

# Smoldering Fire on the Mountain: The Wider Context of the Battle of Blair Mountain

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# Introduction

- The Battle of Blair Mountain is well known to Appalachians and labor historians.
- Most historians view the Matewan Massacre a year prior as the catalyst for the battle.
- However, the tensions between miners and coal companies had been simmering for a decade.

# The Early Days of West Virginia



**Figure 1.** Mountain Cabin (Photo by Thomas Luther, from Doris Miller Papers, Marshall University Special Collections).

- Coal discovered in 1750, but no major mining operation was pursued
- Settlers moved in after the French and Indian War.
  - Mostly Hunters and subsistence farmers.
  - Corn Grown in the valleys while hogs and cattle grazed on the slopes.
  - Mining viewed as seasonal or temporary work to gain a little extra cash.

# The Early Days of West Virginia



**Figure 1.** Mountain Cabin (Photo by Thomas Luther, from Doris Miller Papers, Marshall University Special Collections).

- They were gradually outcompeted by Midwestern farms, making mining the only viable source of income. It was still mostly small operations.
- After the Civil War, many newcomers left the state when coal demand slumped.
- The families of original settlers stayed, liking the mountain isolation.

# The Coal Companies



Figure 2. Kelly Creek, West Virginia, Coal Mine Tippie (Photo by Theodor Horydczak).

- Railway tunnels allow major coal companies to access West Virginia.
- The companies bought land through unscrupulous means.
  - The property tax scam.
- They bought out nearly all the small operations, so that 80% of the mines in southern West Virginia alone were owned by out of state companies by turn of the century.

# The Coal Companies

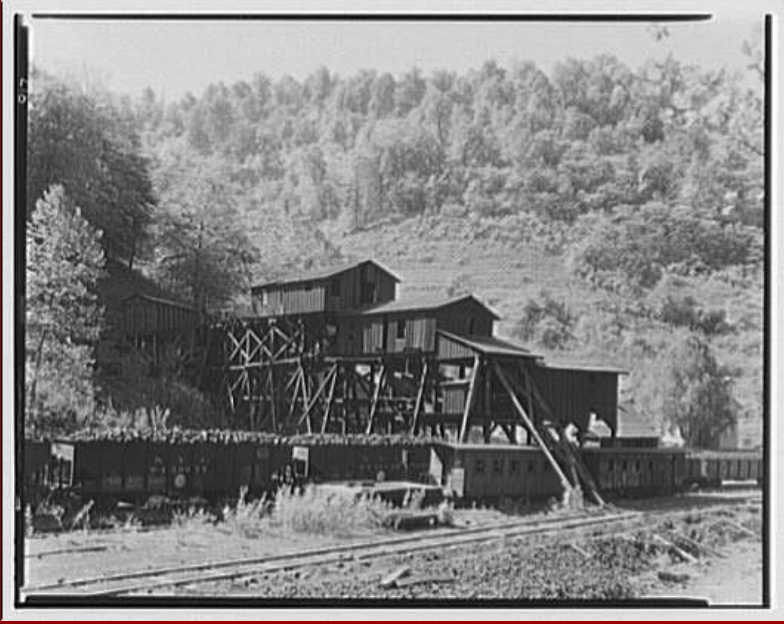


Figure 2. Kelly Creek, West Virginia, Coal Mine Tippie (Photo by Theodor Horydczak).

- Narrow profit margins led the companies to drop wages as low as possible.
  - Companies paid in “script”, not money, which could only be used at a company run store.
  - Abysmal condition of company housing.
  - Half of all employees had to have massive gardens to have enough food.
- A unique problem to Southern Appalachia: miners in PA and OH paid as much as 30% more.



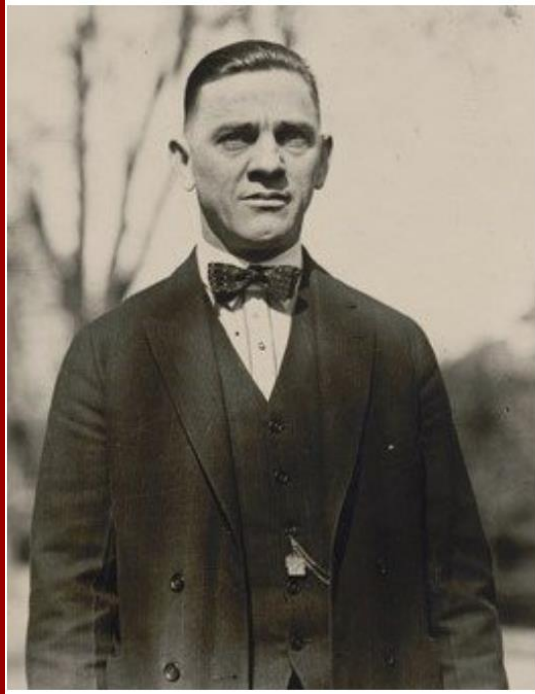
# Work in the Mines



**Figure 3.** Workers stand at the entrance to a West Virginia coal mine (Photo by Lewis Hine, courtesy of the Library of Congress).

