding of union principles and industrial democracy.”<sup>35</sup> Yet Black migrants and existing community leaders were often left unconvinced of

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 140.

<sup>32</sup> “Courier Opposed In Mining Camp; Its Fight For The Negro Too Strong,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec 4, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 174-176.

<sup>35</sup> Grossman, “The White Man’s Union,” in *Land of Hope*, 210.

trade unions' "efficacy" in dealing with issues of race, and that they would actually follow through on their promises to defend Black trade unionists as equals.<sup>36</sup> In response, working-class Black migrants formed their own institutions and networks of support, connection, and socializing.

### **Building community**

A number of strategies, tactics, and decisions reflect Black miners' agency in the 1925-1928 coal mining strike. Facing a hyper-policed, hyper-surveilled climate inside the walls of a Pittsburgh Coal Company town, the ways Black miners resisted mistreatment and racism could not always be overt and visible to company authorities. As Joe W. Trotter Jr. illustrates in his history of Black miners in West Virginia, Black miners displayed a variety of tactics to gain recognition of their dignity, provide for their families, and build meaningful social connections. These included refining their mining skills and trying to produce coal more efficiently than their white counterparts; moving from mine to mine in search of safer, more equitable and profitable conditions; occasionally allying with white miners; and "establishing racial solidarity with the expanding black elite" through churches and fraternal orders.<sup>37</sup>

Black spaces of worship were critically important spaces. From sermons to baptisms to funerals, Black congregations offered profound opportunities for both spiritual devotion and expressions of community solidarity. Through his analysis of the coal counties of southern West Virginia, Trotter points out that Black coal miners, through membership dues and fundraising campaigns, financed much of the development of Black churches in the area.<sup>38</sup> In Appalachian coal towns where Black people were often excluded from civic life, churches provided spaces for

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 264.

<sup>38</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 180.

political organizing, social gathering, and community leadership building – such as in the form of auxiliaries, and boards of trustees.<sup>39</sup>

Methodologically, to properly analyze the political struggles of Black non-union miners during this strike, it is critically important to explore not only the open activism of the miners, but also to be attentive to the “hidden transcript” and to use the framework of “infrapolitics.”<sup>40</sup> First established by James Scott, and later developed by Robin D. G. Kelley, “infrapolitics” are forms of resistance that do not visibly and immediately appear on the official transcript of political organizing. They are daily actions, activities, choices, and cultural expressions that are informal and often hidden, but that, Kelley and Scott insist, should be considered as politically vital as more traditional and formal political activities, such as voting, going on strike, or demonstrating. As Robin D. G. Kelley argues in *Race Rebels*, infrapolitics can range from dragging one’s feet when loading coal, leaving early from a mining shift to socialize or rendezvous with one’s romantic partner, or growing mustard greens in one’s garden to preserve a family recipe in the harsh Pennsylvania winter.<sup>41</sup>

A key way that Black non-union miners and their families found to resist ill-treatment and to build community was by maintaining traditional cultural practices, through gardening, and by employing natural healing practices. When harkening back to the recipes that his mother brought with her from Alabama to Fayette County, Frank Jones recalled that he “used to clean the devil out of chitlins.”<sup>42</sup> He remembered putting in the cinnamon and nutmeg when helping his mother

<sup>39</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 185.

<sup>40</sup> See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (Yale University Press: 1985); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, And The Black Working Class*, (London and New York: The Free Press, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, And The Black Working Class*, (London and New York: The Free Press, 1996), 7-8.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Jones, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 1998, transcript, 1.

bake sweet potato pie, in their Grindstone, Pennsylvania home.<sup>43</sup> Recipes like the ones Jones recounted in a 1996 oral history interview exemplify how food becomes etched into family history. Culinary genealogy, especially when involving migration, can be seen as a form of informal resistance of the families that came to the coal fields of southwestern Pennsylvania searching for a better life.

