

# **June Walker Crandall**

## **Classroom Resource Packet**

1. Student Biography of June Walker Crandall
2. Vocabulary List
  - a. Vocabulary words are pulled from the student biography, the actors' scripts, and the Character Information portion of our Guide Script. Words are organized alphabetically.
3. Supplemental Information (pulled from the Pantagraph)
  - a. "Dusky Diamonds once mined on Bloomington's west side" by Bill Kemp and Candace Summers (September 18, 2022)
  - b. "Coal miners toiled in dangerous, often deadly environment," by Bill Kemp (September 6, 2009)

## June Walker Crandall (1878-1910)

June Walker Crandall was born on December 1, 1878, in Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky, the fifth of Jerome Bonepart and Juliana (Rice) Crandall's eight children.

June Crandall had little, if any, formal schooling. He was largely self-taught. His *Pantagraph* obituary stated that he was “a student of economics and devoted all his **leisure** time to enlarging his own information on the questions of the day. With few advantages of early education, he **acquired** his information by his own efforts while following his daily **toil** in one of the hardest kinds of labor.”

In 1896, Crandall moved to Atlanta, Illinois and worked for the Atlanta Coal Mining Company. Sometime in early 1898, he made his way to Bloomington. He looked for mining work and signed on with the McLean County Coal Company, his employer for the next 12 years.

Shortly after his arrival in Bloomington, Crandall met Mary Carlson and they were married in her parents' home in Bloomington, on December 10, 1898. June and Mary had one child, a daughter they named Beulah, on July 4, 1899.

The Crandalls lived at several addresses during their life in Bloomington. All of the Crandall residences were on Bloomington's West Side, not far from Crandall's employer, the McLean County Coal Company, (which was located just north of West Washington Street and near the Chicago and Alton Railroad mainline).

The McLean County Coal Company operated from 1867 to 1929. The company generated 700 tons of coal per day, accounting for nearly 70% of the coal shipped out of the county. Coal was the principal way to heat homes, create steam for locomotives, and operate industrial plants. The company employed roughly 350 people at any given time during its operation.

Work in coal mines, in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was a dark, dirty, and a dangerous operation. Ten-to-16-hour workdays were the norm, with men being expected to work six or seven days per week. And in an age when no **child-labor laws** existed, young boys could often be found working in coal mines.

Miners worked in cramped, dimly lit spaces several hundred feet below the ground, used crude hand tools—such as pickaxes and shovels—and worked under the constant, but far from unreasonable, fear of cave-ins, fires, and the **asphyxiating** “black damp.” And any accident meant time off work without pay, not to mention the risk of serious injury or death. At least 20 fatal incidents occurred in McLean County mines between 1883 to 1909. Miners did not receive a set wage, rather they were paid based on the coal they produced. In 1893, for example, miners at the McLean County Coal Company received between \$1.50 to \$2.25 per day (which would be between \$416.00 and \$616.00 in 2022).

The long-term effects of mining were, perhaps, of greater concern. Poor **ventilation**, combined with the mine's incessant belching of coal dust and toxic gases, made for not only unpleasant working conditions but **chronic respiratory ailments** and, as a result, shortened lives.

Workers at the McLean County Coal Company organized the Bloomington Miners Union, which eventually became the **United Mine Workers of America** (UMWA) Local #753. Crandall became active in the local **union** almost immediately after his arrival in Bloomington, and was elected to various leadership roles. He was not only an avid supporter of his union, and a tireless worker for the people it represented, but he saw the importance of spotlighting their accomplishments by volunteering to organize annual celebrations of Labor Day and labor's achievement of the eight-hour workday.

Crandall ran but never succeeded in being elected to a public office. He ran as a **socialist**. He evidently had no **qualms** about placing himself, over and over again, on the altar of public scrutiny. In 1903, he ran for Bloomington city treasurer. In 1905, 1907, and 1909, he ran for mayor of Bloomington. In 1906 he entered the race for Illinois state representative and, two years later, for Illinois state senator. He never received more than a handful of votes in his various races. In his bid for the house and the senate, he received 1.1% and 1.3% of the vote, respectively. Undeterred, he pursued office until the bitter end. He threw his hat in the ring for McLean County Clerk but died before the primary election.

