

Breaker Boy Chronicles

The Adventures of Michael and Sean



Steve Varonka



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Michael, The Breaker Boy

My name is Michael Casserly, I am eight years old and I'm a breaker boy. What's a breaker boy? That means I get to work and help earn money for my family. I go to the breaker with my Pop and my brother. They go down into the coal mine and mine the coal. I go into the breaker and pick slate from the coal. The slate does not burn but the coal burns well. When it burns it makes a lot of heat. The heat makes steam and the steam is used to power machines that do hard work. Coal can also be burned in stoves at home to make heat or to cook our meals.

It's time for breakfast, come with me and meet my family.

I love to eat breakfast. I think we are having oatmeal today. It's my favorite. That's my sister Elizabeth at the stove cooking. She's 14 now and has taken care of us since my mother died in a fire. That was three years ago.

I always sit next to my Pop. His name is Patrick. He is a coal miner now but he really is a carpenter. He says he'll be a carpenter again when people forget the bad times and the Molly Maguires. They were angry men who fought for fair treatment by the coal mine owners. Only the mine owners won.

That's my big brother Bernie on the other side of my Pop. Bernie is seventeen now and he has a girl friend. He says as soon as he makes miner he's getting married.

My other sister Kate, is across the table. She is eleven now and goes to school yet. I don't go to school now that I have a job in the breaker. I told them I was twelve and I got the job. My pop says I am a good boy to help the family get by. He hopes that things get better soon so I can go back to school.

Time for work now. Elizabeth has made lunch for me, Pop and Bernie. I wonder what I'm getting today. Yesterday I had some hard tack and bread and then I had chicken for supper. My Pop and Bernie also get tea but I'm too young and I only get water.

We have to walk about a mile to get to work. On the way we will meet up with all my friends. You are supposed to be twelve to work as a breaker boy but most of us start at eight. The mine owners don't really care as long as the slate is pulled from the coal.

"Hey! Michael." yelled Sean O'Boyle. Sean was Michael's best friend. They worked in the breaker picking slate. Sean and Michael always sat next to each other.

"Morning' Sean. How's she cuttin'?" Michael said. "How's she cuttin'?" was a way of saying "How are things going?" It was a miners greeting that referred to how the coal was cutting in the mine. All the boys used it as well.

"I'll be much better at the end of the day." Sean replied. "You know how much Mad Dog hates me. I'll get switched for something, that's for sure."

Mad Dog Thomas was noted for his mean disposition. He was Bully Bill Thomas' younger brother. Bully Bill was a Modoc. They were Welshmen that fought with the Irish Molly Maguries. Bully Bill had the scars to prove it. He had been shot several times but lived to see twenty of his foes hanged. Mad Dog is the breaker boss. He walks around, looking at all the breaker boys, carrying a big, long stick, which he uses on their backs if he thinks they are not working hard enough. He likes to use the stick.

"Maybe he'll be in a good mood today." Michael said to Sean. "I heard he got a big bonus for last week's production."

"I hope you're right Michael. I'll work hard today and try to stay out of his way. No sense making him mad."

“Let’s hurry and be ready early. Hey, how about after work we go down by the pond and skip some rocks?”

“OK, I’ll meet you there at six.”

“Well, I guess it’s time to go to work.”

Dad and Bernie head off to the coal car that will take them into the mine. The car is pulled up and down a track on a cable by a big steam engine hoist. When it’s at the bottom everyone gets out and it makes another trip until all the miners are in. Then they get into another coal car that is pulled by a mule. That’s Bernie’s job, mule driver, except his mule is still in the stable down the number two gangway. Dad and Bernie arrive at the stable and Bernie jumps out to greet his mule, Doughty. Doughty was the strongest and toughest mule of his stable.

“Good morning, Doughty! Are you ready to go to work?” Bernie said as he started to put the harness on Doughty.

“You mind your business today lad. I’ll be off with Mr. Williams in the number four drift.” Pat said to Bernie. “Work hard and stay safe. I’ll see you at quitin’ time.”

Mr. Williams was the miner that my dad worked for. He was a fair man, for a Welshman, and dad liked him for that. Mr. Williams would show dad where to drill the holes that would hold the powder to blast the coal from its hold. That was the hard part of mining, the blasting. Mr. Williams was very good and had never had a mishap.

Dad was the hammer man on the drill team and Liam Jones held the drill. Liam was young and just worked his way up from mule driver. He held the drill and my dad hit it. Then he would turn the drill as he pulled the drill back to clean the hole. My dad was very good too. He never missed.

“Fire in the hole.” Mr. Williams shouted just be-

fore he lit the fuse to set off the charges. Everyone got on the ground and covered their ears.

BOOM!!!

The powder exploded; smoke filled the air followed by fragments and sharp shards of rock and coal. Once the air cleared the work began as the coal was loaded into the car.

I walked into the breaker and started the climb up to my seat next to the coal chute. Mad Dog was staring at me with his glaring eyes.

“Keep moving Molly!” Mad Dog screamed as he continued his glare. “I’ll have no nonsense today, from anyone. Today we work on a new breaker record. That Philadelphia and Reading train below us has two extra cars on it and I intend to fill them. Now get to work!”

As he yelled the door on the chute opened and the coal started to flow. It was our job to pick out any slate or rocks that might be in the coal. The rocks were easy. They looked much different. The slate was harder since it too was black but much duller than the shiny coal. You could tell the new guys since their fingers were all cut and bloody from the sharp slate. After time your fingers would heal and get hard and calloused and you would not get as many cuts. The black coal dust would enter the cuts and remain there your whole life. You could always tell a coal miner by the blue streaks in his hands.

CRACK!

Mad Dog’s stick smacked over the back of Mikey Loftus. “I told you that I was not putting up with any shenanigans today. I saw you throw that rock. I’ll not have it. You’ll work or they’ll carry you out of here.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Thomas. It won’t happen again.”

“Enough talk boy. Get to work. Let that be a lesson to all of you. Now let’s fill that train.”

Mad Dog was really in a bad mood today. I guess

I'll keep quiet today, no mischief. I'll think about what Sean and I can do tonight. Maybe we can come up with something real good. Something we have never done before.

My mind continued to work on the fun we could have tonight.

WHEEEWWW!

The breaker whistle blew. The day was over and it was time to go home. I had picked eighteen pails of slate today, a new record by three pails and we filled that train too.

I was the first to the gate. I had to wait for Pop and Bernie and we could go home and have a good meal; then the fun.

"Hello Michael. How was your day?" Pat said.

