

## **Background on Coal Camp Life**

To understand the history of the Mine Wars, it is crucial to understand the context and living conditions that gave rise these dramatic and bloody events. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of Southern West Virginia was sparsely populated, therefore, as coal mining interests began to come into the region, they were forced to solve two problems to get the coal out of the ground. One was a lack of workers to mine the coal, and the other was an infrastructure to feed, house, and clothe those workers. The main pieces of infrastructure that solved these challenges were the railroads and the establishment of “company towns.” Railroads allowed the mine owners to get labor up the valleys and mountains of the rugged landscape and then get the coal out.

Company towns were established to solve the problem of housing the miners. Company towns were entire communities built on company property. They included houses, churches, schools, stores, and even sometimes movie theatres and swimming pools. However, all of these institutions were owned by the company, and owners were able to dictate the terms of what went on in all of these locations. For example, they hired the minister who usually preached pro-company sermons, and employees at the stores often worked as spies who reported on disgruntled workers or plans for organizing a union. Southern West Virginia had the highest percentage of miners living in company towns, and the system of control meant that labor organizing lagged behind other regions of the country.

Company stores also played a key role in the economic control of miners. Miners in Southern West Virginia were usually not paid in US currency but rather in “scrip” which was money that was good only at the company store. At the stores owners could raise prices as they pleased to ensure they got back a large amount of the wages they paid out. Therefore, even if miners lived close to a town that was not a company town, they often did not have money to buy

things, and in those instances when they did, miners were often punished or threatened for not shopping at the company store.

In addition to the economic and propaganda control the company town system offered, it also gave mine owners direct control over the miners' families. Since the housing was company owned, if a miner got sick or injured, or began to try and organize a union, he and his family could be evicted from his house. With no cash savings, being thrown out on the street put the family in a desperate state. Also, since mine owners were well organized in trade groups, they could easily create "blacklists" of miners who caused trouble and who other owners should not hire.

Even with this system of control, miners still sometimes resisted. Therefore, to enforce this strict control and gather information on who might be trying to organize a union, mine owners in Southern West Virginia relied heavily on private police forces. The most infamous of these was the Bladwin-Felts Detective Agency. The mine guards and those who were hired to help them were often very aggressive and brutal in their work. Since mine owners were influential in the community, and could enforce their will through threats and mine guards, they also usually controlled the politics of a given county, and were also very influential in the state legislature. It appeared to many that miners in Southern West Virginia lived in situation closer to serfdom or slavery than in the United States. This state of affairs meant that many critics referred to West Virginia as a feudal society or simply called it "Russia."

In addition to company towns, the low population density of Southern West Virginia also meant that mine owners had to look elsewhere for workers. While many miners were West Virginia natives, mine owners also sought out and brought in workers from other places. One of the largest groups targeted by owners for work in the mines were African Americans from the

South. The owners sought out these workers especially because they hoped racism would divide the miners and hinder their ability to form a union. Also hoping to divide their workforce, mine owners sought recent immigrants to the US, especially from Eastern and Southern Europe. This workforce meant that Southern West Virginia coalfields were some of the most racially and ethnically diverse regions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Women faced incredibly difficult lives in the coal camps. Mine owners preferred to have married men working for them, because the threat of eviction carried a heavier weight and the owners believed this would make the workforce easier to control. Women were given the difficult tasks of raising children, keeping house, and keeping the family fed on the very low wages the miners earned. This work was made even more difficult when the miners went out on strike, and families were evicted and stayed in tents, sometimes for months at a time.