Black coal mining families, in particular, faced a coal town life full of rules and enforcement: where they could live, where they could go, and when they could access wages. Yet in spite of overbearing policing, regulation, and economic exploitation, they were able to take ownership over many aspects of domestic and social life. Food and cooking were certainly at the core of that, along with religion and spirituality, baseball, and gardening. For Black and white women alike, in the coal towns of Western Pennsylvania, gardening was a strategy of both physical and cultural survival. Company houses, while sub-standard in quality and often lacking heating, plumbing, or indoor appliances, did usually provide small garden plots in the front or exterior. Frank Jones recounted the mustard, turnip, and beet greens that grew in his mother's garden in the coal patch, and Josephine Mickens recalled her that family grew rhubarb and horseradish in their garden, and even raised pigs, chickens, and rabbits.<sup>44</sup> And Helen Banks Brown's mother "always had a large garden" outside their company house, and canned everything in the summer so it would last.<sup>45</sup> These were ways for Black families in Pennsylvania to preserve and keep alive their cultural heritage and cultural practices.

<sup>43</sup> Frank Jones, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 1998, transcript, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Jones, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 1998, transcript, 1; Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 2002, transcript, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Helen Banks Brown, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, April 16, 1996, transcript, 7, Patch Work Voices oral histories collection, Coal and Coke Heritage Center at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus.

As Monica White argues in *Freedom Farmers*, the history of agriculture as a form of resistance for Black people in the United States dates back to the period of enslavement. The gardens and provisional plots of enslaved people were “independent production grounds” and a “strategy of resistance ... to create food security.”<sup>46</sup> Historically and presently, Black women have “demonstrated collective agency and community resilience” through locally harvesting crops and livestock that facilitate self-sufficiency in an oppressive system.<sup>47</sup> Produce cultivated in the family garden allowed migrant communities to incorporate recipes and culinary traditions from their previous home communities, including the U.S. South.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Kimberly Smith and Michael Twitty have argued that gardening has been a way of countering racial oppression and degradation to self-identity.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, mobilizing small garden plots as a way of preserving family recipes was one way to put down roots in Pennsylvania while re-creating southern African-American culture and cultural practices.

Another survival strategy of Black migrant mining families in the Pennsylvania coal fields was to mobilize family garden plots as a first-aid kit. Josephine Mickens described how horseradish leaves were used as a natural remedy to cure headaches. She also recalled how mining mothers cooked onions into a cough syrup for sick children, or grew catnip in their garden for a baby with colic.<sup>50</sup> Healing practices were essential as doctors were difficult to access in rural coal mining communities, and coal company physicians were often focused on getting employees to produce the most coal possible and not on their well-being.

<sup>46</sup> Monica M. White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 13.

<sup>47</sup> White, *Freedom Farmers*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> Kimberly Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*: (University Press of Kansas: 2007), 95; Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South*, (United States: Harper Collins, 2018), 67-74.

<sup>50</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 2002, transcript, 12.

Another way that Black miners in Western Pennsylvania built community was through Black baseball teams. According to Frank Jones, who came of age in the mining town of Grindstone in Fayette County, each company town, camp, or patch, had a baseball field with crowds gathering on each side of the diamond. The Homestead Grays, a professional Black baseball team from Pittsburgh, would come to give exhibitions at Grindstone.<sup>51</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens' husband, Robert, was a catcher for the "Fairchance All Stars," an all-Black baseball team of coal miners in town.<sup>52</sup> She alleged in her oral history interview that one time they even beat the famed Homestead Grays.<sup>53</sup>

There is also scattered evidence that suggests Black mining families did develop some friendships and social connections with their white ethnic neighbors. While it is hard to know how exactly this played out during the 1925-1928 strike, the cultural interplay between Black people and European ethnics certainly reminds us that everyday interactions on the ground can often be more complicated than what the larger discourse would suggest. Miners of all race and ethnicities did build friendships with each other, as they literally depended on each other for safety and survival. This is not to say that when miners emerged from excruciatingly long day and night shifts in pitch darkness underground that the fault lines of race did not erupt chaotically. Oral histories, in particular, provide snapshots of alliance, friendship, cordiality, sharing, and mutual respect between African-American and Southern and Eastern European families in Pennsylvania mining towns – especially between women and children.

