

The Battle of Blair Mountain: Remembering the Story That Got “Left Out”

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Deep in the southern West Virginia coalfields, along the high ridges and steep valleys, trouble was brewing. Thousands of angry, armed men were gathering, getting ready to make their voices heard. They poured in by train, on foot-however they could get there-in support of their fellow miners that had dared to walk out and strike against their employers. This time, surely, they could not be ignored; this time, surely, they would succeed.

The scene described above did indeed take place in the southern West Virginia coalfields. The year was 1921 and these men were fighting to unionize their mines. This event, referred to as the Battle of Blair Mountain, is part of West Virginia's “mine wars,” a struggle that encompassed many different groups of people in several locations over the course of a decade. Unfortunately, it is a story that is often overlooked in the narrative of West Virginia state history. However, it is important for the people of the southern West Virginia coalfields to hear this story that gets “left out,” as it is a source of pride and an example of the courage it takes to make a stand against entrenched economic and social systems that provide for the interests of a select powerful few and overlook the needs of the masses.

According to an article by Michael M. Meador, during the Battle of Blair Mountain “as many as 15, 000 men were involved, an unknown number were killed or wounded, bombs were dropped, trains were stolen, stores were plundered, a county was invaded and another under siege. The President had to send in Federal troops, the United Mine Workers of America was fighting for its life . . .” In early 1981 the site of the Battle of Blair Mountain, located on West Virginia Route 17 between Blair and Ethel, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, certifying that this was a

significant event in American history. However, this is one battle, in one war that is all too easily forgotten. Meador adds, “today, almost unbelievably, this war is nearly forgotten. There is not even a roadside marker to commemorate the mine war known variously as the Battle of Blair Mountain, the Miner’s March, or the Red Neck War.”¹ The fact that this story has been “left out” of the history books is a common theme among those few who do re-tell this story.

David Corbin, an author on the subject of West Virginia Mine Wars, compiled an anthology of primary sources collected from newspapers, magazines, and interviews, so that the story could be heard as the people of the time experienced it. In his introduction to this collection, Corbin comments on his motivation for making sure this story is heard:

“When we were told of the importance of West Virginia held in relation to the rest of the nation, we were not informed of the fact that our coal heated its homes, fueled its industries, and powered its battleships for decades. Nor were we told of the thousands of West Virginians who died getting that coal out of the ground. We were not told of the struggle these people underwent for safer working conditions and a better standard of living; that is the struggle for their union.”²

Clearly there was a gap in Corbin’s educational experience on the history of West Virginia and he wishes to make sure others are aware that these events took place. One could say that Corbin may have just had poor teachers, who merely skipped over this incident without much thought. However, the fact that his sentiment is echoed in so many other voices shows that this is most likely not the case. Many native West Virginians who discover this missing piece of their heritage later on in life feel betrayed by its

omission and feel that there are deeper causes behind its getting "left out" of the history books.

I first encountered the story of the West Virginia Mine Wars and the Battle of Blair Mountain in a college literature class. We read the novel *Storming Heaven* written in 1987 by Denise Giardina, which is a fictional account of the West Virginia mine wars. Although the storyline revolves around fictional characters and plot, it is a well-researched portrayal of the events going on the southern West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky coalfields in the early part of the twentieth century. A review of Giardina's novel, states that the author herself had grown up in the West Virginia coalfields and, "incredibly, she never heard the story of The Battle of Blair Mountain in her mandatory West Virginia history class in eighth grade, nor in her college-level class that was a prerequisite for a history degree."³ Giardina has captured a great method of introducing the plight and struggles of the miners of southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky to the larger public. Historians and authors such as Corbin and Giardina, along with many others who are active in West Virginia heritage and politics, want the public not only to hear this story, but take it to heart and consider what it means to the larger picture of history and how it may even affect current issues in the state of West Virginia.

My second experience hearing about the West Virginia mine wars, specifically the Battle of Blair Mountain, occurred just this past summer on a trip to the West Virginia coalfields to collect some oral histories from people whose homes had been devastated by flooding. There we met activists working to stop mountaintop removal, the method by which many coal companies are now extracting coal from the mountains. This method is devastating to the environment and is a major factor exacerbating the floods. We spoke with Judy Bonds of the Coal River Mountain Watch, an activist group working to stop mountaintop removal, and Larry Gibson, a man who lives by himself atop Keyford Mountain protecting his property, worth over a million dollars an acre, from destruction by the coal companies who want to add it to their mountaintop removal area. Interestingly, both of these people made reference to the Battle of Blair Mountain in

conversations explaining the plight of the people living in the region. They felt it was very important to share this story with the group of people I was with, many out-of-staters, but also some West Virginia natives-most of who had never heard of it. Larry Gibson related:

My people are oppressed people . . . and they didn't get there by themselves. It took almost two hundred years to get these people to here. This is a testing ground for the coal companies, man, I'm gonna tell you something. Everything they tried in the coalfields, they tried it here first. I been raised in the coalfields all my life. They have little to no resistance here.⁴

Gibson was telling the story of the Battle of Blair Mountain because it was an example of those who did stand up to the system. They were people trapped by the practices of the coal companies who tried to resist them and make a change. In his eyes the people of the southern West Virginia coalfields are still trapped, and must look to their brave counterparts of the past as a model of grass roots power and strength.