In April 1910 the McLean County Coal Company closed its shafts temporarily. Crandall was able to find work at the Bloomington Water Works and worked there the entire summer. However, on August 29 of that year, at the age 31, his life ended tragically in a **preventable** accident. On that fateful day he was one of four men working to **fortify** a wall in a 13-foot-deep hole. At about 4:00 p.m., the four men were building supports near the coal sheds. Crandall and his gang were caught by a “caving bank” of dirt. His three colleagues escaped with minor injuries, but Crandall was “crushed about the chest” by the “falling mass of earth” and had to be extracted, unconscious, from several tons of dirt. Witnesses testified at the **coroner’s inquest** that, before the collapse, Crandall had shouted “look out” to warn the others, and they managed to dodge the wall of dirt. He was not so fortunate. Crandall had just enough time to turn away from the massive wall of dirt and it hit his back, bending him over. Doctors were summoned and Crandall was transported to Brokaw Hospital “in the city ambulance.” It was reported that “skilled physicians and medical science” did everything they could “in his behalf,” but he was pronounced dead several hours later, having never regained consciousness.

Following a brief service in his home, Crandall’s formal funeral was held at the Park Methodist Episcopal Church on the afternoon of September 1, 1910. The service was, **predictably**, well attended. The organizations of which he was a proud member—UMWA Local #753, the **Improved Order of Red Men** (a fraternal organization comprised of descendants of the **Sons of Liberty**), and the **Knights of the Maccabees** (a fraternal benefit organization)—were represented and provided pall bearers. June Crandall was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

The celebration of his life did not end with his funeral. Frank Albert Walker of Normal (writer and fellow **Temperance** advocate), offered a **poignant eulogy** in the form of a poem entitled “Fulfillment,” which was published in *The Pantagraph* newspaper. Several newspaper articles honored him, describing him as a self-made man, natural leader, well-balanced in temperament, intelligent, sound in reasoning and judgment, fair minded, an exemplary citizen, and fiscally conservative.

June’s wife, Mary, and their daughter, Beulah, continued to live in their home on West Grove Street after his death. Mary outlived her husband by nearly a half century, passing away on August 16, 1958, at age 79, having never remarried. She is **interred** with her husband at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

## Vocabulary

**Acquired (adjective):** gained by or as a result of effort or experience

**Asphyxiating (verb):** to kill, suspend animation in, or make unconscious through want of adequate oxygen, presence of noxious agents, or other obstruction to normal breathing

**Coroner's inquest (noun):** an inquiry into the cause and manner of an individual's death

**Child-labor laws (noun):** Child Labor Law regulates employment of workers under 16 years of age. The law protects children by:

- requiring employment certificates. The certificate confirms that a minor is old enough to work, physically capable to perform the job, and that the job will not interfere with the minor's education;
- prohibiting work in hazardous occupations; and
- limiting working hours. All work before 7 a.m. and after 7 p.m. is prohibited. However, work until 9 p.m. is allowed from June 1 through Labor Day.
- Requiring that a child performer in an artistic or creative service have a trust fund set up in their name where 15% of their gross earnings will be deposited.

**Eulogy (noun):** a commendatory oration or writing especially in honor of a deceased person.

**Fervent (adjective):** exhibiting or marked by great intensity of feeling.

**Fortify (verb):** to give physical strength, courage, or endurance to

**Improved Order of Red Men (organization, noun):** a fraternal organization established in North America in 1834. It claims direct descent from the colonial era Sons of Liberty. Their rituals and regalia are modeled after those assumed by men of the era to be used by Native Americans.

**Interred (verb):** to deposit (a dead body) in the earth or in a tomb

**Knights of the Maccabees (organization, noun):** a fraternal and benevolent "legal reserve society."

**Leisure (noun):** freedom provided by the cessation of activities

**McLean County Coal Company (business, noun):** coal mining company on the westside of Bloomington, IL that operated between 1867 and 1929. It was operated by the Stevenson brothers—James, Willim, and Adlai E.

