

MINE WAR

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I do not remember the exact date on which I first heard about The Battle of Blair Mountain, but I clearly recall the circumstances of that event. My father and I were traveling to Huntington, West Virginia to spend the day with this mother. While I did not know it at the time, Mrs. Cuni was dying. By working backwards from the date of her death, I estimate that I was nine years old on the day of that trip. The trees were turning color, as I recall, so this story probably begins in the Fall of 1956.

As we were passing several houses which were set back a fair distance from the road, my father pointed in the direction of the houses and said that he and his mother had stayed in one of the houses during the mine war. Of course, the mention of a war was of intense interest to a boy of nine. I had many questions for my father for rest of the trip. Unlike most of the world (and his son in particular) my father spoke in sentences not in paragraphs. Short, declarative sentences were Lee Cuni's means of communication. He was not generous in his description of the events some thirty years in the past. It took a frustrating number of questions to obtain even a small bit of the story. Because my father's description was far too short and I was far too curious, I began, following that Autumn conversation, to assemble by bits and pieces an explanation of the battle which involved over thirteen thousand armed men and which required the intervention of President Warren G. Harding and the U.S. Army to end.

The immediate cause of the war was the assassination of Sid Hatfield in the Spring of 1921. The men who killed him were employees of the Baldwin Felts Detective Agency. It was a company employed by the coal operators to suppress union activity. The use of violence and intimidation by both the mine owners and the union was prevalent throughout the region. The economic struggle among the coal companies was a constant battle for economic survival. The struggle for

economic survival among the companies produced a distillate of very hard men who owned and operated the mines. The harsh treatment of the miners was in the view of the mine owners a necessary element for their survival in the larger industry. Economic necessity and the combined influences of Adam Smith and the Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus provided a scientific and moral rationale for creating a modern form of what amounted to feudalism in the coal fields. The men who owned and operated coal mines in the early years of the last century probably attended their churches on Sunday with a clear conscience.

The geography of southern West Virginia allowed coal companies to successfully resist unionization for many years. The coal fields in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and northern West Virginia were, by the 1920s, nearly completely unionized. The chief impediment to union organization in southern counties of West Virginia was the absence of roads. The southern coal fields were opened by the penetration of the railroads through the narrow valleys of that mountainous region. Because of the interdependence of the railroads and coal companies, the railroads took a strong interest in closely regulating who could be a passenger on their trains. The number of union organizers who entered the region was substantially limited by vigilant conductors and railroad detectives. The coal operators in southern West Virginia, in reaction to the success of union organizational efforts in central West Virginia, formed the Kanawha County Coal Operators Association. Among other measures the coal operators brought in the Baldwin Felts Detective Agency to oppose union organization in the southern coal fields.

Prior to the opening of the southern coal fields, the population was relatively small and scattered along the creek banks and river bottoms. Subsistence farming and timber were the principal industries pursued by a population that was largely of Scotch-Irish origins. The much larger work force needed to mine coal had to be imported. Housing and other necessities of life were

needed for the miners and their families. The town in which I grew up was fairly typical for the region. It was located at the confluence of Buffalo Creek, Huff Creek and the Guyandotte River. Along the fifteen, or so, miles from the head of Buffalo Creek to the Town of Man were a half dozen coal mines and two dozen or more coal camps.

The coal camps were usually built on the floor of the valley as close to the mines as the geography of the area permitted. The housing for the miners was built and owned by the coal companies. Generally, the houses were constructed of pine boards with tar paper roofs. Most such houses had two small unheated bedrooms and one large room which was heated by a Franklin stove. The larger room served as the kitchen and living room for the family. Behind the house there was usually a privy and a coal bin. In some of the coal camps there were often boarding houses which were called “club houses” and which provided sleeping rooms for the unmarried miners.

The homes of the shift bosses, the office force, and the more important company store employees were usually situated slightly higher on the hill above the camp. Those houses were, by custom, two story duplexes with brick fire places. A bit higher on the hill above the camp would be larger, two-story single family homes for the mine superintendent, the company doctor, and the company store manager.

The tipple, which is a coal processing plant, was normally three or more stories high, and was located on the floor of the valley. The tipple was built on stilts which were high enough to allow railroad cars to pass under the structure so that the processed coal could be loaded into the railroad cars. It was most often the largest structure in the area. The process of crushing and washing coal gave rise to a steady cloud of coal dust in the air and black water in the adjacent creeks and rivers.

