In 1921, Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers were murdered here in front of the McDowell County Courthouse in Welch sparking the largest armed insurrection in the United States since the Civil War. Photo by Stan Bumgardner.

The West Virginia Mine Wars
A Brief History

By Stan Bumgardner

On August 1, 1921, Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers were gunned down in broad daylight as they walked up the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse in Welch. The assassins worked for the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, which worked for local coal companies. It was an act of revenge for a May 1920 shootout at Matewan (Mingo County), where 10 men, including 7 Baldwin-Felts detectives, had been killed [see our Spring 2020 issue].

The murders set off an unparalleled five-week chain of events that culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain in Logan County—the largest armed insurrection in the United States since the Civil War. The combatants were a rag-tag army of coal miners versus a posse-like army of law enforcement.

The battle itself lasted only a few days, but it'd been nearly 50 years in the making. The backstory begins January 27, 1873, when a ceremonial spike was driven at Hawks Nest (Fayette County), completing the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Railway and connecting the Ohio River with the Atlantic Ocean. The C&O, soon to be joined by the Norfolk & Western (N&W) and Virginian railways, opened up southern West Virginia's vast fortune in natural resources to the world.

A virtual wilderness at the time, the region quickly sprouted little coal towns. Men who already lived in the area—mostly from old Scots-Irish or German stock—left their farms to work in the mines. Immigrants to our country and Blacks from the South, often the sons or grandsons of former slaves, poured into the region by the tens of thousands. For most, it was a chance to make real money for the first time. Before industry arrived, people lived off the land and made most of what they needed to survive. Sometimes, they bartered what they had for what they needed. But times were changing. Now you needed cold hard cash to buy many things.

Life changed forever when the railroads and coal towns arrived. In southern West Virginia, the culture developed differently from other industrial parts of our state because it was so geographically isolated. The coal towns were built by companies, whose officials typically lived and worked out of state. Coal operators generated income from most facets of this economic experiment: rent on houses, the coal itself, even work tools, which miners had to buy from the company store. Particularly in the early days, coal operators could charge just about any price they wanted at the company store. There was no competition. It was about as close to a monopoly as you could get. They also adopted a form of credit, sometimes used in lieu of pay: *scrip*. Many miners fell deeply into debt before ever digging their first chunk of coal.

The companies were well connected politically, too, and owned or greatly influenced much of the press. Basic worker and human rights we take for granted today—such as reasonably safe working conditions, a chance to earn a living wage, and child-labor restrictions—

Rothwell Coal Company houses and stables in Dubree (Fayette County), Sept. 23, 1896. Photo by Thomas O. "Tuck" Taylor, courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives (WVSA).

were ignored by our state and local governments. Even when West Virginia and the nation finally passed mining laws, few were enforced. And there was nothing anybody could do to change it.

In 1880, a small group of miners mounted a brief show of solidarity by striking at Hawks Nest, near where the golden spike had been driven on the C&O seven years earlier. Governor Henry Mathews sent in the state militia, which ended it.

A slow turning point came in 1890, when the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA, throughout this issue) was formed in Columbus, Ohio. It believed that a large group of workers in the same basic occupation could negotiate with companies collectively to leverage more bargaining power. So, if work stoppages were well-organized and if everyone belonged to a union, companies couldn't ignore individual workers' complaints as easily. To most coal operators, the UMWA was Public Enemy No. 1. They knew that unionism would cut into their bottom dollar and potentially disrupt steady production, which a growing nation was demanding. Companies used various tactics to keep the UMWA out of their mines. They employed mine guards, ostensibly as security forces, which sometimes resorted to violence against miners. They contributed handsomely to politicians who opposed labor. They spread information about the anti-American aims of unions and hired spies to infiltrate and dig up dirt on them. No

Coal company stores (this one unidentified) carried a little bit of everything, usually at inflated prices, proving at times both a blessing and a curse to mining families. Courtesy of the WVSA, Quin Morton Collection.

matter what they tried, more and more miners wanted to join a union.

Some companies required miners to sign contracts promising not to join one. From the companies' standpoint, other able-bodied men were always ready to grab a pick and shovel if union miners wouldn't. These *scabs*, as the unions referred to them, were often attacked verbally and physically by pro-union forces. A repeating pattern in the labor movement is how frequently workers turned on one another.

Miners began fighting back with more aggressive methods. While better pay and working conditions were near the top of their list, first and foremost, miners just wanted the right to *join* the UMWA. Individually, they didn't stand a chance, but collectively, they could be, and would eventually become, a force to be reckoned with. Coal companies—especially in our state, where shipping costs were greater—clearly recognized the downside. They would spare no expense in keeping the UMWA out.

