I Come Creeping: Remembering the Battle of Blair Mountain in Graphic Narrative

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Abstract

Between August 24 and September 4 of 1921, approximately 10,000 West Virginia coal miners marched to Blair Mountain in Logan County in a militant stand for their right to unionize. Despite its status as the largest labor uprising in United States history, few know or understand the impact of the Battle of Blair Mountain today, even within the borders of West Virginia. This creative project aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to memorialize this period of the West Virginia Mine Wars through the creation of a 10-page comic, titled *I Come Creeping*, which depicts and is informed by the events and cultural framework leading up to the battle. A summary of the historical context of the Battle of Blair Mountain establishes the content the comic seeks to cover, followed by an overview of the public forgetting which occurred after the battle and target audience which clarifies the need for such a project. The rationale for the use of a comic to communicate such content is grounded in historiographic narrative theory, which holds that the medium of graphic narrative is uniquely situated to deliver history to audiences.

I Come Creeping: Remembering the Battle of Blair Mountain in Graphic Narrative

The Battle of Blair Mountain, occurring between late August and early September of 1921, was a large-scale effort by striking coal miners to forcibly unionize the southern coalfields of West Virginia. Beginning on August 31, union miners faced off with the forces of Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin at the crest of the mountain and engaged in guerilla warfare over a period of five days. The fighting did not end until federal troops arrived on the scene by order of President Warren G. Harding, prompting miners to lay down their arms and return home.

This event was not an isolated outbreak of radicalism, but the culmination of the Mine Wars, two decades of suffering and resistance against the paternalist coal town systems of southern West Virginia. Despite the enormous significance of the battle, the miners' story was silenced for nearly fifty years, and efforts to educate the citizens of West Virginia are still in progress over 100 years later. This thesis seeks to contribute to ongoing labors to memorialize the mine wars by creating a graphic narrative, titled *I Come Creeping*, envisioning possible content and style for a prospective comic depicting the events of the Battle of Blair Mountain.

Historical Context

Overview of the Battle of Blair Mountain

In the southern coalfields of West Virginia, miners and their families faced a set of conditions designed to maximize their profitability to the company. Upon arrival to the "company town," as such communities were called, miners and their families moved into houses leased by the company itself, most of them one-room shacks with barely enough room for a single tenant. With little exception, every member of the town shopped at the company store, a general store run by the company and stocked with every consumer good needed for a miner's

life. Since miners had little contact with outside interests in the isolated hills of southern West Virginia, the company store essentially held a monopoly over the miners' economy and could thereby charge exorbitant prices to ensure a profit (Green 22). Further, miners were generally paid with scrip, a form of company credit redeemable at the company store but unable to be used as currency outside of the town. Although scrip could be traded for U.S. dollars, the exchange came at a loss; to most, it was easier to pay inflated prices at the company store than to "take [their] dollar scrip and sell it for seventy-five cents government money" (*The Mine Wars*). Low wages and other underhanded measures compounded these prices. Among such measures was "cribbing"—the practice of building wooden "cribs" on the side of coal cars to hold more coal while paying the miner for only a standard load. Between expenses deducted in their paycheck, portions of wages cheated away by company practices, and exorbitant prices in a monopolized economy, miners in southern West Virginia were little more than wage slaves.

Dependent on the company for both housing and basic necessities, miners chafed under their limited freedoms. However, most southern coal companies required miners to sign "yellow-dog" contracts, as they were called by the miners, effectively agreeing that they would not join a union under threat of termination and eviction. Unfortunately, there was no legal precedent preventing these kinds of contracts, which the courts of West Virginia upheld time and again. Further, most coal towns were unincorporated, meaning that there were rarely governmental or law enforcement officers present to intercede for the miners, and those who were typically accepted bribes to protect the companies' interests (*The Mine Wars*). In their place, stood the mine guard system: a private, company-paid force hired from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to serve as mine security. Across central West Virginia and Colorado, Baldwin-Felts

"thugs" became notorious among mining communities for their brutality in acting as strikebreakers during the 1910s. Mine guards were instructed to prevent unionism from taking hold in the southern West Virginia coalfields by any means necessary and often followed through on that instruction with acute violence.

It is against the backdrop of these circumstances that the narrative of the miners' march begins. In the wake of a nationally successful 1919 labor strike, the U.M.W.A. announced that it would turn its attentions to unionizing the southern coalfields of West Virginia, composed of Mingo, Logan, and McDowell counties. Professional organizers were sent into the coalfields around the Tug River, many of them beaten, jailed, and run out of town by Baldwin-Felts agents (*Even the Heavens Weep*). Despite these obstacles, miners flocked to houses and churches to swear their union oaths, with as many as 700 returning to work as union men (Green 203). Within days, the men and their families were evicted from their homes, taking refuge in tent camps on pockets of land not owned by the company.

The dam broke on May 19, 1920, when Baldwin-Felts agents arrived in the town of Matewan, West Virginia to evict union miners of the Stone Mountain Coal Company from their houses. Upon the agents' return from their task, they were met by pro-union Sheriff Sid Hatfield, backed by a contingent of deputies, and Mayor Cabell Testerman. The two parties declared warrants for each other's arrests; shooting broke out only moments later. By the time the battle ended, seven Baldwin-Felts agents and three Matewan citizens lay dead or dying, including Testerman (Savage, *Thunder in the Mountains* 24). The "Matewan Massacre," as it became known, marked the first violent retaliation of pro-union forces in the Tug River coalfields against

the mine guard system and the coal operators, elevating Hatfield to the status of a folk hero amongst striking miners.

On July 1, 1920, U.M.W.A. District 17 president Frank Keeney called for a general strike in Mingo County after coal operators declined to negotiate. Union miners and their families, summarily evicted from their homes, joined the tent camps in earnest; by July 4, 1920, 95 percent of miners in Mingo County had joined the strike (*The Mine Wars*). As the strike dragged on and trials for those involved in the Matewan Massacre began, violence erupted in spurts between union miners and Baldwin-Felts agents. Martial law was declared in Mingo County three times between the fall of 1920 and the summer of 1921.

Although Hatfield and his compatriots were acquitted of the charges connected with the Matewan Massacre, Hatfield and his deputy, Ed Chambers, were indicted in August 1921 on the dubious charges of blowing up a coal tipple. When the two arrived in Welch, West Virginia for their court date, unarmed and with their wives at their sides, they were shot and killed on the steps of the county courthouse in by Baldwin-Felts agents. The agents involved were never convicted in connection with their murders.

Hatfield and Chambers' deaths were the tipping point for a score of tired, frustrated, and angry miners. By August 24, 1921, they had begun amassing at Lens Creek in central West Virginia, intent on marching to Logan County to enact a forceful unionization of the Tug River coalfields, free union miners jailed without trial under martial law, and avenge Hatfield's death (Savage, *Thunder* 76). The armed marchers commandeered trains and automobiles to transport their forces along the way. Within a few days, district leadership, compelled by threats from the governor, convinced the miners to return home and allow the march to fizzle out. However, news

of a violent raid by mine guards at Sharples, which resulted in the deaths of two union miners, reached the marchers quickly (107). Enraged, they turned back onto the warpath.

