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The Battle of Blair Mountain:
Triumph out of Tragedy in West Virginia

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“The class which has the power to rob upon a large scale has also the power to control the government and legalize their robbery.” -Eugene V. Debs

There are many things we presently take for granted in America such as freedom of assembly and the right to vote. These are hallmark institutions of American democracy; however, freedom from tyranny and fair pay are also critical rights in modern day America. In 1921, thousands of West Virginian coal miners began an armed march towards southern Mingo County to win these rights (see Appendix A). This march was a tactical failure, resulting in the confiscation of their firearms and the bankruptcy of their union. The rights they fought for would not be granted until more than 10 years later by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. This battle came too early to directly affect FDR’s election to the presidency and too late to be remembered as part of the labor movement; therefore, it is not covered by the American education system. Ten years, however, is too short for the government to realistically forget a conflict that drew nationwide coverage¹ and federal intervention.² Therefore, considering the similarities between the New Deal issues and the miners complaints, it seems that the Battle of Blair Mountain had at least some impact on the New Deal. The government and the American people came to understand the conflict better in later years, seeing things from the miners’ perspective. In short, the tragic defeat of the miners turned into a triumph for the labor movement as a whole by drawing attention to the treatment of the West Virginian coal miners.

In 1921, the average coal miner lacked many of the rights present Americans take for

¹ "AIR FLEET ORDERED TO W. VA. BATTLEFIELD." *Washington Times* [Washington D.C]. *Library of Congress*, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1921-09-01/ed-1/seq-1/.

² Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

granted, as most of them were later granted via the New Deal. For example, if someone was paid only in gift cards to their employer and charged to trade them in for real cash, they would have a case under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Since this law was still 17 years away, many miners were forced to use company scrip that was only accepted in company stores.³ If miners wanted to trade in their company scrip for real money, they could do so with a 25% deduction.⁴ This situation created a monopoly on goods and services within company towns where it was only financially viable to buy from company stores and receive treatment from company doctors. In this system, mine operators took money out one pocket (the pay) and put it back in another (the company stores). Consequently, the average miner had no choice but to work his whole life shoveling coal into carts and money into absentee landlord pockets. In addition, coal companies controlled the prices for basic goods. When the price of coal was down during the summer, the operators would increase store prices. Companies frequently laid workers off in the summer, making it common for miners to suddenly find themselves unemployed and facing a higher cost of living.⁴ It was also common for companies to force employees to sign so-called “yellow dog” contracts,⁵ which forbade miners from joining a union. By 1932, these contracts were illegal at the federal level. These contracts were used heavily in the southern non-union coalfields of Mingo and Logan Counties.⁴ The unionizing process was already too far along in the northern coalfields to introduce such contracts. In fact, most practices put in place by the New Deal had already been introduced by the unions in northern West Virginia.⁵ Other tactics such as physical

³ "The Battle of Blair Mountain." *History.com*, www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

⁴ Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

⁵ *The West Virginia Mine Wars*. Charles River Editors.

coercion were also employed to prevent unionization. For example, a union member named Sam Copley claimed he was beaten “until (he) spit blood for two weeks thereafter”.⁴ Copley had also been:

... bruised until he was scarcely able to reach home... lodged in the Logan County Jail... for fourteen days; that during said confinement he contracted smallpox... would have starved had it not been for some food he was able to get from the outside; that upon the slightest complaint being made as to the food, the jailer... would beat and abuse the complaining prisoner... that the blanket which was given him while in said jail was stiff with human blood⁶

