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The Coal Famine of 1903 in Chicago, Illinois.

In the winter months of 1903 there was a severe coal shortage in Chicago.

Young girl collecting coal at a Salvation Army post.

It all began on May 12, 1902 when John Mitchell, who in 1898, at the age of 28, had become president of the United Mine Workers of America, pulled the miners in the anthracite fields of eastern Pennsylvania off the job. Firemen, engineers, and pump men followed on June 2, and within two weeks 147,000 workers had left the mines. Of these 30,000 abandoned the fields for good with 8,000 to 10,000 returning to Europe. [Grossman, Jonathan. United States Department of Labor. The Coal Strike of 1902 – Turning Point in U. S. Policy]

The strike finally ended on October 23, 1902 in a precedent-setting agreement, it being the first significant labor dispute in which the United States government intervened. It was such a significant event that toward the end of his career Samuel Gompers wrote, “Several times I have been asked what in my opinion was the most important single incident in the labor movement in the United States and I have invariably replied: the strike of the anthracite miners in Pennsylvania ... from then on the miners became not merely human machines to produce coal but men and citizens ...” [Grossman, Jonathan]

Men and women collecting coal at a city-sponsored distribution site.

All that is significant today, but back in late 1902 all that mattered was that no hard coal was being mined for nearly a half-year at the time when cities should have been building up stockpiles in preparation for the long winter. Conditions deteriorated quickly once cold weather set in.

In Detroit on December 31 Mrs. W. T. Richardson, a boarding house keeper, entered the office of Stanley B. Smith & Co., a coal dealer, and pointed a revolver at the clerk on duty along with $7.50 and demanded a ton of coal after her son had failed to get the order earlier in the day. According to the Chicago Tribune the clerk "gazed down the blue barrel of the weapon and promptly produced the order." [Chicago Tribune, January 1, 1903]

Children picking up spilled coal from railroad tracks during the coal famine.

In early January the combination of a shortage of coal and a local teamsters' strike forced officials at the Lincoln Park zoo to reduce heat in the animal and plant houses to save precious fuel. By January 4 less than a day's supply remained. "After that," The Tribune reported, "it is either coal or chills for the elephant, lions and other captives from the tropics." [Chicago Tribune, January 4, 1903] The next day park workers were put to

work cutting down dead trees in the park and stacking up the wood next to the zoo's power house in case it became necessary to move from coal to wood.

By January 6 the Western Steel Car and Foundry Company in Hegewisch shut down, throwing 3,700 men out of work, because there was not enough coal to keep the machinery running.

Filling sacks with scavenged coal during the coal famine of 1903.

On that same day Mrs. Margaret Perry and her three daughters died in a fire at the Hotel Somerset at Wabash and Twelfth Street. The Tribune began its coverage of the tragedy, "Had it not been for the high price and scarcity of fuel, Mrs. Margaret Perry and her three children, whose lives were sacrificed, would not have been in the hotel, as they left their home at 2535 Indiana avenue some time ago because they thought it

would be cheaper to board than to attempt to heat their own apartments during the winter."

On January 8 the Salvation Army began offering coal to the poor of the city at the rate of five cents for a 20-pound basket. The next day the situation in Toledo, Ohio had reached the point where a physician's certificate authenticating the fact that there was illness in a home and that coal was necessary to safeguard the patient was required in order to buy a ton of coal.

As the middle of January approached the head of the Dunning Institution, home of the Cook County Insane Asylum, said that he would not be able to keep the buildings warm after 2 a. m. on January 12.

Even though a coal relief fund established by Mayor Carter Harrison had reached $2,976, casualties began to mount. Mrs. Esther Everett, 65, was found frozen to death in her bed at 3232 La Salle Street. A six-month old baby died from exposure in an unheated home at 1341 Western Avenue. An unidentified man, between 65 and 70, was killed by a Lake Shore train while he was picking up coal on the tracks at Wood Street. [Chicago Tribune, January 11, 1903]

On January 10, 300 citizens of Arcola, Illinois stopped an Illinois Central train carrying 16 cars of coal to Chicago. An offer was made to buy the coal, but officials refused to sell it. At that point the mob, led by the pastor of the Presbyterian and Free Methodist churches, the presidents of both of the town's banks, and a town policeman, confiscated the cars and the coal.

By January 19 things in Chicago had reached the point where the city council appropriated $25,000 to be used to distribute coal to the needy, asking the corporation counsel to investigate the legality of establishing a municipal coal yard.

Three days later 16-year-old William Stohmeyer went to the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad's freight yard, carrying a sack to pick up coal that had fallen on the tracks. Martin J. Ward, a railway employee, fired at the boy, wounding him mortally. A crowd of 500 people soon gathered, and Ward ran to the yard office where he locked himself in the building. Police dispersed the crowd and freed Ward, who was then booked on suspicion of murder.

On February 2 the Chicago began to sell coal from city yards in half-ton lots with orders being taken at the city's pumping stations. A disgruntled coal dealer observed, "Amateurish mistakes have confused the mayor's coal committee in its administration of the municipal coal yards... Instead of using simple methods the authorities started the

most complex tactics imaginable, and now they are surprised to find themselves in a muddle." [Chicago Tribune, February 2, 1903] Less than two weeks later the city got out of the coal business. "The contractors have refused to send us any more coal to sell," a Central Park station engineer explained. [Chicago Tribune, February 14, 1903]

Finally, a combination of warmer weather, an increasing supply, and more expeditious transportation ended the "coal famine" of 1903.

It would have been interesting if cable news had been around that year with its 24-hour news cycle. MSNBC would have blared nonstop vitriol at the coal suppliers and the railroads for conspiring to curtail supply in order to jack up prices and maximize profits.

Fox would have happily jabbed away at the government for meddlesome behavior that violated the natural laws of the marketplace, making a crisis out of a situation that would have ultimately resolved itself. Probably there would have been some harsh words for the miners, too, many of them first generation Americans who labored long hours for little pay in one of the most dangerous jobs on the planet, but whose strike in 1902 caused the original shortage of coal.

Wherever the blame was placed, it did not hide the fact that real human beings suffered during that long winter of 1903.

In a February 3 editorial The Tribune observed philosophically that one day everyone would be short of coal because there would be no more left to mine. "Then nature will step in," the opinion piece observed, "Nature is always ready for contingencies, and, supplemented by man's ingenuity and skill, life probably will be as easy without coal or wood as it is with them, and certainly cleaner and healthier. 'Star eyed science' will not 'waft us home the message of despair.' It will find agencies in the sun, in the sea, and in the winds; and in the earth and in the atmosphere it will find unending supplies of that marvelous electric fluid of whose properties as a power in nature we still know but little." [Chicago Tribune, February 3, 1903]

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DEATHS CHARGED TO COAL FAMINE; Chicago Tribune, Jan. 12, 1903