This "story worth retelling," as Corbin states, "is not always a pretty one. It isn't always the happy story. But it is history-West Virginia's real history. It is a story of a people struggling for a better way of life."⁵ Their way of life was an existence dominated by "King Coal." The struggle was a fight against the economic and social conditions they were forced to live under as a result of the power of the demand for that precious natural resource. Coal is found in fifty-three of the fifty-five counties in West Virginia. Approximately thirty-five of these counties have mined or are currently mining coal. An astounding estimate of the minable coal available in the state of West Virginia came to 117 billion tons when mining first began in this region in the nineteenth century. With about 100 billion tons remaining today, and at today's current rate of production, estimates show that five hundred years of coal production are left.⁶ To a nation of consumers, especially during the period of heavy industrialization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, West Virginia's abundant natural resources, most importantly its rich coal seams, made it a prime destination for those with the means to extract to them.

Thereby, the economic system of the state of West Virginia became virtually dependent on the production of coal. Under this system, the coal companies came to control almost every aspect of the miners' lives. They owned the land, the houses in which the miners lived, the stores from which the miners bought their goods, the schools that their children attended, and on and on. The coal companies devised ways to keep the miners perpetually tied to the company and their jobs. They would pay them in scrip, currency redeemable only at the company store. From that company store, they were made to buy or rent their own tools for extracting the company's coal, and to pay high prices for goods necessary for everyday living. The miners were paid by the ton for the amount of coal they produced and the companies often found ways to underpay the miners, such as through the use of inaccurate scales, a practice referred to as cribbing. Young boys were often employed, working just as hard and long as grown men. All the miners were in great physical danger while employed in the mines, either from immediate threats such as roof falls and explosions, or by long-term illness such as black lung disease. Living conditions in company towns and houses were often dirty, noisy, unsanitary, and generally sub-standard.

A September 1921 interview of an African-American man named George Echols, expressed some of these tactics used by the coal companies to cheat the workers as the reason he had gotten involved in the strike. He stated:

They promised to pay us by the ton but they don't do it. They promised according to whatever the coal is to pay us by the ton, and we want them to put it on the scales. All they do is say that is too much and we have to take it. We feel we want to give and take, and we want them to measure it for us, that is, weigh it, and we are paid whatever they like to pay us or feel like paying us, and they give it out at the office, they give us the balance. We pay for the lights and the fuel and then the supplies, and whatever they say at the office, they give us the balance. We always felt that we ought to have the coal weighed. I have loaded coal when I got \$1.25 a car, and if we had the scales there I would get as much as \$4.00 a car.⁷

George Echols was a union man, president of his local chapter, and according to him it was for this he was discharged from the mine, under the pretenses of many other excuses, of course. His sentiments were a common theme among the coal workers of this era—the tip of the iceberg of complaints against the coal companies. Telling of the severity of the miners' situation and their feelings of being trapped in a system from which there is no escape, he also stated, "there are some things that we can not stand for. I was raised a slave. My master and my mistress called me and I answered, and I know the time when I was a slave, and I felt just like we feel now."⁸

Many coal workers felt that one solution to this problem of maltreatment by the coal companies was to unionize. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) formed on January 25, 1890 in Columbus, Ohio under the leadership of John Mitchell, first president, who worked to abolish child labor and establish an eight-hour workday. The UMWA achieved many of its goals between 1920-1960, including the aforementioned, along with national wage agreements and safety legislation, under the leadership of John L. Lewis. The first success of the UMWA in West Virginia came in 1902 when it received some recognition in the Kanawha-New River Coalfield. However, the response by the coal operators was to form the Kanawha County Coal Operators Association in 1903, hiring detectives from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency in Bluefield, WV. The job of these detectives was to harass union organizers. These company "thugs," as the detectives were often called, were much feared and hated by mine workers.⁹ As Harold West reported to the *Baltimore Sun* in 1913, "No class of men on earth are more cordially hated by the miners than these same mine guards who are engaged to 'protect' them from annoyances by outsiders."¹⁰ This hatred was escalated by their fondness for brutality. As West reports:

