

By the Kansas State Historical Society

## Immigrant Miners and Their Families: Contributing to the Kansas Economy

Hundreds of thousands of years ago coal was formed underground in southeast Kansas. Coal is a natural resource used for fuel. Burning coal makes electricity. Getting the coal out of the ground is hard work. When coal mining began in Kansas holes and tunnels were dug underground to get the coal. People would go into these tunnels to extract, or dig out, the coal. Coal



companies needed many workers. Coal companies advertised for workers in different languages. People from all over the world came to Kansas to work in the mines. Miners came from Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, and Great Britain.



Mining for coal underground was very dangerous. Often coal dust exploded and tunnels collapsed. This made the work scary. The hours were long and

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the work was hard. Coal companies wanted their workers to stay close to the mines. They built towns called "coal camps" for their workers. Miners and their families often lived in houses owned by the coal companies. They shopped at stores owned by the coal companies. Some companies even built churches and schools for the miners and their families. Some mining camps were nicer than others. Life in these camps centered around the mines. Many of the workers started in the mines when they were young boys.



Many of the miners belonged to a union. A union helped workers get better pay and better working conditions. To get the coal companies to listen to them, the miners sometimes would go on strike. During a strike the miners stopped working. A strike was hard on a company because it lost money. It was hard on the miners because they did not get paid when they were on strike.

One strike in 1921 made families of the miners very angry. This time the coal companies had hired workers to replace

the miners! A group of wives, mothers, and sisters marched in protest. The women declared, "it is our duty to stand shoulder to shoulder with our husbands in this struggle." Some women even carried their babies in the protest marches. The women became known as the "Amazon Army." They got this name from a Greek story about women warriors.

By 1980 most of the mines in southeast Kansas had closed. It cost too much for the coal companies to run the mines. The business of coal mining lasted 125 years in Kansas. During that time the state produced 300 million tons of coal. Immigrant miners and their families made this possible.