Similarly, Samuel Arthur, an organizer from the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), was harassed by mine guards who threatened him with a machine gun when he arrived by train to unionize the coalfields.⁶ Another gentleman, D.E. Gunther, cleverly acquired a letter from the county sheriff, Don Chafin, allowing him to stay in the county.⁶ Gunther claimed that a deputy had later tried to break into his hotel room before Chafin himself entered. Chafin subsequently “struck me (Gunther) on the chin” before threatening him, beating him, and demanding that he leave the county. Along with anti-union contracts, outright thuggery, and payment in now illegal scrip, mining itself is also known for being highly dangerous. According to George Orwell, author of *1984* and *Animal Farm*, English coal mine conditions 15 years later were such that the average miner had to crouch walk more than a mile just to get to the area where the coal was. After this point, miners began “shifting coal at a speed approaching two tons an hour...kneeling down, a thousand feet underground, in suffocating heat and swallowing coal dust with every

⁶Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

breath (they) take”⁷ In summary, not only was the work performed by these miners brutal and backbreaking, they were paid improperly, prevented from unionizing, and subjected to terrorism by groups of armed thugs who had been deputized by the corrupt Sheriff Don Chafin. Upon his election to County Sheriff, Chafin had been presented with stock in coal companies estimated to be worth roughly \$50,000 to \$60,000 at the time⁸. In 2018 US dollars, this is between \$700,000 to \$840,000.⁹ Since Logan was a major coal mining county, this was a significant conflict of interest.

At noon on the 19th of May, 1920, in the small town of Matewan, a group of Baldwin-Felts agents arrived to serve short-notice evictions to local miners. The agents possessed a warrant for eviction from Circuit Judge James Damron, who would later work as an attorney for the coal operators. The agents served the warrants without any resistance and made their way back to Matewan by 3:30pm. During this time, the local Mayor, Cabell Cornelius Testerman, issued a warrant for the arrest of the Baldwin-Felts agents charging them with violating a town ordinance for carrying weapons. The local sheriff, Sid Hatfield, attempted to serve said warrant to the agents. In response to this incident, the agents claimed they possessed a warrant for Hatfield’s arrest, though they refused to show it to him. Testerman was notified and offered to pay bond to keep Hatfield in town. Having been told that no bond would be accepted, Testerman requested to see the warrant. The agents begrudgingly produced the warrant, and upon inspection, the mayor determined that it was fake. The agents’ response was to shoot the mayor. The local townspeople were quick to join the sheriff in returning fire. When the dust

⁷ Orwell, George. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Left Book Club ed., London, Victor Gollancz, 1936.

⁸ Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

⁹“Inflation Calculator.” *US Inflation Calculator*, www.usinflationcalculator.com. Accessed 7 Feb. 2019.

cleared, 7 Baldwin Felts agents and 3 Matewan citizens (including the mayor) had been killed.¹⁰ Hatfield was eventually cleared of all charges related to the shootout at Matewan.¹⁰ On August 1st, 1921, when arriving to the courthouse for a separate charge, Sid Hatfield and an Union organizer named Ed Chambers were gunned down by a group of agents on the court steps; Hatfield and Chambers were unarmed.¹⁰ This act was worsened by the lack of charges brought against the agents responsible. This, along with the arrest of dozens of miners in Mingo County, incensed the miners into open revolt.¹¹ The miners began gathering around Lens Creek to march south to free their fellow miners and overthrow Sheriff Chafin.

Even after these provocations, the miners were soon convinced to return to their homes by the federal government and two prominent UMWA members, Fred Mooney and Frank Keeney. General Harry H. Bandholtz had requested that these two leaders convince the miners to turn back. By all accounts, they had succeeded, and for the moment, it seemed that an all out battle was avoidable. But then the operators attacked the returning miners at the small mining town of Sharples. The coal operators believed that, if they could incite a fight from the miners that they would finally be able to “break the back of the United Mine Workers of America”¹⁰. State Governor Morgan sent state police Captain James R. Brockus with “about 85 or 86 other regular state policemen and ‘volunteers’ (there were allegations of forced service in these units)”¹¹ to serve warrants for eviction. Brockus and his men were soon joined by about 50 men from Don Chafin, before marching into Sharples. They arrested some miner patrols, all of whom surrendered to the police, then entered the town and ended up in a gunfight with several miners.¹¹

¹⁰ Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

¹¹ "The Battle of Blair Mountain." *History.com*, www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Brockus insisted that the miners had fired first, but given the size of the police force, this is unlikely. Brockus also claimed that miners fired from the houses in Sharples. It should be noted that none of the 130 policemen and deputies were killed or wounded, while 2 miners were killed and 3 were wounded.¹³ General Bandholtz would later claim that this attack caused the subsequent armed conflict.¹² In response to this attack, the miners turned around and refused to be dissuaded from rebelling by anybody.