Black migrants and white ethnic immigrants built community through shared recipes, language, holiday traditions, and even dances in the coal fields of Fayette County. Josephine

<sup>51</sup> PWV, Jones, 6-7

<sup>52</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 2002, transcript, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 2002, transcript, 21.

Mickens moved with her family from southern Virginia around 1920, most of her neighbors were “Slavish and Polish.”<sup>54</sup> Mickens recalled fondly, “I learned to cook from them and I learned to eat what they eat,” and even learned to polka dance from her neighbors in the company town of Fairchance.<sup>55</sup> It was, in fact, the Slavic-speaking couple next door who found a mining job for her father. Mickens also had fond memories of shared recipes with her Polish next-door neighbors, including when her mother taught them how to make blackberry cobbler. Even in her late 80s in 2002, Mrs. Mickens still remembered some of the Slavic words and phrases she learned in her youth.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Helen Banks Brown recalled speaking a Slavic dialect, most likely Hungarian, with her childhood playmates in the company town of Fairchance.<sup>57</sup> Brown remarked, “we were just kids together you know.”<sup>58</sup>

These memories reflect moments and spaces of friendship, cordiality, and respect despite the racial tensions and race-baiting going on. They also reflect the fact that white ethnic immigrants did not arrive in the Pennsylvania coal fields with deeply embedded white racial beliefs and stereotypes about Black people. Stories on the ground complicate a simplistic view of tension, division, and complete segregation and isolation.

### **Direct action, protest, and armed retaliation**

Yet despite some scattered examples of cooperation, the strike was more notable for white violence and acts of Black resistance. As the first chapter documents, the Black community in Western Pennsylvania faced increasing stigmatization, harassment, and physical violence from

<sup>54</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 2002, transcript, 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> Josephine Abbott Mickens, interview by Elaine H. DeFrank, 2002, transcript, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Helen Banks Brown, Patch Work Voices project, 1996, interview, 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

white people involved with the United Mine Workers of America. But African-American strikebreaking miners in the 1925-1928 Western Pennsylvania strike were not passive victims of this violence. They fought back and sought to defend themselves, their families, and their reputations.<sup>59</sup>

Sometimes Black non-union miners directly retaliated against the onslaught of aggressive white unionists. On the evening of November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1926, a group of white union sympathizers dragged a Black non-union miner from a bus and severely beat him.<sup>60</sup> Later, he and “other employees” returned to the scene and allegedly shot into a crowd of whites, “seriously wounding Peter Phillips, 24 years old, of Fairhope” in the legs.<sup>61</sup> This story highlights not only how quickly existing racial tensions on the ground could boil over into violence, but also that Black miners were not just going to take abuse from the resentful whites on strike. There is suggestive evidence that Black World War I veterans, such as Joe Thompson, non-union miner who was also a returned Eighth Illinois G.I. who fought at Belleau Wood, brought necessary combat experience for retaliating against violent white strikers.

Some of the most telling examples come from organized resistance to the actions of the coal and iron police. This privately-run police force subjected the Black community to a disproportionate amount of violence, especially when it came to the use of lethal force. Re-exploring primary source documents reveals how Black coal miners in the Pittsburgh District pushed back against the racism and hyper-surveillance that they experienced – as Black people, and as non-unionized workers in one of the most dangerous industries.

<sup>59</sup> See this tone of victims (instead of also agents): Ronald L. Lewis, “Race, Class, & The UMWA in the North,” in *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), 99-118.

<sup>60</sup> “Miner’s Home Damaged By Explosion,” *Monessen Daily Independent*, November 24, 1926, 1.