The town of Logan was the bastion of county sheriff Don Chafin, known colloquially as the "Czar of Logan" for his iron fist and fierce opposition to unionism. Situated against the base of Blair Mountain, both Chafin's forces and the marchers knew that Logan represented their most significant obstacle in reaching the Tug River coalfields. On August 31, the opposing forces clashed for the first time, the start of five days of guerilla warfare on the mountain's rugged terrain that included the dropping of homemade bombs onto the miners' army by private planes (Savage, *Thunder* 139). Approximately 3,000 men served as deputies in Don Chafin's defense forces; historians have estimated that the miners' forces numbered at least 10,000 men, if not more (*The Mine Wars*). Miraculously, only 20 men or fewer died during the fighting.

The battle did not end until President Warren Harding sent federal troops into the field. Alerted of the army's presence by their "generalissimo" Bill Blizzard, the marchers cheerfully surrendered, turning over their weapons or hiding them in the underbrush before they came off the mountain. The men had not come to mount an insurrection against the United States of America—only to dismantle the oppressive mine guard system of the southern West Virginia coalfields and achieve a justice they felt was long overdue (Green 297). Unfortunately, such justice would remain overdue for more than a decade after.

Public Forgetting After the Battle

Despite the significance of the Battle of Blair Mountain and its surrounding events, the mine wars remained in the margins of history for decades afterward, silenced by a combination of political, social, and personal factors. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, scores of

miners were called to the courts to face charges for their actions. Of over a thousand indictments, 325 murder charges and 24 indictments for treason against the state of West Virginia were handed down to union miners by Logan County juries (Savage, *Thunder* 165). While only a few were eventually convicted of their charges, court costs drained the coffers of the U.M.W.A. District 17, funds which were not replaced by the national office. The defeat of the militant miners, combined with a financially exhausted local union office and the ability to blacklist, renewed anti-union vigor in coal operators. As strikes sputtered out, miners abandoned the union to sign yellow-dog contracts or moved their families out of state, causing U.M.W.A. membership in West Virginia to fall from 50,000 in 1920 to roughly 600 in 1929 (166). The U.M.W.A. would not return in force until the Roosevelt administration took charge in the 1930s, a hiatus which effectively shuttered union activity in the state for nearly a decade.

With the suppression of union activity came the censoring forces of media and government. While the Battle of Blair Mountain was highly publicized at the time, much of its journalistic coverage was censored by forces within the battlefield, such as Logan County sheriff Don Chafin. During his time in Chafin's custody, *New York Tribune* journalist Boyden Sparkes was prevented from writing anything sympathetic to the miners' plight, with such material stricken by a Chafin operative who ordered, "'No sob stuff for those rednecks'" (Savage, *Thunder* 158). Further, journalistic coverage both inside and outside of the state attributed the conflict to the supposedly violent nature of the Appalachian people, allowing national audiences to, in the words of scholar A. P. Duafala, "turn a blind eye to Appalachia's problems and the external forces that exacerbated them" (72). Though some journalists made genuine attempts at

an unbiased view of the plight of the southern West Virginia coalfields, these attempts died out within a few years of the battle.

In the ensuing years, forces from within the state acted to suppress and distort narratives concerning the mine wars. Literature disseminated by pro-industrial forces pressed a minimizing take on the battle, such as Chafin associate G. T. Swain's *Facts About the Two Armed Marches on Logan*, which attributes the battle to the union's desire to "[enrich] their treasury immensely" with the southern coalfields' union dues, identifying this as the "sole reason that brought about the misguided efforts of the union to penetrate this rich field" (4). However, the most powerful force suppressing the history of the mine wars was the state government itself. A Roosevelt-era attempt by the federal government to create a state guide met fierce opposition from Governor Homer A. Holt, who decried the book's portrayal of miners' difficult working conditions and steelworkers' strikes as "propaganda from start to finish" (Keeney 53). More significantly, West Virginia textbooks omitted any mention of the mine wars for nearly fifty years after the fact. Phil Conley's *West Virginia Yesterday and Today*, the standard textbook for West Virginia history classes in public schools until the 1970s, noted the start of a new road-building program as the only significant event occurring in 1921 (Keeney 54). Conley's strong anti-Communist sentiment influenced his educational efforts, preventing any state-sponsored discussion of unionism (which was seen as Communist-leaning) during his years at the head of the West Virginia Education Association.

Today, educators and governmental officials alike see Conley as the progenitor of West Virginia history education, having advocated for its inclusion in state curriculum and even creating the Golden Horseshoe Award, an eighth-grade history test administered across the state

for which the highest-scoring students are honored. Yet, these efforts fail to fully educate students about their history as West Virginians. As an eighth grader, I learned enough in my West Virginia history class to earn the Golden Horseshoe Award. However, my memories of the class's labor history unit are short and muddled; despite earning a prestigious honor for my aptitude in West Virginia history, my education in this crucial period of state history was lacking. The very impetus for this project came from trying to remember the connection between a march and the words "Pinkerton" and "Blizzard"—keywords which should have prompted the recall of a crucial chapter in my state's history. Instead, I have spent over a year recollecting pieces of the history that shaped my state's culture into its modern form.

Unfortunately, I am not alone; even esteemed scholars have discussed their late introduction to this chapter of West Virginia's history. Denise Giardina, the first novelist to use the Battle of Blair Mountain as the setting for a historical novel, did not learn about the miners' march until her college years, despite growing up in a coal camp (Boudreau 9). Lon Savage, one of the first historians to treat the topic of the mine wars in depth, noted in a speech given on the anniversary of the Matewan Massacre that "[w]e learned of Bacon's Rebellion in neighboring Virginia 300 years ago, and the Whiskey Rebellion in neighboring Pennsylvania 200 years ago, but we didn't learn of the miners' rebellion that our own parents took part in, right there where we were going to school—and the miners' rebellion may have been the largest of the three" (Savage, "The Gunfight at Matewan" 48). Even Chuck Keeney, the great-grandson of union organizer Frank Keeney, learned about his ancestor's exploits not through his parents or history books, but "from stray remarks at family cookouts and from older strangers, who told him star-struck tales after approaching him when they learned of his family connection" (Robertson). The

system meant to instill pride in West Virginia students has created multiple generations of adults who look back in shame on their state's failure to remember, and at times active suppression of, one of its most significant periods of history.

Target Audience

Since the 1969 publication of Howard B. Lee's *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, the first significant historical work to address the mine wars, the Battle of Blair Mountain has begun to re-enter the public consciousness. While an influx of media concerning the mine wars has arisen over the past few decades, the creative material regarding the events – for example, Giardina's novel *Storming Heaven* and John Sayles's film *Matewan*, both released in 1987 – tends toward an older audience that can handle more mature content. Unfortunately, very little of this content is suited for a younger audience.