... a number [of guards] have been indicted for offenses ranging from common assault to murder. In every case, however, bail has been ready and it is rare that charges against them have been brought to trial. Some of these assault cases in which they

rarely has any serious trouble resulted for the guards.¹¹

Due to the threats of these men, the UMWA had lost much ground in southern West Virginia by 1912, leading up to the first of the "mine wars" along Paint and Cabin Creeks. Miners along these two creeks got together and walked off the job on 18 April 1921 creating a list of demands that included:

The right to organize, recognition of their constitutional rights to free speech and assembly, an end to blacklisting union organizers, alternatives to company stores, an end to the practice of using mine guards, prohibition of cribbing, installation of scales at all mines for accurately weighing coal, unions be allowed to hire their own checkweighmen to make sure the companies' checkweighmen were not cheating the miners.¹²

Then began a strike that would last over a year, in which both sides committed acts of violence. Probably the most famous of these occurred on 7 February 1913 when the "Bull Moose Special," an armored train led by the sheriff of Kanawha County, Bonner Hill, and Quin Morton, a coal operator, made its way through a striker's tent colony at Holly Grove on Paint Creek. Mine guards riding the train opened fire, killing striker Cesco Estep. A battle lasting for several hours ensued as the miners, in retaliation, attacked a mine guard encampment, in which at least sixteen people were killed, most of whom were mine guards.¹³ A ballad written by Walter Seacrist (one of many to write songs about this labor struggle), tells of the murder of Estep from the perspective of his now-fatherless child: "We were oh so happy. We were so wondrous blest. The Union issued a strike call. Dad came out with the rest. To better his condition, that he might not be a slave. That they might have a Union, and get a living wage."¹⁴ Indeed the miners did feel like slaves to the coal companies, just as George Echols who had actually begun life as a real slave, attested to almost a decade after this song was written.

The struggle on Paint and Cabin Creeks lasted until July 1913. Some of the positive gains made by miners included the removal of Baldwin-Felts detectives from Paint and Cabin Creeks, the right to shop in stores other than

company stores, a nine-hour work day, and some others, yet they still did not achieve their goal of gaining the right to organize. This uprising created several leaders who figure prominently into later struggles of the mine wars including "Mother" Jones, an elderly woman who was an activist and vocal speaker for the UMWA, and Fred Mooney who became president of the UMWA District 17. Following these first violent strikes, things were relatively peaceful for the next six years; the coal boom created by World War I had raised wages. However, following the war in 1919 the country went into a recession and coal operators laid off miners and tried to reduce wages in order to cut costs. This led, once again, to unrest in the coalfields, especially in Logan and Mingo counties, the largest non-unionized coal region in the eastern United States.¹⁵

Wary of what had happened in the 1912-1913 strikes, coal operators in southern West Virginia had strengthened their means of resisting labor force unrest. They built up police forces with men supplied by the coal companies who would support and defend their wishes. As Heber Blankenhorn reported to *The Nation* in 1921, "It is public record that the recruits for the state constabulary were picked from lists provided by the coal operators."¹⁶ In Logan County, Don Chafin was sheriff and was paid by coal companies to keep union organizers out of the region. He also hired deputies who would aid him in this task. Arthur Gleason reported in 1920:

The coal operators maintain on their payrolls public officials who preserve order, guard the company funds, and keep union men out of the county. The operators pay directly to the sheriff \$32,700 a year for this immunity from unionization. In addition most of them pay the individual armed guard salary. These agents of the company are deputy sheriffs, appointed by court. The insider who operates this system is Don Chafin, county clerk and running for sheriff.¹⁷

This is supported by a statement from J. M. Vest, president and manager of the Rum Creek Crollieries Company, "Our income is approximately \$100,000 a year. And of the money perhaps \$30,000 is contributed to the

sheriff for police protection.¹⁸ According to Gleason's calculations, "Actually it is one-third of a cent on every ton [of coal] which the consuming public of America pays to Don Chafin."¹⁹ Working against such strong forces as those amassed by Don Chafin, dissatisfied miners had a hard road ahead of them to make their voices heard.

The next major event of the mine wars took place in May 1920 at Matewan, West Virginia. Earlier that year operators lowered wages in the southern coalfields. To compound problems, the U.S. Coal Commission granted a wage increase to union miners, which excluded many miners in southwestern West Virginia. These non-union men struck in the spring of 1920. On 6 May 1920 Fred Mooney and Bill Blizzard, officials of the UMWA, gave a speech in Matewan to about 3,000 miners. About half of them joined and were promptly evicted from company owned houses on 19 May when Baldwin-Felts detectives arrived on the scene. The Matewan police chief, Sid Hatfield, encouraged the residents to arm themselves. When Albert and Lee Felts attempted to arrest Hatfield gunfire erupted, leaving seven detectives and four townspeople dead, including the mayor C.C. Testorman.²⁰ This event was made into the popular 1996 film *Matewan*, written and directed by John Sayles, which provides an accurate portrayal of what took place, as well as the fierce attitudes and hostilities that were held among those involved—hostilities that were only growing as unrest continued without solution.

