

IMMIGRANTS IN THE CHOCTAW COAL INDUSTRY

By Stanley Clark

The coal mining industry in the Choctaw Nation, 1871-1907, not only stimulated railroad development and the growth of towns but also attracted hundreds of emigrants directly from the shores of Europe to Indian Territory.¹

When the Katy railroad first tapped the rich coal deposits in the McAlester-Krebs field, local labor or recruits from the railroad construction gangs were employed in the stripping operations. With the development of slope or shaft mines after 1873, skilled miners were imported. These men were of American, English, Irish, Scotch and Welsh descent mainly from the coal fields of Pennsylvania.

The first Italians recruited for the mines arrived at McAlester in 1874; by 1883 it was estimated 300 families were in the Krebs-McAlester area. Lithuanians in 1875 and Slovaks in 1883 were brought from the coal fields of Illinois and Pennsylvania. A colony of French came directly from Europe to Lehigh in 1881; later, came natives from the silver mines of Mexico.

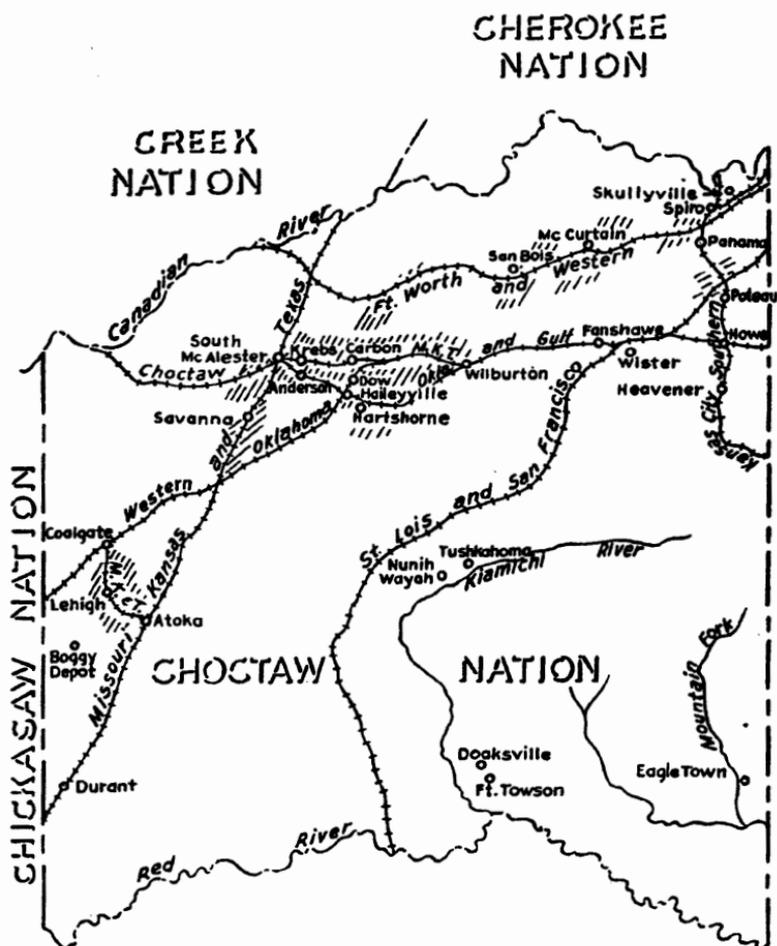
Until the 1890's the principal mining leases were controlled by railroad interests. Various methods were used to recruit mine workers. In the beginning workers were shipped into the Territory by chartered railroad cars. Later, recruits were furnished transportation tickets and railroad fares were collected in installments from the miners' earnings.

Mining company agents also encouraged steamship lines to channel part of their steerage burden toward the Choctaw Nation. Until federal legislation was passed in 1890 prohibiting contract labor, mining companies furnished steamship tickets and expenses to European emigrants recruited for their mines, with the costs taken monthly from earnings.

¹The basis for this and subsequent paragraphs is "The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry in the Southwest," Vol. II, part IV, pp. 1-126 in Bituminous Coal Mining (II Vols.) in *Immigrants In Industries*. This is volume 7 in the *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, Senate Document 633, 61 Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, 1911). General tables of statistics pertaining to part IV, *The Southwest* appear in II, pp. 470-519.

Immigrants In Industries, published in 25 parts, comprised a remarkable series of studies from congressional investigations into the anatomy and pathology of American economy. It was one of the earliest attempts on the part of congress to subject the economics of business to public investigation and modification in the light of documented facts.

Data on the Southwest pertains to a study in 1908 of conditions in Indian Territory or Oklahoma and Kansas, compiled by on-site interviews and statistics on conditions in the coal fields during previous years.



RAILROADS IN RELATION TO COAL FIELDS
CHOCTAW NATION-1904

After 1890 the companies let it be known among the miners that anyone who wished to bring in relatives or friends could do so, providing two or more workmen guaranteed the monetary advance. By this method many of the immigrants were able to have their wives and families join them. This practice was followed by the Italians, and it was estimated there were approximately 10,000 scattered among the coal mining communities of Indian Territory by 1907.

