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**“The Impact of the
Mechanization of the Coal Mining
Industry on the Population and
Economy of Twentieth Century West
Virginia”**

**By
Christopher Price.**

(Mr. Price received his bachelor’s degree in history and government from WVU Tech and his Master of Arts from Marshall University. He teaches at Calvary Baptist Academy in Hurricane.)

The date was January 18, 1951—a date that severely impacted the economic security of thousands of miners and the communities in which they lived. It was on this date that the long-time president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), John L. Lewis, and the president of the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA), Harry Moses, signed a pact that changed the face of the mining industry immediately and which continues to affect it today. This agreement avoided a strike that would

have seen nearly 400,000 men walk off the job, turning in their picks and shovels for picket signs.¹ While the avoidance of a strike and the higher wages were viewed as positive outcomes at the time, the agreement between Lewis and the BCOA included a stipulation that the UMWA would no longer oppose the mechanization of the coal mining industry. This had an extremely detrimental effect upon the thousands of miners who would see their means of earning a living taken by machines. While not the only factor in the loss of mining jobs and population for the Appalachian coal fields, Lewis’ agreement with the BCOA did much to damage the economic well-being of the very people who counted on him to look out for it.

Industrial mechanization often

¹Brit Hume, *Death and the Miners: Rebellion and Murder in the UMW* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971), 22. Many secondary works cite George Love as the President of the BCOA. However, at the time of the signing of the contract in question, Harry Moses is cited in that capacity.

has detrimental effects on the workers that are displaced by the machines. It is nearly impossible for employment levels in certain segments of industry to remain stable with the introduction of new technologies. Two works by economists that back up this hypothesis are *Managing the Dynamics of New Technology: Issues in Manufacturing Management* by Hamid Noori and *Automation: A Study of its Economic and Social Consequences* by Frederick Pollock. Noori gives statistics from Canada, which show that in 1911 one-third of Canadians were employed in “primary industries” such as mining, fishing, and agriculture. By 1981, the number of Canadians employed in primary industries dropped to only seven percent. Over the same time period, after great technological advancements, the number of Canadians employed in service industries rose from one-third of all workers to two-thirds of all workers.² Many times service oriented jobs pay considerably less than mining and manufacturing positions.

Pollock’s work was published shortly after the new UMWA-BCOA contract in 1957. Pollock understood the threat that mechanization posed to the workers of the day. He wrote, “Automation may threaten to deprive wage-earners and salaried employees not only of a particular job but it may perhaps even render certain professional skills redundant and undermine the social status of many people employed in industry. Only a

privileged minority—responsible administrators, engineers, supervisors and maintenance men—can feel that their jobs are safe.”³ This statement describes the effect of the mechanization of mines in Appalachia nearly perfectly.

The cotton industry underwent this phenomenon in the South in the 1920s and 1930s. In an article titled “Technical Change in Cotton Production in the United States, 1925-1960,” Moses S. Musoke looked into technological unemployment in the cotton industry. Although the cotton industry and the coal industry are very different, the effect of mechanization was much the same. Musoke argued that the social costs of automation are not generally recognized and that “these costs were borne mostly by those whose resources were no longer employed.”⁴

Historians largely agree on the way that the agreement between Lewis and the operators affected the miners. Richard B. Drake briefly looks into this in *A History of Appalachia*. He states that “The result of the 1950’s Love-Lewis Agreement was the first massive invasion of technology into an American industry.” He then looks into the net effect on mining employment from just before the signing of the agreement during World

³Frederick Pollock, *Automation: A Study of its Economic and Social Consequences* (New York: Frederick A Praeger, Publishers, 1957), 40-41.

⁴Moses S. Musoke, “Technical Change in Cotton Production in the United States, 1925-1960,” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 1977): 258-260.

² Hamid Noori, *Managing the Dynamics of New Technology: Issues in Manufacturing Management* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990), 293-296.