On August 31st, 1921, the first “heavy fighting”¹³ of the Battle of Blair Mountain began. According to coal operator Walter Thurmond, the death toll for both parties was between 300 to 500 (most estimates put the number closer to 100). It is possible Thurmond was referring to casualties, which would include wounded and prisoners. An estimated 10,000 miners took part in the armed march, while approximately 3,000 “deputies”, consisting largely of Baldwin-Felts agents,¹⁴ and policemen fought from a defensive position using machine guns.¹³ In fact, on September 1st, 50 miners were killed or wounded while trying to capture one of these machine gun emplacements.¹⁵ That same day, three biplanes chartered by Don Chafin and the coal operators began bombing the miners.¹⁴ The planes deployed two types of bombs: one that released a nauseating gas and another that was a sort of impromptu fragmentation bomb

¹² Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

¹³ "The Battle of Blair Mountain." *History.com*, www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

¹⁴ "labor under siege." *DeColonizing Our History*, decolonizingourhistory.com/histories-2/labor-movement/labor-under-siege/. Accessed 21 Dec. 2018.

¹⁵ "AIR FLEET ORDERED TO W. VA. BATTLEFIELD." *Washington Times* [Washington D.C]. *Library of Congress*, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026749/1921-09-01/ed-1/seq-1/.

containing nuts, bolts, and ratchet wheels¹⁶ (see Appendix B). These chartered biplanes were piloted by three aviators: W.F. Denim, Earl Halloran, and R.S. Haynes. Of these three, Denim and Halloran always maintained they only performed reconnaissance over Blair Mountain. However, Haynes later confessed that he did, in fact, drop both types of bombs.¹⁶ In terms of actual fighting, the operators were certainly the defending party, using several machine gun nests to hold their entrenched positions.¹⁷ Many of the miners who had served in WW1 compared the fighting on the forested Blair Mountain to what they encountered during the Meuse-Argonne offensive in France. The federal government, however, was not about to let two large armed groups of citizens fight each other. Before the end of September 1st, the US Air Service (the precursor the modern Air Force) had begun patrolling the skies. Bandholtz then mustered some 2,100 Army troopers to go and break up the fight. By the 4th, most of the deputies and miners had finished fighting.¹⁷ The army had been able to stop the bloodshed in West Virginia, but not before a lot of blood was lost. The largest damage to the UMWA however, was monetary.

While dozens of miners were killed at Blair Mountain, hundreds were arrested mostly on charges of treason and/or murder. The mine operators arrested about 980 miners¹⁸, primarily UMWA leadership, including the impromptu leader of the miners, Bill Blizzard.¹⁹ Blizzard was to be tried first, and if he were found guilty, the operators would have a precedent for following

¹⁶ Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

¹⁷ "The Battle of Blair Mountain." *History.com*, www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

¹⁸ "Coal Reignites A Mighty Battle Of Labor History." Produced by Lauren Silverman, hosted by Guy Raz. *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 5 Mar. 2011. *National Public Radio*, www.npr.org/2011/03/05/134203550/coal-reignites-a-mighty-battle-of-labor-history. Accessed 10 Jan. 2019. Transcript.

