MINING'S IN THEIR VEINS

Occupation runs deep for Trevorton family – Part I

Shingaras dig out living underground

By Bevin Milavsky
The Daily Item

Lottie Shingara lost her husband in a coal mining accident nearly 60 years ago. Since then, she has watched three more generations of men in her family toil underground in an industry filled with history, hard work and heartache.

Mrs. Shingara knows a lot about the mining industry, but she has never actually been below ground inside a mine.

Her father began the mining tradition, and her brothers and her husband continued the legacy.

In the 1930s and 40s, many collieries were in operation in Northumberland County, and there was no shortage of work.

Lottie Shingara, the matriarch of the Shingara family, reflects on her family's long time involvement in the local coal industry. Now in her 90's, Lottie was widowed nearly 60 years ago when her husband was killed in a mining accident.

Lottie's husband, Steve, began working in the mines when he was 15 years old, picking rocks from outside and eventually going underground. In 1946, when he was 38 years old, he was killed in a mining accident, leaving Mrs. Shingara widowed with 11 children, the oldest of whom was 15.

Her husband was killed when he got trapped in an area of the mine that a map incorrectly indicated was solid coal. Water rushed in, the bottom of the mine fell and the top collapsed. It took 56 hours to remove him from the rubble. Despite their father's death, all five of Mrs. Shingara's sons went into mining, although she would have preferred they work in other fields.

"I didn't like it, but that's what they wanted to do," she said. "I was always worried about them. They just convinced me they had to work someplace."

There are an estimated 275 billion tons of recoverable coal available to supply the United States with enough electricity for the next two centuries, according to the National Mining Association.

Anthracite production hit its peak in 1917, when more than 100 million tons of coal was mined in the Wilke's-Barre/Scranton area alone, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. Although production dipped significantly after World War II, it has grown by more than 150 percent since 1990 due to the use of coal in cogeneration, industrial and residential heating, DEP said.

Today, coal accounts for more than half the electricity used in the country and is more plentiful than domestic oil or natural gas. It's also cheaper, averaging less than half the cost of petroleum, or natural gas.

Pennsylvania is the fourth largest coal producer in the United States, following Wyoming, West Virginia and. Kentucky.

Nearly all of the country's anthracite coal, or "hard coal," is found in eastern Pennsylvania.

Northumberland, County ranks, fourth among the eight counties producing the most anthracite coal. Unlike the more common bituminous, or "soft coal," anthracite is the rarest and highest rank of economically usable coal. It burns cleanly and smoke-free.

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In 1995, about 2,180 people were employed statewide by 274 mining operations, which produced more than 8.7 million tons of coal.

The number of mines in Northumberland County has dropped to three in recent years.

One of those is operated by the Shingara family.

The Shingaras have faced arduous conditions while trying to remain true to their family tradition.

There were many years in which the coal operations didn't bring in enough money to cover the bills. But a recent deal with Reading Anthracite Co. could revive the industry for this family.

Joe Shingara and six of his brothers work at Chestnut Coal, a deep anthracite coal mine in Trevorton, carrying on a heritage started by their great-grandfather. The mine has always been family-run, with only occasional help from outsiders. Joe and his brothers started working in the business around 1979.

The miners are Joe, Tim, Albert, Bob, Pete, Jim and Tom. Tim's son, Joey; Steve, who is one of their cousin's sons; and Clint Wynn, a nephew, also help at the mine.

The Shingara brothers are from a family of 12 children. Only the oldest brother and four sisters do not work in the mine. Most of the brothers left school by the time they were 16 and started helping their father, Michael, at the mine.

The miners emerge from the mine in the afternoon. They are all related. "We hire only family," Joe said.

Joe said he never questioned his decision to go into mining, but he acknowledges that it has not been an easy road.

"We work from day to day," he said. "I'm hoping to get another 10 or 15 years out of it so I can retire, not that I'll have anything to retire for.

Clint Wynn comes up at the end of his shift. Once they go underground early in the morning, the miners stay there until mid-afternoon.

A typical day begins with the men running a pump to remove water from the mine. At 300 gallons a minute, this process is usually completed within an hour. Most of this water comes from surface water or underground springs, and it can rise quickly in the mine, impeding the work and putting the miners' safety at risk.