War II and 1960. During that time period, 350,000 miners lost their jobs, the vast majority after the signing of the agreement.⁵ John Alexander Williams also looks briefly into the results of mechanization in his histories titled *West Virginia: A History* and *Appalachia: A History*. In *West Virginia: A History*, Williams writes, “The causes behind this decline (in mining employment) were mechanization and consolidation.”⁶ In *Appalachia: A History*, he writes, “the productivity gains and consequent job losses came quickly, the promised benefits (of the agreement) more slowly if at all.”⁷ This work looks into the conditions of this contract and uses census figures to illustrate the impact that the mechanization of the coal industry has had on the population of West Virginia and show that the twentieth century can be cut into two halves by taking into account the agreement between the UMWA and the BCOA in the early 1950s.

Coal mining has long been a major contributor to the economy of Appalachian. West Virginia is the only state to be located completely in Appalachia,⁸ and has traditionally

⁵Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 201-202.

⁶John L. Williams, *West Virginia: A History*, 2nd Ed. (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2001), 180-181.

⁷John A. Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 318.

⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

been one of the largest producers of coal in the region. The coal industry in West Virginia goes back to the antebellum period before West Virginia statehood. The beginning of extensive mining in the Kanawha Valley began with the discovery of cannel coal at Cannelton in 1848. Cannel coal was very useful, as it could be converted into lamp oil and, later, into crude oil. Many seams were discovered within twenty-five miles of Charleston and the industry began to take off until the Civil War brought production to a near standstill.⁹

After the conclusion of the war in the late 1860s there were relatively few people engaged in coal mining as an occupation in West Virginia. The 1869 statistics on mining, which included “quarrying, oil-boring, and peat-cutting,” showed that there were 185 sites carrying on such activities. These 185 establishments employed only 1,527 laborers, of which only 646 worked underground.¹⁰ From this small beginning, things expanded rapidly. In 1880, 1,680,000 short tons of coal were produced. This total reached 7,394,000 short tons of coal in

⁹Otis K. Rice, “Coal Mining in the Kanawha Valley to 1861: A View of Industrialization in the Old South,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 31, No. 4. (November 1965): 393-416. Accessed on 7/11/2005 at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-4642%281965511%2931%3A4%3C393%3ACMITKV%3E2.O.CO%3B2-O>.

¹⁰Charles Henry Ambler, *West Virginia: The Mountain State* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1940), 454. Rice and Brown in *West Virginia: A History* quote the number of mines at eighty-five, but corroborate the labor statistics.

1890, and “almost doubled again in 1897.” Charles Ambler wrote regarding this, “Mining towns sprang up as if by magic...and clusters of miners’ cottages, with their painful monotony of architecture and color, came into existence in interior counties (of West Virginia), as well as along navigable rivers.”¹¹ All of this was a result of the growth of the coal mining industry.

Coal production continued to increase throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In 1929, West Virginia’s coal production reached 139,297,146 tons. After the Great Depression and World War II in 1947, a new record for coal production in West Virginia was reached with 173,653,816 tons produced.¹² This great increase in production had led to a corresponding increase in the need for labor to extract coal from the mountains. Employment numbers increased at a phenomenal rate in the early years of the coal industry in West Virginia, with the 1,527 employed in 1869 rising to 119,937 in 1926.¹³

The great increase in the need for labor led many to come to West Virginia for work. This is evidenced by the increase in West Virginia’s population from 958,800 to 2,005,552 in the first fifty years of the twentieth century.¹⁴ After 1950 as

mechanization became more and more widespread, many jobs were lost to machines. West Virginia’s population declined accordingly.

West Virginia has seen a great deal of economic trouble since the early 1950s. The 1951 UMWA and BCOA gentlemen’s agreement in which the UMWA promised no longer to oppose the mechanization of coal mines in return for higher wages and better benefits. is probably the most important reason for the decline of West Virginia’s economy and population.¹⁵

As the 1950s began, coal mine strikes were nearly an annual event, to be expected much as one expects other annual events such as the onset of another winter or the Fourth of July. 1950 was no different. On March 3 of that year, the UMWA and the mine operators reached an agreement that would put 372,000 striking miners back to work. The conditions agreed to were very favorable to the miners. Included were an increase in wages of seventy cents per day (which at the time was a five percent increase) and a fifty percent increase in the operator’s payments into the miner’s welfare fund from twenty cents per ton to thirty cents per ton. The agreement was to last until July 1, 1952, with a clause allowing the reopening of negotiations

¹¹ Ibid., 481-482.

