

“They played the real game of Monopoly.”

The Danville News

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“Who Built the Pyramids?”

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Call it “The Other Side of the Coin.” We fuss over big money folk as if they’re more deserving and special. Check out who newspapers reported about from Danville’s iron mill era: Beaver, Grove, Geisinger. The Other Side of the Coin looks at the life of the men and boys who worked in the mills and mines. We honor our Iron Heritage by asking: what was their life like?

Consider a common Laborer in 1881 earning \$26 a month, meaning a weekly wage of \$6.50. Compare this with the weekly family budget for a family of five living in Philadelphia in 1851. Add up the cost of 2lbs daily of butcher’s meat, a barrel of flour, 2lb of butter, ½ bushel of potatoes, 4lbs of sugar, coffee and tea, milk, salt and pepper and eggs and yeast and cheese and starch and soap and soda costing about \$4.25 a week. Add \$6.11 cents for shelter, clothing, and miscellaneous, and weekly expenses amount to \$10.36. Where’s the extra \$3.86 going to come from? Which son will work in the mine instead of going to school to advance himself? How much did hob-nail boots cost? Why hob-nail? So the soles of your shoes wouldn’t melt on the furnace floor. Let’s hope nobody gets sick or injured. What was life expectancy in 1861? 42 at birth. If you made it to 20, it could be 60. Working hours? 12 hour days, six days a week, mills operating 24 hours six days a week. Breaker boys worked 10 hour days at 55 cents day (which is why labor laws were linked to compulsory education).

A Philadelphian might have the advantage of purchasing items from a variety of stores. Less so in Danville where typically the family relied on the company store. A ledger from the 1881 Montour Iron and Steel Works recorded a monthly pay list and what different jobs owed to the company store. Some mills only paid their workers in company scrip.

Laborer – paid \$13, owed \$8.90. Pullout - \$30.80, owed \$18.37. Engineer - \$52.25, owed \$32.94. Draft buggy – \$43.66, owed \$35.76. Stocker -- \$58.84, owed \$22.20. Puddler helper - \$31.80, owed \$21.11. Heater -- \$22.66, owed \$22.60.

What were some of the other jobs? Call boy, superintendent ironmaster, iron puddler, engine machinist, iron founder, miner, puddler roller, apprentice, squeezer, rail finishers, blacksmith, furnace keeper, boiler maker, gas maker, steam engineer, clerk, furnace filler, pattern maker, mill weigh master.

This is your life on the other side of the coin. Just for the fun of wealth comparison, the estate sale of Grove Mansion included a 4 in Hand road coach originally purchased in London for \$4,000, sold used for \$1,800

Let’s take a snapshot of life in Danville in 1873. There was a population growth, totaling 14,000 persons, an increase of 6,000 from 1857. 1873 saw eight blast furnaces, four rail mills, puddle mills, foundries, machine shops, pattern shops. The depression came in 1873, the price of iron dropped, leading to a strike by iron workers and miners protesting wages and living conditions. By 1874 a third of Pennsylvania’s workforce was unemployed. The Reading Railroad cut train workers’ wages by 10%, resulting in an unsuccessful strike. In 1875 only 1 in 5 of American workers had full-time jobs. Some people vented their frustration by damaging tracks, trains, and mines. On May 11, 1875 the trestle at

Locust Gap Junction was exploded by drilling holes and filling them with gunpowder. The telegraph office at Locust Summit was burned. From 1860 to 1909 arson destroyed 25 collieries between Mount Carmel and Trevorton. Then came the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the third wage cut. State militias were called in to aid the Coal and Iron police. In Pittsburgh 20 strikers were killed, 29 wounded. The depot and trains were burnt in Reading. In Shamokin, 2 killed, Wilkes Barre, 3 killed, Reading, 10 killed. That summer, Danville experienced its own bread riot because children were hungry. This too, the other side of the coin.

Capitalism works fine, when capitalists are moral, when there's no socialism of the rich. They were named Robber Barons for a reason. They played the real game of Monopoly. There was no chance of the mill worker winning the way things were. Things had to change.

Journalist Studs Terkel asks in his book, "Working," who really built the pyramids? Was it really that guy Cheops? Was it really the Pharaoh? No, those laborers chipping and dragging the stones built the pyramids.