

# Scranton Fights the Terror of the Hills

PERHAPS no city in America is engaged in a more interesting and at the same time more important campaign of civic warfare than the city of Scranton, Pennsylvania. The third city of the state, situated pleasantly on an undulating plateau along the Susquehanna River in the heart of the anthracite region, Scranton is proud and progressive at heart and wholly modern in appearance.

As one enters the city there is no indication of the danger which menaces the people. The downtown district is one of which cities twice the size might be proud. The business blocks are imposing and substantial. The streets are broad and well paved. There are public parks, splendid hotels, excellent street railway service and all the usual indications of a prosperous and a busy community.

But leave the heart of the city. Go out through the streets that lead to the homes, and there you will find the scars of that evil which Scranton has fought so many years—the cave-in.

There are fine looking brick business blocks whose walls are bulged and cracked, there are shops whose fronts have fallen away, leaving the counters and shelves open to the weather. Here is a building sagging like an accordion and saved from utter collapse only by some quick bracing with immense timbers. There are homes where the front yard has disappeared and other homes which have fallen backward and been half swallowed by the earth. It is by no means an unheard-of thing for half a street to disappear completely, taking pavements, car tracks, water mains and incidentally anything on foot or on wheels which happens to be passing along at the time.

Even the cemeteries are not sacred. Graves are rent, caskets ripped open and the bodies of the dead exposed.

Not long ago a gas main snapped when a street settled. The fumes were ignited by a burning jet in a small store and an explosion followed which blew the building to pieces and sent a thrill of terror to the heart of the entire city.

A small boy, playing in the back yard of his home, disappeared suddenly. The earth yawned beneath his feet and then closed over him.

A powerful truck, engaged in delivering a load of coal, sank, turned over on its side and poured the load back into the earth from which it came.

A housewife, of somewhat ample proportions, stepped out in her yard to hang up the family wash. The yard took a sudden drop of six feet, carrying housewife and washing with it. It took a wrecking crew to rescue the lady. The head of a household

arose one morning and started for the bathroom for a morning tub. He postponed his intentions because during the night the tub had dropped out into the street, along with the rest of the bathroom.

What wonder that there is terror in Scranton and that the citizens refuse to give up the fight against the coal companies whose mining operations are responsible for these conditions. What wonder that there is bitterness in the election campaigns and charges of fraud and corruption when the votes are counted. There is no armistice in this fight. It rages from the city hall to the state legislature and from the newspapers to the courts. The companies have won victory after victory. They have defeated candidates for mayor, even though it

was later revealed in court that they voted dead men and stuffed the ballot boxes with the paid votes of imported gangs. Yet Scranton refuses to surrender. Conditions were not always so bad in Scranton. Years ago the mining companies made it a rule to take out but two-thirds of the coal, leaving the remainder to support the soil above. Then coal rose in value. The companies leased or sold their old workings to independents who went through them and extracted every possible pound of coal, allowing the earth to cave in behind them as they worked in toward the shaft. Gradually the old methods of mining were

abandoned. Fewer pillars were left to support the earth. There was less shoring up of the ceiling with timber and sometimes those timbers were taken out entirely. Meanwhile conditions above ground were changing also. The land, which had once been worth less than the coal, was increasing in value as the city of Scranton grew until the surface rights were far more valuable than those underground. But the titles to most of this land included only surface rights. The

ized what is called the Surface Protective Association. This association did not deny the right of the mining companies to take out the coal but it argued that private rights stop where the demands of public safety begin.

After a long and bitter fight the mining companies offered to sell supports beneath property at a nominal figure but with no guaranty that these supports would protect the property above. They offered also to make repairs to property damaged by cave-ins where the value was less than \$5,000.

Then to this agreement they tacked a proviso that in case the public sought legislation restricting the mining companies' broad rights these promises would be canceled.

The people repudiated the agreement. A committee of 100 was named by the Board of Trade. After seven months a sub-committee reported that it had failed to obtain any other concessions.