<sup>61</sup> “Man Shot in Legs During Pitched Fight at Fairhope: Peter Phillips Hurt; Union Sympathizers – Miners Clash,” *Uniontown Morning Herald*, November 22, 1926, 1,7.



Even without a labor organization backing them, non-union miners organized on their own, and marched together to protest the brutality of the coal and iron policemen. Four Black miners were charged with inciting a riot after they allegedly led “a mob of about 100 miners which forced coal and iron policemen of the Pittsburgh Coal Company ... to release a negro miner they had arrested ... on disorderly conduct.”<sup>62</sup> The four miners, Floyd Dow, William Jenkins, Robert Menace and William Jones, were all employees of the company’s Midland Mine. As the white-owned Canonsburg *Daily Notes* put it, when coal and iron officers at the Midland Mine attempted to escort the miner whom they had arrested, “a group of more than 100 residents of the village” emerged, and hurled bricks until officers let their fellow miner go.<sup>63</sup> Given the concurrent arrest of Alex Woklucih, presumably a white ethnic strikebreaker, we can infer that this was an interracial demonstration of miners.<sup>64</sup> In this case, and in others, non-union Black miners used crowd size as a direct action tactic to put pressure on the Pittsburgh Coal Company.

In a similar, yet more upsetting example from 1929, coal and iron police murdered William Young during a mass demonstration. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Young, who was Black, was part of a group of 300 people who rose up in response to the arrest of miner Howard Childers for allegedly driving under the influence.<sup>65</sup> A white newspaper from 60 miles northeast, the *Kittanning Simpson Leader Times*, reported that “state police and county officers responded to a riot call and dispersed a crowd of 400 negroes who were gathered.”<sup>66</sup> Private James B. Lucas of the coal and iron force alleged that Young grabbed his revolver from its holster and fired at him when Lucas was attempting to disperse the crowd. However, other witnesses disputed that account

<sup>62</sup> “Arrest Mob,” in *Monessen Daily Independent*, June 14, 1927, 1.

<sup>63</sup> “Four Held for Hearing Before Squire McKnight,” in *The Daily Notes* (Canonsburg, PA), June 14, 1927, 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> “Coal, Iron Police Shoot Down Miner- Fired Upon When He Ignores ‘Move On’ Order of Officers” in *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 10, 1929.

<sup>66</sup> “Start Probe in Fatal Mine Riot,” *Kittanning Simpson Leader Times*, Kittanning, Pennsylvania, October 21, 1929, 1.

– and claimed that Lucas attacked Young, and while he was unarmed on the ground, officers fatally shot him.

When the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) later probed the case, they argued in their report that miners were justified in protesting as they likely had “no confidence in the authority exercised by the coal and iron police” to perform their duties fairly and justly.<sup>67</sup> The *Courier* astutely contextualized this uprising at the Montour No. 1 mine of the Pittsburgh Coal Company as merely weeks after the acquittal of infamous coal and iron officers Lyster and Watts, who allegedly tortured and beat a non-union white miner to death earlier in 1929. The *Courier* reported on the killing of Young as another example of the “cold brutality and careless gun-play of the coal and iron police.”<sup>68</sup> Non-union miners constructed alliances, solidarity, and mutual networks of support in much the same ways that unionized strikers did. If it is an accurate statistic, the image of a “crowd which had swelled to 300 persons,” would be significant – given that this mirrors the average population size of an “open-shop” non-union coal mining town of the Pittsburgh Coal Company.