¹⁹ Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

cases, and a strong strategy against other UMWA leaders. If they failed to convict Blizzard, the defense would not only have a precedent, but a winning formula with which to protect the other defendants. Under the “Red Man Act”, which carried a maximum prison sentence of one year, the prosecution had a good case against most of the miners.²⁰ With Blizzard, however, they went for the jugular: they would try him for treason, which could bring the death penalty.²¹ The trial began in 1922.²¹ It was an animated trial, which included an army officer bringing in several rifles confiscated from the miners. This was immediately one-upped by the UMWA lawyers who brought in an unexploded bomb and opened it in front of the jury.¹⁹ The prosecution based their case on the concept of “constructive treason”: the idea that conspiring to commit treason deserved the same punishment as an actual treasonous act. This concept had failed in the 1807 trial of Aaron Burr, but the judge, Honorable J.M Woods, believed that the concept was fair.¹⁹ In order for this approach to work, the prosecution needed to prove that Blizzard was: a) responsible for the actions of all the miners present at the battle and b) intended to overthrow the state government. They were unsuccessful in proving either of these criteria and, at 9:37 p.m on May 27th 1922, the jurors announced that they found William H. Blizzard not guilty on all charges.²² Most other miners were acquitted, but this would still be the (temporary) deathblow to UMWA that the coal operators so desperately desired. The legal fees required to defend

²⁰ West Virginia State, Legislature. Red Man Act. *W. Va. Acts. West Virginia Legislature*, www.wvlegislature.gov/wvcode/chapterentire.cfm?chap=61&art=6§ion=7. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

²¹ "Blizzard Makes Speech; Calls Verdict Vindication 'Disgrace to State,' Some Yell, But Great Mass Cheer Verdict. Never Had Intention to Commit Treason, Blizzard Says." *West Virginia Archives and History. West Virginia Archives and History*, www.wvculture.org/history/labor/blizzardwilliam02.html. Accessed 20 Dec. 2018. Originally published in *Charleston Gazette* [Charleston, West Virginia], 28 May 1922.

²² Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

hundreds of miners left the UMWA destitute, crippling its ability to represent future miners. It would be decades before the UMWA returned to its early 1900's powers. Despite trying and failing to defeat the UMWA in regular combat, the operators were still able to defeat the union just by drawing them into a court battle.

