

"SUNSHINE"

Miners attached small oil lamps, like the one above, to their hats. These lamps provided light in dark underground tunnels. Miners called this light their "sunshine."

The lamps were dangerous: Their open flames could trigger explosions.

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THE-SCENES
VIDEO!

OUT OF THE BURNING DARKNESS

A 14-year-old boy. A dangerous coal mine.
And a horrific accident that would change America forever.

By Kristin Lewis

UP
CLOSE

Main Idea As you read, think about what life was like for children who worked in coal mines many years ago.

**LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S
10 TERMS IN BOLD**



Fourteen-year-old Albert Buckle was staring at death itself. Thick smoke billowed toward him. Flames licked at the ceiling. With each passing second, the heat grew more unbearable.

But Albert couldn't run away. He was trapped deep underground in the coal mine where he worked.

As the **inferno** blazed hotter, people were starting to panic.

"Everyone is going to die!" someone shouted.

It was November 13, 1909, at the Cherry Mine. The coal mine was about 100 miles southwest of Chicago, Illinois. The Cherry

Mine is where Albert—and nearly 500 other miners—spent their days, hundreds of feet underground. They worked digging out coal from deep inside the earth.

But today, disaster had struck. Albert and the other miners were trapped. They were caught in one of the worst coal mine fires in American history.

Bright and Brisk

Just a few hours earlier, the day had dawned bright and brisk in the small town of Cherry. Albert, his 16-year-old brother, Richard, and 478 other coal miners got ready for work. They pulled on their overalls, grabbed their lunch pails, and said goodbye to their families. Then they headed off for what they thought would be an ordinary day.

Around 6:30 a.m., a whistle blew. It was time to start work. To enter the mine, Albert crowded into a small metal cage with a group

of other miners. The cage was then lowered down a shaft—kind of like an elevator. There were two air shafts at the Cherry Mine. They were the only ways to get in and out.

After a 30-second drop, the cage stopped 317 feet below the surface. The miners stepped out into the damp, cold air. They had arrived in the Cherry Mine. The mine was like a vast underground city with three main levels. A maze of tunnels and passageways stretched for miles.

Dangers at the Cherry Mine—as in any coal mine at the time—were everywhere. Cave-ins were constant threats. So were underground gases. They could kill a person in minutes. Perhaps most terrifying of all was the risk of explosions and fires.

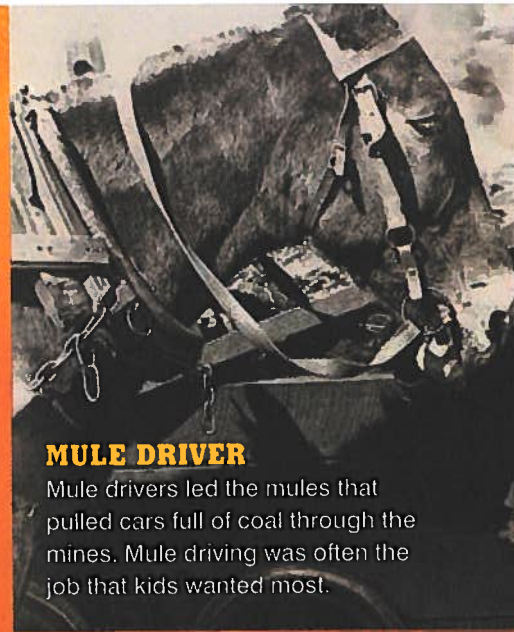
But Albert probably didn't spend much time thinking about the many dangers. Instead, he probably focused on the pay. The money was more than what he would have earned working on a farm or in a factory.

Besides, the Cherry Mine was new. Many called it the safest mine in America. They said it was basically fireproof.

As Albert would soon find out, they were very, very wrong.

Children of the Coal Mines

These are some of the jobs that kids had.



MULE DRIVER

Mule drivers led the mules that pulled cars full of coal through the mines. Mule driving was often the job that kids wanted most.