To fill this gap, I have chosen middle-grade (6^{th}-8^{th}) students in West Virginia as the target audience for *I Come Creeping*. Numerous studies have established the value of using graphic narratives in middle school curriculums to engage students more effectively with course material, as well as the demand for graphic narratives by middle school-level readers outside of school. As previously established, West Virginia history has also been designated as the topic of eighth grade history classes in public schools across the state. By creating a graphic narrative depicting the events of the Battle of Blair Mountain, I hope to intervene against the public forgetting of the mine wars, contributing a work that can be utilized at a crucial point in students' state history education.

The students currently enrolled in West Virginia's schools have borne witness to a culture undeniably affected by the events of the mine wars. In 2018, public school teachers and

staff in West Virginia went on strike to protest detrimental changes to their health plan and wages, an action which originated in Mingo County. Across the movement, striking teachers acknowledged the spirit of solidarity inherited from their forebears in the mines, with one teacher stating, “The word ‘strike’ prompts something in us here… I don’t think my daddy has ever been prouder of me” (Hampson). Despite the somewhat muddled understanding of the mine wars across the state’s populace, there is a clear recognition that labor history has played an enormous role in shaping modern sensibilities in West Virginia.

Further, coal is foundational to the modern political and economic climate of West Virginia. Mining companies have contributed to a version of West Virginia society that often rejects the interests of the working class in favor of corporate advancement, believing that wealth earned by those in power will trickle down to create wealth for the rest of the state. The current state governor, Jim Justice, earned his billionaire status through wealth generated by coal companies that have frequently been the subject of safety violation lawsuits (Robertson). Over the past several years, a slew of legislation has deregulated the coal industry, endangering the health of miners and paving the way for coal companies to exploit both the land and the people in search of profit. Even Blair Mountain itself only recently emerged unscathed from a decades-long battle between companies interested in strip mining the site and those, like amateur historian Kenny King, who wanted to place the battlefield on the National Register of Historic Places (Keeney 59-63). Nonetheless, the coal industry continues to decline, and West Virginians lose their sense of identity with it. Students will inherit this culture as they become young adults, having already witnessed it firsthand. Without an understanding of the history that created it, it is

likely that the same systemic problems plaguing West Virginia will be perpetuated by the next generation.

Historiographic Narrative

I Come Creeping takes the form of what I will term a historiographic narrative—a work of sequential storytelling concerning historical events, delivered in the style of a comic book or graphic novel. Graphic novels like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* provide their own arguments for the form, but a wealth of academic study in comics and historiographic theory has also established the value of historiographic narrative as a medium for delivering history to audiences, especially history concerning violent and/or traumatic events. The majority of this value rests on the unique concept of *closure*. To understand this, we must take a close look at the structure of comics.

The basic form of the comics medium consists of two foundational pieces: frames and gutters. Frames are, as we might discuss in film or animation, still images that are part of a larger whole. We see something of substance in frames: a person, an action, a place, etc. We might also call these panels, but frames are a particularly helpful term for this discussion. Then, we have gutters—the empty spaces between frames. If we were to continue with the animation metaphor, a gutter would be like a blank pause between frames or the space between two frames of a storyboard. The gutter does not actually exist in animation, but it necessarily does in comics; something must separate one moment from another. Nothing truly happens in the gutter—or so it seems. Modern comics theory holds that the gutter is actually a site of great significance.

Unlike other mediums, comics functions as a spatial representation of time. In simpler terms, a comic takes moments (represented by frames) and spreads them out in succession so that

they all exist on the page, visually, at once. To make time flow in a comic, one must read it, following the trail from one frame to the next. The gutter makes this possible by separating one moment from another, both allowing each image to stand on its own and providing the space for the reader to follow the trail between frames. As comics theorist Hillary Chute notes in the introduction to *Disaster Drawn*, "[The gutter] paradoxically suggests stillness (the framed moment inscribed in space on the page) and movement (as the viewer animates the relationship between the frames that indicate time to create the sequential narrative meaning of the page)" (16). In other words, the reader essentially animates the comic as she reads, setting the pace of the narrative.

This animated reading is where comics theorist Scott McCloud's concept of closure comes into play. As we have discussed, the reader takes the gutter as a site of transition between frames, cuing her to connect them as a sequential series. However, the gutter itself does not offer an explanation of the connection between frames, nor does the artist typically include a textual interlude codifying the relationship. The connection is made by the reader herself.

Say a comic juxtaposes two frames against each other: in the left-hand frame, a boy swings a bat toward a baseball flying towards it. In the right-hand frame, a baseball flies through the window of a house and shatters it. The reader assumes that the boy pictured in the left-hand frame hit the ball toward the window in the right-hand frame, thereby breaking it. However, the blank space—or empty gutter—between the frames offers no information explicating the fact that the boy hit the ball and therefore caused the window to break. The reader infers this connection as she transitions between frames, assuming a meaningful causality in the undefined space. This mental activity is what McCloud defines as "closure", "[the] phenomenon of observing the parts but

perceiving the whole" (63) and which Trent University scholar Sean Carleton explains as "the act of mentally completing that which is incomplete" (163). Although the visual and textual material presented on the page is incomplete, the reader imaginatively fills in the gaps, making her an active participant in the process of constructing the narrative. Unlike a singular still image, in which there is no need to imaginatively close the gap between two moments, or a film, in which the automatic succession of frames does the work of closing the gap for the viewer, comics requires the reader to engage with the work on a deeper, more evaluative, and creative level.

For historians, the closure necessitated in graphic narrative is an incredible asset. At the simplest level, the reader's control of the pace of closure allows her to engage in a form of "slow reading" that guides her to absorb complex historical information. In this vein, Chute holds that it is "crucial, especially with texts that devolve upon violence and trauma, that comics leaves the question of pace open" (*Disaster Drawn* 37). Traumatic and violent content necessitates a deeper and more thoughtful approach than other kinds of content, so closure does the work of effectively slowing the reader down so that she can really think about it.

Moreover, Carleton believes that the thoughtful, participatory work of closure encourages readers to consider themselves as active participants in history, rather than simple spectators. Carleton builds this belief on Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization, which he defines as a process of critical reflection that "offers people the opportunity ... to combat harmful myths and contradictions, and ultimately to create new knowledge to solve problems related to their own oppression" (161). When comics present issues such as social injustices or political misdeeds, the process of closure forces the reader to deeply consider, interpret, and draw connections in the knowledge before him. As he reads, the reader is enabled to confront the established knowledge

he has received from the mainstream, comparing it with the knowledge she receives from and the narrative she constructs in the work. In Carleton's eyes, there is potential in this activity "to promote alternative knowledge and encourage... active learning and critical political engagement" (165). A deep level of critical engagement with work concerning a story like the Mine Wars is crucial to developing an understanding of the political and social forces at play in the events.