Gleason's 1920 article, written after a visit to the West Virginia coalfields to assess the situation at Matewan, eerily foreshadows the events that were about to take place within the next year. He states, "The fight in Mingo [County, location of Matewan] is mild compared with that about to explode in Logan [County, location of Blair Mountain], which is under control of the coal companies."²¹ The coal companies did not want their employees to join the union. According to Gleason's article "there are 91,000 persons in West Virginia employed in and around mines. Of these 54,000 are organized in the United Mine Workers of America. For possession of the unorganized 37,000, the coal operators and the union are

engaged in the present bloody struggle."²² It was common practice at this time for coal companies to make the miners sign "yellow dog" contracts before they would be hired. These contracts forced them to agree not to be involved in any union activity. A sample contract from the time reads:

If at any time I want to join or become connected with the United Mine Workers of America, or affiliated organization, I agree to withdraw from said company, and I further agree that while I am in the employ of said Company that I will not make any efforts amongst its employees to bring about the unionization of said employees against the companies wishes.²³

If an employee dared join the union, he would have been fired and blacklisted. In most cases, once a miner was terminated he was also evicted from his home, due to the fact that most miners lived in company owned houses. Upon his visit, Gleason noted a sign in the window of the Stone Mountain Coal Company grocery store stating "that the houses of the miners were owned by the company, and that the miners must leave the premises at once if they join the union."²⁴ It was because of this fact that the miners and their families were forced to set up makeshift tent towns in which to live during the strike. George Echols, the man who felt like a slave to the coal companies, had been abiding in one of these tent towns for four to five months at the time of his interview.

Company officials made no efforts to hide their disapproval of unionization in the mines. George M. Jones, general manager of the Lundale Coal Company, Three Forks Coal Company, and the Amherst Coal Company, was quoted in Gleason's article saying, "The principal point of this whole controversy is the question of union or non-union in Logan. We oppose the unionization of the Guyan coalfield. We are against the union and expect to do everything in our power to prevent its coming to our miners."²⁵ With viewpoints regarding the matter of unionization being so polarized between coal company officials and the miners, a clash such as what was about to occur at the Battle of Blair Mountain was inevitable.

On 1 August 1921 Sid Hatfield went to trial for his actions in the incident at Matewan and was acquitted. However, as he along with his fellow defendant, Ed Chambers, walked up the courthouse steps in Welch, WV they were both shot down-murdered by Baldwin-Felts agents.²⁶ This was the powder keg that set the miners in motion. Calls to action were heard all across the region; the miners began gathering to start a march to fight for the rights that they felt had been taken away from them by the coal companies. As Echols stated, "We claim to be citizens of the United States and we ask for the rights of citizenship; we claim to be loyal to our country, and we are loyal to our country, and all we ask is that we shall have our rights."²⁷ Even the Communist Party of America (a supporter of the UMWA, giving the capitalistic mine owners even greater reason to hate its presence) printed a newsletter calling for support of making a stand against coal company power: "Fellow workers! Act before it is too late! A defeat at Mingo will go a long way toward driving the whole American working class into lower wages, longer hours, and endless drudgery . . . On with the struggle! On to victory!"²⁸ At the end of August 1921 hundreds and then thousands of men began to gather, hopeful that victory would be won and changes in the system created by "King Coal" would be achieved.

On 7 August 1921 Frank Keeney, president of UMWA District 17, called on miners to meet on the State Capital grounds in order to get an uprising underway. Howard B. Lee, author of one of the earliest and most definitive works on the WV mine wars, was a first-hand observer of this day's events. He writes that the crowd was estimated to be around 5,000 and Keeney brought in "Old Mother" Jones, hero of the Paint and Cabin Creek mine wars of the early teens, to speak before those gathered. Mother Jones was about 91 years old at this point, and Lee states:

For nearly an hour that foul-mouthed, vulgar, profane, old agitator harangued the mob. She assailed Governor E. F. Morgan as a 'tool of the goddamned coal operators,' and inflamed the miners with stories of atrocities inflicted by mine guards upon workers in Logan and Mingo Counties, most of which were pure fabrications.²⁹

This left agitated miners to make their way home with the intention of gathering weapons for an armed march into Logan County. On 20 August 1921 six hundred armed men gathered at Lens Creek near Marmet in Kanawha County. This mass kept growing until it had reached 7,000 to 8,000 by 23 August.³⁰ The goal was to march 65 miles southwest to Logan town. As Lee states:

