# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Actors Headshots and Biographies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Letter to Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What is Coal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How is Coal Mined?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What Was the Work Like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dangers in the Mines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>What is a Patch Town?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Legacy of Coal Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Discussion Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Patchworks Vocabulary Wordsearch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Coloring Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Word Scrabble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Word Scrabble Answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learn about the cast before they come to your school!

**Tanner Lenhart** is an NEPA native, and grew up in the very small town of Benton, PA. He has been working on and off the BTE stage since he was 11 years old, and he is incredibly excited to perform in his very first TIC tour! The TIC program is quite near and dear to him, as it was his very first experience with live theatre, and how he first learned of BTE's annual summer community productions. He has had an absolute blast working on this show and hopes that *Patchworks*’ audiences are left equal parts informed and entertained and are just as captivated as he once was sitting on his own cafeteria floor.

**Violet Race** is a 26-year-old Pennsylvania based actor. She is excited to work on her second Theatre in the Classroom tour with the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. Violet’s first TIC show was *Ancient Thunder: Tales from Greek Mythology*, which holds a very important place in her heart. She has been working in professional theatre since she was 9 years old. She has performed in family shows, like *Lil' Red's Extreme Freestylin' Fairytales*, where she played Lil’ Red. She has done musicals, such as *Plain and Fancy*, playing Katie, and *Happy Days: The Musical*, as Joanie, at the Round Barn Theater. The first show she ever performed in was *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* as Momo, at BTE. Violet is happy to be working with the theater that started it all for her.

**Jon Schultz** is an actor, wrestler, and musician with a bachelor’s degree in theatre performance from Bloomsburg University. Thanks to BTE Improv, Jon has been able to channel his impulsive comedy. Mr. Schultz thanks the community for their support at every show so far and the shows in the future.
“Fourty (sic) years I worked with pick & drill
Down in the mines against my will
The Coal King’s slave, but now it’s passed
Thanks be to God I am free at last.”
--From the tombstone of an anthracite miner in St. Gabriel's Cemetery, Hazleton, Pennsylvania

America's Industrial Revolution was fueled by Pennsylvania's coal. Our mountainsides, from Pottsville to Scranton, are scarred with the desolate remains of a once-dominant industry that took all it could from the land and the people who worked for it. Miners worked long, grueling hours in damp, dark, and dangerous conditions for negligible pay. Anthracite mining exacted a terrible human and environmental toll; but the workers and their families were the people who built America. The rise and the decline of the industry spawned a unique regional culture, still very much alive in our music, our food, our celebrations, our work ethic, and in our stories.

In our play Patchworks, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble explores the rich heritage to be found in our backyard. The “patch towns” were the company-owned towns erected for the sole purpose of housing miners, mostly immigrants, and their families. Life in these small shanty villages was hard but spirited. These were the men, women, and children whose strong backs and hearty souls built our country. They have left with us a legacy of struggle and triumph.

In Patchworks, we dig into a huge pile of history and find the “little” stories of what daily life was really like. We listen for the songs and stories, for the human voices that emerge from the clatter of the breakers and the thunder of the underground explosions. What was it like for the boys to go to work at age eight? For the mothers and sisters to feed and clean the always-hungry, always-dusty coal miners? For the fathers to go down the mine shaft every morning unsure if they would ever come up again? These are the real stories we pass along in Patchworks – the stories of our land and our people.
What is Coal?

Coal is a rock that burns. Composed mainly of the element carbon, it is fossilized plant matter—the leaf and wood remains of any kind of plant, but especially of the ferns and rushes that grew as tall as trees on the earth 350 million years ago. Coal beds began as swamps that evolved into vast, thick peat bogs. Gradually the bogs sank and were buried under sediments, compressed, and subjected to heat and the pressure of the earth. Deposits of coal, known as “seams,” lie buried underground.

Geologists rank coal into three major types: lignite, which contains the least amount of carbon; bituminous, which contains more carbon; and anthracite, or hard coal, which contains the most. Anthracite is dense, rocky, and glossy black. The richest anthracite fields in the world lie under the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton/Hazleton/Pottsville region of northeastern Pennsylvania. Anthracite was formed under the extreme pressure of mountain building. It is difficult to light, but it burns “clean” with a blue flame and very little soot.

In the nineteenth century, coal became the fuel to replace wood in warming homes, and it was the new source of power for the Industrial Revolution. It fueled the steam engines that drove machines in factories and turned the wheels of trains. Beginning in the early 1800s, and lasting more than a century, the anthracite industry reigned in northeastern Pennsylvania. Not until the 1930s did oil and natural gas overtake coal as primary energy sources.
How Was the Coal Mined?