Comics presents the opportunity to foster this engagement at a level unavailable through other mediums. In combination with closure, the visible constructed-ness of comics also allows readers to confront the ambiguous relationship between fact, fiction, and memory in historiography. In seeking to convey the story of “what happened”, historians must always wrestle with factuality of the narrative they create. Readers are quick to take a historian's interpretation of an event as the hard facts, forgetting that the historian has constructed what they receive and how they receive it. In literature and film, this is a particularly tricky area. The frame-gutter structure of comics, however, positions the reader almost as if she were looking through a window, a perspective which reminds her that the narrative she is receiving is a constructed one, organized and presented by an outside author. The “marks” in comics imply the same idea, revealing a personal and creative hand in illustrations, speech bubbles, etc. Chute understands these marks to represent "the presence of the body, through the hand" (“Comics as Literature” 457). Unlike a text or a film, the reader is unable to accept a comic as a purely objective work because the presence of the author is inherent in its construction. In other words, marks, like the frame-gutter structure, are a persistent reminder of the human hand behind the work, lending "a subjective register to the narrative surfaces of comics pages that further enables

comics works to be productively self-aware in how they 'materialize' history" (457). Confronted with the constructed-ness of the comic, the reader takes on a more ethical position in relation to the work, able to receive its interpretation of history while remaining aware of its subjectivity.

This “relative distance,” as scholar Kate Polak has termed this kind of ethical position, is additionally useful for negotiating the many layers of perspective present in historical narratives. Polak distinguishes matters of perspective in comics as “point-of-view” and “focalization”, with point-of-view referring to "how a [particular] panel is *framed*" and focalization referring to "how it is *positioned* (i.e., through which character's memory the scene is filtered or, alternatively, how the reader is connected to the characters in the scene)" (27). In other words, even if a graphic narrative is generally narrated or presented from the perspective of a certain character (the focalizor), the frame-gutter structure of comics allows for separate frames to represent several varying points of view: a bystander on the street, a bird's eye view, a non-focalizing character caught up in the action. The act of closure allows the reader to mentally connect these distinct points-of-view into a cohesive understanding of the scene, even if they are not actively mediated by the focalizor.

For historical narratives dealing with a several disparate accounts, the perspective-taking power of comics is a boon. When a comic presents multiple contradictory viewpoints, readers are guided to assess each viewpoint in connection with its alternatives and enact closure upon it to understand its place in the narrative. Historians Rob Kristofferson and Simon Orpana interpret this kind of closure as corroboration, the practice of critical comparison of accounts in order to find the most viable facts (221). By actively interpreting the information presented to her, the reader not only engages with history on a deeper level, but also understands its inherent

complexity. In the words of scholars Martha Cutter and Cathy Schlund-Vials, what we understand as history is truly "*what gets remembered and written* down rather than what *really* happened" (16). Official narratives tend to totalize, omitting key details and alternative viewpoints which would provide a fuller comprehension of events. Comics in the vein discussed here, however, do not shy away from contradictions, but enter into a "dialogue between what constitutes official 'authentic' history… and what is silenced or unspoken because it does not fit neatly within a dominant chronicle" (7)—in other words, an understanding of the intricate polyphony of history.

Comics as a form is particularly well-suited to deal with these kinds of silenced, or incomplete, histories. In discussing the function of the gutter, Chute notes that the space between panels signifies the absence of what is not or cannot be represented there. The gutter, therefore, is not just a site of blankness, but a site of erasure, of "what it subtracts, or refuses to measure and materialize, in the spaces between" (*Disaster Drawn* 36). In narratives of violence, the gutter becomes a visual reminder of experiences that have been erased or obscured by dominant forces, the intentional silence of the subject, or even the incomprehensibility of trauma itself. However, this silence always combated by what is visually depicted on the page—what Chute calls the "risk of representation" (*Disaster Drawn* 5). Rather than allowing these histories to be totally erased, comics takes on the massive task of attempting to represent the unrepresentable experiences trauma, violence, and silencing. Graphic narratives may not succeed, and cannot succeed, at representing such traumas in their totality. Still, comics is a visual form, inclined to the practice of embodiment in its perpetual "desire to make the absent appear" (*Disaster Drawn* 27). For, in the same vein that marks signify the body of the author, Chute holds that the body of

a subject can be materialized on the page through marks. Those inscribed into a graphic narrative, even after their deaths, are "located in space and time... as a kind of compensation for lost bodies, for lost histories. Comics resurrects" ("Comics Form" 112). As long as the subject is present on the page, who he or she is and what he or she has experienced cannot be erased. His or her history has been materialized. A narrative like the Mine Wars, with all the obstacles it has faced in order to be remembered, deserves to be represented in such a tangible way.

All of these formal constructions culminate in comics' singular ability to connect past and present in a distinctly layered relationship. The frame-gutter structure and focalization enable comics to entertain a polyphony of historical voices, and the embodiment implied by material marks allows an author to reinscribe forgotten narratives. Furthermore, comics can portray past and present on the same page, almost as if they were layered over each other in time. A character may walk from a moment set in the present to a scene in the past, or elements of a past setting may invade a frame in the present. These are feats made possible by the spatial-temporal relationship inherent in comics, the visual representation of time which enables "literal, graphic frame-breaking … [suggesting] that the past is present, again and again and again" (Chute, "Representation in 'Maus'" 213). Though other mediums may entertain techniques that explore the palimpsestic nature of history and memory, none offer more vivid a realization of this theme than comics, which is structurally situated for its illustration. The story of the Battle of Blair Mountain, pieced together from oral histories and called upon as an origin point for the present, can find no better expression than in the comics form.

Methodology

I Come Creeping is presented as the private sketchbook and/or diary of Lewis N. Prichard, a coal miner who participated in the events surrounding the Battle of Blair Mountain. Creating a fictional character to serve as narrator allowed me to integrate several witness accounts, such as those presented in Anne T. Lawrence's *On Dark and Bloody Ground*, into the narrative of the comic instead of restricting it to the focalization of a specific historical witness. As a union member and a close friend of Sid Hatfield, Lewis is uniquely situated to witness the majority of the historical narrative, from the exploitation experienced by miners to the violent details of the Matewan Massacre. Writing from the perspective of a miner also allowed me to explore the hesitance many miners felt to break their silence in the years following the battle, a theme I intend to probe further should I revisit this project in the future.

In creating the comic, I sought to integrate historical record in both the general and specific sense. Certain elements were repeated so often in my research that including them in Lewis's story functioned as a broad form of representation of the common experiences of miners – for example, the death of Lewis's father from a roof fall. However, I also endeavored to integrate the precise details of the events from both my primary and secondary sources. Since witness accounts disagreed to a considerable degree in the aftermath of the Matewan Massacre, some beats of the story are conjecture. Nevertheless, several quotes are taken straight from the historical record, such as Hatfield's assertion that he and his deputies would "kill every G** d***** one of them without any G** d***** warrants" (Savage, *Thunder* 21). A few images in the comic are even recreated directly from visual research I conducted at the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum. Inspiration for these recreations is taken from the work of Kristofferson and

Orpana, who suggest the visual integration of primary sources into historiographic narratives to more directly connect the reader with the historiography which occurs in the production of the work (196). The yellow-dog contract shown on the top right of page three and the union membership card on the bottom right of the same page are examples of this kind of recreation.

