

Students take part in mining history



Richard Pawling performs as "Frank Kehoe", a 1905 Anthracite miner, during a presentation about coal mining in honor of Anthracite Heritage Week Tuesday at North Schuylkill Elementary School. Ronni Moore/The REPUBLICAN & Herald

FOUNTAIN SPRINGS — *"Frank Kehoe" was already working in the mines when he was the age of many North Schuylkill Elementary students.*

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Published: Wednesday, October 22, 2008 8:27 AM EDT

FOUNTAIN SPRINGS — "Frank Kehoe" was already working in the mines when he was the age of many North Schuylkill Elementary students. The district's elementary students were treated to a living history performance Tuesday to celebrate Anthracite Heritage Week. Kehoe, a fictitious character portrayed by Richard Pawling of History Alive, set the scene of life in a coal mine in 1905. "What would it have been like to meet up with a miner in 1905?" Pawling asked the students. During the 45-minute presentation, Pawling, dressed as an Irish miner from his lunch pail to the coal dust on his face. He took about 1,000 students, from kindergartners through sixth-graders, back in time with a lively, song-filled presentation.

Pawling described the life of the breaker boy — who would have started picking rock from the coal at the same age as many of the students. Breaker boys worked their way to door boys, then spraggers, who would shove poles into the wheel spokes of moving cars to stop them, and finally to the position of mule drivers. Pawling talked about the dangers of gas leaks and cave-ins, life in

a patch town and buying items at the company store, as he told the story of the students' grandparents or great-grandparents who may have been miners locally. "I present the Coal Region culture, the way you talk, the way you dress, the way you present yourself, even the type of music you would listen to," Pawling said.

Pawling is an adjunct cultural geography professor at Penn State Berks. He is the owner and educational/interpretive specialist of History Alive, a consulting firm that provides living history and traditional music programs, training workshops, character design and interpretive consulting services to parks, museums and other organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada. Pawling was concerned about presenting the miner's story to so many young students, but the children lining the bleachers and sitting on the floor of the gym seemed to enjoy the story. "I decided I had to go to them, to their level. As an interpreter I have to know how to address the audience," Pawling said.

Tyler Briel, 12, of Ringtown, was chosen at random from the audience and got caught up in the role of breaker boy. By the end of the presentation, he was in full dress: a lamp on his hat, mule whip around his neck and tools in his hand. "It was pretty nice to learn something about coal mining and what they used to do," Briel said. "There were miners in my family and we hear stories, but it was nice to see what they would have looked like and what they would have done."

In celebration of Anthracite Heritage Week, North Schuylkill High School students toured Pioneer Tunnel, Ashland, on Monday; Keith Neidig, an engineer at Pioneer Tunnel and the father of a student, will visit the first-grade class of Sue Burns today; and district teachers have tailored lessons to include anthracite themes throughout the week.