Transforming America

Coal is a rock-like substance from the ground. It is a **fossil fuel**, like oil and gas.

When you burn coal, heat and energy are released.

By the time Albert was born, coal was changing the lives of millions of Americans. Albert was growing up during a time of great technological change called the **Industrial Revolution**. And coal was the power behind it.

Coal was fueling the trains speeding across America. Now it was possible to travel faster than ever before. Coal was powering the giant new ships sailing across the ocean. And coal

was being used in factories to make iron and steel. The new materials were used to build America's bridges and skyscrapers.

During this time, thousands of coal mines were blasted into the ground. Many were in Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. In

What Is Coal?

The story of coal begins long before Albert was born. It begins before Illinois was a state. It begins before human beings even existed.

Hundreds of millions of years ago, parts of Earth were covered with hot, swampy forests. The plants in these forests soaked up energy from the sun. After they died, the plants were slowly crushed over millions and millions of years, eventually becoming coal. When you burn coal, all the energy those ancient plants took in from the sun is released.



TRAPPER

A trapper opened and shut doors to let mules and coal cars through. These doors were part of a mine's ventilation system. The doors kept fresh air in and bad air out.

these states, large deposits of coal had been discovered. Some of these mines were 1,200 feet underground. That's as deep as the Empire State Building is tall.

People came from all over the United States to work in these mines. They also came from European countries across the Atlantic Ocean. Down in the Cherry Mine, Albert would have heard at least 10 languages spoken.

But America's love of coal had a dark side. Using coal creates pollution. It poisons rivers and fills the air with toxins.

By the end of the 1800s, a mix of soot and grime hung over many American cities. Today we know that burning coal also adds to climate change.

Difficult and Dangerous

Mining coal was a tough and dirty job. Day after day, miners blasted through rock with dynamite. They cut out the coal with heavy tools, their backs aching. They shoveled the coal into cars that looked like giant metal buckets. Then mules pulled the coal cars along metal tracks—like the tracks on a roller coaster. The tracks ended at an air shaft. From there, the coal was carried up the shaft to the surface.

And it wasn't just grown men who toiled

in the mines. In the early 1900s, thousands of children like Albert did too. Some were as young as 8 years old.

Since 1885, the U.S. government had laws about who could work in the mines. Children had to be at least 12. But these laws were often ignored.

It's hard to understand why parents would let their kids work in dangerous mines. But many families were very poor. They faced a terrible choice. They could send their children to work or watch them go hungry.

In fact, Albert and Richard likely felt proud to work at the mine. Their father had died a few years earlier. It was up to them to support their mother and little sister.

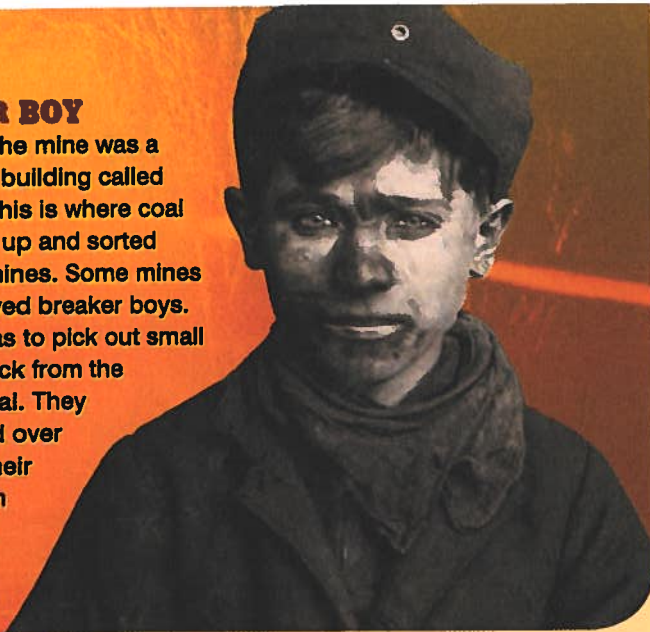
Lonely and Boring

Around 11:30 a.m., Albert finished eating lunch with his brother and headed back to work. Albert was a trapper. He sat by the door and only opened it to let miners and mules pass. The door was part of the mine's ventilation system. This kept fresh air flowing where people were working. It also helped stop the buildup of dangerous gases.