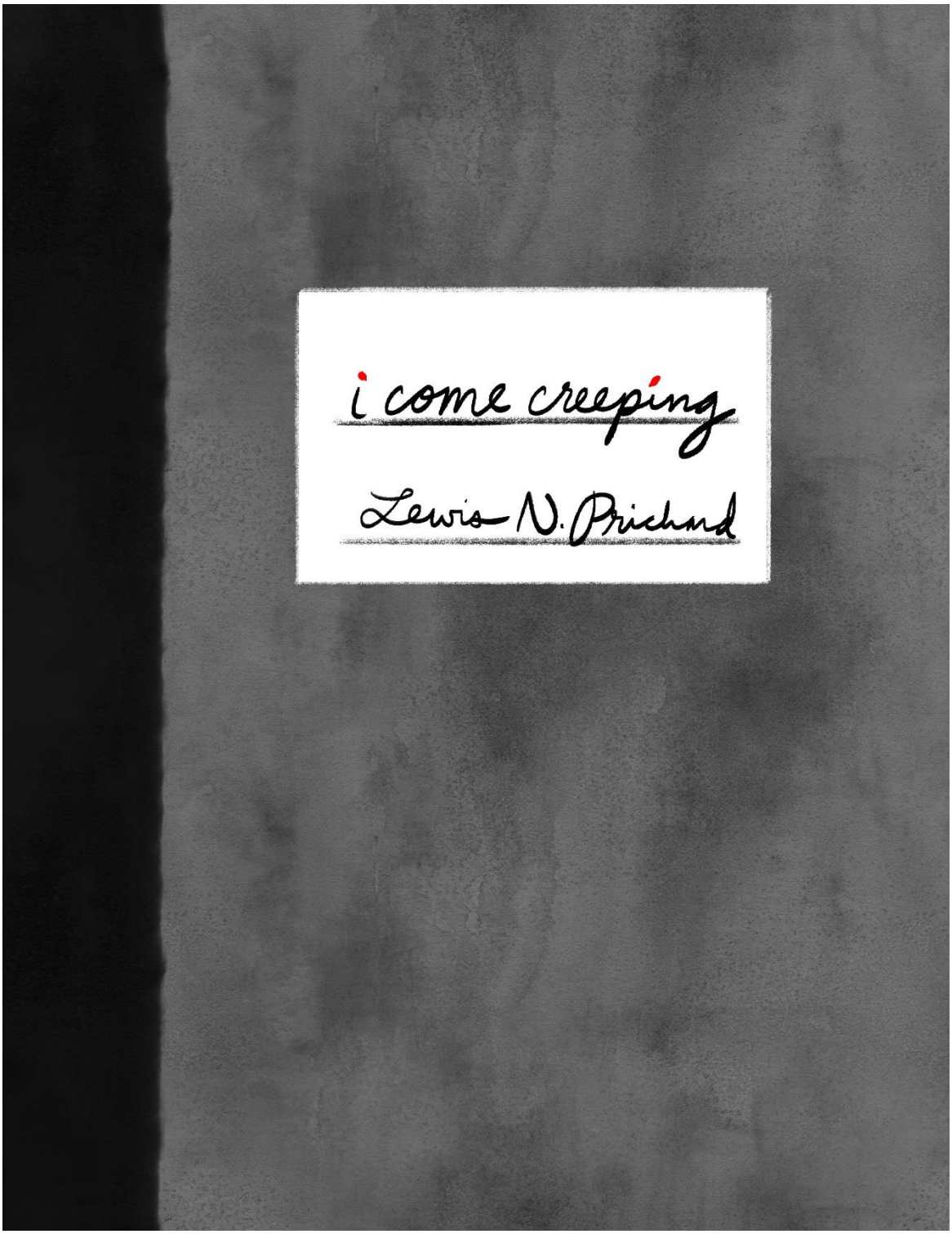
Stylistically, the comic draws inspiration from the art of autobiographical comic artists such as Alison Bechdel and Art Spiegelman. Line art, panel outlines, and speech bubbles were created with a rough ink brush in Photoshop, as if Lewis had outlined his work by hand in a sketchbook. I chose to color the comic with watercolor brushes, an aesthetic decision drawn from Bechdel's work. As noted by Hugo Frey, most historical fiction graphic novels utilize a limited color palette, an example which I have followed in selecting a largely grayscale palette (83). However, the miners themselves chose red as a symbol during the Mine Wars, wearing red bandanas around their necks on the march to Blair Mountain to signify solidarity and resistance (Green 270). In honor of those "rednecks," I have chosen to break the bleakness of the monochrome palette using the color red as a visual cue of the miners' defiance against the oppressive mine guard system. In key places throughout the work, red prods into the gray as a striking symbol of resistance, starting as a small pencil on the first page and ending in the bloodstained shirts of the detectives on the final page.

I Come Creeping stands alone as a completed work, but also functions as a sample of what a larger graphic novel concerning the Battle of Blair Mountain might look like. The color palette, brush style, narrative choices, and source integration translate the visual and historical reality of the Mine Wars to an audience removed from the events by over a hundred years. Although comprising only a portion of this rich history, *I Come Creeping* offers a blueprint for

