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## **Black Diamonds: The Rise and Fall of the Northern Illinois Coal Industry**

*Christopher Kernc*

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While digging a well on Thomas Byron's farm in Reed Township in 1864, William Hennebry struck coal.<sup>1</sup> With what would appear to be an insignificant event, began a period of booms, busts, trials and tribulations for the inhabitants of Will and Grundy Counties that lasted over a century. Thousands of individuals from throughout the world soon descended upon the newly discovered coalfield. Towns such as Braidwood, Coal City, Carbon Hill, Diamond, and South Wilmington formed and flourished due to the quest for coal. As with any area dependent on a single staple industry, the fate of the people who lived among the coalfields rested on the fortune of coal. This paper will examine the various factors that played a role in the decline of coal production in northern Illinois during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Essentially, it will ask what made mining feasible in the area, what were the structural changes that rendered it obsolete, and how did the industry's demise affect the surrounding communities? The goal is to discover how such a prosperous and promising industry in northern Illinois at the end of the nineteenth century waned by the middle of the twentieth.

On the surface it seems that each mine had its own specific reason for closing. For instance, the Diamond Coal Company's No. 2 Mine was said to have shut down because of the "Diamond Mine Disaster," in which the mine flooded resulting in the deaths of an estimated seventy-two miners. In Carbon Hill, the mine was closed after a tornado hit, destroying the mining facility and equipment. One by one, the mines of northern Illinois closed down, each time it was the same story with only a different ending. In this sense, each mine did have a specific reason for shutting down—a proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. However, these explanations fall short in formulating why the coal industry in Will and Grundy Counties as a whole gradually ceased. The closing of several dozen mines cannot be solely substantiated by several dozen singular events. Broader early twentieth-century trends need to be explored to account for this. In order to answer this question, one must delve into the nature of the coal industry in northern Illinois. Comparing and contrasting the coal industry in northern Illinois with

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<sup>1</sup> Modesto Joseph Donna, *The Braidwood Story* (Braidwood, IL: Braidwood History Bureau, 1957), 57.

coal production in other areas of the United States may reveal broader trends and shifts affecting the coal mining industry in general. Likewise, characteristics particular to the northern Illinois coal industry may shed light on why mining declined there, and not in other noteworthy areas of coal production.

Some of the broader aspects that played significant roles in the rise and fall of the mining industry in Will and Grundy Counties include regional economics, the character of the local coal seam, and technology. However, labor is also an essential, and often overlooked, element in this study. The aforementioned factors contributed to the labor struggle in the area, and like them, the labor struggle also led to the exodus of the mining industry from the area. Therefore, a thorough examination of the factors that gave rise to increased solidarity among miners and within the mining communities is required. This paper explores the techniques that the coal companies used to divide and exploit miners, as well as the techniques the miners used to leverage better working conditions. More importantly, it explains why rising solidarity and union power proved to be beneficial to Will and Grundy County miners in the short-term, but ultimately led to the mining industry's departure from northern Illinois.

Being generally of lesser quality than coal from other areas of the state, the coal in northern Illinois was first mined mostly for local consumption. The coal vein in the region was relatively small in comparison to coal seams in other localities; however, the boom coincided with the expansion of railroads in Illinois and the industrial emergence of nearby Chicago. In reference to a mine located at Diamond, a report by the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics stated:

The seam of coal is thin, and near the surface, and one of the chief sources of expense in mining it is the handling of the great quantities of water which continually accumulate in the workings. Its proximity to Chicago, alone, gives to this coal field its special value, and it is doubtful if the necessary capital would be found to develop it were it not the nearest coal to the largest market in the West.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, proximity played a large role in the birth of the northern Illinois coal industry. Chicago provided a market, as well as financiers, and rail provided the link to the Chicago and regional markets. According to M.J. Donna, the first major railroad line that passed through Braidwood, Illinois, was constructed in 1853. Braidwood

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<sup>2</sup> Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Statistics of Coal Production in Illinois: A Supplemental Report of the State Bureau of Labor Statistics* (Springfield, IL: H.W. Rokker, 1883), 97-98.