Before the miners begin their daily underground work, the foreman goes down to check the work area. He uses a detector to check for the presence of methane, and he looks for dangers such as a falling roof.

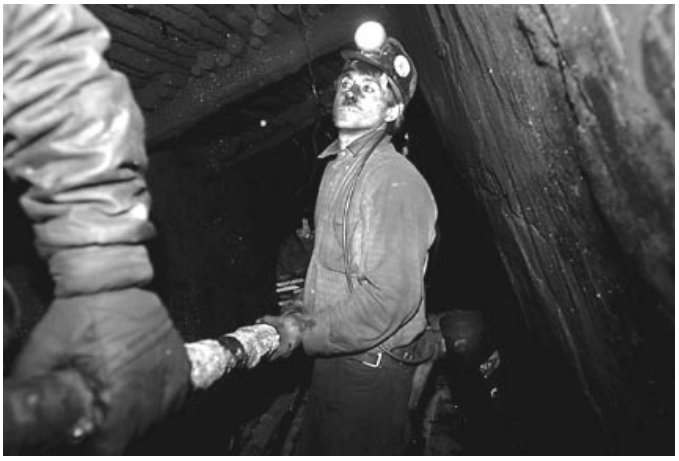
After a long workday 600 feet underground, Bob Shingara is covered with coal dust. Because of the possibility of overheating, the miners cannot wear protective masks, so they are constantly breathing in harmful coal dust.

Once the mine has been checked, the miners descend 550 feet and begin scooping with shovels on the gangway, which is the main passage in the mine. They advance six feet at a time and start shoots off the gangway. An air drill and dynamite are used to get to the coal, which is then scooped into a buggy.

The mine is designed so that air travels down the main slope and out a second outlet to ensure the men always have a fresh air supply. Joe describes the tight quarters of the coal mine as no different than driving a small

vehicle when you're accustomed to a pickup truck.

As the men work in the mine, they must use timber every five feet to support the work area. They dig a hole in the bottom of the rock and measure from that point to the top. Timber is then wedged into the area to keep it stable. If the timber begins to bend or crack, the men know that there is too much weight and they could be in danger.



Clint Wynn, a nephew of the Shingara brothers, carries timbers through the gangway.

The Shingaras' mine yields 50 to 70 tons of coal a day. Until recently, this was sold to local breakers, where it was processed and broken down for use in homes and power plants. Joe said coal heat is the warmest and most constant heat, but the demand for coal is dwindling as elderly people in the area cannot tend to coal furnaces.

"If you have a bad month, it takes three good months to come back," he said.

Joe said the business has been extremely slow year-round since 2000, but his family has no interest in quitting the business. He especially loves that his job is so varied.

"It's what I like to do. There's nothing I'd rather do than be here," he said. But since the contract with Reading Anthracite, which owns the Shingara mine, went into effect in February, the Shingaras have been selling their coal directly to the company.

Reading Anthracite comes to the mine daily to haul the coal. Joe said the weekly average is 250 to 300 tons, while they used to sell about 100 to 150 tons when it was going to the breakers. Reading Anthracite is using the coal in a plant that makes gas out of coal.

"So far it seems that it's going to work out," Joe said.

With the new deal with Reading Anthracite the family will get a temporary reprieve from worrying about the shortage of work. Reading Anthracite plans to purchase coal year-round at a price that exceeds what the Shingaras received when they sold to the breaker.

The Shingaras used to receive between $35 and $38 for a ton of coal; they now get $45. They also expect to save money by no longer hauling their own coal.

Joe expects that the deal with Reading Anthracite will be a yearly contract that will be maintained for an indefinite amount of time. Because the family already leases the mine from the company, they know Reading Anthracite will be fair.

After working hours underground on a cold January day, Jim; Pete; Tom; Tom's son, Tommy Jr.; Dan Shingara and Clint Wynn took a lunch break at a local diner.

Walking into Sophie's on the main street in Trevorton, the men were greeted casually by locals.

An outsider likely would have done a double-take, though, at the sight of six men coated in soot from head to toe.

The only distinguishable features on faces covered in black dust were the miners' vivid brown and blue eyes.