"It was awful. Mad Dog pushed us to a new breaker record. We filled two extra train cars today. We didn't even get a lunch break. He made us work while we ate. He'll get his someday."

"Now Michael it may not have been all his fault. I heard in the mine that Mr. Gowen offered extra bonuses for the extra coal. The price is up in Philadelphia and he asked all his mines to pick up production."

"Yes, he makes money off our backs." Bernie butted in. "More money for Mr. Gowen but none for us."

"Well lads, the day is done. We are all safe and there is no shame in a good days work." Pat tried to consol his two boys. He knew what bitterness would bring. They had to accept their place in life and try to improve it themselves. No one would help them. Hard work was the only solution.

Elizabeth and Kate had plenty of hot water ready for our baths when we got home. There was a small room behind the kitchen where we could take off our dirty work clothes and jump in the tub to wash the coal dust from our bodies. Pop always went first and

got the clean water; Bernie next and then me. Elizabeth made the lye soap herself.

Supper was next. Tonight would be chicken potpie. Elizabeth used the broth and chicken from last night and then added her dough squares and plenty of potatoes. Fresh bread and molasses finished it off. Wow, was it good. Mrs. Albright from up the street gave her the recipe. Mrs. Albright also made great apple pies. I love those too.

I finished up and asked Pop if I could go meet Sean.

“Yes, but stay out of mischief. It was a hard day and I don’t want any parents dragging you back here by the ear. Do you understand?”

“Yes Pop, I’ll be good.”

I bolted out the back door and ran down the street towards Sean’s house. Just as I got there Sean shot from his back door.

“Hey, race you to the pond.” I yelled.

“You’re on. I’ll beat you hands down. Ready. Go!”

Sean got a jump and headed off first. He crashed through the back gate and turned down the street as I followed close behind. Sean took a chance and cut through Mad Dog’s back yard. He must be nuts I thought as I trailed. No, I must be nuts, I followed him. Maybe mad Dog won’t see us.

The chase continued to the top of the culm bank, a big pile of very fine coal dust. Sean tripped and began to slide. I kept my feet and ran down ahead of the tumbling Sean. At the bottom was the pond, its black water just waiting to accept Sean as its next captive. Two boys drowned there last year. I had to stop him; but how? I ran as hard as I could to intercept him at ninety degrees. I lowered my shoulder and caught him in the chest just as he rolled over. It was enough to drive him sideways and stop his tumbling.

“Wow! That was fun!” Sean said as he got to his

feet. “Are you OK Michael?”

“OK? Fun? I thought you were going right into the pond. You know how many have drowned in there.....and you can't swim.”

“Yeah, but wasn't it fun?” Sean was just being his usual reckless self. He smiled at me and offered his hand to help me up.

“What were you thinking of cutting through Mad Dog's yard? Are you crazy?” I was very upset with Sean.

“Oh, he didn't see us. What can he do anyway? He wouldn't even know who it was.”

BANG!

A gun shot; the dirt next to Sean erupted in a cloud of black dust.

“Run!” I yelled and Sean and I took off up the bank and into the woods.

“What was that?” Sean said as we came to rest behind a big dead tree.

“That was Mad Dog with his shotgun. I guess he did see us. What are we going to do now?” I looked at Sean. He didn't even seem scared.

“I know. Follow me.” Sean had a devious gleam in his eye.

He grabbed a piece of rope that he found laying on the ground nearby and headed back toward Mad Dog. When he got to the top of the culm bank he found two small trees and tied the rope to one of them. Then he buried the rope under the culm and handed the loose end to me as I hid on the other side of the tree.

“When I come by pull the rope up, OK?” Sean said and I nodded my head.

Sean doubled back and found Mad Dog pounding the bushes looking for us. He picked up a small rock and threw it just past Mad Dog's ear.

Mad Dog turned and ran after Sean. Sean ducked around trees and lead him right back to me.

“Now!” Sean shouted as he passed the buried rope.

I pulled the rope tight just as Mad Dog hit the spot. It caught his leg and down he fell. His momentum carried him to the edge of the culm bank where his tumble began. Roll, roll, roll, down the bank he went.

SPLASH!

Mad Dog went right into the pond shotgun and all.

“That was fun!” Sean said with that same grin as we watched Mad Dog crawl from the black water.

“Let’s get out of here before he sees us.” I was hoping that he didn’t know who he was chasing.

We took off for home using a different route. What a night we had. I hadn’t had this much fun in a long time. All I could hope for now was that we weren’t caught. Well tomorrow will tell. Mad Dog would really be in a bad mood.

“Michael, is that you?”

“Yes Pop, it’s me.”

“Did you and Sean have fun tonight?”

“Yes Pop, we sure did.”

“I’m really tired. I think I’ll go to bed now.” I just had to think about what might happen to us the next day if Mad Dog knew who we were. Boy, I will never do anything like that again. It was really stupid.

I really didn’t sleep well that night. I was too worried about what might happen. Breakfast went well and Pop, Bernie, and I set off to work.

“How’s she cuttin’?” I heard Sean yell from behind. He came toward me with the big grin across his face. “Good fun last night, haint’a?”

“Yea, good fun.” I said shaking my head.

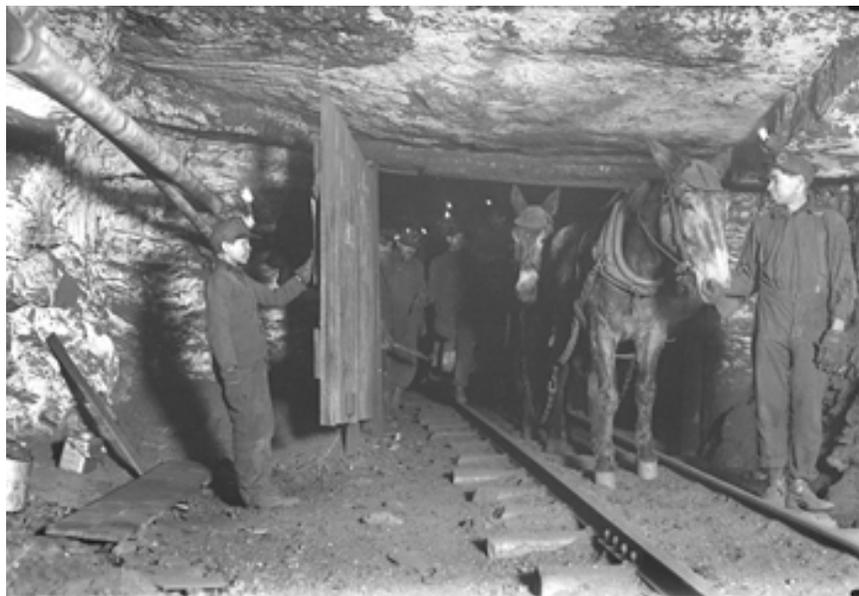
We climbed the breaker to our seats and in came Mad Dog. He had a bandage on his head and one arm in a sling. He stood at the top of the chute and glared at the whole crew.