**Platforms (noun):** a means or opportunity to communicate ideas or information to a group of people; the grounds or basis for further action.

**Poignant (adjective):** deeply affecting, touching; affecting the feelings of a person.

**Poverty (noun):** the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.

**Predictably (noun):** able to be known, seen, or declared in advance

**Preventable (adverb):** to keep from happening or existing

**Qualms (noun):** a sudden feeling of usually disturbing emotion (such as doubt or fear)

**Sector (noun):** a sociological, economic, or political subdivision of society.

**Socialist (noun):** one who advocates or practices socialism; someone who supports a political or economic philosophy that says society as a whole, rather than private companies, should own or control various goods and services.

**Socialist Party (political party, noun):** a political party that advocates for a classless society in which people own and control the means of production and distribution through democratically controlled public agencies, cooperatives, or other collective groups. Typically connected with the labor movement or trades unions.

**Sons of Liberty (organization, noun):** The Sons of Liberty was a loosely organized, clandestine, sometimes violent, political organization active in the Thirteen Colonies founded to advance the rights of the colonists and to fight taxation by the British government.

**Temperance (adjective):** habitual moderation in the indulgence of the appetites or passions

**Toil (noun):** long strenuous fatiguing labor

**Union (noun):** a confederation of independent individuals (such as nations or persons) for some common purpose

**Unionized (adjective):** characterized by the presence of labor unions; workers or their workplace belonging to, or having workers belonging to, a labor union.

**United Mine Workers of America (organization, noun):** a North American labor union best known for representing coal miners. Today, the Union also represents health care workers, truck drivers, manufacturing workers and public employees in the United States and Canada.

**Ventilation (noun):** circulation of air

“Dusky Diamonds” once mined on Bloomington’s west side

Bill Kemp and Candace Summers, September 18, 2022



*McLean County Coal Co. miners pose for a photographer, circa 1920. The man holding the mule is John Johnson, who lived in Stevensonville, a west-side neighborhood built for the company’s miners.*

A cherished urban legend has it that much of underground Bloomington, including downtown, is crisscrossed with coal mine tunnels.

Although there were coal mines in Bloomington, maps held by the McLean County Museum of History show the tunnels generally running west of Morris Ave. between Washington and Market streets, an area on the fringes of the city’s older west side neighborhoods.

Coal was the lifeblood of the Industrial Age, indispensable to railroads, factories, municipalities, and households. The City of Bloomington, to cite one example, needed a steady supply of coal to operate the boilers at its waterworks and electric light plant. Most homes were heated with coal, and most machinery could not run without it.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were coal mines throughout central Illinois. In Livingston County, the coal boomtown of Cardiff boasted a population of 2,500. When the mine closed in 1912, the village underwent a rapid decline and today exists in name only. In McLean County, there were mines in Colfax and Chenoa, as well as a short-lived venture located on Bloomington’s north side near N. Mason St.

For local residents, though, the most important mine was the McLean County Coal Company, located on Bloomington’s west side, north of Washington St. and just west of the Chicago & Alton Railroad mainline (today these tracks are shared by Union Pacific and Amtrak). It was the largest and most successful coal mine in the area, operating from 1867 until the late 1920s. In 1904, for instance, this mine accounted for 150,000 of 218,000 tons—or 69 percent—of all coal

hauled out of McLean County. At its height, coal mining in Bloomington was second only to the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops in economic importance.

Financial backers of the McLean County Coal Co. included the Stevenson brothers, James B., William, and Adlai Ewing I, the latter serving as U.S. vice president during Grover Cleveland's second administration. The Stevensons erected a housing development for the miners situated south of Washington and west of Lumber streets. Aptly named Stevensonville, many of the development's homes still stand.