The miners are so accustomed to working in the earth that cleaning the dust from their hands and face was not a priority when they took their chairs at a corner table.

In any case, water and soap would have had little effect on the stubborn coal dust.

While the men tucked into Sandwiches and stew, served by Sophie's waitress and Pete's wife, Kristy, they bantered good-naturedly and spoke about their work.

A couple of women sitting nearby who were not regulars at Sophie's listened in on the conversation with interest. Even on a break and after working together in tight quarters and under difficult conditions for hours, the Shingaras seem to enjoy each other's company.

Even laughing at jokes they no doubt have heard time and again.

Back at the mine's work trailer, Joe lights another cigarette, leans his forearms on a card table and reflects on the mining industry.

Joe does not go down in the mine anymore. While other members of his family work underground, he and his brother Pete take care of everything on the surface. They keep the roads open, send timber down into the mine and ensure everything is running smoothly.

Joe said the younger miners do not work at the mine full-time because there is not enough work to sustain them. Clint is the exception, working side-by-side with his relatives everyday, then going home each night to enjoy time with his wife, Mindy, and their 15-month-old daughter, Destiny.

"If you have a bad month, it takes three good months to come back. ….It's what I like to do. There's nothing I'd rather do than be here."

- Joe Shingara, lifelong miner

MINING'S IN THEIR VEINS

Occupation runs deep for Trevorton family – Part II

Generations live, work together

By Bevin Milavsky
The Daily Item

Clint Wynn reaches out his hands, black with coal, and picks up his 15-month-old daughter, Destiny. Her soft pink outfit contrasts with the dirty red plaid flannel shirt he wore into the mine that day. Clint hands her a tobacco pipe, which she stares at with fascination until her mother, Mindy, grabs it from her and chastises her husband. Wynn is a nephew of the Shingara brothers, who work at Chestnut Coal in Trevorton. The clan lives on the family farm near Dalmatia, where they were born and raised.

Covered with coal dust after working in the mine, Clint Wynn plays with his daughter Destiny. Wynn is a nephew of the Shingara brothers and works with them at chestnut Coal in Trevorton.

As the men gather in the farmhouse, wives and children slowly trickle in until the home echoes with the sound of voices, laughter and good-natured insults. Living and working in such close proximity for so many years gives the family a tight-knit quality that is becoming increasingly rare.

One of the youngest members of the family looks at his coal-covered father. Many family members married when they were in their teens.

"We all get along pretty good, very little problems," Joe Shingara said. Family matriarch Lottie Shingara has always been close to her grandchildren because she lived on the family farm for 50 years. It was only recently, after she suffered a stroke, that she had to move in with her daughter, who lives in Trevorton.

Although most of the Shingara children are grown and many have children of their own, there are still at least 40 people, including the men, their wives and children at home, who live off the mine, Joe said.

Six of the seven brothers who work in the mine are married. Joe, the oldest of the mining brothers, has been married the longest, 28 years to Brenda.

The Chestnut Coal deep anthracite mine supports more than 50 members of the extended Shingara family. 6 of the 7 Shingara brothers have remained on the family farm, building houses for their families near the home where they grew up. A large kitchen table with long benches is where they all get together.

They all married their first girlfriends, he said. The men's wives do not worry about their husbands working underground. They have grown accustomed to their husbands' jobs, and do not believe there is inherent danger. Joe said there is no need for their families to worry because the Shingaras have a strong mining history.

"Our family is probably the best miners in the state," he said.

Brothers Jim and Pete talk while standing above the mine late in the fall. Through the years, each brother has gravitated to certain jobs within the family business. When it comes to decisions, they have equal say. Pete, who has worked as a miner since he was 15, stays above ground because he contracted a lung infection last year.

He said 90 percent of the mines that are still operating had a Shingara offer instruction on deep mining. His father often taught others his trade.

The Shingaras have also never had a violation or accident underground.

"There's more danger on the highway driving around," Joe said.

When the Shingaras are not toiling underground, they relish time spent with their families, whether camping, hunting or riding horses on their farm.

Joe, who works as a volunteer with the Lower Augusta Fire Company, said they are also committed to giving back to the community.

Joe said when his family travels to other states, people immediately know they are from the coal region because of the way they speak and act.

The family takes great pride in their tradition of mining.