A trapper's job was important but boring. Imagine sitting alone in the dark all day, just

BREAKER BOY

Outside the mine was a large, noisy building called a breaker. This is where coal was broken up and sorted by big machines. Some mines also employed breaker boys. Their job was to pick out small pieces of rock from the precious coal. They sat hunched over for hours, their fingers often frozen and bloody.



shaft. The fresh air was fanning the flames. Albert needed to get out! He and a few others rushed for the shaft to take a cage to the surface. But the cage operator stopped them. He said the fire would soon be out. They should get back to work.

But as the minutes passed, the fire got bigger and hotter. Soon the mine itself was on fire. Only then did the call go out to get people out of the mine.

As Albert finally climbed into the cage, he called to a friend to warn others—including his brother,

Richard. Hundreds of men were spread throughout the tunnels.

opening and closing a door. Sometimes you might not see another person for hours. But you couldn't fall asleep. Say a mule team came speeding along. If you didn't open the door, it could crash. The mules, the driver, and maybe even you would be crushed.

What was Albert thinking about as he guarded the door? Was he looking forward to the next day? It would be Sunday, his only day off.

Whatever his thoughts were, they would soon disappear. Disaster was coming.

Scorching Heat

Not long after lunch, Albert opened the door for a car filled with hay—food for the mules. A few moments later, another miner came running up to Albert.

"Fire!" he shouted.

Somehow, oil from a lamp had dripped onto the hay car, setting the hay on fire.

Albert rushed to get a pail of water. Still, he probably didn't fear for his safety. Small fires could usually be put out easily.

But by the time Albert returned, it was clear that this fire was different. The smoke was already thick. He tossed his pail of water onto the flames. It did nothing.

Worse, the hay car was stuck under the air

Brutal Decision

When Albert finally made it up to the surface, he found panic. Smoke was gushing up out of the mine. Women and children were rushing to the scene. They were desperate to find their husbands and sons and brothers.

Meanwhile, down below, miners were rushing to get out. But the tunnels were blocked by flames, mules, and coal cars.

Over the next few hours, more than 200 men and boys would escape. One brave group began taking the cage up and down, plucking their fellow miners from the flames. They made six trips and saved dozens of men before they died, heroically, in the fire.

CANARY IN THE COAL MINE

Miners often brought canaries into coal mines. If lethal gases were present, the gases would kill the canary before the miners, giving them enough time to get out. Today, "canary in the coal mine" means a warning of danger.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (BREAKER BOY), XPDEL/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (CANARY)

Around 4:00 p.m., mine company leaders made a hard decision: to close off the air shaft. This would choke the fire out, they hoped. Fires need oxygen to keep burning.

To many, this decision was cruel. Without fresh air flowing, anyone still alive wouldn't last long. Many said the mine company cared more about its coal than the human beings.

When the sun set that day, the fire showed little sign of slowing down. More than 200 miners were still trapped.

In the coming days, the fire would continue to burn. More than 1,000 people arrived in Cherry to help. Donations poured in. The disaster was front-page news across the country.

On November 20—a week after the fire started—rescue crews finally entered the mine. The only survivors were a group of 20 men. They had found a spot with breathable air away from the fire.