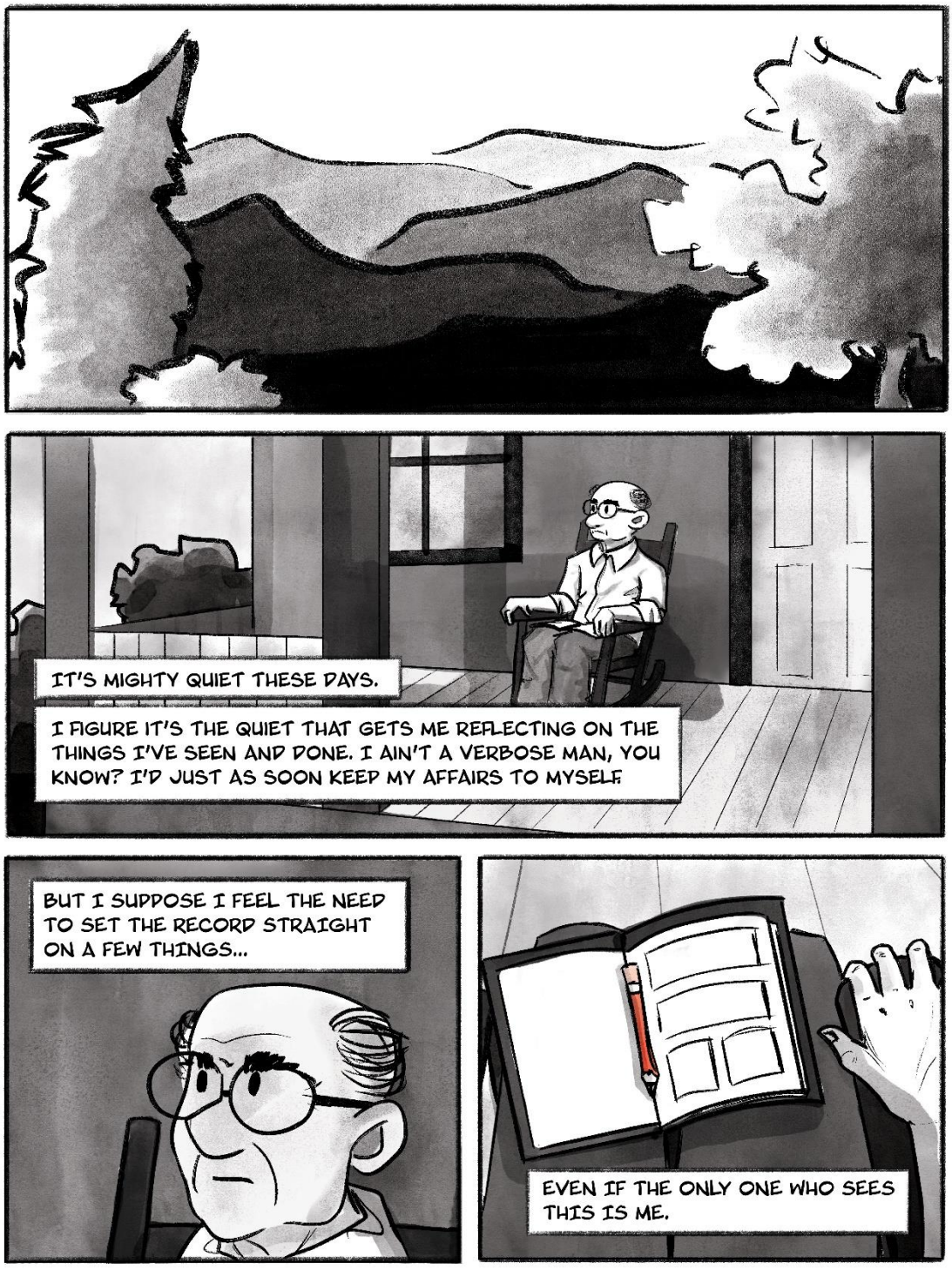
future works which seek to remember the Battle of Blair Mountain in all the ways it might have been forgotten.

I Come Creeping

Front Cover



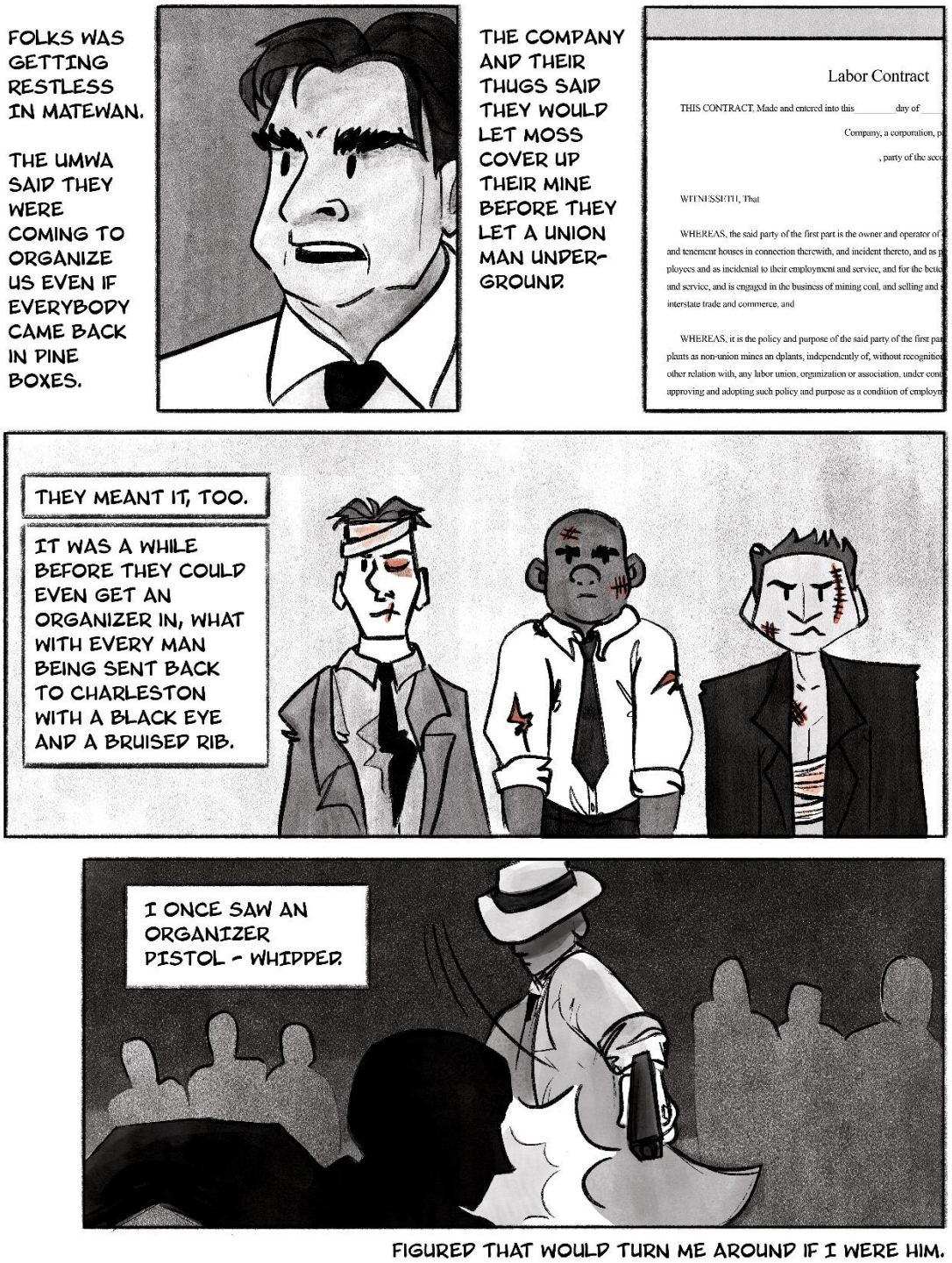
Page One


IT'S MIGHTY QUIET THESE DAYS.
I FIGURE IT'S THE QUIET THAT GETS ME REFLECTING ON THE THINGS I'VE SEEN AND DONE. I AIN'T A VERBOSE MAN, YOU KNOW? I'D JUST AS SOON KEEP MY AFFAIRS TO MYSELF.
BUT I SUPPOSE I FEEL THE NEED TO SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON A FEW THINGS...
EVEN IF THE ONLY ONE WHO SEES THIS IS ME.

