

# Remembering the



Strikers march in this historical photo taken on September 10, 1897, the day of the massacre.

PA STATE ARCHIVES, MG-273 CHARLES H. BURG COLLECTION - STRIKERS ON THE MARCH

## 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

**I**n 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 30 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





**FIRING ON THE MINERS. AN ACCURATE VIEW OF THE FIELD WHERE THE TRAGEDY TOOK PLACE**

*Drawn by an Inquirer Staff Artist.*

*An artist's rendering of the scene of the Lattimer Massacre published in the Philadelphia Inquirer two days after the event.*

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 Pardee Company.

As they approached the mines they were stopped by Luzerne County Sheriff James Martin and a posse of 86 deputies, including Pardee-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 onerous 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.





*These eyeglasses were found during excavations in Pardeesville, where Italian and Eastern European miners, laborers, and their families lived.*

Lattimer mines 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 faunal material, but not here," said Shackel. "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, starch and carbohydrates, such as pierogies and pasta, predominate. "Think of what these people had to do," said Shackel. "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 their 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," Shackel 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 remains were found in one backyard this past summer. Peppers, tomatoes, bean vines, spices, herbs, and



*A child's porcelain cup was also uncovered.*



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 excavated 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 residents' health.

Though the Slavs' lives were difficult, the Italians had it worse. Whereas the Slavs resided 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 shanty 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 system, and the alley is the dumping-ground for all offal."

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 wastewater 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 medal stamped 1854 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 cosmetic 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, Hazleton's silk and rayon mills. Reflecting on the cosmetic containers and stockings, Camille Westmont, a University of Maryland 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."

**I**n 2005, Hazleton made national headlines when the city council approved, and Mayor Lou Barletta signed, the Illegal Immigrant Relief Act. The ordinance was Hazleton's response to yet another influx of immigrants—this



Justin Uehlein excavates the base of a double privy in the back yards of two Pardeesville homes.





WILLIAM THOMAS CANICAIN IMAGES

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

time Latinos, including many Dominicans from New York City. They were drawn by low-wage, unskilled jobs in new factories and distribution centers that had been established to take advantage of significant tax incentives to attract new businesses to Pennsylvania. As a result, from 2000 to 2005 Hazleton's population had increased nearly 33 percent to about 31,000. Over this same period it was transformed from 94 percent white to about 30 percent Latino.

Hazleton's new ordinance called for the suspension of business licenses if a business hired illegal immigrants; set a fine of \$1,000 per day for renting to an illegal immigrant; and established English as Hazleton's official language. This xenophobia resulted in some Spanish-speaking residents leaving Hazleton. By 2010 the population had shrunk to about 25,000, yet the remaining residents were still 37 percent Latino.

Ironically, the anti-immigrant ordinance never went into effect. Three different federal courts declared it unconstitutional. In March 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the town's final appeal. Barletta, a descendant of Italian immigrants who arrived at the turn of the 20th century, has since become the U.S. congressman for Pennsylvania's 11th District. He continues to be a critic of the Obama Administration's immigration policies, including its handling of thousands of illegal children from Central America. As Shackel's team concluded its excavation this past July, Barletta was one

of the local officials who prevented some of those children from being housed at a former corrections facility in downtown Hazleton.

For Shackel, a Bronx native whose parents were the children of immigrants—Russian and Slavic on his father's side, Italian on his mother's side—Hazleton's modern anti-immigrant stance is a clear case of history repeating itself. A practitioner of what he calls activist archaeology, he sees his research as an opportunity to connect the stories of the past to the present.

"The story of the present in Hazleton is about how new immigrants coming in within the past decade-and-a-half have disrupted the status quo—which is the same thing that happened in the 1880s and '90s, when the Slavs and the Italians came in with their own languages and customs," said Shackel, who has put first-generation Hazleton students to work at his dig sites each summer. "It was all foreign to the people who were here and they didn't treat them very well. They made them live in shantytowns, they didn't have proper food to nourish themselves, they didn't have good sanitation, and they were treated as non-humans. I think it's important to see what we did in the past and use the past as a lesson for the present."

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