had forested areas that the railroad companies used as a source for wood to power their engines. The discovery of coal in the area corresponded with the shift toward coal-powered locomotives; thus, the growth of the mining industry in northern Illinois was no coincidence.<sup>3</sup> Because of the railroad the area became an important part of the transportation network of the region, and coal mining became a lucrative enterprise. Mining operations began sprouting up all over the area. Many more miles of railroad track and spur lines through the northern Illinois coalfield followed. Several local mining communities were directly founded by railroad companies, or sprang to life as the result of railroad companies sinking mines in the area. According to Jim Ridings, Braceville boomed when the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad purchased a large tract of land and began mining operations in the 1880s. The population of the township swelled from a small village with few inhabitants to a bustling community of over 3,500 residents within a decade.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the founding of Coal City and its organization was plotted in relation to the Chicago, Pekin and Southwestern Railway.<sup>5</sup> The Village of Gardner, situated along the Chicago and Alton Railroad and the Kankakee and Seneca Railroad, began to grow rapidly, as well, after a mineshaft was sunk there in the late 1860s.<sup>6</sup> James MacFarlane aptly stated that the northern Illinois coalfield “on account of its vicinity to the great market afforded by the city of Chicago, is for obvious reasons destined to be one of the most productive districts in the state.”<sup>7</sup> By 1870, mines in Will County ranked second in the state for coal production, producing 228,000 tons, and the mines in Grundy County were producing 51,375 tons of coal.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the Chicago and Alton Railroad had increased its coal shipments from 12,281 tons in 1865, to 176,876 tons in 1870.<sup>9</sup> Proximity to Chicago and the railroad’s dependency on coal made mining in the northern Illinois economically feasible.

The importance of the railroad to the plight of northern Illinois coal mining became markedly apparent during miners’ strikes. The

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<sup>3</sup> Donna, *The Braidwood Story*, 310, 59.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Ridings, *Cardiff 2: A Second Volume of History from the Lost Coal Mining Town on the Prairie and More History from Clark City, Tracy, Torino, and Campus* (Herscher, IL: Side Show Books, 2008), 287.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Stine Ullrich, *This is Grundy County: Its History from Beginning to 1968* (Dixon, IL: Rogers Printing Co., 1968), 173.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 186, 189.

<sup>7</sup> James MacFarlane, *The Coal Regions of America: Their Topography, Geology, and Development* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875), 426.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Joyce, “Mines of the Prairie: Life and Labor in the Wilmington, Illinois, Coal Fields, 1866-1897” (Masters Thesis, Illinois State University, 1980) 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

targeting and disruption of the railroad and the transportation of coal was not only a way for miners to vent their frustration and be heard, it was a means to advance their bargaining power. Miners often sabotaged trains and railroad tracks in order to sever the Chicago market from its coal supply and create artificial shortages.<sup>10</sup> The *Kankakee Daily Republican* reported one such incident. The article reported that railroad ties had been discovered on the railroad track connecting Chicago and St. Louis near Cardiff. The article stated, "The last time there were fifteen ties piled upon the track and had the train hit them it undoubtedly would have been ditched." The article continued, "It is not known who placed the ties on the track, but it is thought they might have been placed there by Italian miners who have been out on a strike from the mines at Cardiff for some time. They have been unruly and have caused the officials in the vicinity considerable trouble recently."<sup>11</sup> There were likewise many instances of coal trains being attacked by miners in southern Illinois. The attacks were often prompted by the importation of coal from outside of the state during union strikes. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that "A railroad official told a federal court jury today that bombings growing out of the southern Illinois mine union warfare were so frequent in 1935 that for three months a light locomotive was operated ahead of his road's passenger trains for safety purposes."<sup>12</sup> In another incident in Murphysboro, Illinois, striking miners forced train operators to sidetrack five cars of coal being moved for the use of the railroad, "it was found impossible to bring coal from nonunion fields." The article continued, "About twenty cars of coal from the nonunion fields of Alabama were sidetracked from two trains at the demands of miners at Percy, last week . . . the coal in about a dozen of the cars had been dumped on the track, and one wooden car, loaded with coal had been burned."<sup>13</sup> Coal miners and the railroad were intertwined. Illinois coal miners were dependent on the railroad, but over time Illinois railroad companies grew less dependent on Illinois coal. Conflict between miners and railroad companies, as well as conflict between miners and operators, grew as mining operations became more unionized.

The generation of mining unionism can be traced back to the exploitative nature of early coal mining. In response to work advertisements placed by mine operators, families from all parts of the globe traveled to the area in search of economic opportunities. Building off of ethnic differences within the mining communities, operators used

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Joyce, "Early Days of Coal Mining in Northern Illinois," Illinois Labor History Society, <http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/earlyday.htm> (accessed 23 October 2009).

