

Coal Towns and Gridiron: The Development of Community Consciousness and Scholastic Football in Pennsylvania's Anthracite Region

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It is the contention of this work that high school football served as the vehicle for the movement from an ethno-centric culture to a community based society in the Anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania. Scholastic football was the first phenomenon that brought the wide variety of ethnic groups, within each of the coal towns, together for a common purpose. As a result, the sport must be seen as an integral part of the region's assimilation and Americanization process.

From the 1820s to the post-World War II era, coal was the determining factor in the socio-economic structure of northeastern Pennsylvania. One's relationship to the industry was largely responsible for his/her status within the community. The employment opportunities in the mines also attracted thousands of immigrants. The time of arrival, and the skills that these new arrivals acquired in Europe would impact upon the occupational level a particular ethnic group had in the mines. As a result, class levels were also associated with ethnicity. By the early 1900s, a highly stratified ethnic socio-economic system had evolved in the Anthracite region. Old Connecticut Yankee families, along with some Pennamites and Pennsylvania-Germans controlled the coal lands; the Welsh and English served as mine superintendents and bosses; Irish worked as skilled miners and lower level bosses; and the Slavs and Italians were the unskilled laborers. This socioeconomic structure was highly divisive, especially with regard to such issues as religion, unionization and prohibition. The upshot was that people identified more with their ethnic group than with the highly stratified community in which they lived.

By the 1920s, however, a transformation was in the process. World War I, the restrictions on immigration to the United States, and a slowdown in the coal industry had dramatically lessened the number of new arrivals into the Anthracite region. Also, the children and grandchildren of the immigrants were attending the new public high schools and were often anxious to take part in community based "American" activities. Since this period coincided with the rise of spectator sports, the most visible reflection of this new community spirit became the local high school football team. Football was the rallying point for all cultural groups, and thus it became the vehicle that moved the region from a strong ethnically based identity toward a greater degree of community consciousness. In effect, the time was right for this change and football became the facilitator in the process.

While serving as a positive in helping the children of immigrants assimilate into the new culture, there were also some negative overtones to the phenomenon of high school football. The strong identification that each town had with their team often fostered a parochial attitude within the community. This situation was especially problematic, when the demise of the coal industry