

# Coal Culture

## ETHNICITY IN THE COAL FIELDS

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In a 1993 interview with IUP student, Barney Holland, 88 year-old Mr. Michael Kowal of Nanty Glo, PA described the kids that he went to school with as a mini “League of Nations,” which meant that those in attendance reflected a vast rainbow of ethnic diversity that prevailed throughout the surrounding area. The development of the local coal mining industry served as a magnet for attracting these families to the region. Many arrived during two major waves of immigration. The initial influx featured those of Irish, Welsh, Scottish and English descent while the second consisted of people from Southern and Eastern European nationalities, including Italians, Hungarians, Czecho-Slovakians, Poles among others. WWI slowed down this process but it picked up again after the conflict ended and later was virtually shut down with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924.

When considering the scale of diversity one might initially conclude that the community would be destined to a history of deep social divisiveness. Instead, a sense of mutual respect emerged as the dominant characteristic of ethnic relations among the people. In fact some residents interviewed by other IUP students in 1993 expressed that interactions between the various groups were much better in the coal fields than what existed in Europe.

Still, some conflict did arise. Those from the first wave of immigration tended to acquire the best jobs in the mines and often found themselves in higher positions of authority both in the workplace and the public arenas. In some cases this resulted in unevenness for those seeking potential occupational advancements and future opportunities. But it was the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s that marked the low point in ethnic relations throughout the country including the bituminous coal fields. Encouraged by the operators the Klan tried to intimidate ethnic miners by setting off dynamite charges and burning crosses on the hill sides overlooking the town. Being that Nanty Glo was considered a hot-bed for union activities, the work of the KKK was conducted in an effort to pit the workers against each other so that the power of the UMWA would be weakened. The ethnics countered these activities by burning circles on the hills as symbols of “solidarity,” a concept endorsed by the union. Through the efforts of UMWA District 2 Hungarian organizer Joseph Foster, a community resident, and the leadership of local and district officials, an alternative progressive agenda was pursued that featured meetings, Chautauqua’s, and educational forums that stressed class solidarity rather than ethnic conflict. As a result the Klan faded from the scene by the end of the 1920s and ethnic relations returned to their previous condition.

Despite this setback ethnic traditions flourished throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still continue today. Activities and functions found in the ethnic clubs, and churches such as picnics, dances,

weddings, baptism, reunions helped preserve many of the time-honored customs practiced by their fore-bearers. Polka music is a staple at many wedding receptions while food such as koblasz, perogie, halupka, pugach, pot pies, home-made sauerkraut, potato candy and potato pancakes among other delicacies can still be found served at civic gatherings or on the family dinner table. In addition numerous annual summer church festivals which feature games, specialty booths of handcrafted items, and ethnic foods continue to offer opportunities for friends, families, and neighbors to socialize, share stories and remembrances about life in the bituminous coal fields and the important rich ethnic legacy that shaped the character of its people.