There are four main types of underground mines: the simple drift mine, in which an opening is driven into the coal itself if the coal outcrops at the base of a mountain; the slope mine, which slopes downhill following a coal seam that lies upended in the earth; the tunnel mine, which is driven into the dirt or rock of a hillside toward the coal seam at an angle; and the shaft mine, in which a deep shaft provides access to more than one coal seam as it passes down through the earth.

Once access to the coal was achieved, miners dug coal by the room-and-pillar method. To open up the underground mine, they drove a main entry or gangway through the seam, and this became like a main street in a town. Miners then drove cross streets, called entries or headings, off the main entry at right angles to it. Opening off the entries were rooms, sometimes called chambers. These were the underground workplaces at the face of the coal seam. Between rooms, solid pillars of coal were left to hold up the roof. Props made of timber supplemented the pillars of coal.

To reach his room, a miner might walk underground a mile or more. There he would take out the coal, either with a pick, or more often in the case of hard anthracite mining, with a blast of explosive powder. A single blast could bring down a ton of coal. After the coal was removed from the seam, the miner and his butty, usually a younger laborer hired by the miner to assist him, loaded it into a coal car. The miner hung his identifying number tag on the car and pushed it out to the main passageway, where the mule driver collected it into his train.

Mules pulled the coal cars along the track out to daylight (in a drift mine), or to the shaft bottom, where it was lifted to the top by a steam-powered hoist. Above ground, impurities were removed from the coal and it was broken and sorted in a tall building called a breaker. Then the coal was loaded into railroad cars and sent to market.
What Was the Work Like?

To see what the work was really like, let's follow the progress of a mine worker as he grows from boyhood to manhood to old age. (For this information we are deeply indebted to the book Growing Up in Coal Country by Susan Campbell Bartoletti. It is an excellent resource and well written for young readers.)

Breaker Boys

In the nineteenth century, and into the early years of our own century, boys went to work in the coal breakers at a very young age, often by the time they were eight years old. According to an 1885 law, boys had to be at least twelve to work in the breakers and fourteen to work inside the mines. But parents and coal operators found it easy to get around the law in Pennsylvania, which had no compulsory registration of births.

Inside the breaker, which was a large, noisy room, the boys sat on planks astride long, steep chutes, facing a stream of coal tumbling toward them. The breaker boys' job was to remove foreign matter from the moving coal stream; they learned to pick out slate, coal-infested rock (called bony), slap, wood, and all the other odd items they might find and throw the refuse into boxes that would then get dumped on the culm banks outside.

It was monotonous, back-breaking work. As the coal streamed down the chutes, it spewed clouds of coal dust, which turned their faces, clothes, and hands coal black. The boys used their feet to stop the flow of coal. They picked out pieces of slate and rock from the coal with their bare hands, then lifted their feet so that the coal continued to the next boy. During the first few weeks of work, the boys' fingers swelled and cracked and bled—a condition known as red tips. After while, their fingers hardened and grew calluses.
A new boy was almost always “initiated” into the breaker with pranks and practical jokes—his lunch would be stolen, or he would be bombarded with buckets of coal dust or pelted with stones. If a boy could withstand this taunting and prove himself not to be a “squealer” by not telling on the others, he would then be accepted into the gang. At lunchtime, the breaker shut down, and the boys poured outside to play football, baseball, and tag.

The breaker boss always carried a stick—to serve as a probe when the chutes became blocked, as a goad to rouse a dozing youngster, or as a weapon to punish misbehavior. Because it was impossible to hear anything except the clattering machinery and the tumbling coal in the breaker, the boys devised an elaborate sign language, communicating with each other when the boss’s back was turned.

Slate-picking in the breaker was mind-numbing, perilous work. High spirits, youthful ignorance, natural curiosity, and truly dangerous conditions sometimes led to disaster. Small boys fell down the long coal chutes and became buried and smothered in the coal. Limbs and fingers were lost from unprotected revolving wheels, ropes, belts, and crushers. In the early days the breaker boy’s workday averaged ten hours, and he worked six days a week. For this he was paid a daily wage of forty-five cents.
Nippers, Spraggers, and Mule Drivers

Most breaker boys longed for the day that they could leave the noisy breaker and join the older boys down underground in the mines. Descending down into the earth, either by riding the man-trip cars that rolled down the slope or by squeezing into an elevator-like cage that dropped down the shaft, the older boys would spend their days in a variety of jobs to assist the grown-up miners.

