

Hello, I'm John McCoy from Cedar Hill, Texas and in August 1921, some 10,000 West Virginia coal miners, outraged over years of brutality, lawless exploitation, and the daring, daylight assassination of Matewan Massacre defendants Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers, picked up their rifles and marched south to Logan and Mingo counties determined to end the non-union regime. They were intercepted by Logan Sheriff Don Chafin, an infamous figure in union history. Chafin's men met the miners along a broad defensive front just inside the northern Logan county border, and The Battle of Blair Mountain began. For ten days the miners fought a pitched battle against an opposing legion of deputies, state police, and makeshift militia. Only the declaration of martial law and the intervention of a federal expeditionary force, including a bomber squadron commanded by General Billy Mitchell, ended America's largest labor uprising—and the largest armed insurrection on U.S. soil since the Civil War.

For six days the Charleston Gazette's headlines screamed: "Martial Law in Five Counties," "Troops Invade Boone County," & "Hard Battle on Two Fronts of Logan Line". A war was in progress in West Virginia. 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 was under siege. The President had to send in federal troops, the United Mine Workers of America was fighting for its life-and today, almost unbelievably, this war is nearly forgotten. There is not even a roadside marker to commemorate the mine war which is also referred to as The Battle of Blair Mountain, the Miners' March, or the Red Neck War.

The general causes of the conflict of 1921 developed over many years. From the time the first shovelful of coal was removed from West Virginia, the men who did the mining were exploited by those who owned the mineral. Miners and their families often existed in crowded, isolated, and substandard coal camps, at the mercy of the mine owners who owned the camps as well. Miners who fought for better wages or living conditions were fired from their jobs, thrown out of their homes, and blacklisted from other mines. One either accepted the system or moved on.

A ray of hope appeared for the miners in 1890 when the United Mine Workers of America was organized by a merger of two earlier miners'

unions. By the turn of the century unionized mine operators in the northern and Midwestern fields were putting pressure on the UMWA to organize the younger West Virginia industry, whose cheap coal was undercutting established markets.

Threatened with the loss of their foothold in these older coalfields, union officials set about trying to organize in West Virginia. They were met with resistance by mine owners and the courts. Injunctions were issued against the use of coercion or violence to force miners to become union members. West Virginia mine owners hired special guards and deputies (called "gun thugs" by the miners) for the purpose of keeping the union out. One of the most hated tools of the mine owners was the "yellow dog" contract which many miners were forced to sign. In the contract the miner agreed not to join the union under penalty of losing his job and company house. These contracts, upheld in court, were a powerful weapon in the hands of the operators and much resented by the miners.

In the early 1900's the majority of West Virginia's mines were owned and operated by individuals rather than large corporations. Many of these operations were tiny by today's standards, although they employed more workers than might be expected, since coal was mostly mined by hand. Owners of these mines found it difficult to absorb financial losses. They feared the union because of its insistence upon costly practices such as higher wages, safer working conditions, and collective bargaining. In spite of this fear of unions, roughly half the mines in the state had accepted the UMWA by 1910. Most of these mines were north of the Kanawha River. South of the Kanawha the mine owners and their hated guards were still in control. To ensure their continued control over the operations and to keep the union away, mine owners in West Virginia gradually gained control of local and state government through the use of coercion, bribery, and fear. The frustrated miners soon realized that no help for their grievances would come from courts or elected officials, so they turned instead to strikes and violence to settle their disputes. This made their cause feared and unpopular with the general public.

In 1912, the first major strike in the West Virginia Mine Wars occurred on Paint and Cabin Creeks in Kanawha County, when 7,500 miners walked off the job over a wage dispute. The operators, refusing to

negotiate, fired the miners and evicted them from their company-owned homes. Thousands of people were forced to take shelter in the woods and hills above the two creeks. Mother Jones, the fiery, foul-mouthed union organizer, arrived and encouraged the miners to take up arms. The union provided guns and ammunition, and for weeks the two creeks were a bloody battlefield. Only when the enraged miners seemed likely to wipe out the mine guards did the governor declare martial law and send in the state militia to end the strike. The violence, albeit sporadic, continued for years.

In 1917 America's entry into World War I brought a short truce to the continuing struggle between the miners and the mine owners. The market for coal was good and most of the younger labor force was fighting overseas. But tension surfaced again as soon as the war ended. In 1919, an armed band of pro-union miners marched through Boone County in an attempt to organize the Logan and Mingo County mines. They were stopped at Danville in Boone County when word from the governor to either disband peacefully or face the state militia reached them. The march ended without incident.