¹² Otis K. Rice and Stephen W. Brown, *West Virginia: A History*. (1985; 2nd ed., Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1993), 188.

¹³ Ibid., 266.

¹⁴U.S. Census Bureau, *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900-1990* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1995). Accessed on 7/15/2005 at www.census.gov/population/cencounts/wv190090.txt.

¹⁵ Williams, 318.

regarding the agreement at the request of either party on thirty days notice after April 1, 1951.¹⁶

The contract agreed to on March 3, 1950, ended a strike that had been ongoing since February 6 of the same year. The mass walkout of miners on that date brought the number of miners off the job to approximately 370,000. This was “the reply by members of the United Mine Workers today (February 6) to President Truman’s request for voluntary restoration of ‘normal’ coal production.”¹⁷ The reaction of the UMWA prompted then-President Harry S. Truman to invoke the Taft-Hartley Act, which allowed six days for the two sides to find a basis for negotiations, and if no negotiations began within this time frame, the government would be able to file for an injunction that would have forced the striking miners back to work for a period of eighty days, “pending a renewed search for a settlement.”¹⁸

The major impetus for the ultimate agreement was a threat made by President Truman to have the government take over the mines to bring coal production back on line. In a message to Congress given on March 3, Truman stated that since the strike began, “...the production of bituminous coal has been dangerously

¹⁶*New York Times*, March 4, 1950. A January 1951 article in *The New York Times* indicates that the time period for formal notice to reopen the contract was sixty days, not thirty as stated here.

¹⁷*New York Times*, February 7, 1950.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

curtailed. By now, stocks of coal are almost exhausted, and many parts of our country face crisis conditions.” The President had asked the union and operators on January 31, 1950, to “agree to continue production, in the national interest, for seventy days,” in order for a fact-finding board to analyze the situation and propose a contract agreeable to both sides. This request was denied by the union and the strike began on February 6.¹⁹

The threat of a government takeover of the mines was nothing new, as the United States government had done so five times previously in the period between 1943 and 1950. Four of these seizures occurred “under broad, general war powers,” while the fifth instance occurred for a period that lasted just over a year from May 22, 1946, to June 30, 1947. This last seizure ended with an agreement that netted the miners a \$1.85 per day pay increase, which was quite sizeable for the time.²⁰

At the time that the 1950 agreement was signed, there was a question of whether the industry had need of the number of workers employed. Contemporary estimates were that coal production for 1950 would be 400 to 450 million tons, down from 600 million in 1948. Employment in the mining industry in the early 1950s was unstable; much as it is today, even without taking into consideration frequent strikes. At the

¹⁹Harry S. Truman, “Message to Congress,” (speech given March 3, 1950), quoted in *New York Times*, March 4, 1950.

²⁰*New York Times*, March 4, 1950.

time 400,000 miners were employed. The drop in production meant that “a work force of 300,000, employed 200 days a year, would be adequate to fulfill the expected production requirement for 1950.”²¹

Negotiations and agreements between the coal miners’ union and the coal operators in the first half of the twentieth century were usually the result of a strike—or at least the threat of one. This all changed in 1951. On January 17, a report from Washington, D.C., indicated that a deal had been brokered between the UMWA and the BCOA. Most shocking about this report was that the operators were offering a twenty cent per hour raise voluntarily. John L. Lewis summoned his “200-member policy committee, which usually passes on wage contracts” to arrive in Washington on January 18. The *New York Times* reported this information in the January 18 edition, and also informed readers that Lewis and the coal operators had been in “secret conferences...during the last ten days.”