Page Two


I WAS ABOUT TWENTY WHEN IT BOILED OVER.
I STARTED AS A TRAPPER WHEN I TURNED TEN, WORKING ALONGSIDE MY DADDY, UNTIL I WERE STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD THE PICK MYSELF.
HE'D BEEN KILLED BY A ROOF FALL A FEW YEARS BACK.
JUST THE WAY IT GOES.
THAT OLD SAYING: "KILL A MULE, BUY ANOTHER. KILL A MAN, HIRE ANOTHER."

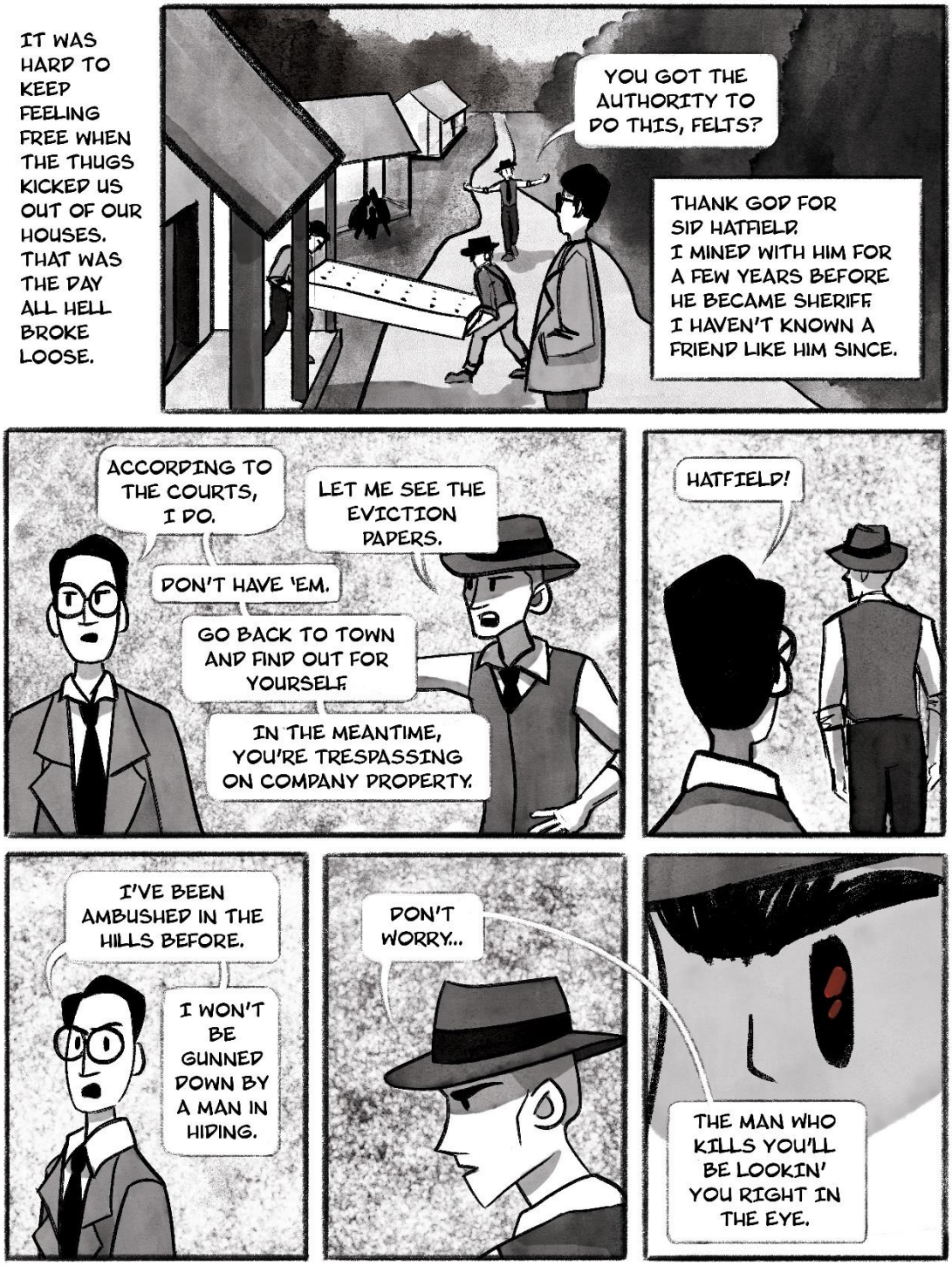
Page Three


FOLKS WAS GETTING RESTLESS IN MATEWAN.
THE UMWA SAID THEY WERE COMING TO ORGANIZE US EVEN IF EVERYBODY CAME BACK IN PINE BOXES.
THE COMPANY AND THEIR THUGS SAID THEY WOULD LET MOSS COVER UP THEIR MINE BEFORE THEY LET A UNION MAN UNDER-GROUND.
Labor Contract
THIS CONTRACT, Made and entered into this day of
Company, a corporation,
, party of the
WITNESSETH, That
WHEREAS, the said party of the first part is the owner and operator of
and tenement houses in connection therewith, and incident thereto, and as
ployees and as incidental to their employment and service, and for the bene
and service, and is engaged in the business of mining coal, and selling and
interstate trade and commerce, and
WHEREAS, it is the policy and purpose of the said party of the first par
plants as non-union mines an dplants, independently of, without recognitio
other relation with, any labor union, organization or association, under con
approving and adopting such policy and purpose as a condition of employ
THEY MEANT IT, TOO.
IT WAS A WHILE BEFORE THEY COULD EVEN GET AN ORGANIZER IN, WHAT WITH EVERY MAN BEING SENT BACK TO CHARLESTON WITH A BLACK EYE AND A BRUISED RIB.
I ONCE SAW AN ORGANIZER PISTOL - WHIPPED.
FIGURED THAT WOULD TURN ME AROUND IF I WERE HIM.

Page Four


BUT SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE, WE JUST HAD ENOUGH.
GET YOUR CAR DOCKED FOR SLATE ENOUGH TIMES AND YOU START WANTING THE UNION, EVEN IF YOU CAN'T SAY IT OUT LOUD.
I STILL REMEMBER HOW IT FELT WHEN I SIGNED MY UNION CARD IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH.
IF A MAN WILL SIGN THE YALLER DOG, HE MIGHT AS WELL GO HOME AND ASK HIS WIFE TO CHAIN HIM IN THE YARD WITH THE DOG!
MEMBER'S IDENTIFICATION CARD
LOCAL UNION NO. 17, U. M. W. OF A.
Mingo, WV.
This is to Certify That
Address
is a member of this Local Union, U. M. W. of A. in Good Standing as of date above.
[SEAL]
Pres.
Rec. Sec'y
Fin. Sec'y
FOR THE FIRST TIME, I FELT LIKE A FREE MAN.

