

INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS HOLT

Ferraro: A Mr. Holt will you tell us how old you were in 1921 and a how you got involved in the Battle of Blair Mountain?

Holt: I was fourteen years old in 1921 and I got involved...a primarily I expect because I a my dad had a car and I drove it. The a at that time a the men who were in here got their food by train. They a the train ran about two o'clock in the afternoon. The passenger train did. It brought in a a hampers of a cheese, boiled hams and bread and they were all unloaded at the store. Well, I happened to be there with the car and couple of miners...a perceded to have me load their food in the car and haul it out to the...well the first trip was up a left fork a beach and then up the main fork of Beach Creek up to a at that time it was called.

Ferraro: What type of car did your father have?

Holt: He had a Baby Overland. It was a one of the newer cars in those days a because it had a half springs in the front and a nine times out of ten when you drove such a ten miles why you break one.

Ferraro: What what were the roads like in this area of 1921?

Holt: They were just a country roads. We had no paved roads.

Ferraro: Were there roads over Blair Mountain?

Holt: No, it was a wagon road. It took a...

Ferraro: A wagon road. What do you mean?

Holt: I mean by well, the best way to travel it would be horse and wagon because cars didn't go over Blair Mountain. In the summertime they go over Blair Mountain but it took a whole day to make a trip to Logan and keep in mind back in that time there were very few automobiles in this area.

Ferraro: Why did the miners choose Blair Mountain to cross to get to Logan?

Holt: Well, there're only two natural gateways from the coal river side of a Logan County and the Guyandotte River side and you had a narrow gap at Blair Mountain and you had another narrow gap up a Hewitts Creek. A when you crossed over Hewitts Creek you came down a on the Guyan side somewhere around Pecks Mill but when you cross from here crossed over Blair Mountain to get to the Logan side you came down at Ethel. Now from Ethel down to Logan you had a fair piece of road but Blair Mountain you didn't travel it in the winter time. The only time you went over was in the summer and automobiles well, as I said before they were very few automobiles here and most of the time the old Model T Fords some places on Blair Mountain when you went up a you had to turn you had to turn around and go up it backwards because the gas tank was under the seat and you had gravity flow from your gas and the hill was steep in some places and the only way you got gas to the engine was go up backwards.

Ferraro: So this the Coal River side of Logan County was fairly isolated from the

Holt: That's right. We were isolated and seldom did anyone from over here go to Logan.

Ferraro: Was this side of the county different from the Guyandotte side of Logan County?

Holt: Well, we didn't know much about the Guyandotte side. The only ones that we knew a about Guyandotte side were the deputy sheriff that would be stationed over here and he lived here. At that time his name was John Browning and he lived here in the community and most of our contact with what was going on on the other side of the hill was through John Browning. If we had taxes to pay we let John take it over. If we needed something from Logan we let John get it.

Ferraro: How did it come about that the union organized on the little coal side of Logan County and not not on the Guyandotte side?

Holt: I don't know about that. I they organized here back a I guess during the war 1918 they organized this side and you see Boone County that joins Logan down here at Clothier was organized and most of the transaction and the conversations and the a social life of the people here in this area of Logan County tended to go toward Madison and the Boone County people because you had a natural travel way down to Madison where as I told you before it took all day to go to Logan if you went in an automobile in the summertime. You when over in the morning transact your business came back in the evening and there were very few automobiles and if a man had

a car and he agreed to take you to Logan your your fare to go was twenty five dollars.

Ferraro: Say a person from this side of Logan County wanted to travel to Logan by by train, how how would they go?

Holt: Oh, we had to go through down by St. Albins in Huntington and back up Guyan River.

Ferraro: How long a trip would that have been?