Black miners who worked for the smaller Pittsburgh Terminal Coal Company also actively pushed back against police brutality.<sup>69</sup> In its article, “Non-Union Miners Protest Brutal Slaying Of Race Man,” the *Courier* reported a story in which 150 Black non-union employees of the open-shop Pittsburgh Terminal Coal Company went on strike to protest the murder of a fellow miner by the coal and iron police. The officer allegedly bludgeoned a Black non-union miner with a blackjack club during a dice game. In response, this large group of miners spread the word and told Mollenauer mine superintendent, William Ivel, that they would not conduct any mining

<sup>67</sup> “Lay Fatal Riot to Mine Police: Liberties Group Claim Lack Of Confidence, Clause,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, October 22, 1929, 40.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Pittsburgh Terminal was also operating open shop.

activities until “the slayer of the miner had been turned over to county authorities.”<sup>70</sup> While white newspapers failed to cover this important story of Black agency and collective action, the *Courier* made sure that its readership knew of the strike. This example reminds us that white unionists were not the only miners to conduct walkouts, wildcat strikes, and make their demands heard.

A 1927 report of employees at the Montour No. 1 mine of the Pittsburgh Coal Company is also clear evidence of Black non-union miners’ agency.<sup>71</sup> The report of the “Colored Committee of Non-Union Miners, Montour No. 1” offers a unique glimpse into strategies and demands of strikebreaking Black miners, as they navigated the complex terrain of union exclusion and police violence during the 1925-28 strike. Written by a chairman and five committee members who were appointed by fellow miners, the document exposes the “ferocious brutality” of the coal and iron police, the “systematic robbery” of Black employees of the Pittsburgh Coal Company, and calls for a mass demonstration. The report insisted that if not for the removal of certain officers, better working conditions, and more equitable pay, “another demonstration, such as that practiced September 12<sup>th</sup>, will immediately take place.”<sup>72</sup>

This committee of African-American coal miners at the Montour Mine No. 1, while they were never mentioned in local newspapers, offers a rare spotlight on the often silenced voices and perspectives of non-union “strikebreakers” themselves. Putting their bodies on the line against police brutality and harnessing their human capital to make demands against the largest coal company in the world, these miners showed much more than their agency given the circumstances. The report of the “Colored Committee of Non-Union Miners” told the Pittsburgh Coal Company

<sup>70</sup> “Non-Union Miners Protest Brutal Slaying of Race Man,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 19, 1928; accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A7.

<sup>71</sup> This source was uncovered by Peter Gottlieb, and re-printed in his 1987 work; Peter Gottlieb, “Black miners and the 1925–28 bituminous coal strike: The colored committee of non-union miners, montour mine No. 1, Pittsburgh Coal Company,” in *Labor History*, Vol. 28 Issue 2, 1987, 233-241.

<sup>72</sup> Gottlieb, 241

that they would not sit by idly and be exploited as a cheap labor source while white miners were on the picket line harassing them. They called out the debt peonage system of the company store, and the coal and iron police's "espionage system which would make the Kaiser seem like a piker."<sup>73</sup> All of this, reflects a disruption – even if not ultimately a consequential one – to the power dynamics of the strike. These committee members spoke their truth in public, well aware of the violent backlash they could face.<sup>74</sup> They did so in the name of "mutual protection," solidarity amongst miners who did not belong to an official labor organization or political party, and a desire to provide for themselves and their families.

Black coal miners during the 1925-1928 bituminous coal strike in Western Pennsylvania emerged on the scene primarily as non-union miners, and encountered relentless racist assaults from white union miners. The Black community also faced persistent police violence from the Pittsburgh Coal Company's private security force. But they pushed back in a variety of ways. These different strategies reflected classed dynamics and tensions between working-class Black miners and the small, but existing community of Black middle-class and upper-class newspaper editors and clergy. The hidden transcripts and infrapolitics are essential to understanding how spirituality, gardening, and family recipes helped Black families navigate the experience of the strike. Black non-union miners also demonstrated more overt forms of resistance when necessary. African-American coal miners in Western Pennsylvania insisted on their belonging in a place and space that was previously nearly all-white. Through their actions, overt and covert, they argued that they were fully capable and able workers who deserved full inclusion in the coal mines.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Gottlieb, 237.