On May 19, 1920, several mine guards (including Albert and Lee Felts of the notorious Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency), who had been evicting miners from company houses in Mingo County, were ambushed and slaughtered in downtown Matewan. The battle, led by Police Chief Sid Hatfield, also claimed the lives of Matewan's mayor and two miners. Hatfield and his henchmen were trumpeted as champions of the union cause and were acquitted for lack of evidence when brought to trial for the murders. The mine guards sought revenge, however, and Hatfield and an associate, Ed Chambers, were gunned down in broad daylight on the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse the next summer.

All during that troubled summer of 1921 there was violence and unrest in the southern coalfields. Fighting got so bad in Mingo County that Governor Morgan declared martial law there. To protest the murder of Sid Hatfield and the conditions in Mingo County, the leaders of the union called for a rally at the state capitol on Sunday, August 7. Mother Jones was invited to speak to the group. She reviled the governor and coal companies and called upon the miners to march into Logan and Mingo counties and set up the union by force. In Logan County this would mean crushing the power of Sheriff Don Chafin, who was paid by

the coal companies to keep out the union. He sustained a force of 300 "special deputies" whose purpose was to watch all incoming roads and railroads and to prevent rallies at the mines. Suspicious characters were jailed without legal recourse and many people simply disappeared. Sheriff Chafin virtually ruled all aspects of life in Logan County and was hated and feared by the union.

At the capitol rally on the seventh, Mother Jones called for the miners to lynch Chafin and to establish the union at all costs. Frank Keeney, the UMW District 17 president, urged the miners to return to their homes, arm themselves, and wait for a call to action. Mother Jones and Keeney were calling for the union to gamble its future in one desperate show of force. They realized that if the march was successful and the union could be carried by force into Mingo and Logan counties, which were bastions of non-union labor, then the UMWA would be free to organize any mine in the state. However, they surely must also have realized that if the armed march was unsuccessful the union would probably be cast out of the southern West Virginia altogether.

The call to arms came on August 20, 1921. On that day 600 armed men gathered at Lens Creek, near Marmet in Kanawha County. The area became an armed camp as angry men swarmed in from all parts of southern West Virginia and surrounding areas. Some reportedly came from as far away as Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. A few men wore uniforms and helmets, left over from army service in World War I.

By the late afternoon of August 21, 1,500 men had gathered at Lens Creek. Their destination and purpose was kept a secret and reporters and law enforcement officers were turned away. The Charleston Gazette reported that the miners were preparing to invade Logan County but no one in authority could be found to verify the rumors. Residents of Charleston were thrown into a panic by rumors that the miners, who were only 10 miles away, were going to attack the capital city.

By the 23rd the number of miners had swollen to between 7,000 and 8,000 men. Flu and dysentery invaded the miners' unsanitary camp, and six doctors and eight nurses were brought in to care for the victims. That night Mother Jones spoke to the assembled miners and for reasons

still unknown, reversed herself and urged the miners to disband and go home. She said she had received a telegram from President Harding ordering the men to disperse. The telegram was proven to be bogus and Mother Jones left the miners' camp discredited and in disgrace. In spite of Mother Jones, preparations for the invasion continued. Finally, on the night of August 24, somewhere between 8,000 and 13,000 men started up Lens Creek toward Logan County, 65 miles away. When the news reached Logan early in the morning, shop whistles blew and church bells were rung in alarm. Sheriff Chafin rushed his deputies to the top of Blair Mountain to man the fortifications that had been thrown up in preparation. Chafin also called out every able-bodied man to assist the deputies.

The marchers followed a winding, mountainous, dirt road from Marmet. The *Charleston Gazette* telephoned Boone County Sheriff John Hill and asked him what he intended to do to stop the thousands of miners. The sheriff replied that he only had three or four deputies and as far as he was concerned the miners were "perfectly welcome to walk along the highway through Boone County."

A fast-moving advance group of miners reached the foot of Blair Mountain early on the morning of August 25. There they were surprised by a group of Chafin's men and a pitched battle broke out. The miners eventually retreated. In the meantime, the main group of marchers was stretched out in a long, straggling, unorganized line of weary older men and excited young ones. They carried every type of firearm, from machine guns to old flintlock mountain rifles. Some carried banners which said "On to Mingo," and around their necks were tied red bandannas, their union symbol. The marchers called themselves "red necks" as did most everyone else. This name, which is now commonly used as a slang term for someone who is uneducated or bigoted, in those days referred to a radical, or "red."