“You know who you are and I will find out. When

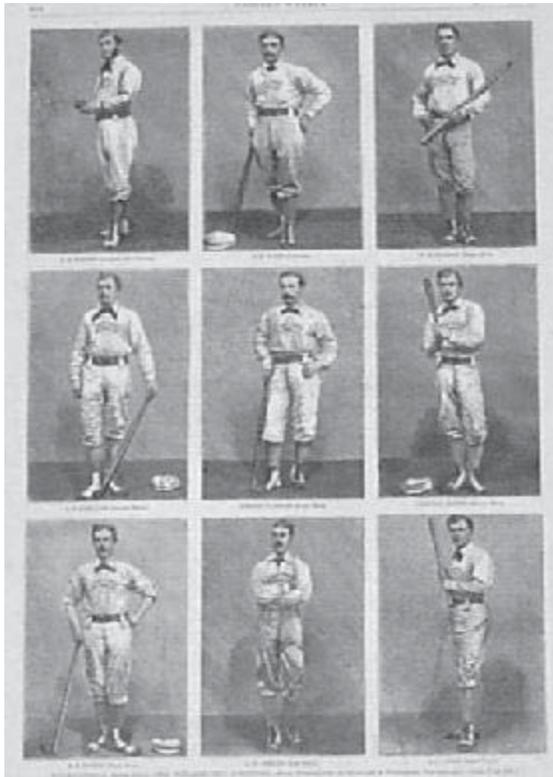
Episode One

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I do you will pay. Now get to work.” The chute opened and the coal and slate began their journey.



Top: Breaker Boss looking over the breaker boys. Bottom: Door boy and mule driver.



The Philadelphia Athletics, circa 1878



Samuel F. B. Morse sending his final telegraph message.

Mike and Sean's Big Game

"Hurry, Michael. We'll be late," cried Sean O'Boyle as he ran ahead of his good friend Michael Casserly. They were on their way to the Humane Fire Company annual picnic.

"OK, OK, Sean, I'm right behind you," Michael said as he tried to catch up with Sean.

The picnic always started with breakfast. There would be bacon, ham, eggs, pancakes and sausage, more food than most would see all year. Many donations were made by all the businessmen in the town. They were grateful to the men in the fire company for giving their time to protect their businesses.

This year's picnic would be like most, food, games, and lots of fun for all. Michael had turned nine, and Sean was eleven; they would play baseball with the other boys today. Baseball was becoming a popular game since the National League started back in 1876. Everyone wanted to know how his or her team was doing. The Boston Red Caps and the Philadelphia Athletics were the two oldest and most popular teams. Other teams were the Chicago White Stockings, Cincinnati Red Stockings, Hartford Dark Blues, Louisville Grays, St. Louis Brown Stockings and the New York Mutuals. Selling newspapers had gotten much easier with the news from the National League coming in daily on the telegraph.

Today's big game would be the breaker boys from the Mahanoy City Colliery against the boys from Focht and Whittaker. One of these teams had won the last three years, and they were heavily favored this year, too. Some of the other collieries represented were Elmwood, Tunnel Ridge, Grant, Hillside, and Hoffman, all from Mahanoy City. Everyone there knew that the boys from the big Mahanoy City Colliery were the fa-

avorites. Old Mr. Gowen would give each boy a dollar if they won the championship. Mike and Sean wanted that dollar; they didn't care how much bench time they had to do to get it. Yes, that's right; Mike and Sean rode the plank. Both were good enough to barely make the team. It didn't matter to them. Mr. Gowen gave all the boys on the team a dollar. Someday they would be the starters, and one of them could be the big hero of the game. Today, they would never get in.

Smith's Farm, the Humane Picnic Grove, had two ball fields and four pitches for quoits. The dads all played quoits while the breaker boys, door boys and mule drivers played baseball. The action at the pitches and on the ball fields was heavy and constant all day. As evening approached, the quoits champion was crowned, and the attention centered on the final ball game of the day. It was the sixth inning by the time the crowd finished gathering around the field. The score was tied, Focht and Whittaker two, and Mahanoy City Colliery two.

"This is a great game, Michael," whispered Sean. "I wonder if F&W will put Johnny Fogarty on the mound soon."

"Fogarty won't hurt us. His fast ball is way too slow; we can hit him," replied Michael.

"I hear Fogarty has been workin' on the curve ball. I've never seen one, have you?"

"Well I'll tell ya', Fogarty ain't no Candy Cummings. Ain't nobody ever throwed a curve like him."

Top of the ninth and the game was still knotted at two all. Everyone got quiet as relief pitcher Johnny Fogarty walked to the mound.

"On no, here comes Fogarty!" exclaimed Michael.

"Hey, you said he can't hurt us. Remember?" replied Sean.

"I know, I know. I just would have felt better with him on the bench. I hope his reputation doesn't spook

our guys.”

“We’re at the top of the order. We’ll win this now.”

“I hope you’re right Sean. I need that dollar.”

First up was Barney Coleman; he would surely be able to hit Fogarty. He ran the count to three and two. Fogarty wound up and let his curve fly. Coleman set his eye on the ball. It was perfect, right down the middle. Coleman swung as hard as he could.

“Strike three, you’re out!” cried the umpire.

Barney looked shocked. His face revealed his disbelief. He couldn’t believe he missed it.

“I don’t know what he threw at me,” he said to Big John Kelly as he walked back to the bench. “One minute I was on it and the next minute it was gone.”

“Awe, it was just his curve ball, Bernie. You got to hit him before he throws it, is all. Don’t let it bother you, I’ll nail this guy.” Big John stepped to the plate.

They didn’t call him “Big” for nothing. Big John Kelly had just turned fourteen, but he was almost six feet tall. He made it to Mule Driver two years ago because he could handle three of them with no problem. In two years, he had gotten much bigger and stronger. His forearms and wrists were big as mules’ legs. His shoulders were as broad as an ox yoke. If he did hit Fogarty, it would surely pass the fence. All Big John had in mind was to hit him early and hit him hard. He couldn’t wait for the count to get ahead of him.