Holt: Well, I'd say it would take him two days because your train out of here- your passenger train out of here would leave Clothier. That was the lay over stop about four o'clock in the morning. Go to St. Albins then the train came back up the river in the afternoon and it went to

is right now the people call it Kelly. You had a good size town up there. You even had a turntable up there for turning the engine around. They would stay there and leave out at a four in the morning and get to Clothier and go on from there. It came up here back in the day time about two o'clock in the acternoon when it got to Monclow. Now it went to Blair and at that time they called it Sovern. It went to Sovern. Then when it came back out of Sovern it backed up Beach Creek here at a Monclow and was the last camp up Beach Creek and it was a large camp. There were probably hundred houses up there and there were two good size mines up there. Then a when the train left there a it went on to St. Albins. So if you left here at two o'clock in the afternoon you got to St. Albins about five o'clock in the evening. Then you had to go to Huntington. Then you had to catch a train out of Huntington and

come back up Guyan River the next day to get to Logan.

Ferraro: So the road over Blair Mountain was the shortest but not the best?

Holt: You couldn't you couldn't travel it in the winter time at all. Now the only way you could travel in the wintertime was to ride a horse.

Ferraro: Was there telephone communication between this side and the Guyandotte side?

Holt: I don't know. I don't know whether there was or not.

Ferraro: Ah, what did your father do for a living and was he involved...

Holt: My dad was a miner. He worked in the mines here at Monclow. He was secretary treasurer of the United Mine Worker Union Number 4384 at that time. My dad came here in 19 and 10 to this river and we moved here in 1912. So when we first came here the roads from Sharples up the rail-road from Sharples up was a load train road and a the chief industry back through that section was timber. Now I don't know whether you ever saw a log train road or not but there a narrow gauge. By narrow gauge I mean a you got a fifty-two inch track out there and those log trains I don't know what they were probably forty-forty.

Ferraro: Would you start from what you can remember as the beginning of the Blair Mountain instant incident and just go cronogolically what you can remember steps happening a the best you can and your part in it and your feelings at the time.

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Holt: My best recollection of it the the mine mine the march started at Marmet and came to Madison and the Governor had a meeting down there and promised varied and sundry things and a they disbanded but in the meantime you had a a group of well they said they were there but there were various estimated of how many there were. Some said 50 some said 250 came across through the Beach Creek section came across from Logan and their purpose was to go to Mitland and arrest two miners. At Montclo just above where the coal company store was located they come in contact with four or five miners that were walking along the road there. Now this happened probably ten o'clock at night and no one knows why the shooting started but the shooting started and two miners were killed. One was seriously wounded.

Ferraro: Do you remember their names?

Holt: Well, the miners that was killed was named Bill Greer and the one that was wounded was named Hunter, Jimmy Hunter, a the other miner killed I think his name was Robinson. He had no relatives or anyone here and he was buried in the coal company cemetary. then some four or five years later some of his people came here and had the body taken up and moved to wherever his home was. I don't know. A Bill Greer left a wife and four or five children. He was killed. He lived next door to us and a I don't know whatever happened to his family but the Hunter boy was over in the Charleston General Hospital for three or four weeks. He was shot in the leg; shot in the chest but he got well. I don't know whatever happened to him after he left the hospital.

Ferraro: Were you present when the shooting took place?

Holt: No, I was at my house and my mother gathered all us up and put us under the bed and so on. My dad had a two or three days before the union required my dad to sign two checks for a thousand dollars a piece and those checks were used I'm told to buy high powered rifles. In the meantime my dad had gone out in the country where his where we came from in Spring Hill in Kanawha County when this fighting took place and we were the family was moved out from home. We just moved out from home and a till things quieted down a couple days later we came back. In the meantime there were well hundreds of people coming in a old men, young men, middle aged men, a men with automatic the latest rifles that you could but and men with old muzzle loaders. And it was a well it was actually a sight to see all the conglomeration of weapons that those people brought in here. Then we had a out excitement the most excitement an airplane flying over. We had a everyday there'd be a plane go over. Well, they said they had bombs. They said they made bombs out of dynamite and put caps in em and then dropped em. I never saw anything like that. The only thing happened to me about the airplanes going over was a I delivered ice for the coal company store and a on one delivery trip the a plane went over and I had the back end of this wagon loaded up with blocks of ice and a plane went over and the horse got scared and jumped over hole and dumped all that ice and tore the wagon up. But that's the only excitement I got out of the airplanes. Of course seeing the airplane was excitement enough because most of us up here had never seen one.