In 1889 there were 1862 miners employed in the Choctaw Nation; in 1902, the number had increased to 4763 and by 1907, to more than 8000. A sampling of 3349 male employees in the coal fields made the following year revealed that 1200 were native born of native fathers, 286 were native born of foreign fathers and 1863, or a fraction more than 55 per cent, were foreign born. Of the 1863 miners born outside the United States, less than 12 per cent were English, Irish, Scotch, Welsh, and German. More than 41 per cent of the foreign born were Italians.

There was a shift from miners of English-speaking countries in the 1870's and 1880's to Europeans in the 1890's and early 1900's.² There are several reasons why emigrants from Great Britain were replaced by Europeans. Although during the 1870's and 1880's the majority of miners were of English, Irish, Scotch or Welsh stock, these groups became dissatisfied with frontier conditions. Family pressure diverted many back to more settled communities where their children could find employment or take advantage of public education denied in the Choctaw Nation. Mine operators found the English, Irish, Scotch, and Welsh stock produced the best miners but also produced the chief trouble makers during periods of strikes in the 1880's and 1890's. Some of these skilled miners had been prominent in labor disputes in the East; they, likewise, were leaders in labor reform movements in the Territory. The Italians, Russians, other Slovaks, Poles, Maygars, and Lithuanians were more easily satisfied with living and working conditions.

Many of those members of the English-speaking races who remained in the mining industry became superintendents of mines, bosses, foremen, company or day men who held specialized or skilled positions. An exception were the Negro strike-breakers shipped into the Territory during periods of labor trouble in 1894 and 1898. The majority of miners engaged directly in the production of coal, paid by the ton for coal produced, were European immigrants.

The majority of the Europeans imported to work in the Choctaw coal mines had no previous mining experience but more skilled miners came directly from Europe to the Choctaw Nation than to any other bituminous coal mining regions of the United States. A list of

² See *Appendix A* for Table I for Percent of Foreign-Born in Coal Mining District, 1908, taken from "The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry in the Southwest," II, part IV, p. 11 in *Immigrants In Industries*.

employees indicates that a high proportion of those who entered the Choctaw coal mining industry had previous mining experience in their country of nativity.³

Population figures at statehood in 1907 for six selected cities indicate the concentration of foreign-born in coal mining areas of the Choctaw Nation. McAlester was a city with 8144 inhabitants. More than one in four was foreign-born. 900 were born in Italy, 250 in Lithuania, 275 in England, 200 in Ireland, 175 in Scotland, 75 in Wales, 50 in Germany, 50 in Poland, and 125 in other European countries.

The neighboring town of Krebs, staunch rival of McAlester for the county seat, had a population of 1508. The town and environs numbered approximately 3000 of whom 1550 were foreign-born: 1100 Italians, 200 Lithuanians, 75 Poles, 75 Syrians, 50 Irish, and 50 of other nationalities.

The population of the nearby mining camp of Alderson was more than doubled by the arrival of 325 immigrants in 1895. The special census at statehood credited Alderson with 517 inhabitants, including 120 Italians, 55 Lithuanians, 50 Poles, and 45 Slovaks.

Hartshorne, 17 miles east of McAlester, was established in 1889 and by 1900 more than one-half of its estimated population of 1800 was foreign-born. The first Italians came to this important mining center in 1890, and invited friends from Europe. Lithuanians, Poles, and Russians employed in constructing the roadbed for the Choctaw Coal and Railway Company transferred to the mines. They, likewise, won European recruits of their nationalities. Hartshorne had a population of 2435 at statehood which included 300 Italians, 500 Lithuanians, 300 Poles, Russians, Slovenes, and Bulgarians, and approximately 100 English, Irish, Scotch, Welsh, and Mexicans.

Lehigh, first seat of Coal County, had a population of 2188, according to the special census of 1907.⁴ Approximately 800 were immigrants, divided according to nationalities as follows: Italians, 350; French, 250; Mexican, 100; Slovak, 50; and Magyar, 50.

Coalgate, founded by immigrants from Lehigh in 1890, was a city with 2921 inhabitants at statehood. It was estimated this number had increased to 3500 by the following year. More than 1500 were foreign-born. Here lived 600 Italians, 400 French, 150 Slovaks, 200 Magyars, fifty or more of other European nationalities, and 150 Mexicans.

³ See *Appendix B* for data from "The Bituminous Coal Mining Industry," *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁴ The French colony in and about Lehigh and Coalgate was estimated to be about 900 by 1894. Many owned homes and were in business. In the unsuccessful strike that year, Negroes were brought in as strike breakers and many of the French leaders were forced to leave the Choctaw Nation.

Few records are left of these our alien pioneers who through brawn and skill cut slopes and shafts into the green hills of the Choctaw Nation. And as their mounting slag piles scarred the hillsides and muddied clear running streams with the industrial silt of progress, their folkways, living conditions, and customs introduced social changes to the Indian nation.