But the industry has not always been kind to them. Since the late 1980s, the Shingaras have been increasingly squeezed by seasonal sales.

Demand for coal is slow from February through August.

"That's what kills you," Joe said.

The miners ended up selling their coal for little profit or taking other jobs to sustain themselves and their families.

Shingara said their family has grown accustomed to doing without. But he said he has to be a miner; it's in his blood.

"Most people don't understand why you want to do it," Joe said. "You have to like your job, and we like our job."

Joe said his family has never found it hard to fit into a society in which mining is becoming increasingly unusual.

He said there is a lot of curiosity about what the Shingaras do.

"They don't know why you do it, but they just admire you because you do it,'" he said.

And why do they love mining? Tommy, the youngest brother, explains it best. He grins, and simply responds with one word: "dynamite."

The men like to blow things up.

He later adds that he enjoys the method of mining, the drilling and setting of timber.

Tom Shingara holds a stick of dynamite in his hands. Only a few of the brothers are allowed to legally handle the explosives, which are kept in a locked metal container.

Joe said they also like being self-employed.

Joe began working at the mine when he was 15. His father and other relatives were in the business, and it was a natural progression for him to begin driving a truck to haul coal.

"The family was all in it," he said. "Usually when you got out of school or quit or whatever, you came here."

Joe said some of their uncles told him and his brothers to get out of the business, but they did not listen.

Pete Shingara's wife, Kristy, is adamant that their 15-year-old son, Peter Jr., will not work in the mine. He is already interested in carpentry, and his parents are encouraging him to follow that path. Kristy has been down in the mine twice. But while she finds it intriguing, she said she would not want her son or daughter entering the business.

Pete has worked in the mine the entire time he has been married. They were married when he was 18 and she, 16.

He began working at the mine when he was 15, even though by law he should have been 16 to push the buggy.

Since Pete had a lung infection last year, he stays above ground. He agrees with his wife that he does not want their son working in the mines.

Pete Shingara, a father of three, puts on gloves before leaving the warmth of the coal-heated trailer to attend work outside, above the mine, in the blustery January cold. Since becoming ill last year with pneumonia and a lung infection, Pete works above ground.

Mrs. Shingara said she helped talk her great-grandson out of the coal mines.

"I keep telling this one I talked out of the coal hole that coal's on its way out," she said.

Mrs. Shingara worries that her grandsons will make mining look glamorous for the next generation.

She said when they have a good week, they talk about the work and the money they made, but the downside is that there is never a guarantee that the demand for coal will remain constant.

Steve Shingara shovels coal into a buggy. On an average day, the Shingaras can bring up between 50 and 70 tons of coal.

On most days, Tom, the youngest of the Shingara brothers, goes to The Bowery, a bar in Trevorton after work. He's taken all three of his children down into the mine before. "We work in it every day, so we know its safe," he says.

Tommy, 13, the son of Tom Shingara, spends time with his father, uncles and cousins at the mine, but says he doesn't want to work there when he grows up.

MINING'S IN THEIR VEINS

Spirits survive water and regulations - *Part III*

A broken water pump shuts down the Shingaras' mining operation for close to a week in December. Jim and the other miners still gather at the trailer each day, monitoring the water level in the mine and waiting for the arrival of the new pump.

By Bevin Milavsky
The Daily Item

The Shingara brothers not only have to contend with state and federal mine inspectors, but Mother Nature as well.

The wet weather that drenched the region in December and January dumped nearly 100 feet of water in their mine, making it impossible for them to work.

They ran out of coal and had to burn wood in the stove at their work trailer.

Then they replaced a pump in the mine, but the rain was still heavy, and the pump could only remove water from one area of the mine at a time.

Before the Shingaras got the pump, the only way to get water out of the mine was to haul it out with a bucket, put it in their buggy and bring it above ground.

The water also washes the loose coal into the area where the buggy travels, and the coal has to be scooped out by hand to clear the area.

"This rain's killing us," Joe Shingara said. "It makes twice as much work when you get water like that."

But Joe acknowledged that for most of the winter, it was going pretty well.

But the cost of mining equipment has soared over the years. The pump the Shingaras had to purchase carried a price tag of more than $4,000,

Dynamite, which was once $18 a box, is now $75, The Shingaras pay another $75 a month for a mine rescue group, even though Joe said they would handle their own rescue in an emergency.