<sup>11</sup> *Kankakee Daily Republican* (Kankakee, IL), 12 August 1910.

<sup>12</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), 18 November 1937.

<sup>13</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), 17 August 1922.

additional methods to ensure division amongst the workforce and maintain hegemony over their employees. According to Richard Joyce, laborers were kept indebted to the mining companies. Mine operators virtually owned the towns surrounding the coal mines. Therefore, more often than not, miners found themselves having to rent housing directly from the mining companies.<sup>14</sup> In turn, if workers threatened work stoppages, they were threatened with eviction, as was the case in Ludlow, Colorado, in the winter of 1914 when families of striking miners were evicted from their homes, which were owned by the company.<sup>15</sup> Wages were often paid in company scrip, which forced miners to shop at company-owned stores where scrip was accepted. Companies were known to fire employees who refused to buy from company stores. Miners were also obligated to pay for their equipment and its maintenance.<sup>16</sup> Essentially, miners were kept in a form of debt slavery. The arrival of fresh supplies of foreign labor guaranteed ethnic, cultural, and linguistic divides among miners. Operators knowingly enticed an overabundance of labor to the mining communities, thereby, securing the continuation of low wages. Miners were easily replaced, yielding an expendable workforce. Besides being exploited on a daily basis by the mining companies, what these strangers to the land and to each other had in common was that they were regularly intimidated by law enforcement that extorted money from the miners and arrested them for various petty charges in order to “put pressure on the miners to remain employed...and to keep 'civil order.'”<sup>17</sup>

The injustices suffered by the coal miners bred a new, shared identity among them. Despite miners' differing backgrounds and the tactics used by operators to stifle empowerment in the workforce, miners banded together. Although they had a broad variety of identities upon arrival—Italian, Bohemian, Irish, Welsh, Scottish, Polish, German, etc.—once settled into the mining communities, their common identity of “coal miner” took to the forefront. As Carl Oblinger stated in *Divided Kingdom: Work, Community, and the Mining Wars in the Central Illinois Coal Fields during the Great Depression*, “Loyalty to each other was based on the understanding that theirs was a separate society and that economic security and basic civil rights were not available to them under the current system.”<sup>18</sup> This unique sense of solidarity that developed within the mining towns was advantageous in many respects

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<sup>14</sup> Joyce, “Early Days of Coal Mining in Northern Illinois.”

<sup>15</sup> McAlister Coleman, *Men and Coal* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1943; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 137.

<sup>16</sup> Joyce, “Early Days of Coal Mining in Northern Illinois.”

<sup>17</sup> Carl D. Oblinger, *Divided Kingdom: Work, Community, and the Mining Wars in the Central Illinois Coal Fields during the Great Depression* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Society, 1991), 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

during the earlier years. The supportive nature of mining communities saw to the well being of area miners. Community members had a vested interest in the welfare of coal miners: local businesses depended on miners' patronage, and many members of the community had family or friends who worked in the mines. Therefore, the townspeople usually stood behind the miners' cause. The communities and fellow miners aided one another throughout the slow mining season and during strikes. An example was during the Braidwood strike of 1874, when neighboring miners from Braceville provided relief funds for the families of striking miners.<sup>19</sup> Also, although they were not members of the union, women of the mining communities played a large supportive role. A Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners organization was formed in which officers stressed a woman's power to become an active participant. Such sentiments "marked coal mining women's militancy and their belief that as the allies of their husbands, fathers, and brothers they could stand as partners, not just supporters."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as a result of rising solidarity within mining towns, local unions were formed, which enhanced miners' bargaining power, and increased the probability of strikes being successful. However, behaving like a unit in support of one another played a role in the miners' plight as technology progressed. While some mining states could successfully raise profits by lowering wages, the stronghold of unions in Illinois made wage cutting almost impossible. Illinois was exceptional in the degree that miners were organized. McAlister Coleman wrote, "The miners of the state organized to a man, in the van of every progressive movement in the union, have played the lone-wolf role time and again, coming out of negotiations with wage scales higher than those in other parts of the country."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Illinois coal companies, unable to lower wages, instead resorted to laborsaving techniques—namely, mechanization. In other words, rather than all of the miners suffering a pay cut, the solidarity of Illinois coal miners and their ability to strike encouraged operators to introduce machinery, resulting in permanent unemployment for a large part of the work force. Although mechanization was inevitable, both resilient unions and the Great Depression accelerated the mechanization process in Illinois.<sup>22</sup>

As coal production rose in other areas with a more abundant coal supply, technology allowed the northern Illinois coal industry to stay competitive. New machinery permitted coal to be extracted cheaply and

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<sup>19</sup> R.G. Bluemer, *Black Diamond Mines* (Granville, IL: Grand Village Press, 2001), 142.

