

Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike 1912-13

By 1912 much of coal mining regions in the United States had been unionized by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). In April 1912, the UMWA negotiated a new contract for the northern coal fields, and they then tried to negotiate a new contract with a pay raise for the southern ones as well. When the union miners on Paint Creek in Kanawha County went out on strike for the wage increase, they reached out to miners on Cabin Creek next door who were non-unionized and encouraged them to go out too. Cabin Creek miners had been restless facing some of the toughest mine guards, and they seized the day, made a list of demands that focused on a union checkweighman and end to the mine guard system. They were quickly evicted from their homes and those evicted set up a tent colony at Holly Grove. When they moved there, they certainly had no idea some would be there living in tents through that winter and stayed out for over a year.

It was at this point that some miners led by Frank Keeney, unable to get support from the UMWA for the miners on Cabin Creek went to Charleston and got the support directly of Mary Harris, "Mother Jones." A grandmotherly figure who could quote the bible and curse like a sailor in the same sentence. The miners loved her and she loved them because she was unexpected by the gender and age norms of the time. In addition to Mother Jones, the miners also began to get support from the rapidly growing Socialist Party.

The companies held strong and refused any demands and instead brought in more detectives to evict striking or sympathetic miners. These evictions were rough affairs. Mothers screaming, children crying, and armed men rummaging through tiny coal camp houses, throwing all belongings out into the street. There is even more than one reported instance of the mine guards evicting pregnant women, and in one instance they evicted a group of miners while they

attended a funeral, and when they came out of church, they were faced with their belongings piled in a heap and across the road mine guards had a machine gun trained at the door of the church expecting trouble.

The Paint Creek Cabin Creek strike eventually broke out into violence because the Holly Grove camp full of women and children that was on “free ground” was attacked one day. Used to their total power, some mine guards simply went up in the hills and wanted to terrorize the miners and their families and force them to leave so they fired down on the peaceful encampment, amazingly no one was killed. But the miners had been getting ready, ordering in cheap rifles and smuggling them up the valleys with help from free citizens up and down the valleys. They launched their own attack on the fortified mine guard base at Mucklow, remarkably during that hour long battle, no one was killed, but the war had begun.

Over the next several months, more than fifty men met a violent end on Paint and Cabin Creek. The miners organized commando brigades like the “dirty eleven” led by men like Dan Chain an African American miner with the nickname “Few Clothes Johnson.” They attacked mine guards, blew up coal tipples, tore up railway tracks and fought or spoke to strike breakers brought in by the company to convince them to join the strike. Many of these strike breakers were African Americans or recent immigrants, and miners who came from similar backgrounds (and often spoke the same languages) like Rocco Spinelli and his wife Nellie Bowles Spinelli would meet incoming trains and convince dozens to join the strike.

Governor William Glasscock finally got involved and declared martial law because the story was getting national press. Many organizers like the Spinellis and Few Clothes were imprisoned along with Mother Jones. Because the pickets were so successful, the owners eventually commissioned a train in Huntington, called the Bull Moose Special (so named

because the ones who paid for it were Progressive Republican supporters of Teddy Roosevelt's independent Bull Moose Party). This train was armored and armed with machine guns to bring in loads of strike breakers. But it also had another use, described here in an expert from the West Virginia Encyclopedia:

The attack was triggered on February 7 when strikers from Holly Grove fired on a company ambulance and attacked the store at nearby Mucklow. Later that night, Kanawha County Sheriff Bonner Hill, Paint Creek coal operator Quinn Morton, a number of deputies, mine guards, and C&O Railway police boarded the Bull Moose Special armed with arrest warrants for unnamed persons. As the darkened train approached Holly Grove, two blasts from the engine's whistle apparently signaled the beginning of machine gun and rifle fire from the Bull Moose Special into the tents of sleeping miners and their families. Several people were wounded, but only one striker, Cesco Estep, was killed. Estep was trying to get his son and pregnant wife to safety. In revenge, the enraged strikers attacked the mine guards' camp at Mucklow two days later.

By April the new governor of WV, Henry Hatfield, decided he would end the strike. He called the UMWA and owners to his office. Coal hadn't only been trickling out the valley for a year at this point. The strike had claimed dozens of lives and millions of dollars worth of coal company property was destroyed. The owners were on their heels. But the miners, aided by solidarity strikers like the Italian anarchist miners from Boomer in Fayette county and the secret mountain gardens tended by miners wives and children buoyed the resolve of a community living in fear, but also side by side in spite of their racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences.

Governor Hatfield got the owners to agree to what came to be called the "Hatfield Contract" It met almost none of the original demands. It did not end the mine guard system, most importantly it did not recognize the union, it simply offered miners a return to work and the only real concession was that union miners would not be discriminated against. The UMWA officials in Charleston were forced to agree to this contract as well, and the governor gave them 36 hours to get back to work or he'd declare martial law. However, since the contract was not any part of

what the rank and file members wanted. They launched a series of wildcat strikes over the next three months, with continued pressure by July won their central demand union recognition of most mines on Paint and Cabin Creeks.