Fogarty stepped to mound. He looked straight down into Kelly’s eyes with a look of hardened steel. Kelly looked right back, his face stone like. Fogarty wound up and let his best fastball go. Kelly saw it coming, right at the side of his head. He jumped down and back, flat in the dirt. The crowd jeered, as the pitch looked like it was meant as a warning. The whole bench got to their feet and were about to run onto the field when coach Mad Dog Thomas stepped in front of

them. He still carried the stick that he used in the breaker. Every boy on the team had felt the pain of that stick at one time or another.

Kelly picked himself up and dusted off. He stepped back up to the plate, not intimidated at all. He looked to the mound at Fogarty in silence and gave him a nod. It was as if he was saying, "OK, now it's my turn."

The crowd quieted as Fogarty got ready for his next pitch. He threw another screaming fastball, too high and too outside to suit Kelly, and he left it go.

"Strike!" yelled the umpire.

The crowd was in an uproar. They were yelling and screaming at the umpire. Surely, that was not a strike. But the count stood at 1 and 1.

Fogarty thought he had Kelly right where he wanted him. His curve ball would be next, and he would be up on the count. He felt an easy strike out. The ball left his twisting hand. And, just as the curve he threw to Coleman, it was heading right down the middle.

Kelly saw it coming and knew he had to hit it. He swung as hard as he could.

CRACK!

He hit it, but not solid like he thought. It broke right before his bat and was now heading straight up in the air. A pop fly and it was heading right to shallow center field. The center fielder took off, the second baseman took off and so did the short stop. All three were heading for the same spot in shallow center, just behind second base. You could hear the crunch, even over the crowd noise, as their bodies mashed together, the ball dropping dead in the middle.

Kelly was shocked as he headed for first, the coach telling him to run it out. He made first easily since no throw was attempted. The second baseman grabbed the ball and rolled to his base. He had to stop the

runner from moving on, and he did.

The winning run was now on first base. Big John was big, and he could hit a ball, but he was not the fastest man on the team. Still, he stood tall on first, ready to bring it home.

Michael was rolling on the ground with his hands on his head, pretending he was one of the three in the collision. “Man, that’s gunna’ leave a scar,” Michael said as he continued with his antics.

WHACK!

Mad Dog’s stick came down over his back. “That’s gunna’ leave a mark, too. Now sit on that bench and behave. This game ain’t over yet.”

“Yes sir!” Michael vaulted back to his place.

“I’ll have no more celebratin’ ‘til this game is won!” Mad Dog screamed at them all. “Now let’s concentrate on bringin’ Kelly in and winnin’ this thing.”

“Jimmy Dougherty! You’re up next. Now, you have to advance Kelly. There’s only one out, and it’s up to you.”

“I can do it, don’t worry,” Jimmy said as his confident walk told the crowd. Jimmy was a lefty and the best bunter on the team. Fogarty signaled his third baseman to come up the base line. The infield pulled in, too. Everyone knew Dougherty would bunt. Fogarty stepped to the mound; he looked over at Kelly on first. He thought Kelly had too big a lead. He threw for first. Kelly dove back.

“Safe!” yelled the umpire.

Fogarty had forgotten how big Kelly was. When he stretched that six foot frame, he was as long as his lead. He would be hard to pick off.

“Sean, did you see that? I can’t believe he got back,” Mike said as he grabbed Sean’s sleeve. Mad Dog gave him the evil eye. Mad Dog’s evil eye could melt a blacksmith’s anvil.

“Yea Mike, good thing Kelly’s so big. I don’t think

anyone else could have gotten back that fast.”

Fogarty started his wind up; he would throw a nice easy pitch first since he expected Jimmy would take the first pitch. Big mistake! Jimmy laid down a perfect bunt right between the pitcher and the third baseman, too far for the catcher.

Jimmy turned and ran for first. Kelly was already on his way. Fogarty froze in his stance; he was mad at himself for making such a blunder. The third baseman ran the ball down, but had only one throw available. He came up with it and in one fluid motion sent the ball to first. Jimmy ran as hard as he could. The ball came streaking by.

“Out!” was the call.

Kelly held at second.

The crowd went nuts. The go-ahead run was now on second base; there were two outs; and the best home run hitter between here and Shenandoah was coming to bat.

“I’m never going to make the end of this game,” Michael cried to Sean. “I can’t take it. I’m going to turn my head. Just tell me when it’s over.”

Sean grabbed Michael and said, “What are you going to do when you are the one at bat? Straighten up! You will have no effect on how this game’s going to end, so calm yourself.”

“I am calm. I just don’t want to loose the dollar. You know how I get when I have a dollar. I’m nervous as a cat ‘til I get it all spent.”

“Well don’t spend it yet. We ain’t won yet.”

“That’s what makes me nervous.”

Seamus “The Flash” McDonnell, the best home run hitter the Mahanoy Valley had ever seen, walked to the plate as if he owned it. And why not, he had all the confidence he needed. He had already hit 28 home runs this year; he wasn’t afraid of a curve ball.

Fogarty was in a spot now. He had a runner at his

back, and the best home run hitter in front of him. He should walk him. There were two outs and putting him on base would give them more chances at getting out number three. His team just needed to play good defense, and he would be out of the jamb. He rolled it over in his head. Should he try the curve or walk him and trust the team defense. His curve had worked well on the first two batters. He was hot, and he felt it. Strike out McDonnell and he would be a hero. Before he knew it, the curve ball left his fingers. He thought, "Oh my, what have I done? I should be walking this guy." It was too late. The Flash couldn't believe what he saw, a curve ball coming right down the middle. It broke early, and Flash picked up the change.

CRACK! Flash hit it, a line drive right back at Fogarty. Fogarty dove to the dirt, and the ball went to center field. A stand-up double for the Flash, as Kelly crossed home plate. Mahanoy City Colliery went up 3 to 2. The crowd was on its feet screaming and cheering.

Michael was up, screaming and jumping on Sean's back. Sean was off his seat, too. Mad Dog even seemed to get a glint in his eye and a curl on his lip as he turned to quiet the team.

"That's only one run, and we have a man on second. Let's get him home."

Pat Reily was the next batter, the number five man.

Fogarty had to pull himself together. He made two huge errors and might have cost his team the game. He had to pitch well now or he risked the wrath of his teammates when they got back to work on Monday.

Fogarty made quick work of Reily and the sides retired. The Mahanoy City colliery boys took the field, three outs from victory.

They stayed with their same pitcher, Stinky McCann. After all Stinky got them this far, and if it wasn't for two fielding errors, they would be up by three not one. Stinky was pitching a great game.

Johnny Jones was first up for Focht and Whittaker Colliery. The F&W team had more Welshmen than any other team. Jones was respected as a hitter, even though he was a Welshmen.