The nipper or door tender was the youngest of the underground boys, usually eleven to thirteen years old. He sat in darkness and solitude beside the heavy doors that were constructed across the gangways or headings of the mine. The wooden doors had to remain closed most of the time to direct the flow of air through the mines, but when the nipper heard coal cars approaching, he opened the door to let them pass through and then closed the door tightly behind them. It was crucial for the nipper to stay alert during the long, dark workday to avert the disaster of a coal car crashing into a closed door. Also, the nipper listened hard for any sounds that might forewarn that a roof was loose overhead and in danger of collapse. The nipper was usually the first to hear the ominous creaks and groans of the shifting rock and could run to warn the others.

A risky and exciting job for fast and agile boys was that of spragger. These boys controlled the speed of the mine cars as they rolled down the slope by running along beside them and jabbing sharpened pieces of wood called sprags into the wheels to slow the cars down. Dodging low ceilings, running through dark, suddenly narrowing passageways, and spragging fast-rolling wheels “on the fly” made
this particularly dangerous work. Many boys lost hands or fingers or were crushed or dragged by errant cars.

A boy entering his early teens considered himself proud to earn the job of mule driver. Drivers started out with one mule, then worked their way up to six-mule teams. The driver and his team would travel through the mines, coupling full cars together and leaving empty cars to be filled. The driver sat or stood on the front car bumper and used only his voice to guide the mules. If a mule was stubborn and refused to move, the driver cracked a warning in the air with a whip, but for the most part boys took good care of their mules and treated them as their special pets and friends. A popular song about the drivers was “My Sweetheart’s the Mule in the Mines:”

*My sweetheart’s the mule in the mines,*  
*I drive her without reins or lines,*  
*On the bumper I sit,*  
*I chew and I spit,*  
*All over my sweetheart’s behind.*

Barrel-loads of hay were brought down into the mines for the mules, and along with the hay came the rats, who thrived and grew huge in the mines. The rats battled the mules for their feed and battled the miners for their lunches. Often the miners struck a sort of bargain with the rats, sharing their food with them, for the miners believed it was bad luck to harm a rat. They believed that the rats could tell long before humans could if a mine roof was about to collapse, so if the rats started to run up the slopes, the miners quickly followed.
The Miner and His Butty

A young man began his real apprenticeship in the mines when he was hired by a miner to be a butty, or assistant laborer. Then he could go into the chambers with the older worker and actually help to get the coal out. He helped in carrying all the supplies—picks, shovels, bats, drills, powder, fuses, axes, and lumber. Once in the chamber, the miner and his butty checked the area for poisonous gases, cleared the space of any loose rock, and hammered new timbers in place if the roof needed propping.

The butty learned the craft of mining while he watched the miner drill the holes, tamp the explosives, and fire them from a safe distance. When the smoke cleared, the butty shoveled the chunks of fallen coal into the coal cars. They worked until full coal was reached—this usually meant five or six four-ton cars per day. The miner was only paid for the coal he produced. For none of the other work necessary to the process of mining (the transportation time down the chamber, the inspection for poisonous gases, the clearing, the blasting, the timbering, the loading) was he paid. The miner bought his own tools, lights, fuses, and powder, and he paid his butty, whom he hired himself.

“I like to work in the mines. It’s the only work I ever did. I was born with a shovel in my hand and I will die, I guess, with one in my hand.”
- William Jones, a former butty
Dangers in the Mines

The mines were dangerous places to work. Poisonous gases, explosives, insufficient ventilation, damp conditions, ever-present coal dust, the instability of the chamber roofs, communication problems because of the many immigrant languages spoken in the mines, the lack of light, and the pressure to produce when paid only by the ton of coal delivered—all of these factors contributed to an industry plagued with disaster. From 1839 through 1914, more than 61,000 men died in the coal mines of the United States. Most—nearly 50,000—died between 1870 and 1914. At the height of the anthracite boom, three miners were killed every two days, and tens of thousands were seriously injured or maimed. Little publicity attended the more usual kinds of fatalities, in which one or two miners would be killed by the fall of a roof, coal-car accidents, or small explosions. Major disasters, however, not only made newspaper headlines but were mourned and memorialized in popular ballads sung for years afterward all over the mine fields.

One such song is “The Avondale Mine Disaster,” which describes the worst mine fire in anthracite history. In 1869, all 110 men and boys working in the Avondale mine were killed when a rickety breaker building, built directly over the mine shaft and the only outlet from below, caught fire. In one chamber, sixty-seven of the workers were found suffocated. Some appeared to be trying to build a makeshift barrier to keep out the deadly smoke and poisonous gases, others seemed to be praying. A father was found holding his son in his arms.

