

# Mingo County 1968

By

Thomas L. Cuni

By the middle of the summer of 1968, the U.S.S. Pueblo had been captured by North Korea; the Tet Offensive had dramatically changed public opinion about the war in Vietnam; and, Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated. In Mingo County, West Virginia, those events were known but to me seemed far away. It was the summer between my junior and senior years in college. The most significant event in my life that year was the decision by the Mingo County Coal Company to open a new seam of coal at its existing mining operation near Sharples, West Virginia. An air shaft and a sloping tunnel were to be constructed. I was hired as a driller to work on the excavation of the thirty foot wide air shaft. When I began the job, the shaft had been dug to a depth of about fifty feet. By the end of the summer we would reach the stratum of coal known as the Eagle Seam at a depth of three hundred ten feet. I was assigned to work the second of the two work shifts. Each shift normally lasted ten hours, except when overtime work was required to finish pouring sections of the concrete liner for the shaft. My work day started at 5:30 PM and normally ended at 4 AM. When I started the job, I did not tell anyone that I was a college student. My story was that I had worked mining construction over in Logan County. It was not a complete lie since I had done that kind of work in previous summer jobs.

A few weeks into the job, the miners who worked for Mingo County Coal Company called a wildcat strike. The tippie which processed the coal from the mine was just down the hill a bit and across the road from our job site. Our union was affiliated with the AFL-CIO. The miners belonged to the United Mine Workers of America. The miners wanted us to shut down

our job in support of their strike. I went to the union meeting but kept my mouth shut and my hand down when the strike vote was called. Since we were not mining coal and because the strike had not been sanctioned by the national leadership of the United Mine Workers, the members of our local voted not to strike.

All might have gone well after that decision except for the fact that we were in Mingo County, West Virginia. It was often referred to as Bloody Mingo because of its long history of labor violence. In fairly recent times, mine owners through their hired thugs and the men who mined the coal fought each other with guns and dynamite over the issue of union organization. In our dispute, the coal company obtained a court order which prevented the strikers from putting their picket line across the entrance to our job site. Having failed to persuade us to join their strike, and after having lost in court, the miners were a little scratchy. After the consumption of what I assume to have been a fair amount of 3.2% beer at one of the local beer joints, four of the striking miners decided to present a more persuasive argument to their brethren in the AFL-CIO. The logistics for their plan consisted of two cars, two shotguns, and a dozen or so shotgun shells loaded with birdshot. I suspect, but I cannot prove, that they probably toted along a couple of six packs of Carling's Black Label to sustain their resolve to present a compelling argument for us to join their strike.

At 10:30 PM we came out of the hole to eat our lunch. We had just settled down to eat our meal when the miners rolled up on the hard road below the job site. I think that they used pump shotguns, but, at the time, I was not inclined to take a very careful look. I quickly found a comfortable if somewhat tight fitting spot under the 45 ton American crane next to which I had been sitting. Everyone else scattered for similar accommodations. After presenting their best arguments to persuade us to join their strike, the four unofficial representatives of the United

Mine Workers of America departed. When the excitement was over, we discussed the merits of the arguments that the miners had just made. The consensus was that the miners were not very fond of our decision not to honor their strike.

Only one guy on our crew had been hit. The crane operator, Ed Coleman, had several pieces of birdshot lodged under the skin of his upper back. I should mention that the men with whom I worked were a pretty rough lot. Opportunities to demonstrate how tough a man was were welcomed rather than avoided. Ed took off his shirt and took out his pocket knife. About a week or so before, I had confessed to the sin of being a college student. Ed had decided that he had an obligation to introduce me to the world outside academia. He and I had become pretty good friends during a tour of many of the lowlife establishments in the state capital of Charleston. I was not particularly surprised when he selected me to perform the needed surgery. As it turned out, it was really not a difficult medical procedure. All I had to do was use the knife blade to maneuver the lead shot a short distance back to the hole through which it had entered. Despite a lack of surgical training, I accomplished the task in a short time and we sat back down to finish our meal. We were back in the hole by 11 PM.

I avoided telling my mother about the incident because she had not been very happy about my summer job anyway. Her father had been a miner and she knew a little about the world in which miners worked. When I explained the situation to my dad, he came up with a pretty good plan. He had taken a pretty little .32 caliber automatic pistol in trade for a past due grocery bill. The gun was modeled on the 1911 Colt .45 that was used by the U. S. Army. I thought it was a pretty cool gun. Before he gave it to me, my father made me promise that I would not actually shoot anyone. His plan was to deter anyone from screwing around with me during my commute across Kelly Mountain in the dark early morning hours. Dad told me that I

should show the pistol to everyone during the shift change. He predicted that it would be popular and that some of the men might want to shoot a few rounds. I took the pistol and a box of ammunition with me to work the next day. As predicted, the little pistol attracted some attention. I let a couple of the guys shoot a few magazines of ammunition into the hillside. Several of the other men also brought guns to work. During the shift change, there was a something of a fire power demonstration in the parking lot. I should add that the parking lot for our work site was in view of the strikers on the picket line.

