

## **Matewan and Blair Mountain**

While the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike had won union recognition for miners in much of Kanawha County; Logan, Mingo, and McDowell counties were still un-unionized in spite of similar difficult working and living conditions. During WWI, things were relatively quiet in the coal fields, however, after the war ended Southern WV, like much of the country, saw dramatic increases in labor strife. This conflict was due largely to large numbers of soldiers returning from the war in search of work and fears that the economy was slowing following wartime production. In this context of heightened labor conflict, the UMWA tried to extend its reach into previously un-unionized counties like Mingo.

In response to this organizing drive, on May 19, 1920, a dozen heavily armed men from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency arrived in Matewan, WV to evict miners from company housing because they had joined the UMWA. The evictions included driving a woman and her children from home at gunpoint and throwing their belongings into the rain. The detectives who carried out this work probably assumed that their reign of “terror on the Tug” would continue much as it had during previous decades of company rule. However, they were unlike any other because on this day, while the detectives contentedly ate dinner, pro-union miners and chief of police Sid Hatfield organized to meet them. Matewan was unique, because unlike areas around it, it was an independent town that was not owned by a coal company. This meant it elected its own government and was at this time under a pro-reform, pro-union city government. When the detectives tried to arrest Hatfield with a bogus warrant, a shootout erupted that left seven Baldwin Felts detectives dead. One miner, Bob Mullins, and a bystander Tot Tinsley, as well as Mayor Cable Testerman were also killed.

Hatfield became a folk hero to miners who were tired of the iron fist of company rule. After a Mingo County jury refused to convict him of murder for the shootout at Matewan, Sid Hatfield was summoned to court in McDowell County on what many agree was a bogus charge of blowing up a coal tippie. Approaching the courthouse unarmed, Hatfield and his deputy Ed Chambers were gunned down by Baldwin Felts detectives. The murderers never faced justice.

To the miners, the murder of Hatfield symbolized the brutal use of violence and the law by the companies in Mingo county that had kept out the union. Soon, unionized miners from across the coal fields (many of whom had only recently won union recognition during the bloody Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike 1912-13), gathered near Marmet to march on Mingo county. Since the companies used force to keep the union out of those counties, the miners decided they needed to use force to bring the union and humanitarian aid in. Union miners eventually formed an army of thousands of “rednecks” (named for the red bandanas they wore). In addition to a high number of returned WWI veterans, the Paint Creek-Cabin Creeks strike had given the miners significant organizational experience. The main leader of the miners was Bill Blizzard who had played a key role in the 1912-13 strike.

However, to reach Mingo, the redneck army would have to pass through Logan County which was controlled by close friend of the coal operators Sherriff Don Chafin. Chafin prepared an army of several thousand mine guards and company men who built a defensive line of trenches in the mountains above Logan. When the two armies met, the most intense fighting occurred at Blair Mountain. Chafin’s army held the advantage of defensive trenches and machine guns. They also had use of a private air force that dropped homemade bombs on the marching miners. The battle raged for several days and though no official account exists of casualties, at least several dozen were likely killed on both sides in the fighting.

Although the miners nearly won the day, a last-minute deployment of the US Army by President Harding averted a union victory. The miners gave up their arms peacefully to the army, hoping they would restore order and constitutional rights. However, they were mistaken and several hundred were arrested for murder and treason against the State of West Virginia. In trials held in the same courthouse where John Brown went on trial for his raid of Harpers Ferry, most of the miners including Bill Blizzard were acquitted. Following the trials and battle, the UMWA lost its influence, and it was not until the New Deal of the 1930s that the previously un-unionized areas were organized. However, the experiences of the 1910s and 20s were influential in creating a culture of sacrifice and solidarity that served the UMWA well in its later organizing drives as well as in its continued militancy in the interest of miners health, safety, and wages.