A business area usually served several coal camps owned by a coal company and it normally consisted of company owned stores which sold the miners their food, dry goods, and furniture. After the Second World War, the coal companies built gas stations to sell gasoline to their employees. My grandfather, Charlie Atkinson, was a miner. In his time the company stores also sold the miners their tools such as picks, shovels, and drills, and also their work supplies such as carbide for their mine lamps, dynamite, and blasting caps. Many companies provided a restaurant of sorts that was called a grill but which had as its principal commercial activity the sale of beer.

Between paydays, the company stores kept a running account of purchases and the total along with the rent for their homes was deducted from the pay of the miners. Well into the 1950s, miners were paid in company issued scrip rather than legal currency for whatever remained after the deductions from their pay. If a miner wanted to actually receive US Dollars for part of his pay, he would have to convince his shift boss that he had to purchase something that was not available through the company stores. There were few opportunities for miners to actually receive real money for their labor. The cost of goods at the company store was nearly always higher than the stores in the towns. After the deductions from his pay a miner often had little remaining from his pay and often he was in debt to the coal company. You may remember the Tennessee Ernie Ford song from the 1950's about loading sixteen tons of coal and being another day older and deeper in debt. The song reflected the reality of a miner's life.

My family's experiences spanned the time period from the early version of harsh exploitation to the current less terrible model. My mother's father, Charlie Atkinson, started his work life as a mule skinner. He drove wagons for the small sawmill owned by my great-grandfather. Charlie

married the boss's daughter, Polly Jerrod. When they married and started a family, Charlie went into the mines in the hope of better pay and housing.

When he was a miner, the pay for a miner was based on the amount of coal that he dug. If there was a break in the seam, the miner was not paid for the rock that had to be cleared. The company charged the miners for the dynamite and blasting caps which the miners used to extract the coal as well as to clear away rock. Often the scales for weighting the coal were adjusted to favor the company. The work was hard and the hours were long for a miner. There was no worker's compensation to sustain a family if the miner was injured. Injuries were frequent. One historian of the coal industry suggested that a World War I soldier had a better statistical chance of surviving in battle than a coal miner in West Virginia. Charlie was injured in two separate accidents. In the first, he had both of his legs broken when a mine car derailed because the pony pulling it got spooked. On the occasion of his second injury, his back was broken by a kettle bottom falling through the ceiling. Kettle bottoms were petrified tree trunks held in the sandstone strata immediately above the coal seam. They were hard to detect and miners who were knocking loose rocks from the ceiling were frequently injured or killed when the kettle bottom burst through a thin layer of sandstone. Charlie and Polly would have been evicted by the coal company from their home had not Polly been a cook of some local renown. My great-grandfather Jarrod had not been particularly happy when his daughter had gotten married. Polly's mother had died some years earlier after giving birth to her twelfth child. Polly's father wanted her to stay at home and take care of him. Along with her mother, Polly and her sisters had learned to cook by preparing meals for the crews of the little sawmill which her father operated. She became a very good cook. To this day, I still remember the meals of fried

chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes, gravy, and green beans that Polly could prepare at what seemed to be a moment's notice.

On both occasions when Charlie was unemployed because of his injuries, Polly set a board for the bachelors in the coal camp. She prepared breakfasts, lunches, and dinners and received payment in cash which she would, in turn sell, to miners or their wives for company issued scrip at a favorable rate. As a result of Polly's cooking skill and financial acumen, they managed to pay the rent and survive as a family.

After their four daughters were grown, Charlie and Polly managed to scrape together some money, which along with the contributions from the son-in-laws who could afford to help, was enough to make a down payment on a small, hilltop, farm near the Virginia border. They were probably part of only a very small number of miners who were able to voluntarily leave the coal company's employment.

As a product of the working circumstances such as Charlie experienced, many miners in southern West Virginia understandably harbored a great resentment toward the coal companies. Sid Hatfield was such a man. He was one of the many relatives of Devil Anse Hatfield of the famous Hatfield-McCoy feud. He had tried his hand at mining but had quickly learned that he did not want that life. The incorporated town of Matewan was a rough town in the coal mining county of Mingo, West Virginia. Sid Hatfield was a rough man and he found that life as a police chief was a better choice than mining. The guns that he carried were not for show. The town and the surrounding coal camps were like a backwater of the American frontier which had long before moved west. Guns, moonshine liquor, the absence of effective regional law enforcement, and a culture of fierce personal honor, made for an atmosphere of violence not unlike that which had existed in the cow towns and mining camps of the west. Even before the union efforts at

organizing the southern coal fields, the county was often referred to as “Bloody Mingo”. In the 1960s, the southern part of West Virginia was still notorious for the frequency of personal disputes being resolved by guns or dynamite. My wife, Sally, is from Cincinnati. Her parents, who were educators, had friends who had grown up in Point Pleasant, which is a town in the northern part of West Virginia. When Sally’s parents, told their friends that their daughter was dating a young man from Logan County, their friends were more than a bit alarmed. They reported to my future mother-in-law and father-in-law that everyone in Logan County carried guns. Despite a somewhat of a slow start with Sally’s parents, I eventually won them over.

