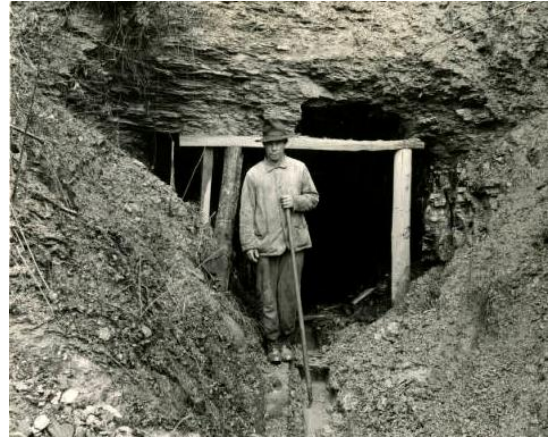# Immigration and Kentucky's Coal Industry

The American coal industry, including that of Kentucky, relied heavily on immigrant labor during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Immigrants were recruited to the coal mines in various ways. Some were attracted by labor agents stationed in major ports of entry who often recruited new arrivals by painting a rosy picture of the living and working conditions in the mines. Others followed friends and relatives in a search for employment and a steady income to support their family.

Early immigrant miners were primarily natives of coal mining regions of Great Britain, Ireland and Wales, with large numbers of eastern and southern European immigrants flooding in during the end of the 19th century. As the coal market increased, so did the need for labor. Some coal mine operators encouraged immigrant groups to maintain their homeland's culture and language in order to build divisions between the miners, creating a dependence on the mine managers and discouraging the organization of unions. Others encouraged immediate assimilation into the American lifestyle.

At the turn of the 20th century, a rise of organized labor overcame many of the cultural barriers when Polish, Czechoslovakian, Greek and other eastern and southern European immigrant miners were actively recruited into the United Mine Workers of American union. Labor opponents exploited fears of radicalism and foreign influence of unions to provoke public clashes. With the U.S. entry into WWI and rise of communism in the Soviet Union, discrimination escalated against these immigrant groups contributing to the legal restrictions on immigration, including the immigration acts of 1921, 1924 and 1930.

There is still a visible impression of the cultural heritage of these coal mining immigrant families throughout Kentucky. After generations of immigrant families much of the skilled labor, architecture, food, language and traditions still linger in the areas of former and current mining communities.

"Pass the Word" is a discovery tool for oral histories throughout the state of Kentucky. To learn more about this topic, visit http://passtheword.ky.gov.

100 West Broadway | Frankfort, KY 40601 | 502.564.1792 | www.history.ky.gov

Kentucky
UNBRIDLED SPIRIT

The Kentucky Historical Society is an agency of the Kentucky Tourism, Arts and Heritage Cabinet.