Joseph Lanchet, a young French immigrant, on May 13, 1884, wrote this brief impression of Lehigh:⁵

About nine or ten miles from Atoka is the mining camp of Lehigh. All the coal mines I have seen in the Indian Territory, thus far, are in the Choctaw Nation. The country occupied by that tribe contains not only magnificent forests and fertile prairies, where the grass grows five feet tall, but on the bosom of the earth there are incalculable mineral riches yet untouched.

All the miners are white people and belong to several European nations. There are a good many Italians, a few Germans and Belgians, very few Frenchmen. A good workman earns from three to five dollars a day. That seems pretty good. But the miner is about the only member of his family, if he has one, that works, except when the boys get to be about twelve years old, then they begin to earn something themselves. Meanwhile the whole family lives on his sole earnings, and in these parts most of life's commodities are very high in price, higher than in France, except for meat. Raw meat, I mean, for when it is cooked it costs as much as in the old country; and to more effectively prevent him from growing rich there are frequent breakdowns, lock-outs, strikes, etc. Notwithstanding all this, an industrious, sober, prudent miner may save a little money, but I have not yet heard of anyone having got rich at this hard labor.

During the 1870's and 1880's when mining operations in the Territory centered about Krebs, Savanna, and Lehigh, the mining companies which controlled the townsites, buildings, and mining properties, were railroad affiliates. Wages were low, employment seasonal, accidents common, and workingmen's compensation laws unknown. Samuel Gompers' description of mining conditions in the East a decade later could aptly apply to this earlier period in the Choctaw Nation where children "were brought into the world by a company doctor, lived in a company house or hut, were nurtured by the company store laid away in a company graveyard."

Hillsides were blighted by the drab, unpainted company houses which rented for \$1.80 to \$2.00 a room per month. Such dwellings usually had two, sometimes three 12x12 foot rooms; the kitchen, utilized for cooking and eating purposes by day became a bedroom by night. Many of the miners had large families; some kept single men as boarders or roomers. Among certain nationalities it was customary to include one of the following accommodations with the nominal price of lodging: (1) Coffee or soup was served once a day; (2) the lodger was allowed the privilege of cooking his food on the kitchen stove; (3)

⁵ Joseph Lanchet, "Diary of A Young French Immigrant," in article, "Sacred Heart Mission and Abbey," edited by Joseph B. Thoburn, *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. V, No. 2 (June, 1927), pp. 238-50.

the housewife bought the lodger's food, had the price charged to his account at the company store, and prepared the food for him.

Company stores issued scrip and carried charge accounts against the twice-monthly wages. Later when Syrians or members of other races opened independent stores in the communities the miners were free to patronize these stores. Between pay days, however, no employee was paid in cash and the only way he could get supplies was to draw scrip against his wages or get a store order, negotiable only at the company store.

Mining companies insisted that powder and other explosives be purchased from the company store. These were precautionary measures imposed because of differences in the quality of powder and explosives; familiarity with the use of standard brands served as safety measures.

Miners were paid in cash. An average fee of \$1.00 per month was deducted for the company doctor and in most camps ten cents per month as a "hospital fee," *viz.*, for emergencies from mine accidents. The company also deducted from wages a twenty-five cent monthly charge by the Choctaw government for a non-citizen resident permit.

With strong allegiance to their "Mother Country", it was natural for the immigrants to introduce societies and fraternal orders into the Choctaw communities. Slovaks belonged to the First Catholic Union and the National Slovak Association; Mexicans, to the National Beneficial Society; Italians, to La Minature, Vittorio Emanuel II, and Christiforo Colombo; Poles, to the National Polish Society. The Greek Orthodox Church at Hartshorne was reputed to be the only church of that faith between St. Louis, Missouri and Galveston, Texas. Mine owners complained during the 1890's of the number of wakes and weddings, holy days or holidays, fiestas and other celebrations which took miners away from their work.

A resident of Savanna in the mid-eighties has commented on the fusion of nationalities there:⁶

In the main the employees were composed of Americans, English, Welsh, Scotch and Irish, with a few Germans and French. Those were the days in which the term "skilled miner" was a reality. The countries represented produced skilled miners. It is a tribute to these groups of mixed nationalities that all entered into the spirit of any gala occasion and that racial differences, if any, were forgotten. A song of that period sung in unison after the day's work was completed, supper over, and a convivial band gathered at the home of an

⁶ Gomer Gower in *Foreman Collection, Indian-Pioneer History*, Volume 84, pp. 279-282. This collection of 120 volumes, Oklahoma Historical Society, consists of interviews made with pioneers in 1937-1938.

accommodating neighbor, who, very thoughtfully, provided a keg of "Choc" to stimulate the vocal cords, ran thus:

"Show me a Scotchman who loves not the thistle,
 Show me an Englishman who loves not the rose.
 Show me a true-hearted son of old Erin
 Who loves not the land where the Shamrock grows."

On St. Patrick's day the Irish were joined in the festivities commemorating the day by all other groups.

On January 25 each year, Bobby Burns' birthday was celebrated by the Scotch when, in addition to the recital of his poems by those who knew them well, such Scotch songs as "Scots Who Hae' Wl' Wallace Bled," "The Maid of Dundee," "Annie Laurie" were sung, and mayhap, a comparatively recent arrival from the Highlands who had brought along his bagpipes would skirl out the Highland Fling while couples performed Scottish folk dances.