Stinky came to the mound and took a moment to survey the situation. It was late afternoon on a hot July day. This was his team's third game of the day, and everyone was tired, even though the early games were only five innings. He was up by one run in the bottom of the ninth. He had good defense behind him. It was a good day to win a baseball game. He let his pitch fly.

CRACK!

Jones got hold of it, a high fly ball to left field. It looked like it was headed foul. The Flash was on it. He was running hard and heading into the crowd. The first man he passed was the mine boss at the F&W; he extended his foot, and Flash was airborne. Flash never took his eye from the ball. He hit the ground hard as the crowd parted, anticipating his run. His glove arm extended; he laid there silent and still. The umpire was right behind him and slowly knelt down next to the still body. He reached up to Flash's gloved hand and turned it over.

"OUT!" he cried as he found the ball in the middle of the glove. He took the ball and headed back onto the field, leaving Flash lying on the ground.

It seemed like forever, as the crowd stood there staring at Flash, until he began to move and moan. He rolled over and sat up. He spit and out came a wad of blood and two teeth.

"What happen?" he asked.

"You caught the ball, boy. Good job!" Mad Dog

said. "Are you ready to play?"

"You bet," he said as he started to get up. His head was spinning wildly, and he fell down immediately.

"You ain't playin' no more today," Mad Dog said as he headed back to the dugout, and two miners helped Flash back to the bench.

"O'Boyle! You get in right field and shift everyone over," yelled Mad Dog.

Sean sat on the bench, he and Michael staring at the ground, not wanting to get into any more trouble with Mad Dog.

"O'Boyle! Are you deaf? I said get in to right field and shift the others over."

That got Sean's attention. "Yes sir, Mad Do... Er, I mean Mr. Thomas." And he ran as fast as he could. He forgot his glove. He turned and there was Michael running toward him with his glove.

"Way to go Sean; you're in," Michael said as he threw him his glove. "Now don't screw up. I need that dollar."

Sean couldn't believe it either. Here he was in the biggest game of his life. Why did Mad Dog put him in? The only thing he may have is speed. He could run. After all, he had run from Mad Dog enough times. That was different; it was run or get a beating from Mad Dog.

Stinky McCann was up to the task. He felt real bad about what happened to Flash and struck out the next batter with three straight strikes. The crowd was now out of control. The F&W crowd was screaming for a hit, and the Mahanoy City colliery crowd was screaming for an out.

Next up was Fogarty, pitcher against pitcher. Fogarty was quite capable of hitting one out, and Stinky knew it. What could he throw him? Stay with the fastball, he thought, and let it fly.

“Strike one!”

He caught Fogarty looking and slipped one by. OK, let's do it again. This time it went high and outside.

“Ball!”

Stinky looked at Fogarty and figured he had him on a run now. The slow change up left his hand. Fogarty had judged him just right. He knew, after two screaming fastballs, Stinky would change the pace. He kept his eye on it all the way down, but he misread the speed and got behind it.

CRACK!

The ball lifted; it rose and rose. It was headed right to right field, right to Sean O'Boyle.

“There it is Sean! Get under it and don't take your eye from it,” Michael cried as he rose from the bench.

He glanced back at Mad Dog, who was now sitting with his head down, shaking right and left.

Sean had to turn and run. It was a long high ball, headed to the fence. He ran as if Mad Dog was on his tail. The ball started down, and Sean was still not under it. He put on a last burst of speed and extended his arm.

“You're OUT!” screamed the umpire. They did it; they had won. The crowd went wild.

Fogarty was mad. On his run to first, he just kept going, right for Sean. Michael left the end of the bench and took the angle to intercept Fogarty. Sean had not yet seen him since he was dancing around the outfield with the ball in the air, and the crowd chanting him on. Just as Fogarty was about to jump Sean, Michael hit him with his body across the back of the legs.

The benches emptied quickly as both teams rushed on the field to protect their teammates. The crowd joined in the melee, as was the tradition, and the brawl was on. The Celts were a proud race that never backed away from a little brawl to end a fine day, and this

truly was a fine day!

Michael worked his way to Sean, and they crawled out from under the brawl to safety. They sat on the bank, the ball still in Sean's glove, watching the crowd wear itself out. Soon they would tire, and all would leave as friends.

"This was a wonderful day, Sean."

"Yes, truly wonderful."

They each collected their dollar from Mad Dog and headed back to town.

"Well, Michael, what'll ya' do with all that money?" Sean asked. "You made me crazy over how you kept talkin' about it."

"Last year, during the strike, my dad sold his pocket watch to that Coalie Captain Linden for \$5.00. It was special. It belonged to my mom's dad back in Ireland. I have been saving since then to get it back. Captain Linden said he knew my dad and my mom, before she died, and would sell it back to me for the \$5.00. I'm going to meet him back in town."

"You mean we ain't going to buy any candy from the pluck-me store?"

"You can if you want. Hey, there's the Captain now."

"Well, Michael Casserly. You're lookin' a bit worn today, lad."

"That I am sir. I have the money right here for ya' sir."

"And here is your dad's pocket watch. I had it cleaned and oiled for you, too. Be sure to say hello to your dad for me." Captain Linden stepped onto the train and headed back to Philadelphia.

Michael and Sean split right before the house, and Michael ran the rest of the way home. He opened the door.

"Dad!" he yelled.

"Well lad. Where did you get to after the game? I

looked all over for you. It was really a fine day.”

“I had to get somethin’ for you. Here.” Michael handed the pocket watch to his dad.

Pat looked down at the watch, and a tear left his right eye. He wiped it quickly.

“Where did you get this son?”

“I have been saving since last year to get it back for you. I bought it back from Captain Linden.”

“Thank you, Michael. It’s like getting a small part of your mother back. Surely, it really is a fine day!”



Breaker Boys after work.

Mike and Sean's Day Off

The weather was starting to turn cool. The sun went down earlier each evening in the Mahanoy Valley. September was warmer than normal, but now October was speeding into winter. Most of the leaves were changed and beginning to fall. The air had that wonderful smell of fall, a coolness and freshness that the nose could not forget. The breakers were working at full capacity, so the coal could be stock piled for the upcoming winter. The Philadelphia and Reading Railroad was now running two trains a day from the Mahanoy City Colliery.

Michael Casserly and Sean O'Boyle were breaker boys in the Mahanoy City Colliery. They worked for the breaker boss, Mad Dog Thomas, brother of Bully Bill Thomas, the meanest Modoc the valley had ever seen.