<sup>20</sup> Caroline Waldron Merithew, "We Were Not Ladies: Gender, Class, and a Women's Auxiliary's Battle for Mining Unionism," *Journal of Women's History* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 73.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, *Men and Cole*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm Johnston Brown and John Nye Webb, *Seven Stranded Coal Towns: A Study of an American Depressed Area* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 64-65.

efficiently enough to make the industry feasible. However, the mechanization that kept production alive ensured a cut in the labor force. Machines were much more efficient than the pick, shovel, and mule. As machines were first being introduced to the mining industry, miners encountered multiple problems. The machinery was expensive and often required high maintenance.<sup>23</sup> Also, because conditions varied from mine to mine, it was difficult to create a machine that could perform universally.<sup>24</sup> However, the increase in production made possible by machinery was promising for mine owners. For example, haulage locomotives adopted by the Chicago, Wilmington & Vermillion No. 3 Mine in Streator could run thirty-seven pit cars in less than nine minutes and produce 600 tons per day—a task that normally required twenty mules and twenty drivers.<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, once machines evolved to become more efficient and less costly, they were increasingly brought into the mines, rapidly replacing workers. In the late 1920s, the work force of mines that brought in mechanized coal loaders was cut in half. The loading machines were characterized as "time-saving and man-hour eliminating" assets to the coal companies.<sup>26</sup> To the miners, though, these machines were a threat to their job security, and in some respects, to their lives as well. According to Oblinger, as more machinery was brought into the mines, accidents increased. Motorized haulage replaced mules, and new workers who were inexperienced in mining were hired to run the machinery. Mining proved increasingly dangerous as more men lacking experience filled the mines. However, coal companies discarded the idea that these new machine workers and their unfamiliarity with mining were to blame. Instead, they insistently blamed the miners for accidents, an attitude that was apparent in an investigative report from 1919 that declared a "large percentage of the fatal accidents may be attributed to carelessness on the part of the person killed." As competition increased, mine owners pushed for more productivity. This further endangered miners' lives because it hurried the work pace and increased mistakes. Increased mechanization worked in concert with increased competition. Owners not only needed to cut costs, they needed additional production and machinery to keep mines open.<sup>27</sup>

The same railroad lines that brought prosperity to the northern Illinois coal industry later connected other areas containing better sources of coal to the regional and national market. Therefore, increased

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<sup>23</sup> C. Chenoweth, Alan R. Myers, And Jennifer M. Obrad, *Photographic History of Coal Mining Practices in Illinois* (Champaign, IL: Illinois State Geological Survey, 2008) 53.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Oblinger, *Divided Kingdom*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 125–126.

competition from nonunion coalfields in other regions, which caused increased mechanization, hurt the mining industry throughout Illinois. The close proximity of the northern Illinois coal mines to Chicago became a less significant factor than the cheaper prices and higher quality coal that could be easily shipped in. Outside competition caused a marked increase in the mechanization of Illinois mining operations. Coleman said, "Between 1923 and 1925, in three Southern Illinois counties alone, 9,300 miners were thrown out of work, either by the abandonment of mines on the part of owners who could not meet nonunion competition or by the introduction of laborsaving machines."<sup>28</sup> According to the Illinois State Geological Survey, "In 1927, about four percent of the tonnage produced by shipping mines was mechanically loaded." Only three years later, this statistic rose to more than half, and by 1954 nearly ninety-nine percent of the coal produced by shipping mines was mechanically loaded. This figure is striking when one notes that between 1923 and 1950 the number of employees in shipping mines dropped by 60 percent—the equivalent of 70,000 workers.<sup>29</sup> It is also of interesting note that the closing of the last underground mine in the northern Illinois coalfield occurred in the year 1954. A South Wilmington newspaper recalled:

