

“Mom, I’m not going back tomorrow to work.”

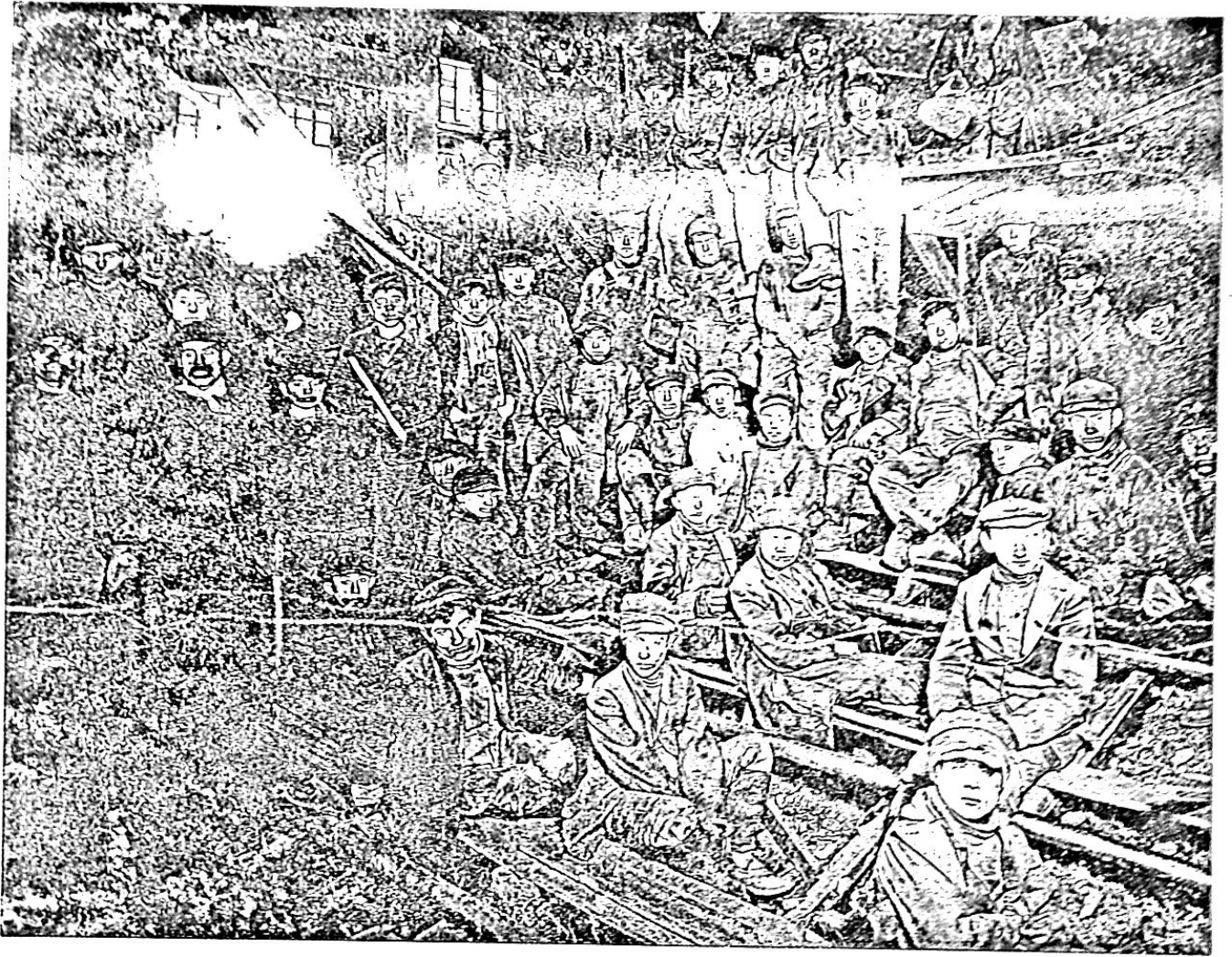
Joseph Miliauskas: Breaker Boy

Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1900

Joseph Miliauskas’s family emigrated from Lithuania in 1900. They settled near Scranton, Pennsylvania, so his father could mine coal. Joseph, not yet ten, begged his parents to let him work, too. Finally they gave in and let him begin as a “breaker boy.” Early each morning he picked up his lunch bucket and proudly walked to the tallest building in the colliery—or coal factory. He sat down on a wooden board in a row behind several other boys. At 7 A.M. a belt clicked on and a river of coal chunks began to tumble down toward them. A rising cloud of coal dust soon blackened their skin and clothes. It was far too noisy to talk. There wasn’t even time to straighten their backs, and many breaker boys ended up with curved spines.