Lewis’ requests were a wage increase, a reduction in the work day, and increased payments into the miner’s welfare fund. Furthermore, if the miners decided to turn down the offer from the operators, the union could give a formal sixty-day notice to the operators of their desire to reopen negotiations on the current contract beginning on April 1, 1951. The *Times* report reacted to the entire incident with what seems to be a bit of shock. This report, penned by Louis Starr began its conclusion thus: “If the

agreement is consummated...it would be the first time that the union would have agreed to a new contract without long, formal negotiations and a strike threat in the offing.”²²

The agreement was signed on January 18, 1951, and its main provision was a \$1.60 per day raise to the base pay of miners. The agreement was hailed by union president John L. Lewis as a “bread and butter agreement as far as the mine workers are concerned.” He also stated that the accord was reached “without tumult or shouting and no public apprehension.”²³ One of the reasons for this lack of public apprehension could be the lack of information regarding concessions that Lewis made to the coal operators. At the time, the agreement appeared to merely be a cordial understanding between Lewis and his “life-long friend” Harry Moses, a former president of U.S. Steel mining interests and one of the leaders of the coal operators. The only hint of any apprehension may lie in the following statement regarding the new contract: “It was in strange contrast to the 10 months of bitter wrangling which preceded the contract last March (1950).”²⁴

Editorialist Victor Riesel of West Virginia’s *Charleston Gazette* found the agreement to be a wondrous thing. His opinion of Lewis was very high. In his January 19, 1951,

²²*New York Times*, January 18, 1951.

²³*Charleston Gazette*, January 19, 1951, 1.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²¹*New York Times*, March 13, 1950.

editorial, he wrote, “Intellectually, John L. Lewis runs second to few men in the nation.” He backed this statement up by arguing that Lewis saw that any major uprising by the miners would be viewed by the world as “a worker’s revolt against ‘capitalist oppression.’” This would not have been viewed favorably by most Americans in light of the fact that the Korean War was being fought against communism, which claimed to be a movement made up of workers who had revolted against capitalists. Riesel also argued that Truman was ready to take over the mines if a supply problem arose from a coal strike and that Lewis was eager to get the wage concessions before price freezes went into effect. A government takeover would have, in effect, led to a price freeze because the government would have then set wages at whatever they felt was a fair price.²⁵ With the information Riesel had regarding the new contract, the conclusion at which he arrived, praising Lewis as a man of great genius, was inevitable.

Nothing in the national papers seemed to indicate that there were any concessions made by the union. The new contract appeared to be nothing but a winning agreement for the miners. The UMWA’s propaganda arm, the *United Mine Workers Journal*, had only good news to report on the agreement signed on January 18, 1951. The closest hint that is given of the coming mechanization in the first edition of the miners’ journal published after the contract is a small statement in the body of an article

²⁵ *Charleston Gazette*, January 19, 1951.

discussing the new agreement, which stated, “We are certain that it (the wage agreement) will make for an improved state of mind that will result in increased efficiencies and the dissipation of all fears appertaining to the economic structure in the coal industry.”²⁶ However the efficiency spoken of in the preceding statement could have referred to the efficiency that would have been broken had there been another prolonged strike that kept coal from being delivered to the nation’s cities and industries. The increased efficiencies spoken of would probably not have raised the suspicion of the rank and file at all, nor would the idea of efficiency necessarily lead to concerns regarding mechanization and the resultant loss of jobs. The miners were probably glad that a work stoppage, along with a paycheck stoppage, had been avoided.

The entire “National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1950 As Amended January 18, 1951” was included in the February 1, 1951, issue of *The United Mine Workers Journal*. In this agreement was no mention of any concessions that the union made to the operators. All that amended the 1950 agreement were the wage increase and the effective dates of the contract. As far as one could tell by reading this document at the time of its signing, there was no mention of an agreement to approve of increased

²⁶ “Wage Increase of \$1.60 a Day Is Won for Bituminous and Anthracite Miners,” *United Mine Workers Journal* 42, No. 3, (February 1, 1951): 3.

mechanization.²⁷ John L. Lewis himself led the miners to believe that it was business as usual with the only difference being that their business as usual involved a higher paycheck. In a letter to the membership of the UMWA published in the miners' bi-weekly journal, Lewis let the miners know that there were the two amendments to the contract signed in 1950. There was no mention of the agreement to allow mechanization in the mines. The only part of Lewis' letter that could have been construed as troubling to the miners was the announcement of an increase in union dues to \$10.00 per month from \$4.00 per month. However, with the great increase in wages, this may not have seemed to be an unwarranted development.²⁸

In the June 1, 1951, issue of the *United Mine Workers Journal*, the answers that Lewis gave to questions asked by "a group of German coal technicians" were published under the title "Lewis Foresees Prosperous Coal Future With Lower Costs, Better Usage Planned." Included in this article was a short statement that dealt with the mechanization of the coal mines and that indicated the union would not necessarily be opposed to this type of development. That statement is as follows:

²⁷"National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1950 As Amended January 18, 1951," *United Mine Workers Journal* 42, No. 3, (February 1, 1951): 4.