The avowed purpose of the marchers, as testified by some of the participants, were to hang Don Chafin in the courthouse yard in Logan; overthrow martial law in Mingo County and liberate all strikers and union organizers held in jail; and unionize all miners in both Logan and Mingo counties.³¹

Curiously, at this point, Mother Jones who had so riled the men on the Statehouse lawn, began urging the miners not to go ahead with the march. Upon finding out that those in charge of the movement would be arrested and charged with treason, she read a telegram, said to have been sent to her by the President, ordering the miners to give up or Federal troops would be sent in. This was proven to be a phony telegram and, therefore, Mother Jones lost all influence over the miners and left West Virginia for good. The question was raised that perhaps Jones had done this because she had been paid of by coal operators in order to stop the march. However, in 1962 Frank Keeney himself told Lee, "No, mother Jones never took money from the operators. At that time she was 91 years old, and age had quenched much of the fighting spirit that characterized her earlier years."³² In spite of Mother Jones' tactics, the miners would not be daunted in their pursuit of overtaking Logan and the march proceeded.

Once Chafin got wind of what was coming his way he began gathering recruits to fight against the angry miners, even to the point of promising prisoners in the county jail release in return for their fighting. However, some prisoners believed in the union cause and did not want to help. Chafin resorted to threatening murder to make some of the men join his side. Prisoner Floyd Greggs, in an affidavit filed with the U.S. Senate Kenyon Committee (a committee formed after the Battle of Blair Mountain to investigate what went on), stated

that Chafin put a pistol in his face and said, "You will either fight or die."³³ Chafin's army eventually totaled 3,000, supported by 150 State police.³⁴

Although smaller than the miners' army that was presently marching into his territory, by all accounts Chafin's men were clearly more adequately armed.

Blair Mountain divides Logan County into two unequal parts. The smaller section, to the northeast of Blair Mountain is drained by the Little Coal River, which flows northeast to the Kanawha River. The mines in this area, which borders Boone County, were mostly unionized. The larger section, to the southwest of Blair Mountain, is drained by the Guyandotte River, which flows northeast toward Huntington. This area, bordering Mingo County and containing mostly non-union mines, was Chafin's stronghold. Marching from Marmet in Kanawha County to reach Logan town in Logan County, the miners first had to cross Blair Mountain (See Figure 1).³⁵ Chafin's men were the first to reach the crest of Blair Mountain, where they dug in along a fifteen mile stretch and waited for the miners' attack.

It was not just miners who were gathering to fight Chafin and his men. Early Ball was a schoolteacher along Hewett Creek in 1921. He had been recruited to lead a group of men over the mountain at Crooked Creek Gap due to the fact that he knew "every crook and turn that mountain."³⁶ He states, "Of course, I aimed to be neutral in the case. To tell the truth, my sympathy was with the miners; still I was not a miner, I was a schoolteacher."³⁷ Similarly, he recalls that many of the other men who were marching toward Blair Mountain were not just miners: "There were men come up there from every walk of life—doctors, lawyers, people that run drugstores and got out of there and took to the hills with high-powered guns with the expression, 'I want to get a crack at those S.O.B.'s."³⁸

The group of attackers made their way toward Blair Mountain, led by "General" Bill Blizzard, President of the UMWA Sub-district No. 2. The long line of marchers continued to make its way along Lens Creek from 25 August until most had arrived by 1 September. Along the way, the main body of

marchers even stole a train just before reaching the Boone-Logan County borders in order to speed up the journey. A blurry photograph taken of those riding this train to the foot of Blair Mountain shows men stacked practically on top of one another, hanging out of the tops of coal cars, and sitting with legs dangling over the sides of flatbed cars.³⁹ As the men began to gather at the base of Blair Mountain they came up with a system to show that they were supporters of the union. They would wear red handkerchiefs around their necks, after which they were called "Red Necks," and hence, the reason that the Battle of Blair Mountain is often referred to as the "Red Neck War." Many report that this is the first use of the term "redneck" and at the time the name simply referred to these men who were radical enough to take a stand. Today the word redneck is used quite commonly and has taken on the connotation of someone who is an uneducated hillbilly.⁴⁰ It seems ironic that one of the lasting impressions from this all but forgotten event is a word that is often applied negatively toward the people of a state whose ancestors so courageously coined it.