Joe said it is hard to make a living in the business because there are so many people who need to be paid.

He said the only thing that keeps him from giving up mining is his will to continue the tradition and his ability to do without amenities.

"It eats up all your money," he said.

Left – On a December day with the mine flooded, Tom Shingara sits inside the trailer and smokes. Piles of wood litter the floor because the brothers ran out of coal to burn in the trailer's furnace.

Kristy Shingara said people often do not realize how hard miners like her husband Pete, work every day. Their day may end at 2 p.m., but they have to put in hours of tough manual labor.

"It wears your body out quick," Joe said.

His wife, Brenda, agreed, "You get old before your time."

Joe said when people think of mining, they often have visions from books or movies.

But he said most entertainment portrays miners working in soft coal mines with machinery handling the bulk of the work. The Shingaras, as others in hard coal mines, have to drill and scoop by hand, and there are no conveyors to speed up the task.

Joe said he and his family do their own electrical work, plumbing and carpentry at the mine.

"In this business here, you cannot afford to pay someone for everything that needs to be done," he said.

"It's not just that you're a coal miner — you're everything."

Cousins Al Shingara and Clint Wynn work on building a chute for the coal. All miners say that setting off dynamite is the best part of their day.

But the government requires that the miners use a certified electrician and that each miner be certified in each area of mining.

Joe said the regulations are becoming increasingly stifling. Even their trucks, which are subject to state inspection, can be targeted by a federal mine inspector.

Joe said his family has scared away some mine inspectors by yelling at the men who come to check the mine.

"I threw a bucket at one, one time," Joe said.

He said they have taken mine inspectors to court in an effort to have fines reduced or dropped.

Joe said the brothers refuse to let the regulations force them out of mining and will continue to fight against perceived injustices.

"The country was built on people like us," he said.

Joe said royalties from the coal industry once kept taxes down. But since many mines have closed, everyone who is left works on privately owned ground and there are no royalties.

"The government beat everyone down," he said.

He said the public needs to approach their state representatives to request that regulations be relaxed so more people can return to mining. He has no doubt that the mining business will be revived.

Joe, the oldest of the Shingara brothers who work at the mine, handles most of the finances. Although the Shingaras have mined the hills surrounding Trevorton for three generations, they don't own any of the coal land. They lease the mine from Reading Anthacite.

"It's going to have to happen," he said.

Joe said coal was once used for many things, including charcoal filters for water filtering systems, car batteries and medicines.

"It wasn't just a burning fuel," he said.

He said if people returned to mining perhaps some of the nuclear power plants could be eliminated.

He said, "You can make gas and fuel and everything out of coal."

Pete and Bob Shingara and a nephew work on welding a piece of machinery. "You've got to know how to do it all." Says Joe Shingara, referring to the upkeep an repair of the mining machinery. Several weeks later, their trailer was broken into and many tools were stolen.

Ninety-year-old Lottie Shingara still listens to her grandchildren talk about mining.

Nearly 20 family members have carried on the mining tradition. She said she worries more now that they work in independent mines instead of the large collieries of the past.

She wishes they would find jobs that were less dangerous. They do their own welding, carpentry and mechanics, so jobs would be available to them, but they tell her they have to be miners, that mining is in their blood.

The smell of coal keeps some of them hooked. Tommy Shingara even named one of his sons Coal. It is their work, but more than that. It is their life.

"If I had my way, they'd all be businessmen or something," she said with a laugh. "(But) I can see they really enjoy their work.

Tom rides on a narrow bar across the top of the buggy. When ice freezes along the chute, the miners sometimes need to force the buggy while standing on the bar to avoid getting stuck.

As a snowstorm closes in on Trevorton Mountain, Jim Shingara and the rest of the miners continue with their mining, both above and below the earth. While winter is the busiest part of their year, they are unable to work if the temperatures dip into the single digits because their machinery uses diesel fuel, which gels in frigid weather.

Steve Shingara pushes anthracite through the gangway, toward the buggy. The markings on the chute indicate how many buggies of coal were filled from that chute.

- Photos by Kate Collins/The Daily Item