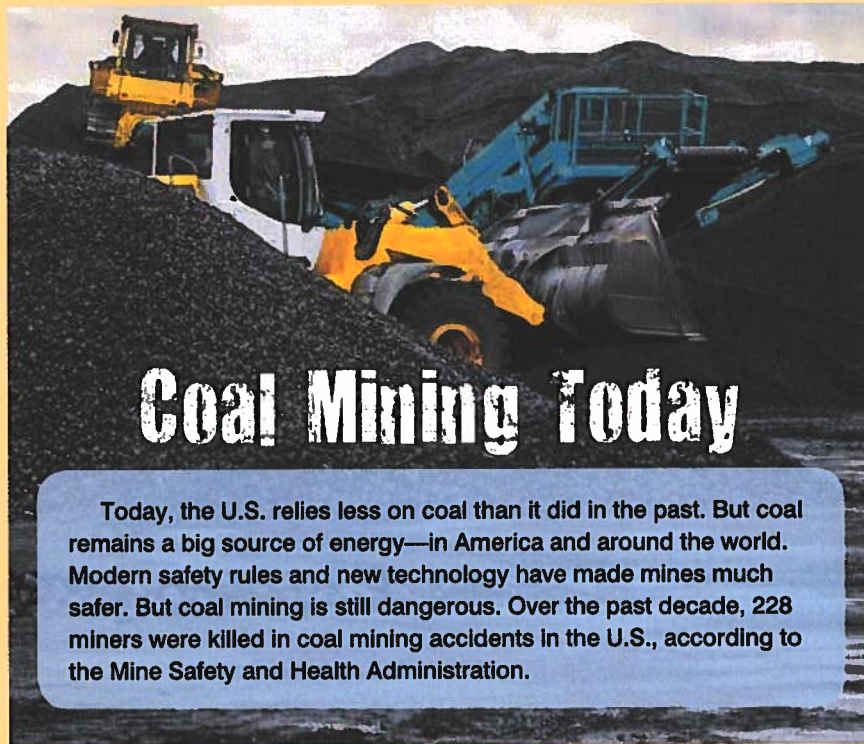
Tragically, 259 miners died in the disaster. Albert's brother, Richard, was one of them.

New Laws

Today, this disaster has been largely forgotten. Yet it helped bring important change.

After the fire, the public was angry. People rallied to help survivors and the families of the victims.

A huge investigation was also started, and Albert himself testified. The mine company was



Coal Mining Today

Today, the U.S. relies less on coal than it did in the past. But coal remains a big source of energy—in America and around the world. Modern safety rules and new technology have made mines much safer. But coal mining is still dangerous. Over the past decade, 228 miners were killed in coal mining accidents in the U.S., according to the Mine Safety and Health Administration.

financed for illegally employing underage kids.

Over the next few years, new safety rules were created. The changes helped lead to laws that protect workers.

The Cherry Mine disaster also showed the sad situation of child workers. It helped start a movement that, in 1938, made child labor against the law in the U.S. at last.

As for Albert, his days working in the coal mine were over. He moved to a nearby town and became a tree trimmer.

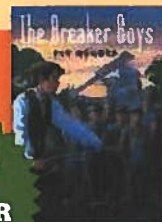
Albert would live his life not in the darkness of the earth but in the light of the sky. ■

Special thanks to the Princeton Public Library, the Bureau County Historical Society Museum and Library, the Cherry Library and Museum, and the Bureau County Genealogical Society for their research assistance.

WRITE TO WIN

Compose a well-written journal entry from Albert's point of view, telling what happened on the day of the disaster. Use text evidence from the article. Send it to "Coal Contest" by May 1, 2020. Ten winners will each receive *The Breaker Boys* by Pat Hughes. See page 2 for details.

FIND A
SKILL
BUILDER
ONLINE!





Name: _____ Date: _____

Word Preview

Directions: Read the sentences below from "Out of the Burning Darkness," then write what you think the term in bold means, based on context. We've provided a few hints. Watch the Vocabulary Slideshow at storyworks.scholastic.com to help you!

1. **inferno:** "As the **inferno** blazed hotter, people were starting to panic."