By the afternoon of the 25th, between 7,000 and 9,000 tired marchers overran the twin towns of Madison and Danville in Boone County. The miners cut telephone lines and emptied the stores of food, shoes, and ammunition as they awaited trains to take them to Blair Mountain. By the early morning hours of Friday, August 26, another group of miners, 1,200 strong, had managed to reach Blair Mountain. There they stole a train which was backed 15 miles up the line to Madison, where the main body of marchers waited for transportation. As soon as the march had

begun, panic broke out in Logan and Charleston. Governor Morgan wired President Harding for Federal troops to end the disturbance. Harding responded by sending a military advisor, Gen. H. H. Bandholtz, to assess the situation and end the conflict if possible. As soon as Bandholtz arrived in Charleston he met with the governor and was briefed on the situation. He then ordered union leaders Keeney and Mooney to meet with him. The pair was ordered to end the march and disperse all of the participants to their homes at once. Failure to do so would force Harding to send in troops and declare martial law.

Keeney and Mooney arrived in Madison on the afternoon of the 26th, about the same time as the hijacked train. There they found thousands of men lying under trees and propped against buildings, waiting for something to happen. The two leaders herded 600 men into the ball field in West Madison and read the President's order. The miners argued and grumbled, but in the end agreed they couldn't fight the entire United States Army and voted to disband. From the Martin Hotel in Madison, Keeney and Mooney issued the following order to all miners: "This is to certify that the men voted today at 2:30 p.m. in the ball park to return home. Trains are being arranged for their transportation home." On Saturday, August 27, the Gazette reported the miners homeward bound, and stated: "The March on Mingo County which started as a protest against martial law... is now history." Or so they thought. On the morning of Sunday the 28th word passed like lightning up and down the line of returning men that Sheriff Chafin's guards were shooting women and children in Sharples, a small mining camp just inside Logan County on the Blair Mountain road. Immediately the men turned and started back toward the mountain and again the sirens were sounded in Logan. The miners re-grouped at Blair in less than 36 hours.

What had actually occurred was that Chafin and Captain Brokus, head of the Logan state police detachment, decided to cross Blair Mountain with 200 men and make some ill-timed arrests at the town of Mifflin, near Sharples. As the men came down Beech Creek in the darkness they were surprised at Monclo by a group of union men who were still in the area. A battle broke out which lasted for some hours ending with two miners killed and one wounded. A Logan justice of the peace, Fulton Mitchell, his brother Lucian, and two other deputies were captured by the miners. Mrs. Maggie Holt, 93, of Sharples, described in

an interview how she and her children lay on the floor of their house in Monclo as bullets ripped through the walls and windows.

By the next day Blair Mountain was a raging battle line. With the fight on and thousands of angry miners attempting to cross Blair Mountain, Sheriff Chafin sent out an appeal for help to neighboring counties. Men soon began arriving from the non-union areas of Mercer, McDowell, Cabell, Wyoming and Mingo counties. The state police also sent in men. The defenders on Blair Mountain wore white scarves to distinguish themselves from the red neck miners. Logan was transformed into a military camp and women began cooking in churches and schools to feed the hungry men. Sheriff Chafin even resorted to offering prisoners in his ever-crowded jail freedom if they would go help the defenders on top of the ridge. One prisoner, a bricklayer, was ordered to take a rifle. He refused and, according to another prisoner, was shot and killed. The Logan Banner reported that he was shot "while trying to escape."

By Tuesday, August 30, the situation was completely out of hand. President Harding issued a proclamation commanding all "insurgents to disperse and retire peacefully to their respective homes by 12:00 o'clock noon of the first day of September 1921, and hereafter abandon said combinations and submit themselves to the laws and constituted authorities." Unless they disbanded he would send in federal troops. The marchers refused to lay down their arms, fearing they would be slaughtered by Chafin's men if they did so. Also, they had amassed their strength at the Craddock Fork of Hewett Creek near Lake, and thought they were about to break over the mountain onto Crooked Creek which leads into the town of Logan. They knew that if they could break through, the defenders would have a difficult time stopping them.

Sheriff Chafin in desperation hired private airplane pilots at \$100 a day to fly over the miners and drop homemade bombs on them. The bombs were made out of four-to six-inch oil well casings. Most of the bombs were dropped over Hewett Creek and failed to explode. One which did go off was aimed at a one-room schoolhouse the miners were using as a hospital, on Graddock Fork near the town of Lake. The bomb missed the school by about 100 yards and exploded harmlessly in a field, making a crater large enough to hold a wheelbarrow. No one was reported injured by the bombs.