The Welsh celebrated Saint David's day and with their inimitable group singing would the welking ring with songs in their native tongue.

A European tradition that wine and beer are excellent refreshment substitutes for water was not abandoned by the miners. Prohibition laws of the Choctaws were ignored. In some instances, wives added to the family income in mining communities through the manufacture and sale of Choctaw beer. Indian agents repeatedly took note of the liquor problem in reports to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, none more forcibly than Dew M. Wisdom who wrote in 1894:⁷

"The sale of Choctaw beer, a drink compounded of barley, hops, tobacco, fishberries, and a small amount of alcohol, is manufactured without stint in many portions of this agency, especially in the mining communities. Many miners insist it is essential to their health, owing to the bad water usually found in mining camps, and they aver they use it rather as a tonic or medicine than as a beverage, and this idea, that it is a proper tonic, is fostered and encouraged by some physicians. But it is somewhat remarkable as a fact in the scientific world that the water is always bad in the immediate mining centers, but good in the adjacent neighborhoods."

The immigrant miners, living on the fringe of poverty, were never free from the danger of maiming accidents. Too often, as a

⁷ Dew M. Wisdom, "Report of Union Agency, August 28, 1894," pp. 140-145, in *Annual Report of the Secretary of Interior, House Executive Document 1, 53 Congress, 3rd Session* (Washington, 1894, Serial 3306). Angie Debo, in the *Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (Norman, 1934), has traced congressional legislation which March 1, 1895 made illegal not only the sale but the manufacture of intoxicants in the Indian country. Several interviews with pioneers recorded in the Indian-Pioneer collection (Foreman Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society) relate devious means by which intoxicants reached mining centers. V. V. Masterson, in *The Katy Railroad and The Last Frontier* (Norman, 1952), pp. 228-29 indicates, from an examination of waybills of the railroad in the 1870's and 1880's, that much whiskey reached the mining communities. The potency of Choctaw beer, good food and wine at Krebs continued as more than a tradition long after statehood.

writer of the period recorded, "seeking bread, they found a grave". Governmental statisticians reported in 1906 that "for each life lost, 73,000 tons of coal are mined in Indian Territory, 149,000 in Colorado, 241,000 in Arkansas, 174,500 tons in the United States". In the following year, Kansas mined 231,315 tons for each life lost; Oklahoma, only 67,002 tons.⁸

Official governmental reports of the period reveal the terrible toll exacted by this hazardous industry. Here are random examples of accidents which caused personal injury or death during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1895.⁹

- August 8—Frank Place (Lithuanian); fatal; coupling link broke causing trip to break loose on slope, running back on him and killing him instantly; Alderson; Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf Railway Company's slope.
- October 1—David John (Welsh), inside foreman, age 34 years, left leg broken above ankle; struck by wheels of pit car which had fallen down shaft, he being near bottom of shaft; Krebs; Osage Coal & Mining Company's shaft number 11½.
- October 4—Antone Benedictchick (German), miner, age 23 years; thigh broken; loose coal fell on him while undermining it; Alderson slope mine.
- October 13—Richard Whalen (American), strip pit boss, age 41 years; face and hands badly burned and sight partially destroyed; explosion of powder while preparing shot; Lehigh; Atoka Coal & Mining Company's strip pits.
- October 15—Henry Sherwood (English), miner, age 30 years; burned about face, neck, arms and hands; explosion of fire damp caused by his taking in naked lamp after being warned of the presence of gas; Alderson slope mine.
- October 25—John Constatto (Italian), driver, age 21 years; small bone in arm broken; arm caught between bar and pit car; Coalgate; Southwestern Coal and Improvement Company's mine number 4.
- October 26—Mose Fennell (English) miner, age 47 years. Fracture of vertebra, causing complete and permanent paralysis; fall of slate while propping roof of room; Galbraith's slope.
- November 10—Joseph Jung (German) slope cleaner, age 66 years. Fracture and paralysis of vertebra; struck by pit car; Krebs; Osage Coal & Mining Company's shaft number 2.
- November 16—George Rachel (Hungarian) miner, age 38 years; burned on face and hands; carried naked lamp into face of No. 72 west entry, exploding fire damp, after being warned. Krebs, mine No. 2.
- November 21—John Hamilton (Colored) miner, age 40 years; killed instantly; went back to examine shot which had hung fire; when it exploded, killing him. Hartshorne mine No. 1.

⁸"Report of the Select Committee to Investigate Matters Concerned with Affairs in the Indian Territory," *Senate Report* 5013, part II, p. 1830, 59 Congress, 2 Session (Washington, 1907, Serial 5063) and *Immigrants In Industries, op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁹"Accidents Causing Personal Injury or Death in and Around Coal Mines in Indian Territory from June 30, 1894 to June 30, 1895," pp. 657-658, in *Annual Report of the Condition of the Coal Mines in the Indian Territory*, Report of the Secretary of Interior, *House Document* 5, 54 Congress, 1 Session (Washington, 1895, Serial 3383). This is the second annual report on the subject, prepared by Luke W. Bryan, Mine Inspector for Indian Territory. Note the wide variations listed for ages of the injured miners (13-66), the different nationalities.