This was a Reading mine, owned by the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company. Its chairman, Franklin Gowen, bought the mine back in 1874 and had turned it into the largest producer in the entire Mahanoy Valley. He made it that way through his ruthless personality. He was a man who always got what he wanted, one way or another. He used his Coal and Iron Police, Coalies as they were known, as a private army to further the goals of the P&R. His current goal was to own all the mines in the valley. He would do anything to get them.

Mr. Gowen almost had Michael's brother hanged back in 1877 with twenty other men known as Molly Maguires. He used the Coalies and another private force, the Pinkerton Detective Agency, to pretend they were a part of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Once they became trusted members, they started trouble and made up lies so they could make the union look

bad. Michael's brother, Bernie, was accused of killing his own mother. It wasn't until one of the rival Modocs told the truth that Bernie was set free.

The Irish and Welsh in the anthracite mines could be best of friends or furious enemies. The Modocs were a group of Welshmen, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians were a group of Irishmen, both tried to look after their countrymen in this new land. They had their own idea of justice, one that, at times, was in conflict with the rule of law.

The whole colliery had been pushing at 120%. The extra work was causing everyone to be angry with each other. Fights were happening over simple things. Today brought them a badly needed break. Just after lunch, the main drive shaft broke on the lift engine that hauled the coal cars to the tippie. The breaker was down. It would be morning until it was working again, that is, if everything went well. The entire crew was sent home. It was a well needed break.

"Sean, Sean, I'll meet you in an hour, at the secret place," Michael yelled to Sean as they left the breaker.

"Casserly, hold it right there," Mad Dog said as he grabbed Michael by the collar. "You two wouldn't be plannin' any mischief now, would you?"

"No sir. We have a spot in the hills where we go on our free time. We go there to stay out of trouble, sir."

"I'll be watchin' you Casserly. Sooner or later, I'll catch you and O'Boyle, and the two of you will be outta' here. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir!" Michael yelled at the top of his lungs.

Focht and Whittaker Mine

"I told you for the last time. My mine is not for sale. Tell Frank Gowen he can go to blazes. Now leave my house, before I get angry." Joshua Focht said to

the agent of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company.

“We’ll have your mine, Joshua Focht. We’ll have it one way or another,” replied the agent.

“You can’t scare me with your threats. Now get out!”

Joshua Focht was normally a kind man, who would not usually let his anger show. He had grown tired of Frank Gowen’s offers for his half of the Focht and Whittaker Colliery. Gowen had bullied others out of their mines in his quest for a coal kingdom, but he would not bully Joshua Focht.

Gowen had threatened to cut off shipping to any mine owner who resisted his offers to buy them out. Coal was no good unless you could get it to market. But, Focht and Whittaker had held out long enough. Rail competition had arrived from the northeast when the Lehigh Railroad ran its tracks to town. He could ship all his coal on the Lehigh Railroad. Gowen, of course, wanted to shut him down now, more than ever.

“Millie, I’m goin’ over to see Whittaker. I need to tell him what’s happened,” Joshua said to his wife. “Al has been very ill and has left this whole thing in my hands.”

“Be careful Joshua. I don’t trust that Gowen. He is a vengeful person, who might try anything,” Millie said with fear in her heart.

“I’ll be home later tonight.”

Focht went to the barn and saddled his horse. He took down his 1873 Winchester Saddle Ring, 45-caliber rifle and made sure the magazine was loaded. All was well, and he put the rifle in its case attached to the saddle. He mounted up and set off to Whittaker’s.

It was just after one o’clock when Focht tied his horse to the rail outside of Al Whittaker’s house. He approached the door and was ready to knock when the door opened and Whittaker’s wife, Emily, stood to

greet him.

“Good day, Joshua. I’m afraid Al is not doing well today. He has had another setback.”

“I won’t stay long, but I must have a word with him,” replied Joshua.

“Hey, Focht, what are you doing here?” questioned Al’s son David. “I suppose you still are holding out on Mr. Gowen’s offer, aren’t you? I’m tired of you takin’ advantage of my father’s illness just to feed your ego. Why don’t you just sell to him and be done with it?”

“David, someday you will understand that real men have to make real hard decisions. We can’t be bullied. Your father knows that, and is in total agreement with the way I’m handling things,” Joshua tried to reason with the boy, but at 18 years old, he thought he knew everything.

“Just the same, my father’s dying and my mother can’t handle running the business with you. I will do all I can to get my father to change his mind and sell his half of the mine to Gowen.”

“Boy, you don’t know what you’re saying. It’s your father’s responsibility to take care of you and your mother. Leave him alone and let things to him.”

“I hope you fall off that horse. The only thing that will help my father now is if you were dead.” David ran out of the house and headed to the barn.

“He didn’t mean that, Joshua. He’s just a boy and doesn’t know any better,” Emily said.

“I know, Emily. I hope he grows up soon and sees Gowen for what he is.”

Joshua’s visit with Al Whittaker went well. He filled him in and received Al’s full support. Al and Joshua had been more than business partners; they were true friends. Joshua gave his greetings, mounted his horse, and headed home. He decided to take a different route over the mountain. He wanted to be cautious and not too predictable. No telling what Gowen

and his cutthroats might try.

Michael and Sean had made it to their secret spot in the mountains around Mahanoy City. It was an outcropping of rocks that formed a hollowed out area against the side of the mountain. It was big enough for about four boys to sit in and not be seen by passersby on the trail below.

“Lucky break today, huh Mikey?” Sean loved to tease Michael and was always calling him something new, sometimes Mike or Mikey and sometimes Mick or Mickey. Once in a while he would get it right and call him Michael by mistake.

“It sure was. I hope they can’t get that engine running for two more days,” Michael said happily.

BANG!

“What was that?” Michael said.

BANG!

“I heard it again; but now it seems like it came from over there.” Michael said while he pointed north, up the trail.

“I don’t know, but there were definitely two shots,” said Sean. “Let’s go see. I think they came from down the trail.” Sean pointed south and headed down the rocks with Michael on his tail.

Just as they were about to come over a rise Sean stopped suddenly and pulled Michael to the ground. On their stomachs, they peered over the top of the rise. There they saw a man on the ground with another man on horseback looking down at him. The man on horseback rode over to an old, boarded up mine shaft and dropped something in.

“What was that?” Sean said to Michael. “I think he dropped something down that old mine shaft.”

“Well, whatever it was it’s gone now,” Michael said as they watched the man ride away.

“Let’s go look,” Sean said as he got to his feet.

“No, I’m scared,” said Michael. Sean had already

started to run toward the downed man. Michael ran after him.