- “Pigeon in the coal mine”.
- Typical vein extraction
  - Miner laid on his side to set charge.
  - Sift through the debris to find coal.
  - Paid by the ton, not by the hour.
- 400 miners died in a 1908 mine collapse, with the company resuming work two days later.
- In 1890, the American Federation of Labor declared coal mining the most dangerous industrial job.
  - Miner casualties from 1890 – 1920: 26,000 dead and 12,000 maimed.

# The Union and Frank Keeney.

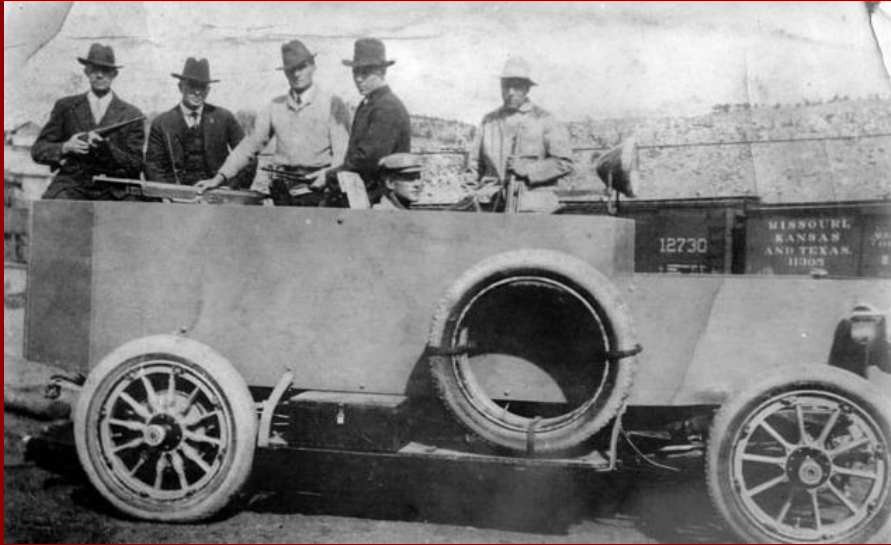


**Figure 4.** Frank Keeney (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

- Setbacks after Molly Maguires incident in 1875.
- United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) formed in 1890.
  - Rare fully integrated union.
- Charles Francis “Frank” Keeney Jr.
  - A coal miner since the age of 10.
  - Became serious union member after a failed strike in December 1904 saw 700 people evicted from their company homes.
  - He also fought corruption within the union.
- Mother Jones aided Keeney in organizing a strike in July 1912.



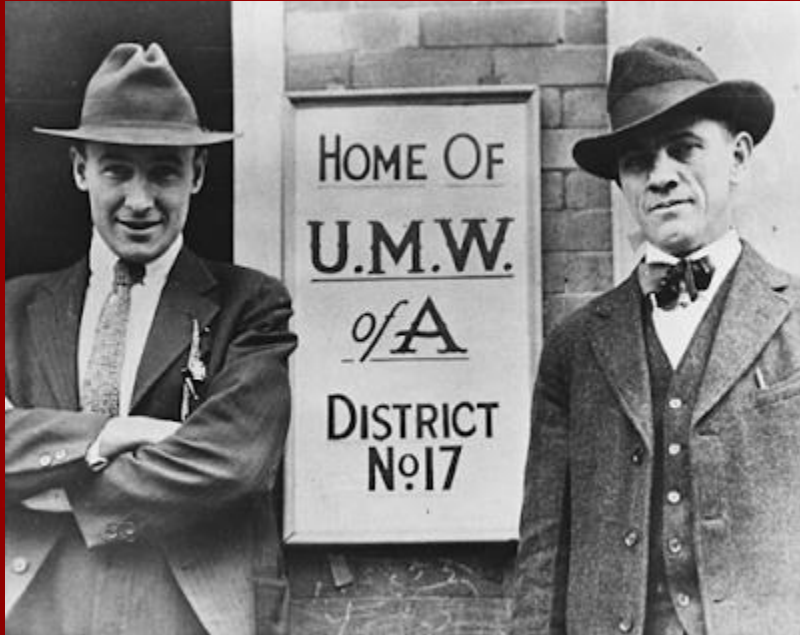
# The First Mine War



**Figure 5.** The Baldwin-Felts detectives hired by the coal companies in West Virginia were referred to as the "Death Special" by miners (Courtesy of the Colorado Historical Society).

- Baldwin-Felts Detective agents guarded the mines.
- First confrontation ended peacefully.
- Miners assault strike breakers.
- Mine guard killed on August 30<sup>th</sup> and constable fired upon.
- Governor declares martial law and sends in the National Guard.
- Guardsmen work with the companies to evict union members and confiscate weapons.

# The First Mine War



**Figure 6.** Fred Mooney (left) and Frank Keeney (right) ( courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, Coal Life Collection).