- February 25—James Frame (Scotch) trapper, age 13 years; simple fracture of left arm; struck by bumper of car; Krebs mine No. 10.
- March 1—Peter Marco (Italian) miner, age 40 years; chest and back bruised from fall of top slate. Krebs mine No. 11.
- March 12—Louis Morofski (Polander) miner, age 34 years; fatal. This man mistook a shot which had been fired by another miner for his, and went back to the face, when the shot went off, killing him instantly. Hartshorne mine No. 1.
- April 16—Frank Vesnick (Austrian) miner, age 33 years and John Seclioski (Austrian) miner, age 26 years; severely burned about head, arms, and body. These men were injured by an explosion of fire damp which had collected in a fall of top, near face. They had been furnished with safety lamps and instructed to use them, but disregarded their instructions and went to the face with naked lamps which ignited the gas and caused their injuries. They had also been instructed to wear shirts at this work and this neglect aggravated their injuries. Hartshorne mine No. 1.
- May 21—Jerdon Groter (Colored) miner, age 49 years, burned about face and hands; James Gordon (Colored) miner, age 41, burned about face and hands; Peter Cameron (Polander) miner, age 28, burned about face, hands, arms and back; Frank R. Sannons (Polander) miner, age 38, burned about face, hands, and chest; Joe Obert (Italian) miner, age 28, burned from head to hips, fatally. These five men were all injured by an explosion of fire damp in the Alderson Slope mine, in room No. 31, which room had been known to have developed some fire damp; room had been marked with cautionary sign indicating that "gas" should be "brushed out" before entering same with naked lights. Sannons and Cameron who were "buddies" were working this room, and Sannons went in with a naked light, in disregard of the rules and caution mark, and placed his naked light on a pile of coal about 6 feet from the face. He then proceeded to brush out the "gas", brushing it right onto the lamp when it immediately exploded, burning Cameron and himself as described. Obert, Groter and Gordon were passing along the entry in front of the mouth of room No. 31 and were badly burned as described. Obert's injuries terminating fatally."

Accidents in the territorial mines gave these mines the reputation of being the most dangerous in the United States. Many accidents resulted from roof cave-ins, falling coal, explosions from fire damp, and premature blasts. Others frequently occurred around the pit cars and from carelessness in handling hoisting machinery. During a five-year period from June 30, 1894, there were 297 recorded accidents in the coal mines of the Choctaw Nation that resulted in the loss of life or limb, or disfigurement; ninety-five of these were fatal.

Major disasters, that is, accidents that took the lives of five or more miners, were chiefly the result of fire damp, explosions from gas and dust. Ignorance of safety measures and a common disregard for danger were contributing causes to these early disasters. The rich bituminous character of the coal caused it to give off a large quantity of fine coal dust at the working faces and, as these faces were usually drier than other parts of the mine, the dust became explosive. This was especially true in the winter months. At any rate, all major disasters in the Choctaw Nation occurred from December to May.

Typical of the indifference of miners to this danger is the thought expressed in this recollection:¹⁰

Up until the year 1885, miners fired their own shots, and it was a common occurrence for them to hold onto the props and rails to keep from being blown away by Windy Shots at firing time, and it is here the term 'Windy Shot' originated Not knowing the danger, we used to laugh when coal dust was blown into our ears, eyes, nose and mouth but the laugh soon changed to horror, for on the 2nd day of February, 1885 an explosion occurred in Mine No. 1, Savanna in which one man lost his life and a number were severely burned. In the same month a Windy Shot burned a number of men in Mine No. 10, Krebs, and in the following month in Mine No. 7, Krebs, when the miners were firing their own shots an explosion occurred which killed thirteen men. Windy Shots were beginning to get serious. Shot firers were (later on) employed to fire the shots in the rooms."

One hundred eighty-seven miners lost their lives in major disasters between March, 1885 and April, 1906; all but twenty were killed as the result of the explosion of gas and dust. During the same period more than two hundred were killed in accidents involving less than five fatalities.¹¹

Two major disasters of the period may be cited in which the courage and fortitude of miners was portrayed. On the night of April 4, 1885 a terrific blast rocked the mining community of Savanna. Six men were trapped in slope No. 2. Entrance was blocked and rescue workers had to force an entry from slope No. 1. Ten men were chosen from the anxious volunteers to form a rescue team. Four were overcome by the gas fumes or after-damp. Nine more volunteers went forward; only two survived. A third group forced an entry; one of this heroic squad succumbed to the fumes. Thus twelve men suffered tragic but heroic death in the attempt to reach the bodies of their six comrades. Men of greater valor never lived in Indian Territory.¹²

No greater disaster ever occurred in Indian Territory than the explosion at Mine No. 11, Krebs, January 7, 1892. At this time the Osage Coal and Mining Company furnished employment to more than 500 miners. Shot firers were employed to fire the shots in the rooms but miners working in the slopes and entries fired their own shots. About 5 p.m., as the day shift was being brought up, six at a time, a shot was fired near an airway intake that caused a terrific explosion. The engine house was wrecked. The cage shot up, followed by dust and smoke. Almost 300 men were trapped five hundred feet below.