“Oh my, it’s old Mr. Focht. I think he’s dead.” Sean was the first one there and a very observant lad.

“Quick, let’s go for help. He might still be alive,” cried Michael.

Michael and Sean ran back to town as fast as they could. They went directly to Sheriff Wright’s office.

“Sheriff, sheriff, old Mr. Focht’s been shot. He needs help,” Michael said.

Sheriff Wright grabbed his hat and ran to the street. His buggy was hooked up and ready as he had just come back to the jail.

“Get in the back, boys. Take me to him,” Wright said to the boys as he grabbed his buggy whip and cracked it above the horse’s head.

Sean was talking so fast the sheriff could hardly follow what he was saying. Michael was only slightly calmer. Soon they came upon Joshua Focht, lying in the dirt. He was still breathing. The sheriff picked him up and put him in the back of the buggy. They headed right for Dr. Phaon Hermony’s office.

The boys helped Sheriff Wright get Focht into Doc Harmony’s. The doctor quickly shooed the boys from the room. They sat outside in parlor waiting for news. They didn’t wait long.

The sheriff came back into the parlor and told the boys that things didn’t look good. “I need to get a few men together; we need to find out who did this,” the sheriff said to the boys. “What else did you boys see?”

Michael was about to speak and tell the sheriff about the man on horseback, but Sean grabbed his arm and said, “Nothin’ sheriff, we didn’t see nothin’.”

“OK boys, you did a good job comin’ to get me. Let’s hope old Mr. Focht lives to tell us what happened. You boys get goin’ home. You had enough excitement for one day.”

Michael and Sean ran off down the street. They wanted to tell everyone what had happened. Then Michael stopped, "Why did you stop me from tellin' the sheriff about the guy on the horse?"

"You are slow," said Sean. "What if the sheriff doesn't catch the guy? Or, what if he finds out we saw him? He'd kill us just as fast."

"You're right," said Michael. "We can't tell anyone what happened. I'm too young to get killed."

"Just stick with me Michael. I'll take good care of you."

The Arrest

Later that day, Michael was at home with his dad, Pat, and his two sisters, Kate and Elizabeth. They were soon ready to eat, but Bernie wasn't home yet. He had gone hunting. He left just after the breaker shut down. He should be home soon. There was a knock at the door.

"Mr. Casserly?" the man at the door said. "You'd better come down to the jail. Your son, Bernie, was just arrested for killing Joshua Focht."

"There must be a mistake. Bernie wouldn't do that. He's too kind. Besides, why would he want to?"

"You better go down and ask the sheriff," said the man.

"Girls, you go ahead and eat. I will be back, with Bernie, soon. This all must be a terrible mistake. Michael, you be good and listen to Elizabeth." Pat grabbed a jacket and slammed the door as he went.

Michael did not intend to sit there while his brother was under arrest for something he did not do. He would have to help, even if it meant he might be killed, too. He grabbed his jacket and ran for the door. Elizabeth cried out for him to stop, but Michael did not listen and sped out the door. He ran straight for

sheriff's office. There was an old nail keg below the back window of the office, and Michael used it to get up close to the back window. He could now hear what happened.

"I got him coming back into town and asked him if I could see his rifle," the sheriff was explaining to Pat as they stood facing each other, only the sheriff's desk between them.

Bernie carried an 1860 Henry, a lever action, 45 caliber, repeating rifle. It was a Civil War leftover Pat had acquired many years earlier. It was a good hunting gun.

"I smelled his gun. It had been fired. I checked the magazine, and there were eleven cartridges still in the gun. The boy told me he had fired at a turkey and missed. That must be the bullet that struck Mr. Focht. The magazine holds twelve rounds, and he only had eleven when I checked it."

Pat couldn't believe what he was hearing. "That would be an accident then; an act of God. You have nothing that says he tried to kill the man."

"That's up to the District Attorney. I just hold the people who we suspect. He will decide whom to prosecute. I've already sent for him. With a record like your boy has, I don't suppose it will take a lot of convincing. Once a Molly, always a Molly; he'll hang for sure this time."

Pat, angered by the sheriff's attitude, strode out of the room. He needed to think. He needed some advice. He decided he would take a walk to think things through.

Michael, propped at the window, heard it all. He knew that Bernie didn't do it. He heard the two shots. They came from different directions. The man that shot Focht was on horseback. Bernie had no horse.

Then it came to him. What did that man drop down that shaft? It was a rifle. He knew it now. It all

became clear. He needed to get that rifle to prove that two shots were fired on that mountain and not just one. He took off to get a rope and a lamp. He needed to get into that mine and find that gun.

The Old Mine Shaft

The sun was just ready to disappear over the top of the mountain when Michael got to the old mine. It wouldn't be long now. He would have the gun, and he could go to the sheriff and tell the story. He would leave Sean out of it. There was no sense getting the both of them killed.

Michael pried off a few boards to make a hole he could get through. He tied the rope off, threw it in and headed down the slope. The mine went in at almost a 60 degree angle. It was steep, but not steep enough that he couldn't go down using the rope to help him. He went very slowly, searching with his lamp as he went. There was no tellin' how far that gun went. The one thing for sure was that it had to stop somewhere. Michael did not know how far he would have to go until he reached the caved-in point that had closed the slope.

He went further and further, and still had not seen the rifle. He was at the end of the rope. It seemed that the slope eased up some so he decided to keep going, without the rope. It was much harder now. He held the lamp in one hand and crawled down backwards, searching as he went.

And then... a quick slid. His foot slipped, and he was now stuck. A rock that moved with him pinned his foot. He struggled but could not get it free. He tried to move the rock, but it was too big. What would he do now?

Patrick returned to the house after his walk.

"Where's Bernie? Where's Michael?" Elizabeth cried out.

"I couldn't get the sheriff to release Bernie. We have to wait for the District Attorney to arrive. What do you mean where's Michael? I left him with you."

"He ran off after you when you left. When he didn't come back right away, I thought you kept him with you."

"I never saw Michael. What could he be up to now? I'm going to O'Boyle's. Sean must be at the bottom of this one." Pat turned and headed to Sean O'Boyle's.

Sean lived close by. Pat walked onto the porch and knocked on the door.

"Good evening Patrick," Mr. O'Boyle said as he opened the door. "What is it I can be doin' for you this evening?"

"Michael's missing. Is Sean here?" replied Pat.

"Yes, he's here. I'll get him. Come in and sit."

Mr. O'Boyle went for Sean. Patrick had a seat at the table. They returned quickly.

"Sean, do you know where Michael might be?" asked Pat.