²⁸John L. Lewis, Letter to the Officers and Members of the United Mine Workers of America, January 27, 1951. Quoted in *United Mine Workers Journal* 42, No. 4, (February 15, 1951): 4.

Outlining the position of the mine workers on mechanization, Lewis said the UMWA has always held that labor is entitled to share the benefits of increased productivity due to mechanization and other reasons. "If a new machine lowers costs, the mine workers want participation in it; we don't believe that God put an idea in the mind of an inventor for the sole advantage of a coal company," he observed.²⁹

Lewis was being truthful that his long-held point of view on machines in the mines had not changed, although nothing was said in the contract about the free pass to mechanization given to the mine operators. In the 1930s, unions were not generally vocal about stopping mechanization. Lewis was no different. At the 1934 UMWA convention one Indiana local "proposed a resolution calling for 'gradual removal of machinery.'" Lewis was very cautious, arguing that this would backfire if implemented. He argued that they should instead attempt to share in the benefits of mechanization such as a shorter work day and better compensation.³⁰ Lewis

²⁹"Lewis Foresees Prosperous Coal Future With Lower Costs, Better Usage Planned," *United Mine Workers Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 11, (June 1, 1951): 3.

³⁰ Amy Sue Bix, *Inventing Ourselves Out of Jobs?: America's Debate over Technological Unemployment, 1929-1981* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 101-113. Bix quotes from the *Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Constitutional Convention of the United Mine Workers of America*, which was held in January 1934.

felt from a policy standpoint, it did not matter how many members the UMWA had. Lewis biographers Melvin Dubofsky and Warren van Tine argue that the UMWA president “felt it better for the industry to support two hundred thousand well-paid miners than five hundred thousand destitute ones.”³¹

Increased mechanization was perhaps not the most insidious feature of the understanding reached by the two parties. As John Alexander Williams states, “Nothing in the agreement addressed the needs of young people coming of age in the coal towns, since the number of new jobs was expected to decline slowly but steadily.”³² This was perhaps the most detrimental part of the accord as far as West Virginia history is concerned. Dubofsky and van Tine argue much the same thing. They argue that Lewis never grasped what mechanization would mean for the unemployed miners. He did not foresee the massive loss of jobs in such a short timeframe, instead believing that the losses would be more gradual and easier for the region to absorb.³³

John L. Lewis was a very popular president for the miners during his lengthy reign. This was despite the fact that under Lewis’ watch, the UMWA became a much less democratic organization. In 1952, it

was shown that half of the delegates to a union convention in Cincinnati were from districts where “Lewis and his henchmen pick all the officers.”³⁴ When one lone dissident questioned the method of selecting officers, Lewis was quick to respond. He argued that the result of any change would be to “tear down the union from its ‘high peak of efficiency.’” The miners were hesitant to criticize due to the improvements in their paychecks.³⁵ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics as quoted in the *New York Times* in January 1952, miners earned an average weekly pay of \$86.99. These wages were 46.9% above 1946 levels and represented a 264.3% increase over 1939 levels. These increases more than kept up with the increase in the cost of living over the same time period. The cost of living only increased 90.2% from 1939 to 1952, while the increase from 1946 to 1952 was only 35.6%. At the time, the “bituminous coal miners (were) the highest paid of any major category of United States industrial workers. Their average January (1952) wage topped the average of manufacturing workers by \$19.91.”³⁶

Lewis’ popularity was also very high in spite of the decrease in the number of miners employed. In 1952, it was said that there were 375,000 “soft (bituminous) coal miners” employed. Those miners were able to mine twice as much coal with half the

³¹ Melvin Dubofsky and Warren van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 357-359.

³² Williams, 318.

³³ Dubofsky and van Tine, 357-359.