¹⁰ From a speech delivered by Pete Hanraty at Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1908 before the Mine Inspector's Institute of the United States, in *First Annual Report of the Chief Mine Inspector for the State of Oklahoma*.

¹¹ Jim Hughes, State Labor Commissioner, addressed a letter to the Twenty-First Legislature in 1947 in which he listed 27 major disasters when 5 or more men were killed from 1885-1945. All occurred within the confines of the Choctaw Nation, ten before statehood. These disasters took a toll of 603 lives. Of this number 583 were killed in accidents caused by the explosion of gas and dust.

¹² Memorial services are observed annually at the Knights of Pythias cemetery, Savanna, for the victims of this disaster.

Again, those fearful ones, wives, children, friends, and relatives gathered at the scene while miners from the area and as far away as Lehigh came forward to join in the rescue attempt. Instead of hours, this took days. A minimum estimate of the number killed was 68; more than twice that number were maimed or burned. At least thirty-one women were made widows and eighty-one children fatherless by the explosion. Here, again, the emigrant miners showed a trait exemplified as a frontier characteristic: Miners at Lehigh and other points in the Territory donated a day's wages to the injured survivors and the relatives of those killed.¹³

After this disaster mining companies immediately installed safety measures, required by the Congressional Act of March 3, 1891.¹⁴ Typical were the regulations posted by the Osage Coal and Mining Company one month after the explosion. These provided that coal in entries or other narrow work under 12 feet wide was to be undercut to the full depth of holes drilled for blasting, and that shot-firers were not to fire any shots unless coal was cut as specified. Only one shot was to be fired at a time and the following shot was not to be fired until the smoke from the preceding blast had cleared away. No shot was to be fired while anyone other than shot-firers was in the mine. Only enough powder for one day's use was to be stored in the mine at anytime; it was to be kept in air-tight cans in a closed, locked box at least 300 feet distant from any working face.¹⁵

The following excerpts from reminiscences of miners who worked in the Choctaw mines during the 1880's and 1890's give a glimpse of working conditions:¹⁶

. . . . Take our lamps, for instance. A lamp was a sort of can with a spout; a cotton wick went through the spout down into the can. We burned kerosene, or a thick black oil called Black Jack, or a sort of grease called lard oil. The light flickered and smoked and the hot oil dripped on a man's arms and scalded them, or soaked into his hair and made him bald.

. . . . The company store sold lard oil and kerosene for our lamps but we could swipe Black Jack, a thick oil, at the engine house. Lots of us burned Black Jack. A man never needed to get a hair-cut; that stuff kept our hair burned off.¹⁷

. . . . We set our own shots. We didn't have fuses but used a home made contraption called a squib. We placed powder for a shot then made a hole through the dirt to the powder with a long needle; next came the squib, then we'd light this and run.

Our shots were made with black powder. This was dangerous because black powder makes a flash of fire when it explodes, and was liable to set off an explosion of gas."

¹³ It is unnecessary to point out that workmen's compensation laws were non-existent; that employers were not liable for the act of a fellow servant. *Oklahoma A Guide to the Sooner State*, (Norman, 1942), p. 302, cites interesting material culled from the Indian-Pioneer collection, Foreman Papers, (Oklahoma Historical

. . . . Where we worked all blasting was done 'on solid' which means the vein wasn't undercut. Shooting on the solid makes slack—and we were not paid for slack.

Miners were paid only for lump coal that could pass over a two-inch screen. Tined forks were used for loading and screens for sifting the coal. One expert, William Cameron, expressed the opinion that not more than one-third of the coal mined passed this test, at least thirty per cent was slack:¹⁸

Mine No. 1 at Hartshorne was a shaft mine, about 212 feet deep. When veins come to the top they are called croppings; a slope mine starts at the cropping and follows the vein. If the vein turns downward it is called a pitching vein. A shaft mine is one where a shaft is sunk directly to the vein.

By 1895 there were about 500 men working Mine No. 1. Every thirty-six feet along the entry we would turn a room. A room was about fifty feet wide, five feet high, and went back into the vein sometimes a hundred feet or more—how far depended on a number of things, but we never ran a room through to another entry.

Usually two men worked in a room. If the entry was level we had rooms on both sides. If it sloped we had rooms only on the upper side. It was hard to get coal out of a room that slanted downward.

Most mining underground followed the pattern set forth above. Two men, buddies, sometimes isolated, worked together at the coal face. Invariably buddies were of the same race, oftentimes of same family, Negro with Negro, South Italian with South Italian, Slav with Slav, etc., sometimes a father and son, cousins, or brothers who shared work and pay.

. . . . Ventilation was always a problem. We drove cross-cuts to rooms as aids, and hung doors of canvas into the entry. Our mine had an air shaft for additional ventilation and boys were employed who kept a fire going in a big kettle at the foot of the shaft. The warmed air helped draw circulation.