The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike

As both sides dug in, the conflicts became increasingly violent. Early strikes were generally in reaction to wage reductions, which followed price dips in the extremely volatile coal market. On April 18, 1912, union miners along Paint Creek in Kanawha County walked off the job, demanding better pay. Non-union miners (who earned less than UMWA miners) along Cabin Creek joined in, demanding to be paid in U.S money instead of scrip, opportunities to shop outside the company store, and the right to hire their own check weighman, who determined how much coal each miner had loaded (dictating their pay).

The strike rapidly escalated in scope and violence. Companies evicted striking miners (no longer considered employees) from their company-owned homes, relegating them to live in tent colonies; brought in replacement workers; and hired a private army of mine guards led by the

Tents pitched along Paint Creek during the deadly 1912-13 strike. Courtesy of the WVSA, Coal Life Project Collection.

Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. During the strike, both sides employed hit-and-run tactics, and pitched skirmishes occurred at Dry Branch and Eskdale in Kanawha County.

The most notorious episode happened on February 7, 1913. An armored train, nicknamed the *Bull Moose Special*, led by coal operator Quin Morton—with Kanawha County Sheriff Bonner Hill aboard—roared through a miners' tent colony at Holly Grove on Paint Creek. Mine guards fired machine guns from the train into the pitch-dark tent colony, where miners were living with their families. Fortunately, most sailed high, but one bullet struck and killed Cesco Estep, one of the first Mine Wars martyrs. After the shooting, Morton supposedly wanted to "go back and give them another round" but was talked out of it. Miners retaliated by attacking an encampment of mine guards at nearby Mucklow (present Gallagher), where 16 people died in an hours-long shootout [see *The GOLDENSEAL Book of the Mine Wars*].

On three occasions, Governor William Glasscock declared martial law and dispatched state militia to the strike area in what historian Fred Barkey called an "unprecedented exercise of military rule during peace time" *(West Virginia Encyclopedia)*. The militia arrested more than 200 miners and union organizers, many under questionable circumstances. One of those was Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, a champion for the rights of workers and children. Even in her 80s and 90s, she was a fiery and often profane speaker who got under the skin of company and government officials, more so than any of her male counterparts. Vastly quotable, she opined about "Medieval West Virginia" and that "there is no peace in West Virginia because there is no justice in West Virginia." Perhaps more than any one individual, she garnered miners' trust during the 1912-13 strike and riled them up to fight. Some government and company officials naively believed she was so singly important that if she went

Armed miners at Eskdale (Kanawha County), 1913: (left-right) George Cole, Oliver Sloan, ____ Thompson, ____ Lunsford, two unidentified men, Homer Sloan, and Sam Holt. Courtesy of the WVSA, Dale Payne Collection.

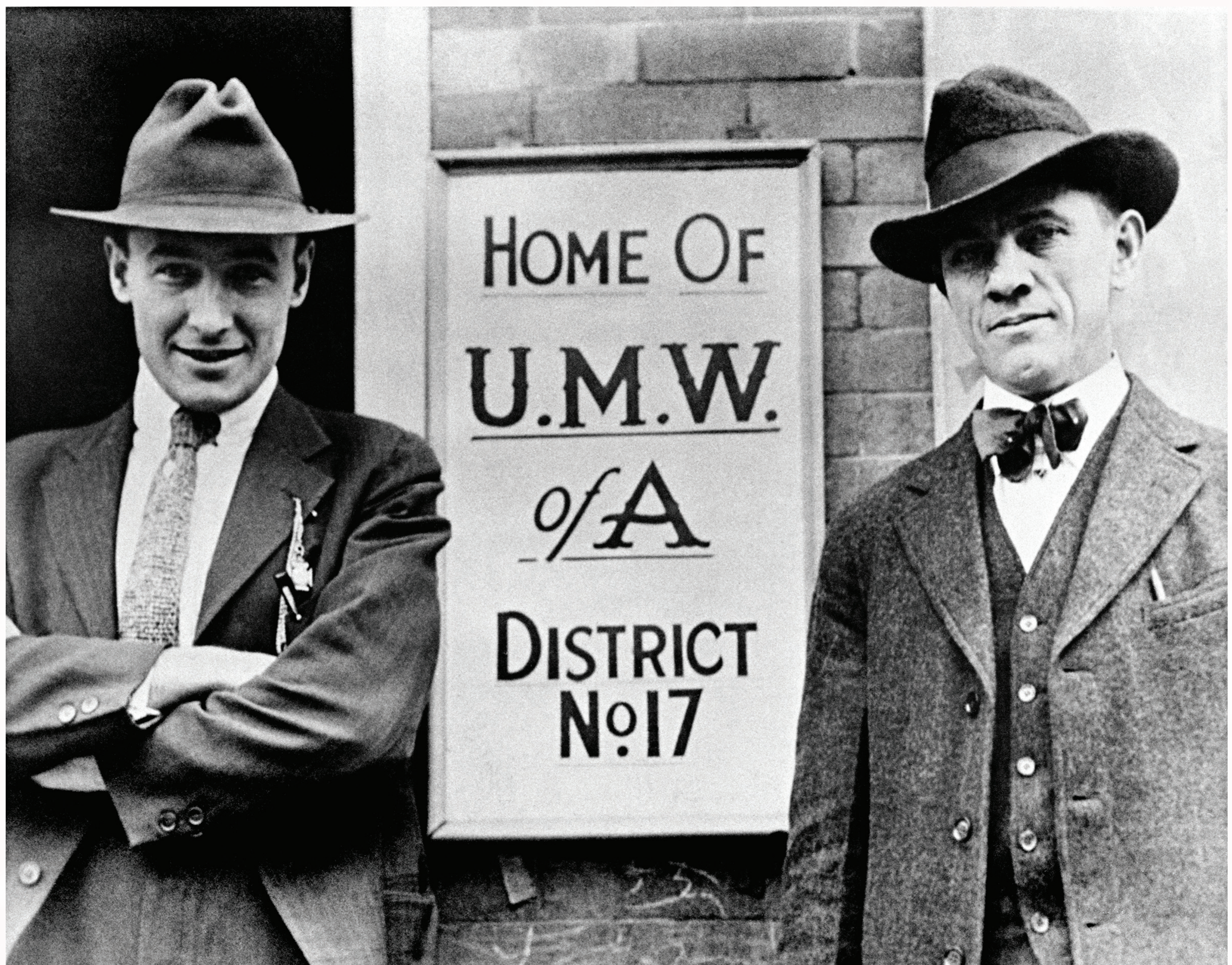
away, the miners would just give up. Not for the last time, they'd drastically underestimated the determination of West Virginia coal miners.