³⁴A.H. Raskin, “Secrets of John L. Lewis’ Great Power,” *New York Times Magazine*, (5 October 1952): 52.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶*New York Times*, April 16, 1952.

work force of thirty years earlier. This mechanization was not bitterly opposed even at this point. A.K. Raskin observed, "Lewis applauds this displacement of men by machines. His only insistence is that the men who are left get their 'fair share' of the savings and profits the operators reap from their mechanized mines. It is this policy that enables men who once earned \$18.25 a week to earn that much each day under the new Lewis agreement."³⁷ A look at these statistics makes the reason for Lewis' popularity among the rank and file who were still employed quite obvious.

By 1960, the mechanization that the union had begun to tolerate and even encourage led to the loss of 350,000 mining jobs nationwide from World War II levels.³⁸ The effect on West Virginia was extremely devastating over the same time period. The largest number of miners ever employed in the State of West Virginia was 130,457 in 1940. This number dropped slightly to 119,568 in 1950, the year before the major agreement by the UMWA and BCOA that promised to stop opposition to the mechanization of mines. After the new contract, however, the number of mining jobs in West Virginia dropped very quickly. By 1960, while there was a lessened demand for coal, as production in West Virginia dropped by over 25,000,000 tons, or about seventeen percent from 1950 levels, there was an even greater impact that could be seen in the loss of

mining jobs. Over the same period, nearly 71,000 miners lost their means of feeding their families. This meant that from 1950 to 1960, nearly sixty percent of coal miners in West Virginia were forced to look for other employment.³⁹ The number of miners employed in West Virginia dropped to 41,573 by 1968, but then saw an upsurge in employment during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as mining employment rose to 62,982 in 1978. This increase was short-lived, however. In just one year between 1982 and 1983, over 18,000 miners were laid off. This was nearly one-third of the work force at the time. The downward spiral of lost jobs has continued into the new century. In 2003, only 14,871 miners were employed in West Virginia, barely 11 percent of the peak workforce.⁴⁰ This decrease in employees has not led to a decrease in production. In 1997, West Virginia reached its all-time coal production record, while only 18,165 miners were required to mine over 181,000,000 tons of coal.⁴¹

The effect on West Virginia has not only been a matter of lost jobs. The mass exodus of mining jobs has also led to a mass exodus of people

³⁹Darrell E. Holmes, ed., *West Virginia Blue Book* (Charleston, WV: Chapman Printing Co., 2004), 895.

⁴⁰ According to the West Virginia Miners' Health Safety and Training website, www.wminesafety.org/month2006.htm (accessed on 9/6/2007) there has been a slight increase in the number of miners employed since 2003. The average number of miners employed during calendar year 2006 was over 17,000.

³⁷Raskin, "Secrets of John L. Lewis' Great Power," 15.

³⁸Drake, 201-202.

⁴¹Ibid., 895-896.

from the state over the last fifty years. In order to show the impact that the loss of mining jobs has had on the population of West Virginia, it is beneficial to look into the great increase in population that the mining industry brought to the state in the first half of the twentieth century for comparison. In 1900, just after the coal industry began to take root in West Virginia, the state had a population of 958,800. The United States had a total population according to the United States Census Bureau of 76,121,168. Just before the union and the coal operators agreed to higher rates of pay and mechanization in January 1951, the population of West Virginia had grown to 2,005,552 in the 1950 decennial census, its highest population ever. The United States' population had grown to 151,325,798 by the 1950 census.⁴² From these numbers, it can be seen that the population of West Virginia grew by 109 percent from 1900 to 1950. The population growth rate of the United States as a whole over the same period was just under 99 percent.⁴³ What is interesting about these numbers is that West Virginia actually had a higher growth rate over the first half of the twentieth century than the nation as a whole.

One thing that is perhaps more important than looking at the

⁴²U.S. Census Bureau, *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900-1990* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1995). Accessed on 7/15/2005 at www.census.gov/population/cencounts/wv190090.txt.