. . . . We left more coal than we ever took out. We never took more than a third of a vein. The rest was left for support.

. . . . A lack of knowledge of long-wall mining caused us to leave a lot more coal underground than we ever took out. Good, producing properties at Coalgate were abandoned because of squeezes.¹⁹

Society) on Krebs. Mention is made of a drugstore, established in 1888, which because of numerous injuries associated with the mining industry, stocked vaseline in five hundred pound quantities, raw linseed oil in fifty barrel lots, and iodoform in ten pound lots. The store stayed open night and day for two weeks following the January 7 explosion.

¹⁴"An Act for the Protection of the Lives of Miners in the Territories," 26 U. S. *Statutes at Large*, pp. 1104-1106.

¹⁵"Notice," posted by the Osage Coal & Mining Company, February 8, 1892.

¹⁶These are random samplings from the Foreman Collection of Indian-Pioneer History, 120 volumes (Oklahoma Historical Society).

¹⁷Carbide safety lamps were introduced into the mines in the 1890's but it was more than ten years before they came into general use.

¹⁸"Testimony of William Cameron," April 9, 1906, in *Senate Report* 5013, part II, pp. 1786-1802, 59 *Congress*, 2 *Session* (Washington, 1907, Serial 5063). Cameron had been engaged in the coal mining industry in the Choctaw Nation for 24 years, 19 years as mining superintendent for the Gould interests or the Missouri-Pacific Railway.

¹⁹Long wall mining, the use of coal pillars permits maximum production from coal deposits. Where capital investment permits, mining is begun at the end of the vein and workings progress back toward the shaft. This allows the waste to close-up the rooms. This is called "retreating long wall."

Mining conditions in the Territory were conducive to the formation of labor organizations. Skilled miners from Pennsylvania and West Virginia had belonged to unions while those from Europe had a thorough understanding of trade unionism. It was natural, therefore, that the first concerted effort to improve the status of the working man in Indian Territory came from these men.

Dan McLaughlan, Coalgate labor leader in the 1890's, expressed the workingman's viewpoint very ably:²⁰

... The miners know the effect of unreasonable competition. In the past the companies have come to us and said, "The Blank Coal Company has been furnishing a large establishment with coal. If you work for a little less we can get their contract and give you steady work".

We have accepted the reduction only to find that in order to hold the contract we must accept another, and another. And when we could not go any lower, the companies combined and restored the price of coal in the market, but never restored our wages.

We now say to the company: "We will, as near as possible, put you on an equal footing as far as the cost of producing coal is concerned, but if there are to be any reductions they must be made in your dividends. You can get along without your trip to Europe better than we can do without our breakfasts."

Rarely did the Indian Territory miner work more than 160 days during the year. After April 1, 1894 the price miners received for screened coal per ton at Alderson, Lehigh, Hartshorne and Coalgate was reduced from 94 cents to 75 cents; at Krebs, from \$1.02 to \$0.80. The price offered for mine run coal at all points was reduced from 81 cents to 60 cents and day men received an average wage reduction of 20 per cent.²¹ During a series of unsuccessful strikes the miners were warned by the operators that 'a dollar would look as big as a cart-wheel', that the mine owners would see them beg in the street rather than let them back in the mines.

Strikes were countered by the operators with the federal power of injunction, and strikers found they were effectively denied employment in the mines of the Choctaw Nation by the circulation of their names on a 'black-list' among the operators. Another effective deterrent employed by the companies was the eviction of strikers from company houses and the threat of deportation. Choctaw law provided that non-citizens of the Nation should pay twenty-five cents per month for a residence fee. This fee was normally deducted from the earnings of miners and paid by the company. Striking miners automatically became non-paying miners or intruders.

A squeeze is caused by the gradual closing of the workings by the settling of overlapping strata.

Oklahoma folklore suffered an irreparable loss when Frank E. Lorince, Enid, died April 22, 1952. His "Tony Baloney" stories based on early day experiences in the Lehigh area entertained thousands of Oklahomans during his lifetime.

²⁰ *Indian Citizen* (Atoka), January 3, 1891.

²¹ "Annual Report on the Conditions of the Coal Mines in the Indian Territory," *House Executive Document* 1, part 5, p. 515, 53 Congress, 3rd Session (Washington, 1894, Serial 3307).

During the disastrous strike of 1894 federal troops were quartered at Lehigh, Coalgate, Hartshorne, Alderson, and Krebs. The eviction of miners and their families prompted one sympathizer to write: ". . . in the recent ejection of so-called intruders of Hartshorne, the mantle of disgrace has been thrown over the Stars and Stripes. . . . It is enough to astonish the demons of Hell and make the angelic hosts of Heaven weep!" The British and Italian ambassadors protested to the State Department over the forcible removal from the Choctaw Nation of citizens of those countries during this crisis. They were informed the Choctaw officials had acted within their legal rights.²²

In 1903 mine operators of Indian Territory and states in the area met with union leaders at Pittsburg, Kansas and agreed upon eight hour shifts, recognition of the union, the weighing of coal in pit cars rather than that received by railroad cars, and a satisfactory wage scale. When the contract expired March 15, 1906 it was renewed June 16 at Kansas City and continued in effect after statehood.