Joseph later recalled that he earned seventy cents a day for his labor.

“**T**here were five slate pickers on our chute. The last one was the cleaner. He got one cent more than the boys in front of him. It was up to us to watch and pick the slate [rock that couldn’t be burned] out. We had to throw it to the side and let the clean coal go down.



“The boss was behind us with a broom and if he caught you slipping up and letting some slate come down, boy, you’d get it in the back with a broom. Oh, he’d sock you. If you were the first one, and if you don’t throw [out] much slate, he’d come back up of you and let you have it . . . Sometimes when the boss wasn’t looking we let more of it go through. Usually he was there though watching you and he’d slam you with the broom.

“[My] second day [on the job] my fingers were all cut up and bleeding. I asked the boss if I could go home and he hit me with the broom and said, ‘Stay there.’ Twelve o’clock came and the whistle blew. I took my dinner pail out and went home. I come home and said to my mother, ‘Mom, I’m not going back tomorrow to work anymore. My fingers are all bloody.’ ‘Oh, yes you are,’ she said. ‘We didn’t tell you to get this job. You got it on your own. You started it; you’re going to stay with it.’ So I stayed home that afternoon and then went back. [After] you’re there two or three weeks, your fingers get hardened up. No more blood. You get used to it.”

DIGGING UP THE PAST

is dug up the past to heat present. Anthracite, or hard coal, is formed when ancient trees are squeezed from four sides into a hard, black shiny rock that gives off heat when burned. The boys often found fossils of animals among their rocks. They produced what went to heat the old fuel steam engines on the railroads.

The breaker boys looked for chances to get back at the bosses who beat them. Sometimes they fired pieces of coal at a boss who turned his back. When they really got mad, they jammed the machinery with pieces of board or rock, bringing the whole factory to a standstill. But getting caught meant big trouble at home, since no one got paid when the machines were down. For Joseph, the best part about being a breaker boy was lunch:

"[We] worked from seven to noon, then a half hour to eat, then back to work till 5:30. [When the noon whistle blew for lunch] we ate our sandwiches in no time, then started playing tag. We knew every hole in that breaker, and we'd hide and go through in complete darkness. We'd go over the machinery and around it. You get to know it because everything stops during lunch hour. We got to know it like a bunch of rats."

When he turned twelve, Joseph became a "nipper" in the underground mines. All he had to do was sit on a bench outside the door and open it when he heard a train or a mule coming with a coal car from another part of the mine, and then close it again. At last he was free of noise, dust, and bosses. He fed crumbs of bread to the rats that kept him



The drivers at work. Mules lived in the mines, where the boys fed them, cleaned up after them, and treated them as pets.

company and made friends with the mules that hauled coal cars along the underground railroad tracks. It was warm and peaceful deep inside the earth. But Joseph soon found out how important it was to stay alert.

"Once I got up a little late and missed the cage that took us down the shaft to work . . . I got there late, but thank God, there were no empty cars and nothing had come through [my door]. I was all wet with perspiration. I stretched out on my bench, put my lamp along side of me, and fell asleep. First thing I knew I heard a bang and I jumped up. The bib to my overalls was on fire [from the lamp] and there was my door on top of a loaded car . . . A short time later [the boss] came through. I told him the whole story of how I got up late. All he said was, 'Well, Joe, be a little more careful.' "

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOSEPH MILLIAUSKAS?

Unlike most of his friends, Joseph left the mines after being a nipper. He went to school and became a Roman Catholic priest in a Pennsylvania coal town. He lived into his seventies.

N

There

on the

comm

and a

the u

Some

one p

their

part

woul

tobac

mou

song

My s

I dri

On t

I che

All c