The Battle of Blair Mountain was by now making front page news all over the world and war correspondents were sent in by major newspapers. One correspondent who had served in World War I wrote that the scene of refugees fleeing in panic from the battle area into Boone County reminded him of Belgium. Boyden Sparks, a famous war correspondent for "The New York Tribune," was dispatched to the scene with a female reporter who was to report on human interest stories. Chris Holt, who was 15 at the time, remembers loading the reporters into his father's Baby Overland automobile and driving them to the front lines, where he left them. While attempting to reach the Logan lines their group was fired upon and Sparks was wounded in the leg. Holt also remembers being captured and thrown in jail in Logan until they could be identified. Special trains carrying food and ammunition were brought in by the UMWA. All local unions were drained of funds to pay for the supplies. Holt remembers his father, who was secretary-treasurer of the Sharples local, writing a check for \$1,000 to purchase guns and ammunition.

For a week the battle on the mountain continued. The lush vegetation of late summer provided a perfect cover for guerilla warfare and individual gun duels, and much of the action was hidden from view. Doctors and nurses in Boone County were pressed into service by the union to care for the wounded. Dead miners were carried out on the trains, their names unrecorded. The deaths on both sides have been estimated at between ten and 30 men, with many more wounded. It is estimated that at least 10,000 men engaged in the battle. Even though Chafin's men were grossly outnumbered, they had the advantage of strongly fortified positions, several machine guns, unlimited ammunition, and an organized command.

Bill Blizzard, president of Sub-district 2 of UMW District 17, was generally regarded by the miners as their leader, but the men were too disorganized and strung out to respond effectively to his orders. One miner said, "If the union had only organized and concentrated its forces it could have broken through easily." The miners almost pushed through to Crooked Creek once during the week, but were driven back at the last moment. The citizens of Logan panicked, and the Banner published Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," to urge on the defenders.

President Harding's proclamation was dropped to the miners by airplane. When his deadline to cease fighting came and passed unheeded, he called for troops to be sent in from Kentucky, Ohio, and New Jersey. Also, a squadron of army planes was dispatched from Langley Field, Virginia. The planes were armed with gas bombs and machine guns, but were not used. One crashed in Nicholas County and got as much front page coverage in the Gazette as did the battle. When the federal troops arrived in Charleston, they found the streets decorated with flags and lined with cheering crowds. The men were loaded into boxcars and rushed off in the direction of Logan County. Another group of soldiers was dispatched toward Logan by way of Huntington and the Guyandotte River.

The troops arrived in Madison at night and were met by Bill Blizzard. He was ordered to call a cease fire and send the miners home. He disappeared into the night and by the next morning, September 3, when troops arrived at Sharples, the miners were coming out of the hills without guns or red scarves. They were simply a group of dirty, unshaven men trying to get home. Their guns were hidden all over the mountain; in caves, under leaves, and behind fences. Cush Garrett of Lake, who was a boy at the time, remembers a friend finding a large number of rifles wrapped in a blanket behind a fence. It's reported that rifles are still occasionally found in the area of Blair.

The army set up camps along the little Coal River to preserve the peace, but the fight was over and the union had suffered a crushing defeat. A grand jury was convened in Logan County and indictments were handed down against Frank Keeney, Fred Mooney, Bill Blizzard, and 982 others, charging them with "murder, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, and treason against the State of West Virginia." Immediately the round-up of prisoners began in the surrounding counties. Hundreds were arrested and taken to Logan where every attempt was made to obtain confessions. The trial for treason was moved to the courthouse in Jefferson County, where John Brown had been convicted of treason in 1859.

The major union leaders who had participated in the march were acquitted through lack of evidence and a friendly jury. It was for the lesser figures in the drama to be found guilty and sentenced. One such pair was the mountain preacher and minister J. W. Wilburn and his son

John, of Boone County. They had joined the miners' cause only at the last minute, declaring, "It is time to lay down the Bible and take up the rifle." For their minor part they were sentenced to 11 years in the penitentiary. Another miner, Walter Allen, was convicted even though nothing more damaging than the fact that he had been seen "with the armed forces" in Logan County and "had been carrying a gun" was presented. Out on bail while awaiting an appeal, Allen simply disappeared and was never seen again. Others were also sentenced to similar prison terms. Governor Morgan paroled them in 1925.

After the Battle of Blair Mountain, the union, for all intents and purposes, disappeared in West Virginia with membership plummeting from 50,000 men to as little as a few hundred. It seemed to all that the struggle between working people and employers backed by the government and its military had been forever lost. Then in 1933, the Great Depression forced President Franklin Roosevelt to adopt the New Deal legislation which guaranteed the right to organize. The coal companies had won the battle but they eventually lost the war.

If you're interested in learning more about this subject then I highly recommend watching the movie "Matewan". It tells the true story of the Matewan Massacre that elevated Sid Hatfield into folk hero status and it does a great job of portraying the struggles of the miners. It may be a little hard to find as it was made in the 80's but it is well worth the hunt.