"No, sir, I don't. I haven't seen him since we found old Mr. Focht, shot."

"What do you mean, you found Mr. Focht shot?"

Sean proceeded to tell Pat how he and Michael got the sheriff and took Mr. Focht to Dr. Hermony's. He carefully left out the part about seeing the man on horseback.

"The sheriff didn't mention that today. You know he arrested Bernie for shooting Focht."

"That's not true!" exclaimed Sean. "It was the man on the horse."

"Hold on, hold on. What man on a horse?" said Pat.

"I didn't say anything before 'cause I didn't want

to get shot, too. Michael and I saw a man on a horse over old Mr. Focht. He dropped something down the old abandoned mine shaft and then took off. Michael and I saw the whole thing.”

“You don’t suppose Michael is at the old mine shaft do you? Could the man have dropped a rifle down the shaft?” said Pat.

“That’s it, that’s what it was. I can see it now!” Sean replied excitedly.

“Let’s go. Michael’s trying to get the rifle,” Pat said. “Sean, you run down to the sheriff’s office and tell him the story. Your dad and I will head to the old mine shaft. Hurry!”

Sean grabbed his jacket and headed one way while his dad and Pat headed to the mine.

“Look at that, O’Boyle. A rope going down the slope,” Pat said as bent down and yelled down the slope. “Michael! Michael!” He put his ear down the hole.

“Dad! Is that you, dad?”

“I’m going in.” Pat said and then yelled back. “I’m coming Michael; I’ll be right there.”

Pat headed down the slope using the rope and holding his lamp. He went further and further until he reached the end of the rope. Then he crawled backwards, as did Michael.

“Dad, be careful right there. The rock fall was there, and I didn’t see it until it was too late.”

Pat was finally there, and he moved the rock from Michael’s foot. “How’s your foot, lad? Can you walk?”

“Yea, I’m fine. I can make it,” said Michael. Then, with the aid of the second lamp that Pat had brought, he saw it. “Dad, there it is, right behind you. The rifle that that man dropped down here. Grab it.”

Pat reached down and grabbed the gun. They both started back up the slope. It was much easier when they finally reached the rope to help them. When

they got to the top, the sheriff was there with Sean, and he brought Bernie, too. Pat handed the gun to the sheriff.

“Sean has told you the story and here’s the gun to prove it,” Pat said as he handed the gun to the sheriff.

“Let me see it,” he said as he examined the gun. First, he smelled it; it had been fired recently. Then he checked the magazine, only nine rounds left. It was an 1873 Winchester Saddle ring, 45 caliber. It held only ten rounds. One had been fired. “What’s this? There’s something on the side. It’s the initials ‘DW’.”

“David Whitaker!” shouted Sean. “That’s who we saw on the horse. I’m sure of it!”

“Well Casserly, it appears as though I have a new suspect to see. I’ll let you go in your dad’s custody. I want to see you all in my office at 9:00 A.M. tomorrow morning. I need to go see old Mr. Whittaker and find out what happened.”

The sheriff got back into his buggy and headed towards the Whittaker mansion. The Casserly’s and the O’Boyle’s headed back down the mountain, happy with the outcome.

“Michael, why didn’t you tell me all this when you got home?” Patrick asked as they walked along.

“Sean and I were scared we would get shot if that killer knew we saw him,” responded Michael.

“You need to have some faith in people and a little trust in those who love you. I thought you knew that.”

“Yes, pop, I know now for sure.”

“Hey, kid, thanks for savin’ me from that mess,” Bernie said as he grabbed Michael around the head. “I thought I was headed for the rope again. Two times is enough for me. I thought I had it for sure this time.”

They all laughed and headed home. They had to be at the sheriff’s office in the morning.

Confrontation

The sheriff drove up to Whittaker's house and knocked on the door. It was David who answered.

"Sheriff Wright, what are you doing here?" David said uneasily.

"Evening David, I wonder if you and I could take a look at your saddle out in the barn. Let's go."

"Of course we can. What seems to be the problem?"

"Maybe no problem, lad. We'll know in a minute."

They got to the barn, and the sheriff pulled the gun from its saddle holster and examined it. Looks like an 1873 Winchester Saddle Ring. The sheriff smelled the gun and checked the magazine. The magazine was full; the gun had not been fired recently. Then he said, "Why look here. Engraved on the side of this it says 'JF.' That's Joshua Focht now isn't it?"

David got a little restless and agitated. He said, "There is nothing on the side of that gun."

"Oh, but it looks just like this one, except this one says 'DW'," the sheriff said as he pulled David's gun from behind his back.

David turned to run but found the door blocked by his father.

"What's going on here, sheriff?" said old Mr. Whittaker.

The sheriff proceeded with the whole story. Mr. Whittaker told him what had happened earlier, about not selling the mine to Gowen and how upset that made David.

David, filled in all the details in front of his dad and the sheriff.

"You're under arrest David. You're coming with me," the sheriff lead David to the buggy and sped back to town.

The Next Day

Morning came quickly. Pat, Bernie, Michael and Sean O'Boyle approached the sheriff's office, not knowing what to expect.

"Good morning, Sheriff Wright," Pat said as they entered the office.

"Sit down, I have something to say," replied the sheriff.

They all sat and waited for him to start. They were a little nervous; they hadn't heard about anything since they left the sheriff the night before.

The sheriff began, "I went to see David Whittaker last night. I told him the Winchester in his saddle holster had the initials 'JF' on it, even though it didn't. David came unglued and confessed everything in front of his father. He wanted to kill Focht because he did not want to sell the mine to Frank Gowen. His father backed Focht's decision. Al Whittaker has been ill and may not live long. David thought that killing Focht would get his dad to sell the mine to Gowen, and they would have money for his mother and himself to live on after his father past. David wanted to make it a sure thing and not just a gamble. He was afraid Gowen would burn them out or blow up the mine. Then the mine would be worthless, and they would be left with nothing.

"At least David will not have to face murder charges. Joshua Focht is not going to die. Dr. Hermony has gotten the bullet out, and he is going to live. He's a tough old dog.

"I want to thank you boys for coming forward, although you were a little late. Tellin' your story led to the real shooter, and justice was served."

They all got up and started out. Patrick extended his hand to the sheriff, "Thank you, too, sheriff. I

know you were only trying to do your job. I'm glad it all turned out OK."

WOOOOOOOOOUP! WOOOOOOOOOUP!

It was the breaker whistle calling everyone back to work.

"OK, boys. The fun's over, and it's time to work again. Let's go."





Miners playing quoits.



Irish stepping in 1878.