Mining of course was a hard and dangerous occupation and owners like the Stevenson's were constantly recruiting new workers. Miners not only had to worry about cave-ins, mine fires, or other accidents, but they also had to worry about "black damp." Black damp or choke damp was where carbon dioxide and nitrogen slowly replaced oxygen in the mine. It was not combustible or poisonous, but a high enough level could lead to suffocation.

The McLean County Coal Company was not immune from strikes either. The earliest strike occurred in 1870 when the company reduced the price per ton of coal paid to the miners. In 1894 miners ceased working not because of the management of the mines or wages paid, rather "in sympathy for their less fortunate comrades in other parts of the country." These strikes, especially longer ones during the cold months, could often produce "coal famines."

Strikes like these were one of the reasons why many Swedes were brought to Bloomington by the owners of the McLean County Coal Company. James Stevenson brought the first sizable number of Swedes—about 30 families, (Alexander G. Erickson's) and almost as many single men—to Bloomington in August 1872 for this very reason. Stevenson traveled to Kewanee and Galva, Illinois and recruited new workers, convincing them to relocate to the growing city. However, these workers were ignorant of the fact that they were being brought on as strikebreakers. A written history of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bloomington noted that "they were entirely ignorant of the miners' strike until they arrived, or they would not have come" but "they were here and there was nothing to do but remain, suffer the consequences of strikebreakers, and make the best of it."

It was common for young boys to work in the coal mines. Alexander G. Erickson (a Swedish immigrant who came to Bloomington with his family in 1872) recalled that at the age of 13 he dropped out of school and began working in the McLean County Coal Co. mine with his father. Erickson recalled later in life that "there were no child labor nor school laws then. So it was the custom for the oldest boy in the family to begin early to help his father earn a living for the family." Erickson worked in the mines for nine years before becoming a clerk in a grocery store.

In May 1899, the McLean County Coal Co. offered a rare glimpse of its operations to "Madame Annette," a pseudonym for a local female newspaper reporter with a literary bent. Annette, who wrote for *The Daily Bulletin*, a long-defunct competitor of *The Pantagraph*, described in vivid detail life 500 feet below Bloomington's far west side. "Stepping from the elevator, one hears the sound of dripping water, catches a glimpse of twinkling lamps far down the dark galleries," she wrote, "all so weird and fantastic as to cause the imagination to go farther into the realms of Pluto."

At the time, mine production averaged 700 tons of coal per day, with a workforce numbering some 350 men. Annette noted the “cosmopolitan crowd down under” by identifying African-American, English, French, Irish, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Swedish miners.

In early 1903, local resident Edwin O. Ropp received permission to spend a day underground, recording his observations in a diary. During the long, dark day, he trailed a German miner he knew, as well as that miner’s work partner. In a side tunnel the party came upon two loaded coal cars pulled by a mule. “We also passed the barn for this mule,” Ropp wrote. “It consisted of one stall with bits of hay scattered about. These animals have a dark life. It is said they never see the light of day.”

The Museum’s annual Evergreen Cemetery Walk this year will feature the story of Alexander G. Erickson (who had a long career in the grocery business and local politics after his career in the mines ended). Performances for the Walk will be held on Saturdays and Sundays, September 24-25 and October 1-2, with tours at 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. each day. Tickets are now on sale and can be purchased at the Museum, Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, or online at [mchistory.org](http://mchistory.org).



Area coal miners toiled in dangerous, often deadly, environment

Bill Kemp, September 6, 2009



*The primitive conditions of the McLean County Coal Co. mine are apparent in this photograph, which dates to about 1920. The miner on the right is John Johnson. The other is unidentified.*

“Death came to Jacob Osman, vast in fantastic horrors,” began a December 11, 1899 Bloomington Bulletin. The McLean County Coal Co. employee was climbing up the screening tower when his jacket caught a screw poking out of a two-inch shaft which powered a system of chains used to pull the coal upward. Osman was yanked by the rapidly whirling shaft into a space about one-foot wide. “His brains were dashed out and death was mercifully instantaneous,” continued The Bulletin.