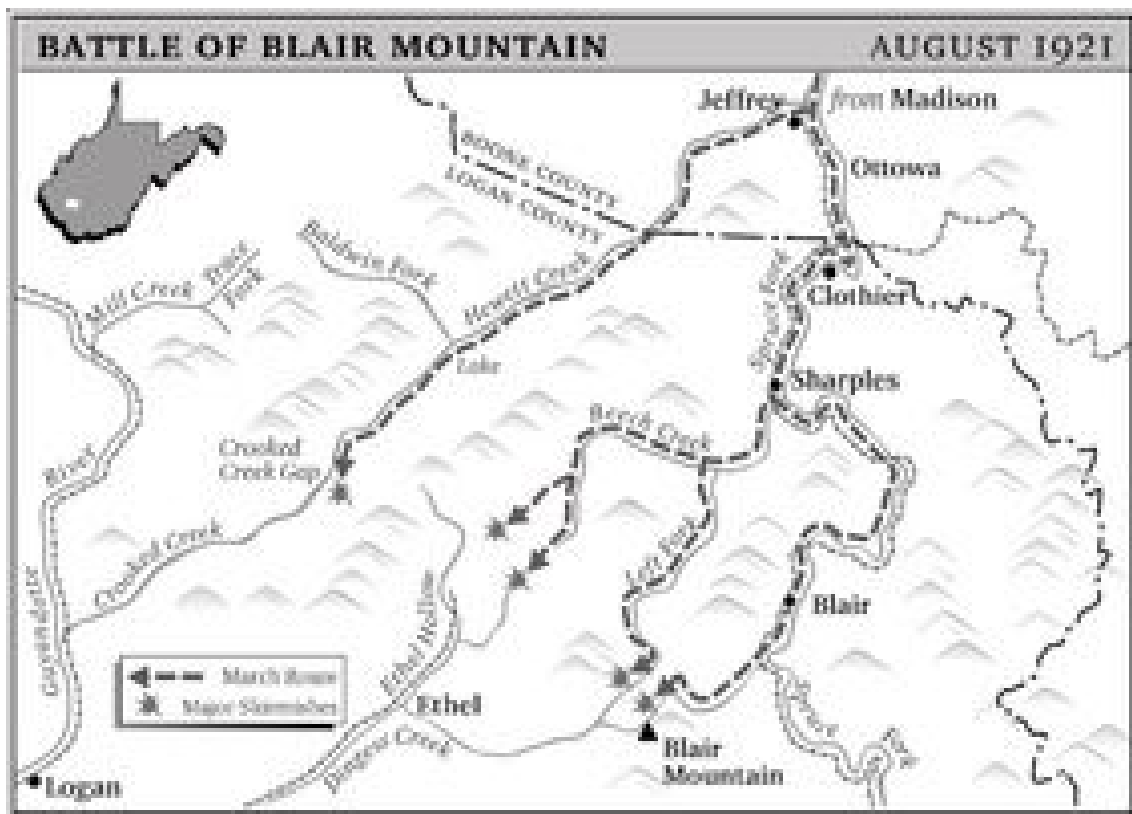
So, the operators were able to score a tactical victory on the battlefield and bankrupted their biggest enemy. Biased local newspaper coverage was the order of the day²³ and nationwide reporters initially sided with the operators. However, within a few years, reporters would begin investigating what incited the miners' revolt. What they found changed their perspective and public opinion recovered from wartime propaganda, which blamed strikes on foreign governments, and turned pro-union.²⁴ By the 1930s, the primary reasons for the armed march were addressed in the New Deal. Collective bargaining was recognized, company scrip was banned, and yellow dog contracts were made illegal.²⁵ Despite the miners tragic losses in every area, except verdicts, they triumphed by effecting later legislation. All it took was the greatest economic depression in modern history.

²³ Blizzard, William C. *When Miners March*. Edited by Wess Harris, PM Press, 2010.

²⁴ Weir, Robert E., and James P. Hanlan, editors. *Historical Encyclopedia of American Labor*. Vol. 1, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2004. 2 vols.

²⁵ "The Battle of Blair Mountain." *History.com*, www.history.com/news/americas-largest-labor-uprising-the-battle-of-blair-mountain. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Appendix A



Battle of Blair Mountain. e-WV, www.wvencyclopedia.org/media/17249. Accessed 10 Jan. 2019.
Map.

Appendix B



BRASS RATCHET WHEEL FOR CLOCKS 20mm. Meadows and Passmore,
www.m-p.co.uk/muk/parts/chap01/brass-ratchet-wheel-for-clocks-20mm-0335002015.htm. Accessed 8 Feb. 2019.

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Mass Cheer Verdict. Never Had Intention to Commit Treason, Blizzard Says." *West*

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BRASS RATCHET WHEEL FOR CLOCKS 20mm. Meadows and Passmore,

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Accessed 8 Feb. 2019. This shows what a ratchet wheel looks like.

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0-search-proquest-com.nell.flatironslibrary.org/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/98764762/A2208943CFE04A58PQ/6?accountid=48257. Accessed 20 Dec. 2018. Originally published in *New York Times*, 3 May 1922, p. 20. This describes the revelation that the Air Force used biplanes and their use of Gas bombs.

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Ready to Aid Dispersal. BOMB FELL NEAR TROOPS Major Thompson States Belief at Trial That 'Mob Hysteria 'Caused Logan Invasion. Says Troops Were Bombed.

Newspaper Correspondents Captured." *New York Times*, 5 May 1922, p. 16. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*,

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Map. This shows the route taken by the miners to Blair Mountain and where they fought Chafin's men

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Accessed 16 Nov. 2018. This describes the unfair practices in employment and payment for the miners.

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