Now, the mine war of 1921. It had its origins in an incident in May of 1920. Sid Hatfield, the police chief of Matewan, along with the town’s mayor and several other deputized citizens of the town confronted a group of agents of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. The agents were in Matewan to evict miners from company owned houses. The miners had joined the union, and under the terms of the “yellow dog” contracts which they had to sign with the company, they could be fired for any union activity. Baldwin-Felts was a national company which provided armed men to break strikes and disrupt union actions. They were nearly universally referred to as “thugs” by the miners and their families, and also by a large part of the other citizens of the coal fields, including my father.

Sid Hatfield, who was barely literate and who was a very rough character, took exception to the presence of the agency’s thugs usurping his authority in his town. Seven of the twelve Baldwin-Felts agents died in the ensuing gun fight in the streets of the town. Two bystanders also were killed, as was the town’s mayor.

Among the dead were Al and Lee Felts, the younger brothers of Tom Felts who was one of the principals of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. Sid Hatfield and his deputies were tried and,

not surprisingly, acquitted of murder charges in Mingo County. Shortly after the acquittal, Sid Hatfield was indicted in McDowell County for a shooting in a coal camp in that county. When Sid, his chief deputy and their wives arrived at the courthouse in Welch, several Baldwin-Felts detectives shot both men dead on the steps of the courthouse. Sid Hatfield's wife was the widow of the mayor of Matewan who had been killed in the previous gunfight. For the second time in less than two years she was a widow. Some years later the killers were tried for murder and also not surprisingly, they were acquitted.

The murder of Sid Hatfield sparked perhaps the largest insurrection in America's history other than the Civil War and the Revolutionary War. In August 1921, miners began to assemble in Marmont, a small town near the state capitol, Charleston. The miners in the Kanawha Valley area which surrounds Charleston had recently fought an ugly battle with the coal operators of central West Virginia. They had ultimately won the right to organize a union. Ironically, the coal operators in the mining areas of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and north and central West Virginia pressed the union to organize the southern coal fields in order to eliminate the competitive advantages of the non-union mines. The southern West Virginia mine operators had added additional pressure for a confrontation by collectively lowering the pay for their miners shortly before Hatfield's murder. Prior actions to suppress union organizing efforts included a famous incident in which an armored train was used to attack the tent encampment of miners who had been evicted from their company owned homes during a strike. The arrest and conviction of union organizers and striking miners by corrupt sheriffs and judges who had been bribed by the mine operators was not uncommon and served to further enrage the miners. For each of the more notable acts of violence and suppression, there were, for most miners in the region, a daily menu of small indignities to endure from the unfair employment practices of the coal companies.

The murder of Sid Hatfield and his deputy and friend, Ed Chambers, in front of their wives produced an effect across the entire mining region. Men from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and northern and central West Virginia spontaneously left their jobs and homes and began a disorganized and essentially leaderless march toward Mingo County. The inventory of guns in quite a number of hardware stores along the way suffered unexpected shrinkages. Food was sometimes provided by those who were sympathetic to the miners, and sometimes by those who were probably not particularly fond of providing provisions for the growing army of angry men travelling south. The consensus of most historians of the event is that there were probably ten thousand miners who ultimately arrived at Blair Mountain in Logan County. That mountain had to be crossed to get to Mingo County. Don Chafin, the sheriff of Logan County, was on the payroll of the coal operators, and he was determined that the rebellious miners would not cross his county.

Another circuitous thread which connects me through my father to that long ago war comes by way of Don Chafin, or more precisely, a daughter of Don Chafin. In most of America the first topic after being introduced to someone is most often a discussion about what that person does for a living. In the West Virginia of my youth, the first topic was generally about the person's family and where that family lived. For instance, if one's family was known to be shiftless, lazy, or dishonest (or all three) that pretty much was taken as a good indication of the character of the person. If one's family was not from the region, it was considered fairly certain that a substantial character defect probably existed in such a stranger.

When I learned from my father that one of my mother's friends was a daughter of Don Chafin, I understood for the first time why he had been polite but never warm in his social interaction with her. It was common knowledge that Don Chafin had been on the payroll of the mine operators.

Or, as the saying went, he was in the pocket of the operators. Therefore, his daughter was naturally someone who was not to be trusted.