Ferraro: A when the miners were here were they fairly orderly?

Holt: They were orderly: They never bothered anyone. They were all polite.

They a if a you fixed them a lunch or something they thanked you. They were they was organized. Each group had its own little captain and one group wanted to go this way and another group wanted to go that way and there was no organization to em. Everyone they claimed there was ten thousand I seriously doubt there was over twenty-five hundred all together.

Ferraro: A where you were or total on the whole?

Holt: I was in the whole thing until the soldiers came in. Now you mentioned an incident of this a

Ferraro: Mr. Holt would you tell me again about from your viewpoint a how many miners do you think were involved in your area what you considered of the fighting?

Holt: My opinion the number of miners a in this thing was exaggerated a great deal. A I would say there were not over twenty-five hundred all together. They traveled in groups each little group had it's own commander, its own captain and you'd see the same group two or three times a day. And I hauled and I don't know of anyone else that provided any food stuffs but they had a boiled hams come in. Boiled hams came in in long boxes that packed in ice back at that time and I would take or I'd load in that Baby Overland I'd load the back end with a four or five boxes of boiled hams. I think there were two or three hams in a box. The hams were put in and ice poured on top and the box nailed up. Then there would be two cases of bread so I'd put the hams in the back and throwed two cases of bread in and then I'd take the car and drive it up to the mouths of these

hollers. And somebody would meet me at the mouth of the hollers. Now I was 14 years old boy and a a the men didn't let me go back in the woods and so on where a where there was any possible danger of me getting hurt. Because they were very circumspect about seeing to it that I only went so far and no farther. They'd take the hams out and the bread out and disappear with it. But from now a no no other no other food stuffs came in to this area and a certainly the hams and the bread that I hauled out and the hampers of cheese that I took out didn't feed a whole lot of people.

Ferraro: From where you were during most of this could you hear constant gunfire?

Holt: I only heard gunfire once and that was a the time I well I'll take that back I heard the I heard the shooting that took place the first night when the two men were killed. Now they claim there was several deputy sheriffs killed in that a noone every knew whether there were or not. They just said there was. But a the only other gunfire that I heard was when this a these two reporters went up the mountain a to a try to see what was going on up there.

Ferraro: Tell me about your part in a these two reporters. A what you knew about them and a describe them.

Holt: Well the governor declared Marshall Law and the president sent a a soldiers in. The commander of the soldiers was a man named Goshaw..... Captain Goshaw and he they set up a headquarters down here at Sharples. I happened to be there I happened to be there with the car and these reporters came in. Now they were both smart-elec people. The woman was

just as smart-elec as the man or worse. But they demanded to go to the front, they wanted right up to the front. They wanted to see the hospital they wanted to see the people that were dead. We didn;t have any dead people over here, we didn't have any hospital here and certainly those miners since the president declared Marshall Law they weren't going to get out and let anybody see em. Certainly not to take any pictures for the New York newspapers. But Commander Goshaw said a asked me if I'd drive em up to the foot of the hill that was up this way Beech Creek side. I drove em up and he put a soldier in the car with me and we let em out at the foot of the mountain. They started walking. Now the woman created quite an impression because she was wearing pants a they call em jodphers nowadays or that's what they called em then of course we had never seen a woman wear pants like that and they was wide in the thighs across the legs as they were real tight at the bottom and a she talked real smart-elec to the people and of course our people weren't used to that and right away a our people labeled her that old huzzy from New York. But a course as far as I know she was a nice person. The man with her was a reporter.

Ferraro: Do you remember their names?

Holt: No I don't I don't remember their names of those people but he was a reporter and he was evidently he actually wnated to get a good story. Because they started walking up the hill a that section that divides this section from Ethel.

