

BOYS EMPLOYED IN COAL MINES.

DRIVING THE MULE TEAMS AND WORKING IN THE SCREEN ROOM.

SCRANTON, Penn., July 18.—Those who have at any time visited any of the mines or coal breakers of the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania could not fail to be forcibly impressed by the large number of boys, many of them of a very tender age, employed in the collieries as drivers of mules and door tenders, and in the screen room as slate pickers. Many of these little men, who with their grimy faces and hardened hands look like a strange race of human beings, are under the age of 12 years, but they perform a most important task in the great work of preparing the dusky anthracite for the market. In the mines as mule drivers these hardy lads are invaluable. They sing and whistle and laugh and play amid their gloomy surroundings, and they can manage the erratic mule better than most men. They drive the loaded cars from the working chambers to the foot of the shaft up which the coal is hoisted to the tower of the breaker, and they take the "empties" back to the men who blast down the coal from the "breast." As a general thing the boys employed as mule drivers are older and stronger than those who work in the screen rooms of the breakers. The duties of the latter consist in sorting the slate from the broken coal, which flows in black streams down a number of chutes from the ponderous machinery in which the gleaming anthracite boulders are broken into the requisite sizes. The slate pickers sit in rows astride these chutes, their eyes fixed steadily on the broken coal that brushes past them down the steep incline, and their fingers nimbly at work picking out the black, dull pieces of slate that are mixed with the glistening anthracite. During this flow of coal down the chutes no shirking is tolerated. The boys must keep their eyes constantly on the chutes and see to it that all the bits of slate are taken out. In order to insure strict attention on the part of these little workers a superintendent stands on guard, with his eyes on the boys. This individual, who by the nature of his occupation is usually disliked by the slate pickers, is known as a "cracker boss," the breaker being sometimes called a coal cracker. The "cracker boss" must be strict, therefore he is considered severe. Sometimes he is the victim of various mischievous pranks. His whip is hidden, his chewing tobacco is lost, his hat is mislaid, or some other "accident" of an embarrassing sort occurs whenever the opportunity presents itself. If by any chance the "cracker boss" is absent for a few minutes the screen room suddenly undergoes a transformation, and the rows of little fellows who usually sit at their work with bowed heads give a forcible illustration of the maxim that "boys will be boys." Some of the saddest accidents connected with coal mining have occurred in the breakers among children who pick slate. Little fellows have been ground to death in the massive machinery, and many of their comrades have lost their lives in the effort to save them. The unselfish heroism of the men who work in the mines has had its counterpart among the lads in the coal breaker, and instances could be mentioned of this child heroism of the screen room. When the little fellows first go to work at slate picking they find the task severe and painful. Sitting in a stooping position amid clouds of coal dust is painful, and tiny fingers are cruelly cut and bled by contact with the pieces of coal which are as sharp as bits of broken glass. In time the hands become hardened and so do the boys, so that what was at first regarded as a slavery seems comparatively easy. In the coal breakers especially many hundreds of children are employed under the age of 12 years. There are instances of boys being sent to pick slate even at 6 years of age, and any number may be found in the screen room between 6 and 9. Some of these are probably the sole support of a mother and younger children, the father of the family having been suddenly killed at his work in the mine. It seems cruel to send such boys to work, but it seems equally cruel to prevent them from earning the needed crust for the stricken families to which they belong. The question has consumed much attention for several years throughout the coal fields, and at the last session of the Legislature of Pennsylvania a section was embodied in the general mine law prohibiting child labor in and about the mines. The section provides that "no boy under the age of 14 years, and no woman or girl of any age, shall be employed or permitted to be in any mine for the purpose of employment therein; nor shall any boy under the age of 12 years, or a woman or girl of any age, be employed or permitted to be in or about the outside structures or workings of a colliery for the purpose of employment." This does not prohibit boys or women from being employed as clerks in the offices of the coal companies. Acting in accordance with the act of Assembly, the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company, the Delaware and Hudson Company, the Pennsylvania Coal Company, and other large corporations have notified their foremen to discharge all boys under the specified age that are now working in and about the coal mines. The provision will apply to nearly one-half the number of slate pickers throughout the region, and will work quite a revolution, not only in the mines, but in the public schools. The latter will find themselves suddenly taxed beyond their limits, and School Boards will have to provide largely increased accommodations for their new pupils. To the children themselves the release from the slavery of the screen room in their tenderest years is a great blessing, and no act of the Legislature is worthy of higher praise than that which prohibits the employment of child labor in and about the mines.