As the disorganized army of miners moved south toward Mingo County, Sheriff Chafin deputized every store clerk and small business owner that he could recruit, as well as anyone else in the county who was sympathetic to the mine owners. The governor of West Virginia, Ephraim Morgan, contributed most of the small detachment of the West Virginia State Police to the sheriff's growing army. The West Virginia National Guard had not been reconstituted after the Great War. The governor hastily formed several National Guard infantry companies and made that pool of manpower available to Sheriff Chafin. Still, the available force was not large enough for the task at hand. Men were recruited from Bluefield, Huntington and Charleston to fill the ranks of the army. My father's description of recruits was that they were the sweepings from the streets of those cities.

To Chafin's army, the local coal operators contributed the mine guards they employed and a contingent of Baldwin-Felts agents. The total number of men who assembled under Chafin's leadership was around three thousand. However, the availability of machine guns from the National Guard arsenal more than offset the numerical disadvantage which Chafin's force faced. The governor's appointment of Colonel William Eubank as commander of the reconstituted West Virginia National Guard nominally transferred the leadership of defending army to him. However, most miners still believed the Don Chafin was the one who was really in charge of the defense.

As the miners converged on Blair Mountain, the script for the largest armed conflict in America since the Civil War seemed complete. However, like every good drama, a last minute resolution to the conflict seemed to be at hand. President Harding sent General Henry Bandholtz, a Great

War hero, to Charleston to report on the growing conflict and to help restore order. Bandholtz and Governor Morgan called in the union leadership in the persons of William M. Blizzard, Frank Kenney and Fred Mooney. While the union leaders had often used violent means to confront coal operators, the march of angry miners had not been planned nor had it been particularly encouraged by the union leadership. The union leaders had, prior to the governor's intervention, actively tried to dissuade the armed men from continuing their march south. In their meeting with the governor and General Bandholtz, the union leaders were told that the miners and the leadership of the United Mine Workers of America would be charged with treason if the march continued.

Armed with the government's threat of arrest for treason, the UMWA leadership was able to persuade many of the miners that they should return home. As with all wars, events overcame plans. The trains which were supposed to carry the miners back to Charleston were delayed. The West Virginia State police did not get the word and raided a miner's encampment and killed two miners. The war was no longer avoidable.

As wars go, it sounded more violent than it actually was. For three days the opposing forces confronted each other along the steep ridges and valleys of Blair Mountain. The volume of gun fire was, by most reports, nearly continuous. The contemporaneous estimates of miners, killed were far greater than those which were actually inflicted by the well armed defending force. As the scope of the conflict increased, it was seized upon by the famous General Billie Mitchell as an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of the military air power which he had been promoting since the Great War. Mitchell had his bombers flown in from Maryland to join the defense. Several of his planes crashed in the rough hill country and while a few bombs were

dropped, Mitchell's contribution to the conflict was more a stunt than a real factor in the outcome.

On September 1, 1921 President Harding sent in federal troops from Ft. Thomas, Kentucky. The miners surrendered. Many of the miners were veterans of the past war and they did not want to fight the army in which they had so recently served. After surrendering their weapons to the federal troops, the miners were transported by train out of the area. Despite the enormous amount of ammunition expended, the final count was, twelve miners killed, and four men from Chafin's army killed.

The legal repercussions of the war began with great enthusiasm to punish the men who were perceived as the leaders of the insurrection. There were 1,217 indictments handed down by special grand juries. Of the 24 charges of treason handed down, only one man was convicted. He skipped bail and was never found. Of the 325 indictments for murder, a father and son were the only ones convicted for the murder of three of Chafin's deputies. Both were pardoned by Governor Howard Gore after serving three years of the eleven years to which they had been sentenced. The balance of the trials resulted in acquittals and dropped charges.

The defeat of the miner's army effectively stopped the unionization of the southern coal fields for over ten years. The Great Depression eventually caused the mining industry in the area to collapse. When the economy began to recover, the coal operators were not as strong as they had once been. The passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act also gave the unions an opportunity to enter the region again. By the time of the conversation with my father with which I began this story, the United Mine Workers of America under the leadership of John L. Lewis had organized the coal fields of southern West Virginia.

Bitterness and animosity between the coal companies and the miners was, in the 1950s and 1960s, still very much a part of the culture of the region. By the early 1960s the company stores were gone, as was payment of the miners in scrip which had sustained those stores. Federal laws which governed mine safety began to come into effect after the Second World War. As I was growing up everything in that peculiar society was changing.