Since Avondale, laws regulating almost every aspect of mining have been passed. Breakers must be located a safe distance from the shafts, every mine must have at least a second opening, mines must be ventilated by fans rather than by dangerous furnaces, the amount of powder that can be stored underground is limited, and there must be sufficient support timbering. State law requires operators to provide first-aid facilities at the collieries. In the early years, medical care was haphazard at best. Injured or dead miners were simply dropped off at their homes by a carriage called the “Black Maria,” and operators assumed little or no responsibility for miners wounded or killed on the job.
What is a Patch Town?

In the patch town, everything—the colliery, the houses, the store, the church, the school, even the police force—was owned by the coal company. The village consisted of long rows of small, poorly constructed houses, which usually had two rooms: a kitchen area downstairs and an attic upstairs, where the children slept. Families, as many as eighteen people, lived in these two rooms. Few houses had cellars or foundations, and most walls had no plastering. Outhouses, shared by several families, stood in the backyards.

The coal company charged high rent for this housing, which was deducted from the worker's pay. To help make ends meet, many families took in boarders. These were usually single men from the old country or married men saving money to send for their wives and family. Butties and other laborers lived in shacks along the side streets. Sometimes as many as twenty or thirty men crowded into one shack. They took turns sleeping in shifts.

The patch village was divided into ethnic sections, because the recent immigrants wanted to live with people from their own homeland. People lived in parts of town popularly known as Paddy’s Land, Dutch Hollow, Welsh Hill, Dago Street, and Hunky Town. The streets were filled with the sounds of different languages and the smells of ethnic foods.

The life of a mother and wife in the patch town was a hard one. She often married early, as young as thirteen, and had many children. Her days began early and ended late. Up before dawn to stoke the coal stove, she packed the lunches for her husband, sons, and boarders, and prepared their breakfasts. Mondays were wash day, with water drawn and carried from the community pump and then heated on the kitchen stove; Tuesdays meant ironing with heavy irons heated on the stove; Wednesdays she made bread, baked outside in the community oven;
Thursdays all the mending and sewing was done, either by hand or on foot-operated treadle machines; on Fridays the floors were scrubbed on hands and knees; Saturdays meant shopping and baths for all the children; and on Sundays a woman went to church with her family. In the summer, she tended the garden, preserved the fruit, and canned the vegetables. Most families kept some livestock, so chickens, ducks, cows, and pigs had to be fed and watered.

What the women couldn’t grow or make—flour, sugar, spices, and so on—they bought at the company store. Men had to buy their powder, squibs, oil, and other mining supplies there also. The store was a good source of profit for the coal company. One shopkeeper admitted to inflating the prices as much as 200 percent. In hard times, when work was scarce, customers would pay on credit and what they owed would be deducted from their wages. On payday, it wasn’t unusual for a mine worker to discover that his pay equated his deductions, or that he was in debt to the company store. This caused the miners and their families to refer to the company store as the “pluck-me” store.

Even coal was expensive for the miners. To heat their homes, many miners’ wives and children would head out each day to the enormous culm banks that shadowed the patch town. With wheelbarrows and buckets in hand they would search the banks for chunks of usable coal that had been thrown out with the rubble. “Picking coal” was illegal, since technically the refuse coal belonged to the company. If the coal police caught scavengers, the families had to pay fines as well as pay for the coal.

Families and neighbors gathered to prepare food and eat together. They enjoyed traditional foods from their home countries. Those from England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland ate stews, potatoes, and puddings. Immigrants from eastern Europe cooked pork, kielbasa, sauerkraut, and breads. Italians preferred spaghetti, tomato sauces, salads, and spicy meats like salami and sausage. At first, the immigrants found the foods of other ethnic groups odd and distasteful. But gradually, these diverse flavors became not only acceptable, but savored. Now all of these traditional foods are cherished items in the vast array of “American” cooking.
The Legacy of Coal Country

Americans who had lived and worked in the coal fields all of their lives felt threatened by the large number of immigrants pouring into Pennsylvania, bringing with them their foreign ways. Immigrants were met with prejudice and discrimination and dealt with each other in a seemingly unending cycle of ethnic animosity: The Welsh hated the Irish, the Irish hated the Italians, the Italians hated the Slavs. But over years of facing hardships together, the miners and their families began to realize that they had to overcome their differences and join together in the fight for better working and living conditions. As John Mitchell, the leader of the United Mine Workers, said in 1900, “The coal you dig is not Slavic coal or Polish coal or Irish coal. It is coal.” Out of the many diverse ethnic cultures, a whole new culture had emerged: a coal culture, built out of common struggles and distinctly American.