Ferraro: Which is on the Guyandotte side?

Holt: Yea, it was on the Guyandotte side. The shooting took place probably fifty shots when they got just out of sight and I heard her and this soldier that was with me heard her scream the woman scream and we heard the man holler at her and then we heard the evidently there was state police because a they took hollered down and told that soldier that they'd take care of it and for us to move on out. But a I understood that the woman was shot in the breast had a had a one bullet hole in one breast, the man was shot in the leg and his leg broken and the woman was shot in one other place but I don't know whether it was the leg or not. I know they took both of em to the hospital. They stayed over there a while and when they were released they went back to New York and they wrote some ungodly stories about West Virginia.

Ferraro: From, I'll ask you this again a if there had been constant gunfire at Beech Creek and would you have been able to have heard it? Were you close enough to have heard it do you think?

Holt: Yes, I was close enough to hear it the a there was gunfire on the Blair Mountain section up at Blair.

Ferraro: Which is how far from...

Holt: From here that was seven miles from here.

Ferraro: Could you hear any of that?

Holt: No we didn't hear it. Now that's the section where John Gore was killed. Now John Gore was a deputy sheriff. His family lived over here but he had

forsaken his family and moved to that side of the hill. A he was the deputy sheriff for Don Shafin and he was killed on that side on that section up there. Don told the people in Blair could hear shots that lived down in Blair they could hear shots around the mountain through there but we never heard any shots back here.

Ferraro: Were the men stationed in this area just waiting?

Holt: They were just here you'd they'd march down the road and in the morning and back up the road in the evening and a one incident we had a tipples up here. A coal tipple that had a long stairway that went down from up here at the headhouse down to the railroad tracks and they were about fifty miners walking around that tram road late at night. It was after dark and one of em fell one of em fell and let his gun off. It happened to be a shotgun and immediately there was about fifty more shots fired at an old cow on the hillside but nobody was killed. But everybody got excited about that how many shots were fired there at that coal tipple at a cow.

Ferraro: Why were the miners trying to get over Blair Mountain and and do you think that a the average miner knew what he would do if he managed to cross Blair Mountain?

Holt: The only way to get over to a Mingo County from this section or the section that was a was a organized was to go through Logan.

Ferraro: Why did they want to go to Mingo County?

Holt: They wanted to go to Mingo County because a the a sheriff of Mingo County was a United Mine Workers supporter. His name was Sid Hatfield. And was shot down in the streets at Matewan or Williamson. I don't know which town but I believe it was at Matewan. He was shot down in the streets over there by a coal operator, a security guard, a Boldenfelts detective. And the miners resented the fact that one of their chief supporters who was a sheriff of Mingo County or Sid Hatfield was killed. And they were trying to they were organizing Mingo County. The United Mine Workers was. And to get there they had to go through Logan. Well, Don Shafin said they're not going through Logan. And that brought on the conflict.

Ferraro: Do you think that the average miner soldier who came to Blair armed do you think he knew what he would do if he managed to make it over Blair Mountain?

Holt: I think he knew what he was doing. They those boys were they were pretty radical. They a a once they'd agreed to turn back and I remember they agreed to turn back down at Madison and they'd turn back and the day after they turned back they sent fifty to hundred two hundred deputy sheriffs over here to serve a warrant. two men. and that just didn't set too well.

Ferraro: What do you think they would have done if they had crossed Blair Mountain?

Holt: I think they would have behaved themselves and gone on over and organized Mingo. They a that was their purpose and that was intended and after

they organized Mingo I think they'd organize Logan. A this section here from the Coal River side of Logan County was organized. All that section over there the Tridelphia District all the rest of Logan District, Chapmanville District, no union people worked over there. And we were told I can't prove this, we were told that Don Shafin got ten cents a ton rotality from every coal company over there to keep the union out. Now I don't know whether that's true or not but I know that Don Shafin and his family got rich and hell you didn't get rich in those days being a sheriff of Logan County because it only paid about twenty-five hundred dollars a year.