## **Conclusion: What does a coal miner look like?**

As this thesis has shown, a racial analysis helps us examine how and why the 1925-1928 bituminous strike was ultimately a battle over belonging in America's coal mines. For white working-class union miners and their families, this strike was a fight over keeping coal mines a space in which white miners were in a privileged position. During this period, Black non-union coal miners and their families were trying to gain access into a part of the Pittsburgh-area industrial economy that had previously excluded them, and to find a place in the dignified profession of coal mining. However, to the investigating United States Senate Committee of Interstate Commerce, this strike represented a moment in which the white Senators feared that coal mining could become degraded due to too close an association with blackness. As government officials and stewards of whiteness, the Senators wanted to keep mining a form of work that was both valued and reserved for whites within the labor landscape of the 1920s.

Looking at this episode is one window into the question, who gets to belong in the industrial economy? During this dispute, white miners attempted to claim coal mining as theirs for the taking – a noble profession solely for themselves. The United Mine Workers and the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce constructed narratives that attempted to firmly link the identity of coal mining to whiteness. But Black miners resisted this narrative and demanded they be included in coal communities and the coal workforce. For Black miners, coal mining was work that meant good pay, autonomy, pride, masculinity, and full citizenship – a combination that terrified the white psyche.

By the end of this strike race-baiting was not enough of a strategy for white union miners and the United Mine Workers of America to force the Pittsburgh Coal Company into making any concessions. With the coal company as the clear winner of this failed strike, in 1928 and 1929,

some white union miners decided to cut their losses and go back to work. Union membership in the Central Competitive Field, which had previously been the UMWA's strongest region in the U.S., tanked as the decade winded down.<sup>1</sup> The United Mine Workers were entering a rough period: between 1929 and 1933 the economy crashed and the coal market shrunk, meaning less jobs and less bargaining power. It would take until the New Deal labor reforms of the mid 1930s for unions to gain their footing again. Some of these same Senators from the Committee on Interstate Commerce, including Wheeler and Wagner, went on to champion pro-union legislation during the FDR administration.<sup>2</sup>