Meanwhile, West Virginia Governor E.F. Morgan was busy working on a solution to the problem growing just south of his capital city. An article published in the Independent on 17 September 1921, states, "Morgan had acknowledged the inability of the state constabulary to deal adequately with the situation."⁴¹ Therefore, he called on the United States President, Warren Harding for help. On 30 August, President Harding issued a proclamation "calling upon the armed marchers . . . to disperse and return to their homes by noon of September 1."⁴² This too failed to stop the miners and various guerilla battles continued to be fought at the base of Blair Mountain. The miners had weapons stockpiled everywhere in the mountains and confrontations between the two sides were vicious battles. Cush Garrett, who was a schoolboy at the time of the battle, relates, "Men stuck guns everywhere, just in hollow logs, under rocks or anywhere."⁴³ Federal airplanes were called out under the command of Brigadier General Billy Mitchell from Langley Field near Washington, D.C.

Reports are rather unclear as to just how significant a role the planes actually played in the Battle of Blair Mountain. Several of the planes actually crashed on the way to West Virginia, killing pilots and crew before they even reached the battle. Some reports claim that they played no important role in the battle, but recollections from those involved in the battle hint otherwise. Early Ball recalls, "There was one that over us, and it was shooting some kind of gun, a rifle ore something, and it wasn't very high. We both tore loose with high-powered guns. If we ever hit it, it never made a bobble."⁴⁴ Bombs were dropped; Ball himself "saw one drop and the dirt fly up."⁴⁵ A picture in the UMWA Journal shows a bomb dropped on 1 September in Jeffrey, WV, stating that "some twenty or twenty-five others were dropped, many of which exploded, but did no material damage."⁴⁶ Most likely, only the miners who had been World War I veterans would have much experience seeing airplanes prior to this event. Regardless of whether or not the planes did much physical damage to the attackers' efforts, to these miners, they were an extremely visible and impressive symbol of the coal operators' power.

By 3 September forces had come to a head. There was active fighting for three hours, then a retreat and a re-advance after noon for four hours. During both of these advances the miners failed to take the crest of the mountain, still held off by Chafin's men. At 4:00 p.m. General Harry Blandholz entered the scene with his Federal troops. He had been put in command of the troops that the President had ordered into the area after his proclamation to cease fighting by noon on 1 September had been ignored.⁴⁷ According to the testimony of Colonel Stanley H. Ford, the entire Twenty-sixth Infantry from Camp Dix was commandeered along with detachments from the Columbus Barracks, altogether consisting of "approximately 106 officers and 2,000 men."⁴⁸

According to Meador, "Fighting was the heaviest at three points where the roads crossed the ridge. These places were above Blair town, where the main road crossed, at Beech Creek near Sharples, where a horse trail wound over the mountain, and at the head of Craddock Fork of Hewett Creek, where an old road crossed

over onto Crooked Creek near Logan."⁴⁹ (See Figure 2.) However, exact skirmish locations along Blair Mountain are very hard to decipher, especially due to the rough terrain in which the fighting took place. It seems that the whole time things were very chaotic on both sides of the lines and reports were often very confusing or incorrect. As Early Ball recalls, "They [Chafin's men] were everywhere."⁵⁰ Along Hewett Creek where Ball was from, "The miners were all up the left-hand fork, about 5,000. That never was published in the papers. They never mentioned Hewett Creek or nothing like that."⁵¹ It is easy to see how published accounts of the events at Blair Mountain often contain variable reports of locations and numbers of men involved.

Upon the arrival of Federal ground troops on the afternoon of 3 September, the miners realized that they were outgunned and, therefore, surrendered. General Blandholz sent this telegram to the President: "About 400 insurgents surrendered this afternoon at Sharples and Madison, turning in about 80 firearms. They were immediately sent out of the area to St. Albans by train."⁵² So, in the end, the Battle of Blair Mountain resulted in the defeat of the miners. It was no small war; as Dr. Miliken, a company doctor at Blair mining camp, testified, "I was in the Spanish-American War, and I heard about as much shooting on Blair Mountain as I heard in Manila."⁵³ News correspondents from all over the country were sent in to report on the events, and it even appeared in international newspapers. The New York Times ran front page headlines including: "Fighting Continues in Mountains as Federal Troops Reach Mingo; Planes Reported Bombing Miners," and "400 Miners Surrender with Arms as Troops Surrounding Fighting Area Quick Peace in Sight in West Virginia."⁵⁴ The figures for the amount of men wounded vary depending on the source, but on average it seems that about ten men were killed on each side of the fight. There were probably men on both sides whose deaths were never accounted. The total number wounded is impossible to know; however, it is clear that it was large. Innocent standers-by were also reported wounded in the battle. For example, news correspondent, Boyden R. Sparks, of the New York Tribune,

was even hit by gunfire as he made his way to the "front" to report on the action.⁵⁵