The mining companies grew bolder. They notified the board of education that work was about to commence beneath a school building occupied by 500 children. An irate father visited the school board. He said: "The state compels me to send my child to school. You designate which school that child shall attend. You cannot stand supinely by and see my child's life endangered. Her safety rests upon you. I serve notice here that I shall hold you not only morally but personally responsible for the safety of my child, and should she come to harm I will not hesitate to act."

It was a bold thrust and the board decided it did not care to incur that father's wrath. It went to court to decide whether the mining company's

rights went to such limits that the lives of 500 school children were endangered. The courts of the great state of Pennsylvania decided that they did, and ruled that if the board wanted to protect the children it could buy the rights to the coal beneath the school property.

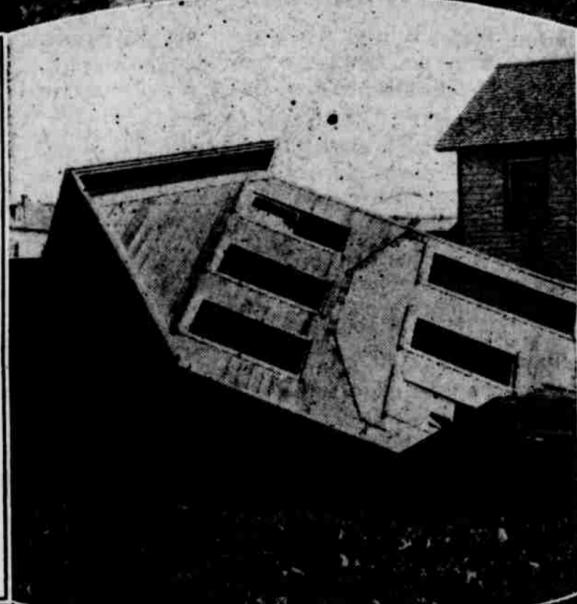
Then the city of Scranton took a bold step. It seized the coal mine and closed it up. A systematic investigation was started. It was found that the company had violated many laws. Coal had been taken from beneath state highways. Reports and maps had not been filed as the law demands. It found, in short, it is claimed, that there had been a ruthless disregard for public safety and upon the completion of the report it was declared that the mine was so unsafe that to reopen it constituted a public menace. In the face of this the company has sued for a million dollars in damages and no one dares to say that they may not get it.

One of the most dramatic incidents of the entire campaign was the death of Dr. Joyce P. Echman, one of the leaders of Methodism in this country and pastor of the Elm Park Church, of Scranton. Dr. Echman was present when the sub-committee reported that it had made no progress with the mining companies and that it had agreed to continue under the old conditions. He arose in his chair and in the name of the people of Scranton repudiated the agreement and as he finished fell to the floor dead.

When one looks over the wreckage it seems strange to find Scranton filled with evidence of the civic liberality of these same industries. There are fine school buildings and a magnificent Y. M. C. A. Many churches are imposing. Broad asphalt streets are everywhere and there is an endless number of beautiful homes.

The business heart of the city is preserved from destruction by the fact that the city government has reserved the underground rights to a strip of land two blocks wide and several blocks long.

For the safety of the remainder of the community the fight must go on, and to the credit of the fighting qualities of Scranton let it be said that it will go on. Defeated in the legislature, overruled by the courts, defrauded in the elections, beaten at every turn, the people of Scranton have the spirit of John Paul Jones—they have not yet begun to fight.



Above—A street in Scranton showing broken water and sewer pipes. The abandoned mine working which caused the damage may be seen. Center—A home which suddenly toppled over backward and dropped into an abandoned mine. Below—A cave-in caught this motor truck as it was rolling along the street.

deeds were peculiar to the mining region. They gave the owner of the surface no protection against the activities which went on in the coal veins below. Sometimes, to be sure, the mining companies sold the owner of surface rights the coal which lay below his holdings but even this was no positive guaranty of safety because sometimes the companies stole the coal after they had sold it.

The deeds could not be changed. The coal rights had been purchased in good faith, it was claimed, and the courts upheld this view. But terror after terror struck at the heart of the people until the public organ-