For several days all was peaceful and quiet. However, since we were in Mingo County that condition was only temporary. It was dark when I left the job site to go home. A few miles into my drive home, I crested a small hill and when the headlights of my truck shifted down to the roadway, I realized that there were two railroad ties across the road. I was able to skid to a stop on a wide spot off to the side of the road and avoided hitting the ties. It took me a few moments to collect my wits. I got out of the truck to investigate but then realized that it might be an ambush. I reached back into the truck to get my gun. No one shot at me as I stood there trying to decide what to do. The headlights of a car coming from the same direction as I had just travelled appeared and brought my attention back to the situation at hand.

On reflection, standing beside a highway, in the dark, and waving my arms over my head with a gun in my right hand may not have been one of the better ideas I had entertained that day. Rather than slowing the driver, the sight of a figure in his headlights waving a pistol above his head seemed to have encouraged him to apply more pressure to the accelerator. I recognized the blue Chevrolet station wagon as its front tires hit the railroad ties and the vehicle was launched into the air. It belonged to Arlen James, the shift leader of my crew. Even with both of the front tires blown, he was able to skid to a stop and stay on the road. Arlen was

not hurt, and more importantly, he was not mad at me for my less than well thought out attempt to warn him. He was however pissed at whoever had staged the stunt that might have killed us. He wanted me to start shooting into the trees to see if it would scare the lowlifes.

To this day I am astonished that I did not spray bullets into the trees and underbrush. In retrospect, it may well have been some bored local boys looking to cause mischief. The nearby coal camp called Sharples was just over the Mingo County line inside Logan County. It was generally accepted in the county that the boys who lived in that area were prone to bad decisions and to more than a moderate amount of troublemaking. I cannot remember if I even considered that it might be boys on that hillside that night. I think that it must have been my father's admonition to me to not shoot anyone that held me back. In any event, I did not shoot at the phantoms in the trees. I was driving a Chevrolet pickup truck so by using my spare tire and the one he carried, we were able to get Arlen's car back on the road that morning.

The little adventure on my early morning commute played no part in it, but a day or so later our union decided to honor the United Mine Workers' strike. I used the time off to make a trip to Cincinnati to visit Sally, then my girlfriend now my wife. When we were confronted by a man in Burnet Woods, I had an occasion to show him the pretty little pistol that my father had given to me. For the second time that summer I exercised good judgment and did not actually shoot anyone. I am confident that my father would have been proud of his son's restraint if I had told him about the incident. However, I thought that it would probably be better if he spent the rest of his life not knowing that I had travelled to Cincinnati in the family car with a gun.

The strike ended after only a few days. We went back to work, and a week or so later we

heard that the four culprits who are the stars of this story had been identified. The crime was solved by some first class police work. The four men who had shot at us often drank after work in a local beer joint. The establishment happened to belong to one of the hoist operators on the tunnel crew. He was a local boy named Jimmy who was also known as 'Jimmy the Bootlegger'. Later in the summer I would have a chance to help Jimmy out of a little situation that involved the West Virginia State Police, but that is another story.

I am sure that the four miscreants must have taken solemn vows of silence when they planned and executed their mission in support of the strike. However, on one of their visits to Jimmy's bar, the 3.2% beer seemed to have undone their vows of silence. In short, they bragged about the adventure. A patron of that bar, probably in the expectation of a generous reward of free beers, could not wait to tell Jimmy about the confession. Armed with that slender piece of evidence, the deputy sheriffs were able to solve the crime and apprehend the criminals.

Now if you believe in the strict enforcement of laws and in putting criminals in jails for long terms, you will probably be disappointed at how this story ends. The deputies brought the four perpetrators to the job site at the shift change. One of the deputies explained the investigation to us. The main point of his recital was that the four men had been very drunk when they committed the crime. Also, he told us he did not believe that they had really intended to seriously harm or kill anyone. Their use of birdshot was, I think, the deputy's principal argument in favor of the benign nature of their intentions. At the end of his report, the officer suggested that an apology from each of the four should be sufficient punishment and penance for their sins.

Amid a good deal of foot shuffling to rearrange the gravel in the parking lot, each of the now contrite miners expressed sincere remorse for his actions. The deputies loaded those guys back into the patrol cars and presumably drove them home. We went to work a little bit late that night, but as far as Mingo County was concerned, the world was back to spinning in greased grooves.