According to U.S. Senator Kenyon of Iowa, who headed a Senate Committee investigating the strikes and mining conditions in West Virginia, the cause of these "mine wars" could be answered in two words, "HUMAN GREED."⁵⁶ The greed of coal company officials who were only interested in making as much money as possible, and thereby created an entire economic system that aided this wish-without concern for the effects it had on others. Historians who have looked at this battle often suggest similar causes. Howard B. Lee, author of *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, clearly blames collaboration between coal company officials, state government, and local government (namely Don Chafin) for "this bloody blot on the State's history."⁵⁷ He ends the section in his book covering the battle with this quote from a staff correspondent to the *Washington Star* on 2 September 1921: "Everywhere one goes down in this country he hears the name of Don Chafin, high sheriff of Logan County . . . He is the king of the 'Kingdom of Logan.' He reigns supreme by virtue of state machine, backed by the power of the operators."⁵⁸

Probably one of the most in-depth and thorough works written on the subject of the West Virginia Mine Wars is Lon Savage's *Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920-1921*. His own father fought in the battle as one of Don Chafin's men.⁵⁹ Savage went back to the primary sources and thoroughly describes every aspect of these intriguing events. Interestingly, he looks at how World War I shaped the battle-providing veteran fighters on both sides of the line. Another historian, Clayton D. Laurie, who is employed as a historian for the United States Army Center of Military History, wrote an article in 1991 that also looks at the role of World War I in the Battle of Blair Mountain. His focus is on the changes that The Battle of Blair Mountain caused in the history of military policy, as well as its impact on the larger picture of the American labor situation during this era. According to Laurie, "The West Virginia disturbances were significant as they closed a chapter involving extraordinary extra-legal procedures in the domestic employment of

Federal troops and in effect restored the provisions of the pre-war statutes."⁶⁰ Basically, during World War I the government suspended the procedures that had been previously necessary for state authorities to gain Federal assistance and, therefore, between the years of 1917 and 1921 there were unprecedented numbers of federal interventions in domestic disturbances and labor disputes. Laurie concludes that the Battle of Blair Mountain is important because it marks the return of responsibility of handling similar disturbances in the future by state police and National Guard forces, rather than the United States Army.⁶¹

There are several other good anthologies written on the subject of the West Virginia "mine wars," many of which are included in the source list at the end of this paper. Clearly then, the Battle of Blair Mountain did make into some history books. For the most part, however, these are not books that often get taken off the shelves. John Sayles, the director of the movie *Matewan*, has written, "The story . . . is a dramatic and important one, as much a part of our heritage as that of the Alamo or Gettysburg or the winning of the West."⁶² Yet most people, even most of the residents of West Virginia, have probably never heard of what happened at The Battle of Blair Mountain. Sayles calls the miners a "colonized people" who "pulled a hard living from a hard land, people who lived under the heel of power and who finally could be pushed only so far." Although Blair Mountain resulted in a tactical and political defeat, Sayles recognizes that it was a psychological victory, shaking the foundations upon which their exploiters sat.⁶³ There are those that would argue that the people of the southern West Virginia coalfields are still colonized and held under a system that has yet to be altered. Yes, the union did finally come to coalfields after New Deal legislation allowed them to be recognized in 1933-but unions are often easily corrupted and are not always the answer.

Denise Giardina ends her novel *Storming Heaven* with a single sentence paragraph, "The companies still own the land."⁶⁴ Owning the land means that the coal companies still own the resources and the power. Today, Blair Mountain is home to the nation's fourth largest mining complex, owned by Arch Coal. The

people that once made that area their home have been moved out to "protect" them from the blasting and heavy equipment that have moved in to tear down the mountain through mountaintop removal practices. As activist Larry Gibson, stated, "They have little to no resistance here."⁶⁵ The fight did not end at Blair Mountain in 1921. Ken Sullivan, editor of *The Goldenseal Book of West Virginia Mine Wars*

puts it well: "The struggle for a better West Virginia continues and your [those who lived the mine wars] passionate commitment is an example to those who follow."⁶⁶ To those who are willing to listen and are interested in taking a stand and making changes in systems of oppression too-long entrenched, it is important that this story be told.

End Notes

¹ Quotes from Michael M. Meader, "The Red Neck War of 1921: The Miners' March and The Battle of Blair Mountain," p. 57, found in *The Goldenseal Book of West Virginia Mine Wars*, Ken Sullivan ed., (Charleston, WV: Pictorial Histories Distribution, 1991). Historic register information also from *The Goldenseal Book*, p. 65.

² David Corbin ed., *The West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, (Martinsburg, WV: Appalachian Editions, 1990), i.

³ From "Storming Heaven Book Review," by Colleen Anderson. Found in *The Goldenseal Book of West Virginia Mine Wars*, 82.

⁴ Larry Gibson, interview by Oral History Class from the Augusta Heritage Center, 8 August 2001, from Kristen Baughman's personal recording. I added the italics to emphasize the importance of that line.

⁵ Corbin, *The West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, iv.