Ferraro: Did your father or did you (cough)

Holt: How was that?

Ferraro: Did your father or you know Don Shafin personally?

Holt: I knew Don right well (cough) I ran for the house of delegates in 1934 and he supported me. He was a nice man.

Ferraro: Describe him.

Holt: Well, he was probably a five foot ten or six foot. He weighed maybe two hundred and thirty or thirty-five pounds. Jovial, fat face. He had a smile for everybody he saw that included his enemies as well as his friends. He'd do anything at all for you that he could. If he liked you the sky was the limit.

Ferraro: What was the well your mother told me a story about the night of the shootout at Mitland about a man dropping a gun outside the house. Do you remember that story?

Holt: Well that happened here at Montcloe. That's the night that the two men got killed and Cecil Cloric got shot. They a a she herded all of us under the floor. That shooting took place. Now the house is still up here. It's the first house above the coal tipple on the right of the side track. It's still there and a I don't know whether they've ever filled up the bullet holes in the plaster or not. But there were a number of bullet holes in the first floor part of that house.

Ferraro: Where you were staying?

Holt: No, no that was some other people lived in that house. I lived on above there. But mom just put us under the under the floor because a the foundation was concrete. And if you get under the floor you were pretty safe from any flying bullets. We didn't stay long. We kids got to ballin and out we went.

Ferraro: Did a dis she find any guns in the yard the next morning?

Holt: No we didn't find any guns in the yard, we found a we found a number of guns after those men marched away after the soldiers came in a every-body that was in that was supposed to turn their guns into the army. Well a lot of em didn't. I say during the next month or two there was maybe a hundred or two hundred guns found out in the woods hid under a log or under a pile of leaves and so on. No we didn't find any guns.

I had a little old a twenty-five automatic pistol I carried around and why I guess I killed twneety-five people with it, mentally.

Ferraro: Describe what it was like when the soldiers arrived.

Holt: Well, the soldiers came in. They set up a headquarters down here at Sharples and sent patrols up this and the other way and the next thing you know everything quieted down. You saw these men coming in with empty handed get on the train and the train took em on out to St. Albins or wherever they were going to a no names were taken by the army. They just came in and when they marched out into the section I guess you'd called out from the field everything stopped.

Ferraro: What was the attitude of the miners towards the army coming in?

Holt: I don't know I couldn't tell whether they were glad of it or sorry of it or what. A my opinion is they were glad to see it happen. A because a there was alot of hilarity on the train when they loaded up on the train to go back out of here. There was a big lot a laughin and hollerin and a hoopin and so on. And another thing I never saw any drinkin of any kind. Of course, that was just a couple of years after proibition went into effect but the fact still is there was still plenty of moonshine. But I never saw any man in the whole group and I'd say all together from one time or another I saw a thousand men, and never saw a man take a drink.

Ferraro: How were the men dressed?

Holt: Just the way we're dressed. Just the way they were at the house when ever they decided to leave. They were not dressed up. Every man had him a red handkerchief.

Ferraro: Did the a Logan defenders wear any particular ensignia?

Holt: The only ones I knew of that wore any kind of any kind of uniform were the a state police. Now remember the state police at that time was a new organization too. I think they was only about a year old in West Virginia.

Ferraro: Which side did the state police support?

Holt: They didn't support either side but they were with they were with the deputy sheriffs on the Blair Mountain side because they were law enforcement officers and the governor had declared this group of miners in here as insurrectionists. And consequently the state police what few there were over there we were told there were two or three hundred but I doubt if there were over twenty-five. But a they were with the deputy sheriffs.

Ferraro: Did you go up on the mountain after the fighting and look around?

Holt: After it was all over I went up two or three of the places there. You, you didn't see much you could see people had laid themselves a bed and a rolled up some rocks to be in front of them but other than that there wasn't anything exciting you could see some trees shot up on the Blair Mountain side but now we never found any trees shot up back through here.