I think this word means _____

2. **fossil fuel:** "Coal is a rock-like substance from the ground. It is a **fossil fuel**, like oil and gas. When you burn coal, heat and energy are released." (*Hint: Think about what a fossil is. That's where this fuel comes from!*)

I think this term means _____

3. **Industrial Revolution:** "Indeed, Albert was growing up in a period of great technological change known as the **Industrial Revolution**. And coal was the power behind it. Coal was fueling the trains speeding across America, making it possible to travel faster than ever before. Coal was powering the giant new ships churning across the ocean. And coal was being used in factories to make the iron and steel needed to build America's bridges and skyscrapers." (*Hint: What do these lines tell you about the kind of change that was happening in America?*)

I think this term means _____

4. **deposits:** "During this time, thousands of coal mines were blasted into the ground, especially in Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. This is where vast **deposits** of coal had been discovered."

I think this word means _____

5. **toxins:** "Using coal creates pollution, poisoning rivers and filling the air with **toxins**."

I think this word means _____

Continued on next page >



Name: _____ Date: _____

Word Preview, p. 2

6. **soot:** "By the end of the 19th century, a stomach-churning brew of soot and grime hung over many American cities." (*Hint: What disgusting thing might hang over a city as a result of burning coal?*)

I think this word means _____

7. **toiled:** "And it wasn't just grown men who toiled in the mines. In the early 1900s, thousands of children like Albert did too—some as young as 8 years old." (*Hint: What did men and children do in the mines?*)

I think this word means _____

8. **ventilation:** "The door was part of the mine's ventilation system—which kept fresh air in the places where people were working. This also prevented the buildup of dangerous gases."

I think this word means _____

9. **oxygen:** "Around 4:00 p.m., mine company leaders made a brutal decision: to seal off the air shaft. This would choke the fire out, they hoped; fires need oxygen to keep burning."

I think this word means _____

10. **testified:** "A massive investigation was also launched, and Albert himself testified. The mine company was fined for illegally employing underage kids." (*Hint: Think about what Albert might have done to share the truth about the Cherry Mine.*)

I think this word means _____

“Out of the Burning Darkness” Quiz

Directions: Read the feature “Out of the Burning Darkness” in the March/April 2020 issue of *Storyworks*. Then fill in the bubble next to the best answer for each question below.

1. Which best describes coal in America in the early 1900s?

- (A) rare (C) important
 (B) unpopular (D) clean

2. Which of the following quotes supports the answer to question 2?

- (A) “. . . Albert was growing up in a period of great technological change known as the Industrial Revolution. And coal was the power behind it.”
 (B) “But America’s love of coal had a dark side. Using coal creates pollution, poisoning rivers and filling the air with toxins.”
 (C) “Day after day, miners blasted through rock with dynamite. They cut out the coal with heavy tools, their backs aching.”
 (D) “By the end of the 19th century, a stomach-churning brew of soot and grime hung over many American cities.”

3. According to the article, what are two dangers of working in a coal mine?

- (A) mules; darkness (C) crowds; cave-ins
 (B) explosions; fires (D) gases; boredom

4. Children like Albert worked in the mines so they could . . .

- (A) lead mules that pulled cars.
 (B) have an exciting job.
 (C) learn important skills.
 (D) help support their families.

5. The author writes, “As the inferno blazed hotter, people were starting to panic.” What does the word *inferno* mean?

- (A) a deadly gas
 (B) a very large and dangerous fire
 (C) a long and dark tunnel
 (D) a cart full of hay

6. What is “Out of the Burning Darkness” mainly about?

- (A) a coal mine fire that led to new laws to protect workers and children
 (B) why we still use coal as an energy source today
 (C) how fossil fuels formed underground
 (D) how coal mining used to be a lonely and boring job

Constructed Response

Directions: On a separate piece of paper, write your answer to each question in a well-organized response. Make sure you support your answers with information and details from the article.

7. How does the picture on pages 4-5 show you details you read about in the article?

8. What are some positive results of the Cherry Mine fire? Use details from the story to support your answer.