The last [underground] mine, number 3 was abandoned in 1926, although it was acknowledged one of the richest veins in the state. Hundreds of South Wilmington men were out of work when the mines closed and many moved to the coalfields of southern Illinois. Many of the townspeople even predicted a quick death for the village. It was a trying time for the people. Employment was scarce and the depression ate into life savings. The populace [sic] of the town rapidly dwindled.... Two local men...reopened and operated the number three mine in 1927, providing some employment for village men until its final closing in 1954. It was the last operating shaft mine in this part of the state.<sup>30</sup>

Many underground mines in northern Illinois were closing in the 1920s. A decrease in government spending fueled a post-World War I economic slump.<sup>31</sup> The lack of industrial demand combined with the

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<sup>28</sup> Coleman, *Men and Coal*, 137.

<sup>29</sup> Chenoweth, Myers, and Obrad, *Photographic History of Coal Mining Practices in Illinois* 28.

<sup>30</sup> Rick Alderson, "Short History of South Wilmington" *Gardner Chronicle South Wilmington Centennial Celebration Supplement*, July 29, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Jarvis, "Toward a New Deal for Coal?: The United States Coal Commission of 1922," *Journal of the Historical Society* 8, no. 3 (2008): 438.



resurgence of European coal production spelled hard times for Illinois coal producers. New machines, however, made strip mining feasible. "In 1924 it was generally thought that it would be unprofitable to strip a vein of less than four feet in thickness; in 1927 this estimate had been reduced to a foot and continued to drop as larger machines were developed."<sup>32</sup> In turn, the Northern Illinois Coal Company erected its first stripping shovel in 1927, and began strip-mining coal west of Wilmington in 1928.<sup>33</sup> When compared to southern Illinois, where the coal veins were much thicker, the increased interstate competition proved especially difficult for coal operations in northern Illinois because of the region's thin coal seam. The introduction of strip mining allowed northern Illinois mines to continue extracting coal, but the feasibility of mining in northern Illinois was growing evermore tenuous. Employment in the mining sector had dropped precipitously since the early days of underground mining. The growing insecurity amongst miners due to the decline of mining in Illinois fueled tensions between labor and capital. While the coal companies were concerned with sustaining profits in the future, the miners were focused on putting bread on the table in the present.

The unionization of the Illinois coalfields continued over the course of the early twentieth century. In the early days of coal mining, unionism consisted of area miners bonding together, and union activity existed mostly on the local level. Around the turn of the twentieth century mining unionism began to take shape on a more national scale. Under the leadership of Braidwood's John Mitchell—known as the "Father of the Miners' Union"—the United Mine Workers of America grew from 34,000 members in 1898 to over 263,000 members in 1908.<sup>34</sup> But, it was under the leadership of John L. Lewis that the mining union was forged into a truly national entity. Lewis focused on accomplishing union objectives on a national level—often to the chagrin of many local mining union organizations. Lewis sought to consolidate his hold over the nation's local coal mining unions; after all, union strength and bargaining power rested on combined numbers. Mining strikes were less successful when other miners continued coal production. Coordinated strikes increased union effectiveness. Lewis' determination to end local autonomy was evident when he collaborated with operators to end a local Illinois miners' strike in 1919. Lewis expelled twenty-four local Illinois UMW leaders and hired gunmen to dispel strikers.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> Pete Kodat, *Goose Lake Township Centennial: September 1897-September 1997*, Coal City Public Library District, <http://www.coalcity.lib.il.us/coalmining/pages/coalcity/gooselake.html> (accessed 21 November 2009).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Donna, 61; Coleman, 79-80.

<sup>35</sup> Oblinger, *Divided Kingdom*, 6.

consequence of the growth of national unionism was that it subverted local union grievances to national labor and capital disputes. Local miners still rallied together in local mining disagreements, but they often had to go along with the agenda of the national union. The local union initiatives were often placed on the chopping block if it meant leverage in larger national mining issues.