⁴³Ibid.

population growth in West Virginia as a whole during the early twentieth century is looking at the population growth of counties that are known for their coal production over the same period. From 1900 to 1950, the population of Logan County grew from 6,955 to 77,391. This number was an increase in population of 1,013 percent. McDowell County's population increased by over 80,000 or 427 percent over the same time period and Raleigh County's population growth tallied a 674 percent increase. These counties are all located in the southern coalfields of West Virginia. Growth was also noticeable in coal producing counties of the northern part of the state, although it was not quite as impressive. For example, Marion and Monongalia Counties experienced growth at rates of 121 percent and 219 percent, respectively, between 1900 and 1950.⁴⁴

The true impact of coal on the population growth of these counties cannot be underestimated. To draw a comparison, the population growth (or loss) in counties where coal is not produced in large quantities can be examined. For example, the population of rural Wirt County in the central part of the state actually dropped by just over half from 10,284 to 5,119 over the first half of the twentieth century. The population of Doddridge County over the same period dropped, as well, from 13,689 in 1900 to 9,026 in 1950. This indicates a drop of 34 percent in the population of the county in just fifty years. Jefferson

⁴⁴Ibid.

County, which is not a coal producing county, but which is one of the only places in West Virginia to experience population growth in recent years, grew by only 7.8 percent over the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁵ It can be seen from this brief sample of a few counties in West Virginia that the state's population and economy are inextricably linked to the fortunes of the coal miners.

In 1951, the new agreement between the UMWA and the BCOA went into effect. The effect of this agreement on the population of West Virginia could be seen almost immediately. Between 1950 and 1960, the population of the United States grew from 151,325,798 to 179,323,175. This was an increase of slightly over 18.5 percent in just ten years. Over the same time period, the population of West Virginia actually dropped from 2,005,552 to 1,860,421. This was a drop of 7.2 percent. Things have not improved in West Virginia, except for a brief period in the late 1970s to early 1980s when the demand for coal was higher. In 1980, the state's population nearly returned to its 1950 level. However, the 1990 census showed that the state lost over 156,000 residents in just ten years. The population of West Virginia from 1950 to 1990 decreased by 10.5 percent, a net decrease of over 212,000 residents. Over the same time period, the nation's population as a whole grew by 64.3 percent.⁴⁶

As expected, coal producing

counties have been the hardest hit.⁴⁷ From 1950 to 1990, the population of Logan County decreased by over 34,000 or 44 percent. The population of McDowell County dropped from 98,887 to 35,233, or 64 percent, over the same time period. Non-coal producing counties have not had nearly the drastic population losses over the last half-century. Wirt County's population actually increased slightly by 73, or 0.1 percent from 1950 to 1990, while Doddridge County's population dropped by 22 percent. While a 22 percent population loss is significant, it is not as drastic as the loss in many coal producing counties. Two of the largest growth areas in West Virginia recent years have been Putnam and Jefferson Counties. Both of these counties more than doubled their populations from 1950 to 1990.

⁴⁷Most sources indicate that the mechanization of the mining industry has had an adverse impact on the miners of West Virginia. John Alexander Williams does, however briefly bring up the question of the military industrial complex in his *West Virginia: A History*. In 1950, Colorado Springs had the Broadmoor Hotel, which was roughly equivalent to the Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs. The Broadmoor was a place that generals liked to visit, while the Greenbrier generally entertained only a handful of undercover agents. In 1950, Wheeling and Colorado Springs had nearly the same population. Today, Wheeling's population has decreased, while the population of Colorado Springs has increased to nearly 400,000. Williams argues that the difference has been due to the amount of military money that Colorado Springs has received. This topic is explored to a greater degree in William's work *Appalachia: A History*. While many parts of the nation were obtaining high dollar government contracts, West Virginia and Appalachia were not, further contributing to the lack of economic stability in the region.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

Neither relies heavily on the coal industry for their prosperity.⁴⁸ Rather, these areas have gained population as urban dwellers seek a more suburban lifestyle.