Over time, through many long and difficult labor strikes and hard-won legislation, working and living conditions improved for the miners and their families. Then the coal industry became increasingly mechanized, and miners’ children grew up to pursue other livelihoods.

In 1917, anthracite production peaked at 100 million tons a year, but after World War I the need for anthracite declined as people turned to oil, gas, and electricity to warm their houses and fuel their industries. By the end of the 1930s, anthracite was no longer a major industry.

Most of the coal companies closed their doors and abandoned coal country, leaving behind thousands of unemployed miners, stripped mountainsides, polluted ponds and streams, dilapidated breakers, mine fires, culm banks, and debilitating illnesses such as black lung. But what the coal industry could not destroy was the human spirit. The people who now live in this part of Pennsylvania are proud of their heritage, and they have a powerful sense of belonging just where they are. They are part of a community made strong through hardship and struggle. Their legacy lies in the communities they built and the stories they tell...
Discussion Questions

1. How was coal formed? Is it still being formed today?
2. Why was coal so important to the Industrial Revolution?
3. What were the special qualities that made anthracite so useful as a fuel?
4. What were the qualities that made anthracite so difficult to mine?
5. What is the difference between anthracite and bituminous coal?
6. Why did the coal companies hire so many immigrant workers?
7. Why did so many immigrants travel to America to work in the coal mines?
8. Why did the coal companies build the “patch towns” for the immigrants and their families?
9. What do you imagine it was like for the immigrants to come to America?
10. How were the immigrants treated by Americans and the other immigrants who had come before them? Why do you think that people from different cultures are sometimes mistrustful of each other?
11. Did the people who lived in the patch towns and worked in the mines learn to get along? How do you think they did that?
12. What evidence do you see around you today that reminds you of the immigrant cultures that came to settle in coal country? Place names? Street names? Family names? Holiday festivals? What about food? What are some of the foods you enjoy eating that were originally recipes brought over by immigrants?
13. There is a rich tradition of work songs and folk tunes that were a vital part of the life of the miners and their families. Why was music so important to them? Does music play the same role in our lives today?
14. Why did so many boys go to work in the breakers and in the mines at so early an age? What do you think it would be like to have to go to work at age eight?
15. What do you think of the work the breaker boys had to do? Do you think it was right that children were allowed to do that sort of work? What would you have done if you had been a child in the 1890s?
16. When boys were twelve to fourteen years of age, they started working down in the mines, as nippers, spraggers, and mule drivers. What were these jobs like? Can you imagine yourself doing these jobs? What would be the dangers? What would be the rewards?
17. What were the various tasks that a miner had to be an expert at in order to do his job well?
18. What were the dangers involved in working as a miner? What do you imagine might be the rewards?
19. The women who were the wives, mothers, and sisters of the men and boys who worked in the mines also had to work very hard. What was their workload like? Are there differences between then and now in working conditions for women?
20. Why is anthracite no longer a major energy source? What are the fuels we use now? How are those fuels obtained and processed?
‘Patchworks’ Vocabulary Wordsearch

Find the words from the play *Patchworks: Life & Legends of the Coal Towns* in the puzzle above. Words may appear forward, up and down, and diagonally.

**ANTHRACITE** – a name for hard coal
**MINER** – a person who digs for coal
**PATCHTOWN** – the place where miners and their families live
**IMMIGRANT** – a person who comes to live in a new country
**BUTTY** – a miner’s assistant
**NIPPERS** – boys who open heavy mine doors
**SPRAAGERS** – boys who slow down mine carts with sticks
**DRIVER** – a boy in charge of the mule
**MULE** – the animal in charge of the driver

**CANARY** – a bird that can indicate dangerous gas in the mines
**BREAKER** – a tall building for sorting coal
**SLATE** – a kind of rock
**BONY** – a useless mix of coal and slate
**CULM BANKS** – big piles of bony and slate
**OUTHOUSE** – a small shack with a toilet
**AVONDALE** – the site of a deadly mine disaster
**STRIKE** – to stop working in protest
**PENNSYLVANIA** – home of the most anthracite in the world
Color Buddy as he makes his way down to work in the coal mine.
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Word Scramble

NMERI  MINER
UTBYT  BUTTY
SRGGSARP  SPRAGGERS
ELMU  MULE
RERDVIS  DRIVERS
KWARPOSHCT  PATCHWORKS
ALOC  COAL
PIRNPSE  NIPPERS
RETATHIACN  ANTHRACITE
ERBREAK  BREAKER
SBYO  BOYS
PHCATTNWO  PATCH
TOWN
TELSA  SLATE
PNIYLNNEASAV  PENNSYLVANIA
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BTE's Patchworks: Life & Legends of the Coal Towns Study Guide