- Governor ends martial law just long enough to win reelection.
- Union members wage a guerilla war against the companies.
- The war ends in the summer of 1913 when the companies agree to the miners' demands.
  - The removal of strike breakers.
  - Pay raises and improved working conditions.
  - No member of the Union be fired, blacklisted, or evicted.
- Keeney's family was evicted, and he was fired and blacklisted.

# The Interlude



**Figure 7.** Three Coal Miners of the Lorain Coal & Dock Company, Lorado, West Virginia (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).

- Keeney becomes head of a local UMWA chapter and spreads the union throughout West Virginia.
- Companies in Logan and Mingo County resist unionization.
- August 1919, a march of 5,000 armed miners to the resisting counties only ended when the governor personally intervened and threatened to call in federal troops.

# The Second Mine War: The Matewan Massacre



**Figure 8.** The Matewan Train Station in Matewan, West Virginia (Screenshot from "The Matewan Massacre" film by PBS).

- The First Mine War and the governor's threats convinced most of the union that violence was a legitimate tactic. Only Keeney thought otherwise.
- Matewan Massacre
  - May 19, 1920.
  - Sheriff Sid Hatfield, his deputy, and the town mayor, all union sympathizers, confront Baldwin-Felts Agents arriving at the Matewan train station in Mingo County to evict union members.
  - A gun fight breaks out and seven agents are killed, along with the mayor and two bystanders.
- Hatfield and his deputy were arrested but post bail.

# The Second Mine War: The Spark



**Figure 9.** Miners posing with rifles (Screenshot for the documentary “The Battle of Blair Mountain” by SierraKiloBravo).

- On August 1, 1921, Hatfield was assassinated on the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse on the way to his trial.
- Mass protests in Logan and Mingo County lead the governor to declare martial law and suspend the right of habeas corpus.
- Company backed sheriff departments only arrest union members.

# The Battle of Blair Mountain



**Figure 10.** The Baldwin-Felts detectives hired by the coal companies in West Virginia were referred to as the "Death Special" by miners (Courtesy of the Colorado Historical Society).

- On August 25, 1921, Keeney abandoned his non-violent stance and urges the union to go to war.
- Over 10,000 miners march from union-controlled Boone County towards Logan County, the largest labor uprising in US history.
- "Rednecks"
- The two sides clash at Blair Mountain on the county line.
- The companies uses machine guns, airplanes, and poisonous gas.



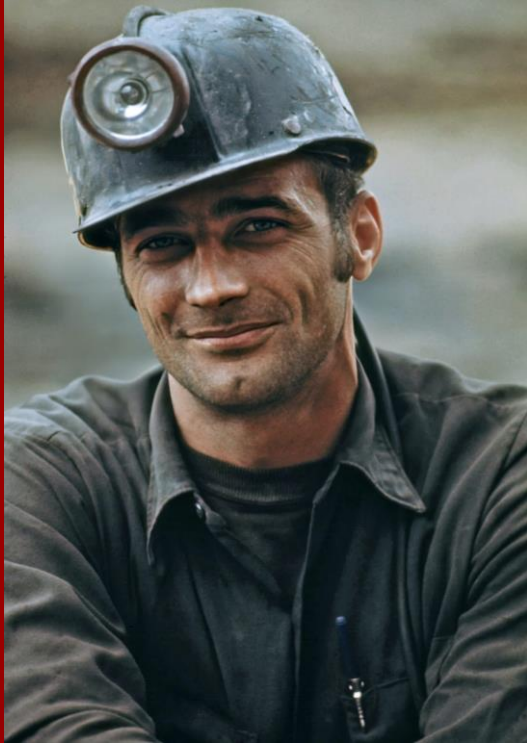
# The End of the Second Mine War



**Figure 11** UMW officials and members of the "miner's army" display a bomb dropped on them during the Battle of Blair Mountain (Originally from the Charleston Gazette, courtesy of the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture, and History).

- The conflict only ended when Pres. Harding sent in the army.
- The war officially ended on September 2, 1921.
- Estimated 10,000 – 20,000 casualties. Many people arrested.
- The Union's reputation ruined.
  - Companies no longer negotiated.
  - Only non-union members allowed to work.
  - Falling prices and the Great Depression lessen union power.
  - The UMWA disbanded in 1930.

# Not All is Lost



**Figure 12.** One of a series of portraits of miners waiting to go to work on the 4 P.M. to Midnight Shift at the Virginia-Pocahontas Coal Company Mine, near Richlands, Virginia (Photo by Jack Corn).

- New unions formed after passing of the Wagner Act of 1935 protected the right of workers to organize.
- Miner protesting in similar numbers as their ancestors at Blair Mountain helped pass the 1972 Mine Safety Act.
- However, poor Frank Keeney died in obscurity.

# Conclusion

- The Battle of Blair Mountain wasn't simply a sudden snap or the outburst of angry hillbillies.
- The people of Southern Appalachia and of West Virginia in particular have long been plagued by outside corporations.
- Missing the decade of uptick in violence misses the nuance of the conflict.
- The long history of the Mine Wars should be taught both to better understand the Battle of Blair Mountain and to inform people in bad working conditions today that positive change rarely comes quickly.

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