Remembering the

Lattimer Massacre

A strike led to the deaths of 25 coal miners in 1897. Despite the many casualties, this incident has been largely forgotten. An archaeological project has uncovered evidence of the massacre as well as details of the miners' lives.

BY BRUCE E. BEANS

In early September 1897, a mining strike in the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania culminated in one of the deadliest labor incidents in U.S. history: the Lattimer Massacre. In the previous weeks, protesting low wages and high rents and company store prices, nearly 5,000 miners had gone on strike in the Hazleton, Pennsylvania, area. The strike came at the end of the crippling four-year depression that began with the Panic of 1893, during which time the price of anthracite coal—to which the miners' pay was tied—sank to its lowest level in more than 50 years.

Ironically, although they were organized by the United Mine Workers of America, the mostly foreign-born miners were also protesting a state law supported by the UMWA that was designed to protect American citizens' jobs. The Campbell Act mandated a tax on the coal companies of three cents per day for each unnaturalized worker over the age of 21, and this tax could be deducted from the pay of miners who were already earning 10 percent to 15 percent less than their Anglo-Saxon peers. The strikers had already succeeded in shutting down several of the mines in the region.

On September 10 about 400 unarmed Polish, Slavic, and Lithuanian miners marched several miles north of Hazleton intent on closing the three Lattimer collieries operated by the family-owned Calvin Pardoe Company.

As they approached the mines they were stopped by Luzerne County Sheriff James Martin and a posse of 86 deputies, including Pardoe-company men and members of the local contingent of the Coal and Iron Police, who were armed with rifles, shotguns, and pistols. A scuffle ensued, a gun was discharged, and the posse then opened fire at point-blank range on the miners. Many of them were shot in the back as they fled. Twenty-five miners were killed and approximately 30 were wounded. All of the victims were immigrants.

Despite the UMWA's role in the passage of the infamous Campbell Act, tens of thousands of foreign-born miners galvanized by the incident joined the union. Meanwhile, as a test case, Martin and all of his deputies were subsequently tried for the murder of just one of the miners, Michael Cheslock, who had recently applied for U.S. citizenship. All 87 defendants were acquitted.
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These eyeglasses were found during excavations in Pardeeville, where Italian and Eastern European miners, laborers, and their families lived.

BAMMER MINE just north of Hazleton. The archaeologists also interviewed third- and fourth-generation descendants of the miners and researched historical news accounts and coal company archives.

One of the key findings is the paucity of animal bones, which suggests the residents consumed very little meat. Almost every site I have ever excavated has contained a significant amount of animal material, but not here," said Slackel. "It's a real sign of poverty. During the first two years of excavations at two different Italian shantytowns (this past year's artifacts are still being catalogued), only about 45 bone specimens from cows, pigs, chickens, and ducks were unearthed. The faunal evidence also indicates the residents were trapping wild rabbits and hunting deer.

The lack of protein is reflected in the recipes of local and regional cookbooks from the period, most of which do not include meat. Instead, starches and carbohydrates, such as potatoes and pasta, predominate. "I think of the kinds of foods people had to do," said Slackel. The men worked 10 to 12 hours a day in the mines; the wives woke up early and packed their husbands lunches, took care of the children, tended their gardens, and some worked in the local textile mills, and at the end of the day, they ate starch, with very little protein in their diets." To supplement their food supplies, the miners and their families gardened extensively. In many cases, "every square foot that was not being used for a house or an outbuilding was used for gardening," Slackel said. The researchers speculated that these vegetable gardens could have played an important role in enabling the miners to sustain labor stoppages.

The archaeologists uncovered several Mason jars that most likely were used to preserve garden vegetables. Peach and pumpkin canning jars were found in one backyard this past summer. Peppers, tomatoes, bean vines, spices, herbs, and

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Date of Birth

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berries were also commonly grown, according to the miners’
descendants. Justin Uehlein, a graduate student at American
University, plans to analyze the pollen and seeds found in
evacuated soils to better determine the types of produce.
They also are going to analyze privy soils to see if there are
any detectable parasites that could have affected the resi-
dents’ health.

Though the Slav’s lives were difficult, the Italians had
it worse. Whereas the Slav residents in company-built and
-owned homes constructed in the late 1860s, the Italians
lived nearby in shanties they built on the company’s land.
Roller is researching the Italian neighborhoods and how
they evolved over the decades from the 1870s’ scrap-wood
shanties to more permanent structures, some of which still
stand today.

Excavations of the stone foundations, maps from the
company archives, aerial photographs, and GIS-generated
digital map overlays show a sharp contrast between the
shabby town and the much more spacious and uniformly
built Slavic homes. The Italian residences were irregularly
shaped, and some sat three deep off a dirt road, with shared
walls, tiny alleys, and no yards. Roller estimates one home
was only about 10 feet by 10 feet. Yet, according to an article
in The Century Magazine, an average of six to 12 immigrants
lived in a single shanty. Another article described some of the
homes as being “not much larger than dog kennels.”

That article also noted that, “There is no sewage sys-
tem, and the alley is the dumping-ground for all off-

The archaeologists discovered that the residents gradually
improved the village’s sanitation. “We found concrete pads
poured in the early 20th century to drain effluvia and waste-
water away from the homes,” said Roller, and those pads
were eventually replaced by iron pipes.

The researchers also uncovered various other items such
as a miner’s metal I.D. tag and a corroded metal stamping
1864 that was inscribed, in Italian, “Papa Pio IX” (Pope Pius
IX). That family heirloom, which apparently belonged to
Italians, was found in the basement of a house that Shackel
originally assumed had been inhabited exclusively by Slavs.

A variety of ceramic bottles and nearly 100 pairs of
nylon stockings, all of which date sometime between the
1930s to the 1950s, were found at a Slavic residence. To
supplement their husbands’ inadequate mining wages, many
wives also worked in, and waged labor battles with, Hazle-
ton’s silk and rayon mills. Reflecting on the cosmetic contain-
ers and stockings, Camille Westmont, a University of Mary-
land graduate student researching the role women played
in the mining communities, said “Even though women were
working eight- to 12-hour days in the silk mills in Hazleton,
they were still trying to conform to expectations of what
womanhood is supposed to be.”

In 2005, Hazleton made national headlines when the city
council approved, and Mayor Lou Buretta signed, the
Illegal Immigrant Relief Act. The ordinance was Hazle-
ton’s response to yet another influx of immigrants—this

A child’s porcelain cup was also uncovered.

families gardened extensively. In many cases “every square
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Justin Uehlein excavates the base of a double privy in the back yards of two Pardoeville homes.

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american archaeology
Students screen excavated dirt in search of tiny artifacts during the 2014 field school.

A new book reveals the conclusions of years of scientific study of the ancient skeleton and recounts the legal and political battles that followed its discovery.

The Story of Kenneewick Man

By David Malakoff

On a warm July day in 1996, Will Thomas and Dave Decy, two college kids, were watching some speedboat races on the Columbia River near Kennewick, Washington, when they came upon a startling sight: a human skull lying in the shallow water near the shore. Wanting to watch the races, they hid the skull in some bushes, and later reported their find to the local police.

Neither man had any idea that they had just spotted one of the best-preserved ancient skeletons ever discovered in North America. Or that the roughly 8,500-year-old remains, dubbed Kennewick Man, would soon spur a historic legal confrontation, some bitter political wrangling, and an intense debate among scientists, government officials, and Native American tribes over who should control such ancient finds, and who...