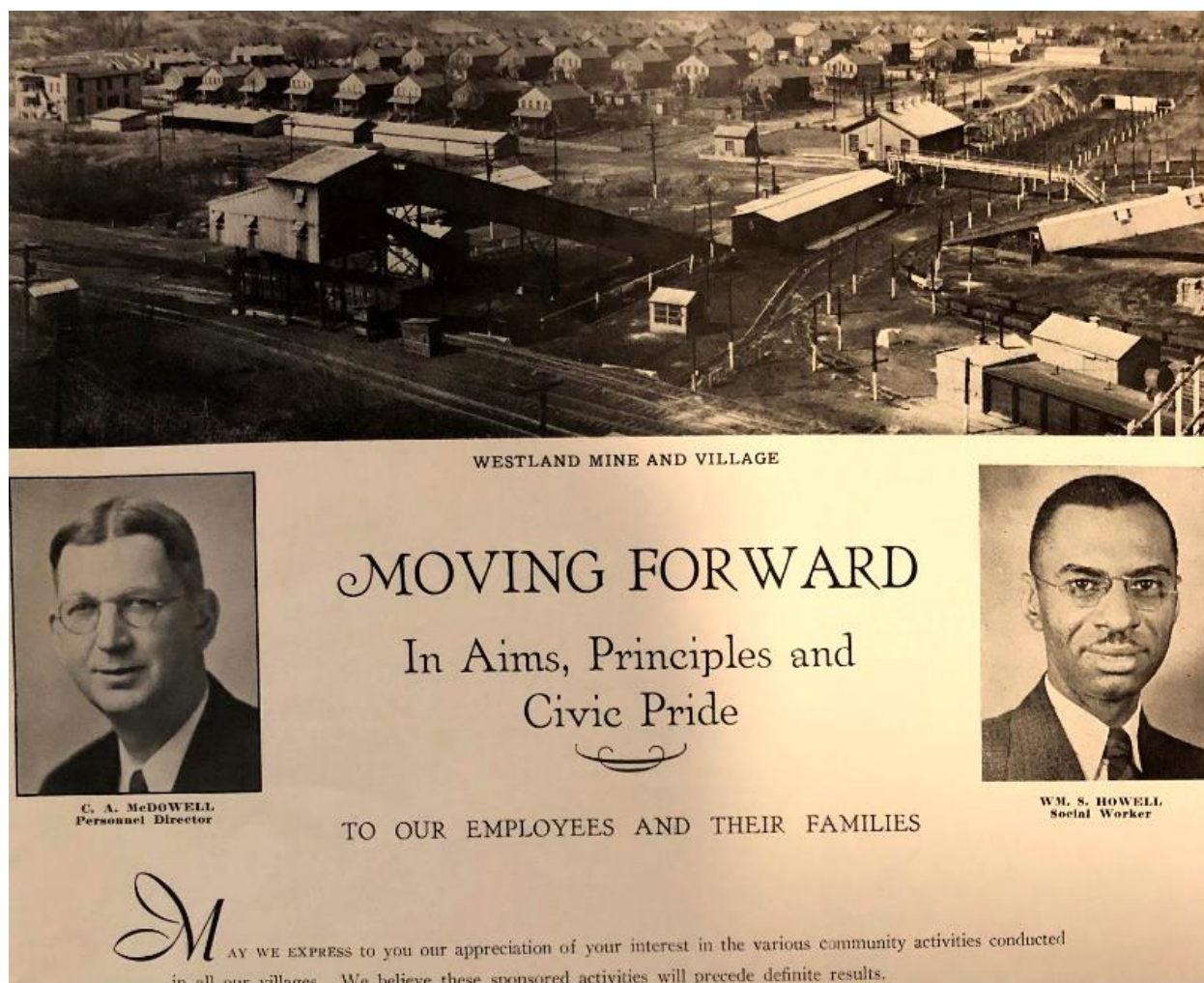
The 1928 report of the Senate Committee ultimately did nothing in the short term, as far as passing legislation or otherwise intervening to materially aid the white union miners on strike. In spite of their race-based sympathy with the UMWA, the Senators were unable to do much concrete damage to the Pittsburgh Coal Company, who was winning the economic war of attrition in this strike. While their hearings were mostly performative in the end, there is still much we can learn from what the Senators and witnesses discussed and debated.

Black non-union miners and their family members made meaning out of their experience during this strike and forged their own community networks. While not all Black coal miners remained in the area after its conclusion, this strike was one historical entrance point for African-American coal miners in the rural counties outside of Pittsburgh to gain a foothold in the local industry. That foothold was tenuous at best. Black miners would be disproportionately affected by automation of mining technology in the 1940s and 1950s. As machines came into the mines, white men put a stranglehold on mechanized union job positions. When companies eliminated positions

<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Filippelli, "Diary of a Strike: George Medrick and the Coal Strike of 1927 in Western Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* vol. 43, no. 3, July 1976, 255.

<sup>2</sup> Senator Robert Wagner of New York was the namesake of the Wagner Act in 1935, which established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to act as an impartial arbitrator of disputes.

that were previously pick and shovel posts, Black men were the first to be fired. This trend happened across the Appalachian mining states.



*Figure 5: An image of the Westland Mine in a 1939 Pittsburgh Coal Company pamphlet, which “celebrates” their “moral improvement” efforts towards Black employees. This source is highly paternalistic, and includes staged photos of everything from women’s civic clubs, men’s riflery clubs; but it also suggests that Black miners maintained somewhat of a position as to employment within the company’s mining towns, 10 years after the strike.*

Although not all of the Black families that moved into Westmoreland, Fayette, Greene and Washington counties during the strike stayed there, many did. Black miners and their families, stigmatized and targeted for both their race and their non-union status upon entry into the local economy, put down roots and insisted upon their right to exist in this space. They built lives, connections, traditions, and local institutions in small towns and cities like Monessen, Fairchance,

Whitsett, Masontown, Republic, Brownsville, Waynesburg, Connellsville, and Uniontown. Although major coal mining does not exist anymore in this area, many of these places still have relatively sizeable and vibrant Black communities, with local African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Churches, for example, that still stand today.