The State Constitution, adopted in 1907, and enabling legislation resolved many of the obstacles faced by the imported labor force for the Choctaw mining industry. Although a section of the constitution forbade the appropriation of money to support a Bureau of Immigration and a separate article provided for prohibition, other provisions clarified points that had caused difficulties during the territorial period. Free public schools were made mandatory; a state Department of Labor was established and provision was made for the creation of a Board of Arbitration and Conciliation. The office of Chief Mine Inspector was created; the incumbent to have eight years' actual experience as a practical miner. Enabling legislation caused best safety devices to be put into effect. The eight-hour work day was written into the constitution and boys under sixteen can not be employed underground. The common law doctrine of fellow servant liability was abrogated, every employee of a person, firm, or corporation engaged in mining in the state "shall have the right to recover for every injury suffered by him for the acts or omissions of any employee or employees of the common master that a servant would have if such acts or omissions were those of the master himself in the performance of a non-assignable duty."²³ A Court of Indus-

²² *The Indian Citizen (Atoka)*, June 21, 1894; *South McAlester Capital*, June, July issues, 1894; *The Caddo Banner*, June 22, 1894. The editor of the *Banner*, who wanted the Territory opened to white settlement, added this comment: "Agent D. M. Wisdom has at last dumped a few poor miners who were struggling for an honest living for their families, over in Arkansas. If they had been wealthy like the cattle owners who are grazing thousands of heads of cattle, contrary to law, under Agent Wisdom's nose, they never would have been molested."

²³ *The Foreman Transcripts*, Superintendent For Five Civilized Tribes, volume 19 in *Indian Archives Division*, Oklahoma Historical Society, contains correspondence relative to strikes in 1894 and 1898.

²⁴ *Constitution of the State of Oklahoma*, Article IX, Section 36. See also *Ibid*, Article IX, Sections 12, 33, 42; Article XXIII, Sections 4-5, 7; Article VI, Sections 20, 21, 25; Article V, Section 48; Article XIII, Section 1.

trial Commission was established in 1915 to pass upon claims of injury or death and to administer the state's Workmen's Compensation Act.

No industry or segment of people had a profounder effect upon Oklahoma's organic law, the Constitution, than the Choctaw coal mining industry and the labor force employed in it.

APPENDIX A

TABLE I

Percent of Foreign-Born Males in the Bituminous Coal Mining District of the Southwest, in 1908

RACE	Number Reporting Complete Data	PERCENT IN UNITED STATES EACH SPECIFIED NUMBER OF YEARS				
		Under 5 Years	5 to 9 Years	10 to 14 Years	15 to 19 Years	20 Years or Over
English	246	11.0	10.2	4.1	6.1	68.7
Scotch	137	9.5	9.5	2.2	4.4	74.5
Irish	92	13.0	7.6	3.3	6.5	69.6
French	212	26.4	23.6	6.6	14.2	29.2
German	181	19.9	13.3	3.9	17.1	45.9
Italian, North	1160	38.4	36.7	9.7	7.9	7.2
Italian, South	427	40.7	35.4	13.3	4.9	5.6
Lithuanian	121	24.0	34.7	17.4	14.0	9.9
Magyar	48	39.6	39.6	6.3	6.3	8.3
Mexican	109	26.6	23.9	22.0	19.3	8.3
Polish	216	39.8	31.0	13.9	8.8	6.5
Russian	106	28.3	37.7	13.2	6.6	14.2
Slovak	128	43.0	27.3	6.3	16.4	7.0
Slovenian	195	40.0	33.3	9.7	9.7	7.2
Total, and Average Percent	3378	33.1	29.9	8.8	9.2	19.0

APPENDIX B

TABLE II
 Percent of Foreign-Born Male Employees in
 Choctaw Coal Mining Industry, by Occupation
 Before Coming to the United States

RACE	Number Report- ing	PERCENT WHO WERE ENGAGED IN:					Other Occu- pations
		Mining	Farming or Farm Labor	General Labor	Manu- factur- ing	Hand Trades	
English	129	87.6	5.4	—0—	.8	3.9	2.3
French	144	90.3	3.5	2.1	1.4	.7	2.1
German	144	65.8	14.9	7.0	.9	8.8	2.6
Italian, North	853	21.6	46.8	19.5	1.2	8.1	2.9
Italian, South	319	9.4	40.1	44.2	.6	2.8	2.5
Lithuanian	109	11.0	65.1	11.0	—0—	11.0	1.5
Mexican	98	71.4	17.3	5.1	—0—	5.1	1.0
Polish	175	33.1	44.6	5.1	1.7	8.0	7.4
Russian	88	13.6	67.0	6.8	6.8	3.4	2.3
Scotch	90	87.8	3.3	3.3	—0—	4.4	1.1
Slovak	122	54.1	34.4	5.7	.8	3.3	1.6
Slovenian	99	53.5	35.4	6.1	—0—	2.0	3.0
Total, or Percent	2340	43.0	34.6	13.2	1.2	5.5	2.5