Now some, oh five or six years later yea longer twenty years later, we found two skeletons back here in the head of Deech right in the area where those miners were. Now we don't know how come those skeletons there they were never identified they were men. Then we found another skeleton up there of a man hangin in a tree. There wasn't anything left but the bones but he was still hangin there. They were still there. We don't know why it was hangin whether he hung himself or whether somebody did it or anything else. And a the a they claimed, I didn't see this I just heard it that there were bullet holes decernable in the skeletons of the two men they found a that had been covered up up there. I didn't see that, I just heard it talked.

Ferraro: In your opinion, how many people were killed up there?

Holt: I know on the miners side I know there were only the two people killed here the first night. That was Bill Greer and I believe the mans name was Robinson. I've never I'm not certain about that. And the Hunter boy Cecil Hunter was shot. He was not killed. I don't know of any other miners that were killed and the only deputy sheriff that I know of being killed was a a John Gore.

Ferraro: What do you know about him being shot um....

Holt: I just know he was shot on Blair Mountain. I don't know anything about him being shot. I know that he was shot by the miners side.

Ferraro: A Reverand John Wilburn was a found guilty of the murder, do you think that was a.....

Holt: I think they wanted to find somebody guilty. My dad was indicted on that same thing.

Ferraro: On what charge?

Holt: Charge of killin John Gore. A....

Ferraro: Was your dad present?

Holt: No he wasn't even in Logan County. He was down in Kanawha County. But he was tried and was taken up to a required to go he was out on bond. He was required to go up to Charlestown. You see, they had this these trials of these men at Charlestown. A based on the fact they supposedly couldn't get a fair trial in Southern West Virginia so they moved it over in the Eastern Panhandle. And of course, when my dad went over there and showed that he was not even in Logan County the charge against him was dismissed. Now they tried to get him too for signing the checks two thousand dollars that they used to buy the rifles with. But he didn't buy those rifles he just signed the checks and turned them over and the people that bought the rifles filled them out.

Ferraro: What did you dad have to say about the trial in Shepardstown?

Holt: He never talked much about it. He was just very glad to get out of it. He was of course, he knew he he knew that he was innocent because he was not here and he had plenty of witnesses to prove that he was not even in Logan County. And a so they didn't have any trial. He was very happy about the matter they didn't have a trial.

Ferraro: What happened to your family after all the trouble up here?

Holt: Oh, we all went back home and played a we all went back to school and half of the boys in school was a deputy sheriff and the other half was a coal miner and we had to fight the battles all over again on the school ground.

Ferraro: Did you ever see Mother Jones?

Holt: I saw her in a crowd, not close up. I just saw her go by in a crowd.

Ferraro: What was the general feeling on the miners side toward her?

Holt: They thought she was the berries, she was it. I know she could cuss like a trooper and a I guess she was quite a gal.

Ferraro: Do you remember hearing any stories about her?

Holt: No, not a I heard stories about her but I don't remember them. The a, I think there's a record out about her now. One of the networks had a record about her.

Ferraro: What do think a were the major consequences of the Blair Mountain battle? Do you think anyone won or anyone lost?

Holt: I don't think anybody won. I don't think anybody lost. I know the miners the miners lost on this to this extent. A we had a United Mine Workers union here in this locality, all this section did. And after

that mine wars so called mine war the union got disrupt and the the union was disband and the miners the mines up here became scab mines after that up until the Roosevelt revolution when they were reorganized again under the National Labor Relations Act.

Ferraro: So then what you're saying is the union actually lost?

Holt: Lost, that's right. We lost from this section. On the other hand I think maybe I think the publicity and the plight of the miners in the non-union sections I think that ought to have been worth something.

Ferraro: Can you think of anything to ask? Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the incident?

Holt: I don't know of anything. I a it's been a over fifty years and a lot of things happen that you don't remember that long. I was fourteen years old when that happened and right now I happen to be seventy-six. So a you can judge yourself accordingly when you get to be seventy-six.

Ferraro: I hope my memories as good as yours. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Holt: O.K.