The union’s thinking in agreeing to not oppose mechanization could be questioned. In a speech before the Senate Committee on Labor in 1969, UMWA President W.A. Boyle gave the following reasoning for the lack of opposition:

The union...recognized the industry was undergoing a serious economic depression and, in fact, its very existence was at stake. The union subscribed to the philosophy that it was much better to have fewer coal miners working in the industry, with mechanization, since it would provide full-time work and better working conditions as contrasted to the most difficult situations which existed in the industry prior to mechanization. It was the consensus of those, both on management’s and on labor’s side, that if there was not mechanization, there would be total elimination of coal mining in America.⁴⁹

While it may seem from this

testimony that the union was only looking out for the wages and welfare of its members in allowing for mechanization, John Peter David has argued that in the early 1970’s that coal miners earned less than those employed in the auto and steel industries, with that gap widening further at the time.⁵⁰ Furthermore, despite claims of an attempt to improve the welfare of miners, conditions in the mines did not improve. David wrote, “Since 1950, the number of fatalities per 1,000 men working, and fatalities per million man-hours worked, have not shown a downward trend.”⁵¹

After the contract and gentlemen’s agreement took effect after the secret negotiations in 1951, strikes became more and more a thing of the past. In fact, the union negotiated no new contracts until 1968, arguing that its cooperation with the operators would ensure a healthy industry.⁵² Subsequent strikes have been for the purpose of maintaining benefits for those employed, rather than for regaining employment for displaced miners. A 1989 strike against the Pittston Coal Company lasted for nearly a year, after “the company unilaterally cut off health-care benefits to our (the UMWA’s) retirees and widows.”⁵³ The union claimed a 1993 strike was necessitated because the BCOA “refused to give the union information it was seeking on

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹ John Peter David, “Earnings, Health, Safety, and Welfare of Bituminous Coal Miners Since the Encouragement of Mechanization by the United Mine Workers of America” (Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University, 1972), 2.

⁵⁰Ibid., 241.

⁵¹Ibid., 244.

⁵²Ibid., 241.

⁵³*Charleston Gazette*, July 1, 1994.

subsidiaries and affiliates.” This led the union to feel that they could not “effectively participate in the collective bargaining process.”⁵⁴ In both of these strikes the union did not strike over the loss of jobs to machines, which could lead to the conclusion that they do not have a problem with the development.

In the late 1980s new mining technology led to even greater heights as far as mining production was concerned. New technology also led to greater heights as far as displaced miners were concerned. Longwall mining became much more efficient at this time. By early 1990, it was estimated that longwall mining could extract 75 percent of available coal, compared with around 50 percent for conventional mining. The effect that the longwall mining machines had on employment was extensive. For example, in 1989, 9,500 employees of the E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Company mined 55,000,000 tons of coal. Just fifteen years before that, in 1974, it took 23,000 men to mine that much coal for the company.⁵⁵ It is apparent that many man-hours can be saved by switching to machines without compromising productivity.

Although the mining industry is not alone in having former workers unemployed, the loss of mining jobs hurts the state’s economy worse than many other job losses. In 1994, coal miners brought home an average weekly wage of \$858.13, which was the

⁵⁴ *Charleston Gazette*, September 20, 1994.

⁵⁵ *New York Times*, February 8, 1990.

highest wage for any industry listed in the *West Virginia Statistical Abstract, 1995-96*.⁵⁶ To better illustrate the purchasing power of mine employees, in 1994, seven percent of Marion County workers were miners. Those seven percent of workers earned sixteen percent of the wages earned in the county. The loss of mining jobs in Marion County also had the ancillary effect of 400 retail jobs lost and twenty-seven of the county’s retail stores closing their doors.⁵⁷

In conclusion, over 100,000 mining jobs were lost in just over fifty years since 1950. As a result, West Virginia’s population declined during a period that the population of the United States as a whole increased by approximately 60 percent. Furthermore, the UMWA had erroneous estimates as to the actual results of mechanization, feeling that the impact would be more gradual than immediate. West Virginia has lost many tax-paying citizens and businesses in the wake of mechanization. The future of the State of West Virginia remains cloudy as a result. In the final analysis, what is best for business is not always best for those who are employed by the business.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, February 15, 1996.

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ANNUAL MEETING

SCHEDULED FOR

October 10th, 2008 at 6:00 p.m. at the
Archives and History Library
Charleston

Program featuring presentation on
The Hawk's Nest Industrial Accident

DETAILS TO BE MAILED IN
SEPTEMBER