The United Mine Workers of America was trying to help Illinois coal miners, but the concerns of northern Illinois coal miners were seen as less significant than the concerns of miners in areas of greater productive capacity like southern Illinois, Appalachia, and coalfields in the West. The UMWA's relegation of local concerns to broader concerns proved divisive. Lewis' heavy-handedness ultimately led to the formation of the Progressive Miners of America. In Illinois, Lewis worked under the supposition that some miners would have to be sacrificed in order for mining to remain viable. If miners obtained all of their demands, many mines would eventually be forced to close. He looked to long-term feasibility over short-term gains. This was partially the reason that Lewis embraced mining mechanization, much to the dismay of many Illinois miners. In an interview, Harry McDonald reckoned that the Progressive Miners of America ultimately failed because PMA members opposed increased mechanization; therefore, over time PMA mines were forced to close because they were unable to remain competitive. In regard to the PMA, McDonald said, "You can't go on under some old beat-up way of life and get anyplace; you have to go with progress."<sup>36</sup> Problem piled atop problem for Illinois mines in the 1920s, and as a result Illinois miners grew increasingly militant.

Grievances in the Illinois coalfields often escalated into violent armed conflicts—as was the case in Herrin, Illinois in 1922 when a mob of striking miners killed nineteen strikebreakers.<sup>37</sup> The bitter divide between the UMW and PMA resulted in numerous deadly clashes in the 1930s. The amount of violence throughout the Illinois coalfields during the interwar years hurt output. Undoubtedly, Illinois miners' militancy caused coal companies to seek business ventures in less chaotic areas outside of the state.

Likewise, as time progressed technology provided cost-effective alternative energy sources to coal. This was another considerable factor in the demise of coal production in northern Illinois. Oil and natural gas began to compete with coal as the primary source of energy. In the mid-1920s industries around the world were shifting away from coal and turning to oil and natural gas for energy resources. The coal industry in northern Illinois suffered greatly as Chicago followed this movement.

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<sup>36</sup> Oblinger, 171.

<sup>37</sup> Paul M. Angle, *Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1952. Reprint, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992) 278.

Right when the coal industry was being pressured by competition from other sources of energy the Great Depression set in. Unsurprisingly, industrial demand for coal tumbled. By 1930, Illinois coal production had dropped from a usual seventy to seventy-five million tons per year to sixty million tons, and in 1931 that number plummeted yet further to fifty million tons. Illinois experienced a temporary increase in coal production during World War II, but again succumbed to the tough competition of oil and natural gas by the late 1940s. Making matters worse, railroads began replacing coal-fueled locomotives with diesel-electric locomotives.<sup>38</sup> By 1950, the effects of diesel, oil, and natural gas on the coal industry were undeniable. Attending a Midwest Power conference, Bertrand A. Landry, a fuel research supervisor, warned of massive declines in coal consumption in the near future. Landry "attributed coal's losses to its increasing price, the increased convenience of gas and oil for domestic and commercial heating, interruptions in supply caused by frequent coal strikes, and rising standards regarding air pollution."<sup>39</sup> Along with the developing external industrial competition and the internal setbacks that Illinois coal operators were all too familiar with, there was another more powerful obstacle that coal companies faced: the government.

In an attempt to stimulate the economy during the depression, President Roosevelt put forth government financed hydroelectric power projects. The completion of these projects would promise a decline in the demand for coal, and inevitably unemployment for miners. Roosevelt continued on with the program even after engineers advised him to favor coal. This new blow to the job security of miners could not be blamed solely on technology. As was aptly stated in a 1935 newspaper article, "The responsibility will rest with the Roosevelt administration, which with hundreds of millions of public funds is planning unemployment for coal miners."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, national economic recovery did not necessarily translate to recovery for the northern Illinois coal industry. Likewise, government action came into play when environmental legislation was introduced. As clean air regulations grew popular in Chicago, coal consumption was bound to take a hit. Upon growing awareness of health hazards relating to soot-polluted air, coal companies had to take steps to accommodate the desire for cleaner energy resources. In support of the anti-smoke campaign in Chicago, coal executives announced they would help "abate the nuisance by educating their customers to burn their coal smokelessly."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Spencer Range, *Down But Not Out: The Rise and Fall of Illinois' Coal Industry*, Northern Illinois University Libraries, <http://www.lib.niu.edu/2006/ih010613.html> (accessed 21 November 2009).

<sup>39</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago), 6 April 1950.

<sup>40</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago), 30 July 1935.

<sup>41</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago), 18 September 1926.

Unsurprisingly, these actions were not solely philanthropic. The coal industry was very aware of the demand for clean fires, and of the alternate energy sources that could provide them if they did not.