. . . . .

Until recently, I bought into the whitewashed narrative that a coal miner in Appalachia looks like my great-great grandfather Leonard Sarver. Or perhaps my great-great-great uncles, Henry and Joseph Sharpenberg, who were both killed in tragic mining accidents in the Pittsburgh area. Whiteness has, yet again, shaped a story about coal mining in the United States that erases the experiences, contributions, and struggles of Black people and other people of color in that industry.

Coal mining, as an industry, livelihood, and family identity, emerged as a key topic during the 2016 Presidential Election cycle as then-candidate Donald J. Trump promised to bring back good-paying coal mine jobs to the Appalachian Rust Belt. Ninety years after the strike, on a hot day in June 2016, Donald Trump stood inside a factory in the formerly-booming steel town of Monessen, Pennsylvania, to deliver a plan to “bring back our jobs.” Named for the Monongahela river it sits on, about 30 miles south downstream of Pittsburgh, Monessen has long been a working-class community of some racial and ethnic diversity.<sup>3</sup> Monessen used to be a haven for good-paying union steel jobs, and the nearest small city to neighboring coal mines in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those mining and steel mill jobs have all but evaporated, and the hard-working people of Monessen have been left behind.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2018 American Community Survey, about 12 percent of Monessen residents identify as African-American.



When Trump came to Monessen, the same city of publication for the *Monessen Daily Independent* during the strike, he blamed economic woes on “open borders,” and vowed to put “America First again” on immigration. This counterfactual targeting of Latinx immigrants during the 2016 election was not unlike the misplaced blame on Black coal miners for the economic suffering of unionized white working-class communities during the 1925-1928 strike.<sup>4</sup>

Reliable coal jobs have not really existed in substantial numbers in Western Pennsylvania since the 1960s and 1970s. Deindustrialization, the automation of certain elements of mining work, outsourcing, and transitions to more sustainable forms of energy have decimated the coal industry. Even so, one major aspect of then-candidate Donald J. Trump’s “Make America Great Again” strategy was to evoke nostalgia for the once-booming coal industry in states like Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. Coal was one of the more-talked-about parts of the Trump campaign’s efforts to ignite white resentment around larger economic problems of deindustrialization and automation that have decimated many “Rust Belt” communities for decades.

But that political appeal relies on linking the question of “what a coal miner looks like” with white male faces, both past and present; it erases women and miners of color. It is certainly true that the racialized forces of mechanization in the 1940s and 1950s took a significant toll on the Black mining community – according to the National Survey of Mining Employees, only 4 percent of U.S. coal miners identified as Black in 2012. This literal and rhetorical erasure obfuscates who mined in the heart of the world’s coal production, Western Pennsylvania, in the 1920s and 30s – quite literally fueling and powering the nation’s steel plants and electric grids.

<sup>4</sup> Most voters in these four counties, where the strike occurred back in 1925, pulled the lever hard for Trump in November 2016. But this area was not always a bastion of Republican red; in fact, in 2008, President Barack Obama only lost Fayette county by 160 votes – or 1 percentage point. In 2016 though, many of those voters switched it up nearly 100 fold: Trump won Fayette by 16,000 votes, or a lead of 31 points.

If there is one thing we can take away from this latest evolution in the politics of coal, it is the extent to which the histories of coal mining in the United States, and especially in places like Western Pennsylvania and Southern West Virginia have been whitewashed. The selective erasure of people of color, African-Americans in particular, from this history was necessary to create such a monolithically-coded image of the aggrieved white male coal miner during the 2016 election cycle. But we must not perpetuate that erasure: the history, stories, tribulations, and lived experiences of Black coal miners in the United States matters.

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