

ABOUT LEWIS HINE'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Scattered throughout this volume are several photographs by Lewis Hine. Hine is probably most famous for his pictures of people at work, especially for children at work. His photographs have been made into posters, and they're widely available via a simple online search.

Most of the photographs in this book, however, have not been so widely distributed. The bulk of them appeared in a book entitled *What the Coal Commission Found*, largely a summary of a multivolume congressional report. The book appeared in 1925. Hine's pictures show his exceptional skill as a portraitist, and they're worthwhile simply for their value in that sense. A few are also valuable because they illustrate key aspects of the work of coal mining that otherwise are difficult to describe in words, and that have largely been lost today. These pictures have not been widely duplicated and the negatives apparently have been lost. The notes and provenance of the pictures are also missing. We know that they were taken in coal mines before 1925, but some were taken far earlier. The photographs that show the miners' lamps with reflectors are using carbide, and therefore those photos were probably taken in the 1920s, after the period covered by this book.

Most of the pictures here are simply portraits of different miners, but a few beg for explanation. Hine took these photos during a time when flash photography was in its infancy, and he probably used magnesium flash powder to have sufficient light.

The photograph of the miner on his side, digging away with his back to us shows the basic act of mining. The miner is lying underneath the seam of coal and using a pick to hack away the underlying material so that he can wedge, break, or blast the coal down in big chunks. Note how he is lying on his shovel for leverage and support, and the sprag of wood in the upper right that is holding up the seam. Miners had to crawl underneath the seam in order to prepare it for mining, and then for loading. This is what often killed coal miners: The seam sometimes came down when they were underneath it.

It's difficult to tell if the tired-looking miner who is sitting by his lunch pail is the same one who was pictured doing the undermining. Carter Goodrich, writing in 1925 in Pennsylvania, spoke of "the miners' freedom" to work unsupervised in the mine. The miner was a piece worker and if he chose to take a break to prop up his room underground, or to have lunch, or talk with his neighbors, this was his decision to make.

The two photographs entitled, respectively, "The Company Weighmaster" and "The Union Checkweighman" illustrate a key feature of coal mining. Miners were paid by the weight, but crediting the miner for weight was hardly straightforward. The miners dug, undermined, and loaded their coal far off underground, hung a small round brass "check" with their number on it on the back of the coal car, and watched a teenage driver hitch up a mule and haul it off to the surface. The miner rarely saw his coal weighed. The company weighmaster subtracted the weight of the coal car, and weighed it. He would generally dump it into a railroad car, estimate the amount of impurities and quality, and credit the miner accordingly. The union checkweighman had the job of checking the weighmaster's work and representing the miner. In this and other ways, the coal miners' union had a direct, daily role in managing the mine.