

The Mine Whistle

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Many of the coal mines served by the Montour Railroad had a steam whistle which was used to regulate the miners' workdays. The following is an account of life at National Mine #3 in Muse but was very similar in other mining communities as well.

A steam whistle at the main shaft building could be heard about 5 miles away. A system of signals was established to keep the miners and their families informed of activities at the mine. The whistles were exact to the minute and possibly the responsibility of the Hoisting Engineer, one of which was on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Even if there was no coal mining being done on certain days, other jobs would take place while no miners were in the mine. Track gangs would repair or relocate the mine tracks used by mine motors and cars. Survey crews would plot out and map new areas to be worked. Other maintenance would be done while these chores would not interfere with the miners working at the coal faces. Thus, there was still traffic in and out of the mine on "non-work" days, necessitating a Hoist Engineer to be on duty at all times.

The most important whistle for the miners was heard at 5 PM. This whistle would tell the miners that there would be work the following day. No whistle meant no work, which meant no pay. At many mines, especially those working multiple shifts, a chalk board sign at the Man Shaft entrance would be posted, listing "Work Tomorrow" or "No Work Tomorrow" for that shift.



The bad news for miners checking out at the end of their shift is No Work Tomorrow. John Collier, Jr. photos from Library of Congress.

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On a work day, the whistle would be blown at 5 AM to wake the miners. At 6 AM the whistle would notify the miners that the mine car “Man Trip” would be leaving the bottom of the mine shaft to take the miners to the working face.



Miners crowd into mine cars at the start of their shift at Westland for the Man Trip to the working face inside the mine.

At 6:45 AM the whistle would alert the surface or “outside workers” and at 7 AM the whistle would signal the start of the outside shift. At 11 AM and 12 Noon the whistle would signify the start and end of the lunch period for the outside workers. And at 3 PM it would sound to denote the end of the outside work shift.

The 3 PM whistle would also signal the start of “picking time”. One of the chores for many of the miner’s children was to go to the slate dump with a burlap bag and pick up chunks of coal which were mixed in with the slate dumped on the mine refuse pile. The families would collect the coal year round to be used for heating in their homes during the winter, storing it in a shed or coal bin at their home. The coal company was very strict about “picking hours” as they did not want any of the kids to be near the refuse pile while slate was being dumped during work shifts.

In some places, the whistle would also sound in the evening at 9 or 10 PM as a curfew signal for all children to be home and off the streets. In some of the miner's patches the curfew signal might be sounded by a siren instead of the whistle.

One whistle signal no one wanted to hear was a series of short blasts, often accompanied by a siren, which meant there was an emergency in the mine. This called all employees to their duty stations in the event of a fire, explosion or cave-in at the mine.

Thanks go to the Cecil Township Historical Society for providing much of the information used in this column. For more information available on-line, go to ceciltwphistoricalsociety.org.

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