Labor Day is a fitting time to remember the men who lost their lives in area coal mines. The McLean County Museum of History holds a collection of local newspaper articles detailing some 130 workplace fatalities from the mid-1850s through the mid-1920s. The collection includes 20 coal miners and others who worked in and around area mines. Including the McLean County Coal Co. on Bloomington’s west side and smaller operations in Chenoa and Colfax.

Coal mining has always been a dirty and dangerous profession, and death can come in a myriad of forms. On August 22, 1879, 30-year-old McLean County Coal Co. miner James O’Brien was hauling dirt and slate to the shaft cage so it could be carried out. He signaled for the cage to be brought to the second vein of coal where he was working. Evidently, he only gave one tap to the bell—the signal to bring the cage to the surface—instead of two taps—the signal to stop at the second vein. Thus O’Brien, thinking he was about to step into the cage, plummeted down the

shaft 140 feet to the bottom, where he crashed through three-inch oak planking and into the sump. It took six hours to extricate O'Brien's lifeless body from the water.

Death was not always instantaneous. On September 16, 1886, McLean County Coal Co. miner William Farrell was crushed between a tunnel wall and a passing coal car. "Suffering in the greatest agony," he was taken to his house in Stevensonville, the working class, west side neighborhood of miner cottages. Farrell's bladder was ruptured and a physician "pronounced the case hopeless."

Even so, he hung on for another 11 days. "He displayed a great deal of nerve, and on Sunday [the day before his death] afternoon was talking and joking with his friends," reported The Pantagraph. "He said that he might as well enjoy himself, as before tomorrow (Monday) night he would be dead. He also selected six of his friends, whom he requested should carry him to his grave." Twenty-three years later his brother, John Farrell, would be killed working for the McLean County Coal Co.

Charles Rauschka, a Polish born miner with the McLean County Coal Co. was killed on June 20, 1893. He was working in a room in the second vein, 400 feet below the surface, when two tons of coal came down and buried him. After some difficulty miners were able to pull Rauschka free. His last words were, "Get me out as quick as you can." He died before reaching the surface, leaving a wife and five children behind.

On August 26, 1901, four Chenoa miners, three of whom were Italian, were killed when the cable suspending their cage snapped and they fell 285 feet. As was standard practice in mine deaths, the corner's jury affixed no blame on either the company or the workers, and instead rule the deaths as an accident.

Colfax miner I.N. Brewer was working a "room" on June 30, 1902, when "a large piece of rock fell on him, breaking his thigh and inflicting internal injuries." He died later that day. A year previous he had suffered a serious injury tripping over a mining prop, and had just returned to work. He left a wife and seven children.

Between 1889 and 1903, there were 11 fatal accidents in the Colfax mines, 8 of which were caused by falling rock. The ceilings of the coal rooms were soapstone, and cave-ins of the soft material were an ever-present concern.

On March 17, 1904, Swedish-born Gust Erickson, a 30-year veteran with the McLean County Coal Co., was walking down a tunnel with a double cable road (that is, two coal car tracks). With cars coming at him from opposite directions he evidently became confused and was crushed to death between the two "trains." Erickson lived in Stevensonville and left a wife and four children.

Charles Niedermeyer, another longtime McLean County Coal Co. employee, died on March 22, 1921, when he fell more than 500 feet down the mine shaft. Niedermeyer, who logged 29 years with the company, was the weighmaster of the mine. Since one of the gates on the surface was open it was assumed that Niedermeyer "stepped into the opening thinking the cage was on the level of the surface." His "crushed and broken body was found at the bottom of the shaft lying on top of the lift."

In 1909, 259 miners were killed in a horrific underground fire in Cherry, a small Illinois community north of LaSalle-Peru. The Cherry Mine disaster and a rash of mine fatalities around the same time led to sweeping, state-imposed safety measures directed at mine operators. The state overhauled its antiquated mining code and, for the first time, instituted serious enforcement measures. Other reforms during the period included mandated safe zones between mine walls and coal car tracks and the creation of a “mothers’ pension” to reduce the likelihood that widows would send their children to state or charitable homes. Workmen’s compensation was passed in 1911.