The last of the mining operations in northern Illinois had ceased production by the 1970s.<sup>42</sup> While coal mining continues to this day in southern Illinois—though at a much-reduced rate from the boom period—coal mining no longer exists in northern Illinois. The quality of northern Illinois coal, along with the thinness of the coal seams, ultimately rendered the downfall of northern Illinois coal industry. The railroads that had ushered in the northern Illinois coal boom, also played a part in its downfall as they eventually connected regional and national markets to cheaper sources of coal. Union growth enhanced the welfare of the average coal miner at the expense of operators' profits.<sup>43</sup> While this may have been feasible for mine operations that were healthy, it was not sustainable for the marginally profitable coal enterprises in northern Illinois. Technological advances proved to be only a crutch. Mechanization allowed northern Illinois mines to remain competitive, but only temporarily. Meanwhile, nonunion mines and mines in areas with thicker coal seams continued to produce. As mines in these areas further reduced production costs by implementing the same technological innovations as the mines in northern Illinois, northern Illinois coal production waned once more. The nation's shift toward alternative sources to fulfill its energy needs further compounded northern Illinois coal producers' problems. Over the course of the early twentieth century northern Illinois mine operations either simply closed shop, or went in search of new frontiers. The impact mining had on the towns scattered throughout the northern Illinois coalfield was striking.

Strip mining literally stripped the fertile topsoil away from areas of coal deposits, and left the flat land a bumpy countryside of holes and slag piles. The remaining prairie land was useless as far as agriculture was concerned, especially in northern Illinois. Although the land in southern Illinois had been ravaged also, the soil in the south was still capable of growing hay and pasture crops, as well as certain trees. But, as conservationists in the 1950s explained, the most difficult mining areas to reclaim were those in northern Illinois, where "the hard clay subsoil that has been turned up is much like concrete as far as plant life is concerned."<sup>44</sup> Northern Illinois land had suffered greatly from mining, and needed major restoration if any farming or building developments

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<sup>42</sup> *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), 19 September 1974.

<sup>43</sup> William M. Boal and John Pencavel, "The Effects of Labor Unions on Employment, Wages, and Days of Operation: Coal Mining in West Virginia" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 109, no. 1 (February 1994): 295.

<sup>44</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago), 11 December 1950.

were to be considered in these areas. In 1952 a project was started in which Braidwood became a test site for crawler tractors and other equipment belonging to the International Harvester company in hopes that "long sought answers as to the best manner of restoring worked over mining land may be found..."<sup>45</sup> Considering that coal mining companies originally neglected to level the land due to the fact that it was costly to do so, reclamation of all the abandoned mining land was improbable. Fortunately in many areas, land that was not reclaimed found its own purpose in the form of recreational beaches, lakes, and golf courses.<sup>46</sup>

Because mining operations were the nuclei of the communities that grew around them, when mines shut down and coal companies moved out of the areas, the residents—most of whom were families of miners—were often left no choice but to relocate to areas with active mines. As the coal industry in northern Illinois began to dissipate, entire villages and towns were abandoned. Newspaper headlines and advertisements that initially boasted of mining successes and population booms were being replaced by more somber news such as "[Mine] Closing Sounds Knell of Whole Town," and "A Whole Village for Sale."<sup>47</sup> It was a normal occurrence for company houses and buildings that had been left behind to be bought, dismantled, and shipped elsewhere to provide lumber for construction in another area. Sometimes, as was the case with the ghost town of Torino, the buildings were bought by coal mining companies in southern Illinois to supplement housing for their own employees. Individuals also took advantage of the houses that had decreased in value—some selling as cheaply as \$400—by purchasing them and having them brought to Joliet, where construction costs were high.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the site of Torino stands as a symbol of the coal industry's plight, as a cooling lake belonging to the Braidwood nuclear power plant now covers it.<sup>49</sup>

*Christopher Kernc of Wilmington, Illinois completed his BA in History at the University of Central Florida. He is currently working toward a MA in History at Eastern Illinois University. His essay was written for Dr. Curry's America Between the Wars Seminar in the fall of 2009.*

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<sup>45</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago), 7 January 1952.

<sup>46</sup> *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), 19 September 1974.

<sup>47</sup> Ridings, 204; Richard Joyce, "South Wilmington Mines," *Gardner Chronicle South Wilmington Centennial Celebration*, July 29, 1999.

<sup>48</sup> Ridings, 218.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.