Page Five


IT WAS HARD TO KEEP FEELING FREE WHEN THE THUGS KICKED US OUT OF OUR HOUSES. THAT WAS THE DAY ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE.
YOU GOT THE AUTHORITY TO DO THIS, FELTS?
THANK GOD FOR SID HATFIELD. I MINED WITH HIM FOR A FEW YEARS BEFORE HE BECAME SHERIFF. I HAVEN'T KNOWN A FRIEND LIKE HIM SINCE.
ACCORDING TO THE COURTS, I DO.
LET ME SEE THE EVICTION PAPERS.
DON'T HAVE 'EM.
GO BACK TO TOWN AND FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF.
IN THE MEANTIME, YOU'RE TRESPASSING ON COMPANY PROPERTY.
HATFIELD!
I'VE BEEN AMBUSHED IN THE HILLS BEFORE.
I WON'T BE GUNNED DOWN BY A MAN IN HIDING.
DON'T WORRY...
THE MAN WHO KILLS YOU'LL BE LOOKIN' YOU RIGHT IN THE EYE.

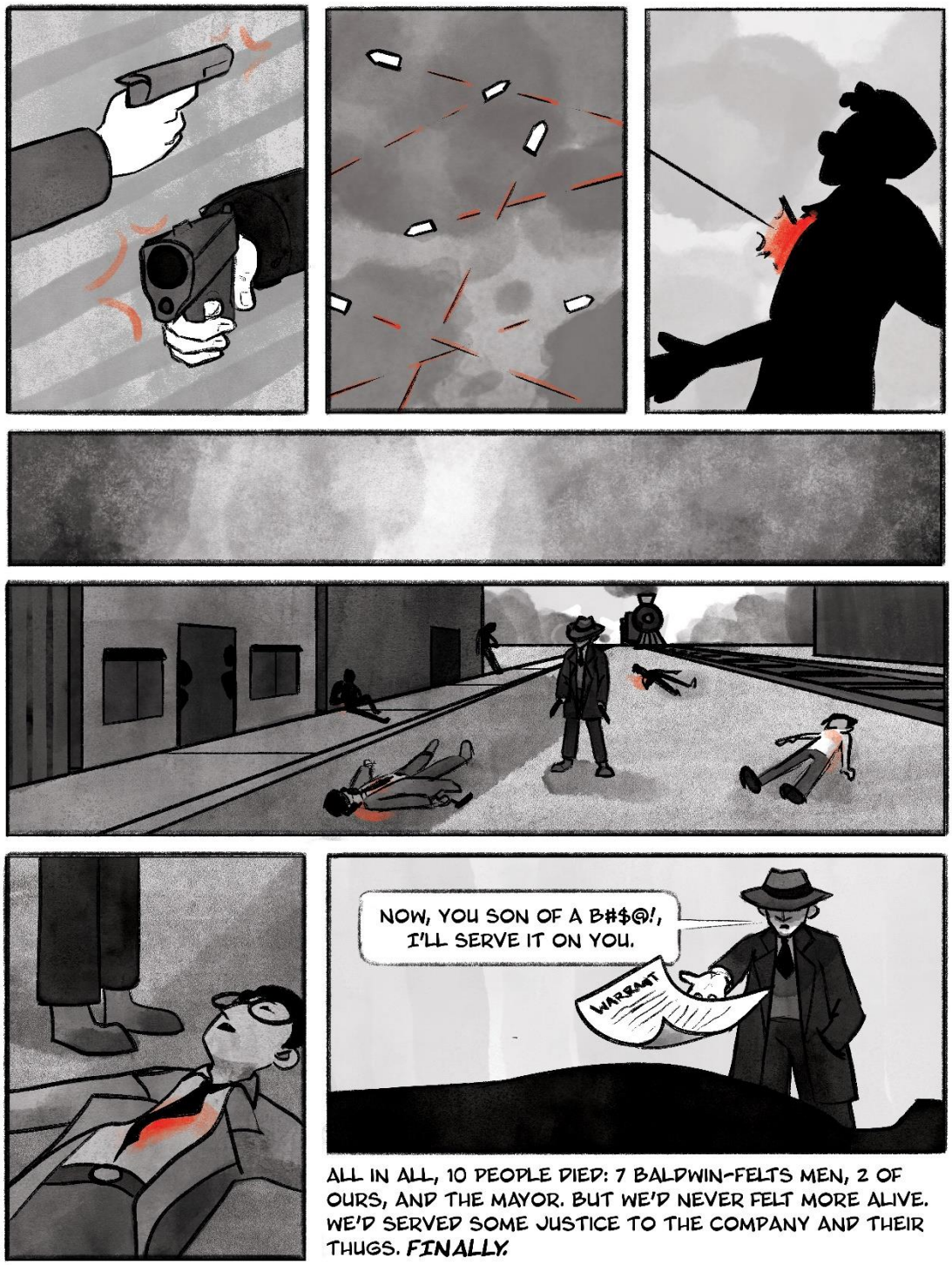
Page Six


IT WAS CHAOS IN TOWN. EVERY MAN WITH A UNION CARD AND A GUN CAME TO THE HARDWARE STORE.
WHAT'S GOING ON?
I CAN ARREST 'EM, IS WHAT'S GOING ON.
COUNTY SHERIFF'S SENDING THE WARRANTS ON THE FIVE O'CLOCK TRAIN.
WHAT IF THAT DON'T STOP 'EM?
THEN WE'LL KILL EVERY G$@-D#$%@! ONE OF THEM WITHOUT ANY G$@-D#$%@! WARRANTS.
KILL?
PASTOR, CAN'T YOU FIND SOME SOBER-SIDED MEN TO ACT AS DEPUTIES INSTEAD OF THIS RABBLE?
FRANKLY, MAYOR TESTERMAN, I'M PLANNING TO KILL A FEW DETECTIVES MYSELF.

Page Seven


JUST BEFORE 5:00 PM...
HOPE YOU HAD A GOOD DINNER. I'VE GOT A WARRANT FOR YOUR ARREST, BOYS.
I'LL RETURN THE COMPLIMENT. I'VE GOT A WARRANT FOR YOU, TOO. YOU'LL BE COMING WITH US TO BLUEFIELD, MR. HATFIELD.
I'LL DO NO SUCH THING.
HOGWASH!
THAT WARRANT MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ON GINGERBREAD.
ALRIGHT, SETTLE DOWN, BOYS!
LET ME SEE THAT WARRANT, MR. FELTS.
THIS IS A BOGUS WARRANT-
BANG!

Page Eight


NOW, YOU SON OF A B#$@!, I'LL SERVE IT ON YOU.
WARRANT
ALL IN ALL, 10 PEOPLE DIED: 7 BALDWIN-FELTS MEN, 2 OF OURS, AND THE MAYOR. BUT WE'D NEVER FELT MORE ALIVE. WE'D SERVED SOME JUSTICE TO THE COMPANY AND THEIR THUGS. FINALLY.

Back Cover

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