Yet, the passage of years did not change everything in the world of coal mining. I had a first-hand experience of what it meant to be a miner. In what I call a West Virginia scholarship, several of the coal companies in the area would hire college students to work in and around the mines during the Summers, and, in my case, also over Christmas break. The UMWA allowed students to join the union, and, by an informal arrangement, waived the seniority rules to allow their employment. The experience was, for me, a transformative one. Besides providing the money needed for a college education, it has always been my suspicion that Lee Cuni wanted to show his son what it was like to really work for a living. If my suspicions were in fact true, his plan had the desired effect. I was properly motivated by the experience to continue with my education.

In the course of my work in the mines, I met some memorable people. Some I remember for their remarkably good character and wisdom. Some I remember for their complete lack of character and questionable judgment. As a young man, I will admit to preferring the company of the less reputable among them because they provided more exciting experiences outside of work.

There is one experience from my work in the mines which I will relate. On one of my jobs I was employed for a time on the third shift (Midnight to 8:00 AM) as the assistant to the miner who set the timbers and put in the bolts to support the roof of the mine. His primary job was to drill holes in the roof of the mine into which long bolts were inserted. There was a molly, that is an

expanding anchor, on the end which was inserted. There was a metal plate on the end of the bolt which was flush with the roof. The roof bolts bound several layers of sandstone into a stable sandwich of the different strata.

The first and second shifts mined coal and typically the third shift performed the work to maintain and to keep the mine safe. On one occasion, there had been an electrical problem and the second shift had not mined enough coal to meet the production requirement for the day. The section boss received a call shortly after work had started. If you have ever wondered what happened to the old wooden wall phones which were powered by a hand cranked magneto, I can tell you. Those telephones wound up in coal mines. The call was to tell us that we were to mine coal and skip the maintenance work. A heated debate about the safety of working too far beyond the shoring began between the section boss and a couple of miners. The union steward was called over from another area of the mine and when the section boss refused to change the order, the steward told us to empty our water pails. Before we had poured our water out, the boss asked for a few minutes to talk to his boss. The net result was that the order was rescinded and we did the maintenance work. The demand for production was, for once, not permitted to overrule the safety of the miners. It does not always turn out the way it did that night. Twenty-nine miners died a few years ago in Raleigh County, West Virginia as a result of the mine owner insisting upon meeting production goals at the expense of maintenance and safety. Don Blankenship, the CEO of Massey Energy Company, is presently under a federal criminal indictment for his decision to order that safety and maintenance issues be deferred in favor of meeting production goals.

When I was much younger, I would have explained the seemingly cruel treatment of the men who mined coal as the inevitable product of a capitalistic economic system. I do not think that

my earlier belief was correct. The section boss who wanted us to mine coal in an unsafe condition was not a bad man. He and his boss, and the boss of his boss, all were part of a hierarchical organization. Hierarchical structures are present in all economic systems and such structures seem to be necessary for the production of the goods and services in every society. I not believe that safety will ever take consistent precedent over production requirements within such management structures. I now believe that the intervention of such forces as unions and government regulation may ameliorate the worse excesses but such counterforces will not solve the conflict between production and safety. The current revolution in technology which we are experiencing has already changed the means by which goods and services are produced. Technology will in time change the means by which work is performed. Coal is likely, for at least a time, to remain as a necessary resource in commerce and industry, but it is my belief (perhaps more realistically, my hope) that miners will be exposed to much less risk in earning their livings in the not too distant future by reason of the introduction of machines that will perform the dangerous work.

A short postscript to my story involves a previous reference in this paper about being told to empty our water pails. There is a small story in that act. Pouring out your water had at some point evolved into the signal to strike. It is why the miners carried water pails that is interesting to me. One of the very few times that owners and unions were in complete agreement was adoption of lunch pails of uniform design for all union miners. Prior to the change in the union rule, miners carried their lunches and drinking water into the mine in any container they wanted to use. Frequently there was an annoying minority of miners who did not bother to carry water with them. It is a dark work place and helping one's self to whatever water bottle was at hand led to numerous, and sometimes violent disputes.

The lunch bucket that I, and every other union miner, carried was like a double boiler. The bucket had a top section with a lid. The water was carried in the bottom part and food in the top, removable container, which had the lid on it. The trip from the mouth of the mine to the working face began with a little ceremony. Before settling into the small mine cars for the man trip, as it was called, the miners would remove the top section of their lunch pails and spit into their water. Everyone saw that you had water. No one would be tempted to steal it, particularly from a man who dipped snuff or chewed tobacco. It is not a custom that apparently travels well. As far as I know, it is peculiar to coal miners and it may be the only unique bit of knowledge with I brought for you tonight. Thank-you.