⁶ Stan Cohen, *King Coal: A Pictorial Heritage of West Virginia Coal Mining*, (Charleston, WV: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co, 1984), 1.

⁷ "Testimony of George Echols," 18 September 1921. From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 103.

⁸ *Ibid*, 104.

⁹ *West Virginia's Mine Wars*, compiled by the West Virginia State Archives, found at <http://www.wvculture.org/history/minewars.htm>.

¹⁰ Harold A. West, "Civil War in the West Virginia Coal Mines: The Mine Guards," *The Survey*, 5 April 1913. From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 20.

¹² This list was taken from *West Virginia's Mine Wars*, compiled by the West Virginia State Archives, found at <http://www.wvculture.org/>

[history/minewars.htm](http://www.wvculture.org/history/minewars.htm). The following summaries of the early events of the West Virginia mine wars (the battles of Paint and Cabin Creek and the uprising at Matewan) are detailed in many of the works listed in the bibliography, but I found this source to provide an accurate and concise description. Therefore, I have used it as a reference for my own summaries and have noted where I have done so.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Walter Seacrist, "The Striker's Orphan Child." Found in *Goldenseal*, 27.

¹⁵ *West Virginia's Mine Wars*.

¹⁶ Heber Blankenhorn, "Marching Through West Virginia," *The Nation*, 14 September 1921. From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 111.

¹⁷ "Private Ownership of Public Officials," by Arthur Gleason. From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *West Virginia's Mine Wars*.

²¹ Gleason, "Private Ownership of Public Officials," 97.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Cohen, *King Coal: A Pictorial History of West Virginia Coal Mining*, 82.

²⁴ Gleason, "Private Ownership of Public Officials." From *The West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 96.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 100-101. My italics.

²⁶ *West Virginia's Mine Wars*.

²⁷ "Testimony of George Echols," 18 September 1921. From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 104.

28 "Stand by the Miners of Mingo," Communist Party of America newsletter. From *The West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 118-119.

29 Howard B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia: The Story of West Virginia's Four Major Mine Wars and Other Thrilling Incidents of Its Coal Fields*, (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University, 1969), 96.

30 Sources differ on number estimations throughout the course of the battle. This comes from Michael M. Meador, "The Red Neck War of 1921: The Miner's March and the Battle of Blair Mountain." From *Goldenseal*, 59.

31 Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 97.

32 Ibid, 96-97.

33 Ibid, 99.

34 Again, these numbers vary slightly from source to source, these particular figures coming from Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 99.

35 Meador, "The Red Neck War," 59.

36 Michael M. Meador, "The Siege of Crooked Creek Gap," Interview with Early Ball and Cush Garrett. From *Goldenseal*, 68.

37 Ibid, 67.

38 Ibid, 67.

39 This picture appears in several sources listed in the bibliography. One specific location is in *Goldenseal*, p. 62.

40 Meador, "The Red Neck War," *Goldenseal*, 59.

41 "The War in West Virginia," 17 September 1921, *Independent*. From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 106.

42 Ibid.

43 Meador, "The Siege of Crooked Creek Gap," Interview with Early Ball and Cush Garret. From *Goldenseal*, 70.

44 Ibid, 66-67.

45 Ibid.

46 "Gunmen Resort to Use of Bombs to Kill Women and Children of West Virginia," United Mine Workers Journal, from *Goldenseal*, 72.

47 Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 101.

48 "Testimony of Col. Stanley H. Ford."

From *West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, 121.

49 Meador, "The Red Neck War," *Goldenseal*, 61.

50 Meador, "The Siege of Crooked Creek Gap," Interview with Early Ball and Cush Garrett. From *Goldenseal*, 67.

51 Ibid.

52 *The New York Times*, 4 September 1921.

53 Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 101.

54 *The New York Times*, 3 and 4 September 1921.

55 Ibid, 4 September 1921.

56 Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, xi.

57 Ibid, 102.

58 Ibid, 102-103.

59 Joe Savage wrote an intriguing account of being on the "other side" in this battle, which has been published in *The Goldenseal Book of West Virginia Mine Wars*.

60 Clayton D. Laurie, "The United States Army and the Return to Normalcy in Labor Dispute Interventions: The Case of the West Virginia Coal Mine Wars, 1920-1921," *West Virginia History* 50 (1991): 2.

61 Ibid, 21.

62 John Sayles, from the Forward to Lon Savage, *Thunder in the Mountains*, vii.

63 Ibid.

64 Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven*, (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 312.

65 Larry Gibson, interview by Oral History Class from the Augusta Heritage Center, 8 August 2001, from Kristen Baughman's personal recording. I added the italics to emphasize the importance of that line.

66 Ken Sullivan, ed., *Goldenseal*, iv.

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