Although everything was peaceful in Charleston 20 miles away, the prisoners were court-martialed (military court), an apparent violation of an 1866 federal law that prohibited martial law while civil courts are still operating. Glasscock was succeeded in 1913 by Henry Hatfield, who released most of those who'd been court-martialed but still kept many under military detention without charges. A licensed medical doctor, Hatfield visited Jones under house arrest in Pratt and refused to pardon her despite her advanced age and a severe respiratory illness, likely pneumonia.

The governor virtually dictated an end to the strike. It appeared to be a compromise, allowing both sides to claim a certain amount of victory. In reality, coal companies got most of what they wanted—and more or less ignored their concessions—leading to a follow-up strike by rank-and-file miners to obtain additional demands not included in the Hatfield Agreement. The strike's violence, though, attracted the attention of Congress, which openly investigated the actions of a state government for the first time. Testimony from miners, their families, and coal officials were reported in newspapers nationally and published in the *Congressional Record*, flashing a negative spotlight on the West Virginia coalfields.

Bloody Mingo

World War I brought a temporary peace, for the most part, as coal prices soared and wages kept pace. The federal



After rising to the leadership of UMWA District 17 in a 1916 election of rank-and-file miners, Fred Mooney (left) and Frank Keeney (right) guided the union in a more radical direction and were ousted after Blair Mountain. Courtesy of the WVSA, Frank Keeney Family Collection.

government brokered a deal between the UMWA and coal operators. Miners agreed not to strike in exchange for a wage increase. When prices fell after the war, companies cut wages and upped their pressure on unions. Word spread of labor organizers being harassed in southern West Virginia. A new, more radical leadership had emerged through the ranks in the UMWA's District 17. The two most prominent were Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney, who'd led the rank-and-file strike against the Hatfield Agreement in 1913. They focused their attention on Logan and Mingo counties, the largest non-unionized bituminous coal region in the eastern United States.

In September 1919, thousands of armed miners gathered in Marmet, 10 miles east of Charleston, to march south and bring the UMWA to Logan and Mingo counties by force if necessary. Keeney convinced most to abandon the idea; although, a good number went about halfway—to Danville (Boone County)—before returning home. In return for Keeney's help, Governor John Cornwell promised to study their grievances; unsurprisingly, his commission determined that miners really didn't have much to complain about.

Months later, wages were lowered again in southern West Virginia at the same time when union miners were getting raises nationally. In spring 1920, miners in Mingo County walked off their jobs, and the focal point of the dispute became Matewan, which had a labor-friendly police chief, Sid Hatfield. On May 19, Hatfield tried to block Baldwin-Felts agents from evicting striking miners from company houses. A gunfight broke out, leaving 10 dead [see our Spring 2020 issue].

By July, Mingo County had become a war zone. Guerrilla-like tactics were the strategy of choice. Non-union mines were bombed, replacement workers were assaulted, and union miners were arrested or attacked. Union miners sometimes shot sniper style into coal towns where non-union miners worked and lived with their families. On at least one occasion, in May 1921, non-union miners fired back in force; at least 27 (and likely many more) were killed in what's come to be known as the Three Days' Battle of the Tug.

Tensions continued to escalate as martial law was declared yet again, and pro-union miners were arrested in increasingly larger numbers. The situation further deteriorated after a State Police raid on a strikers' tent colony along Lick Creek in Mingo County—after which, the UMWA's food shipments to the colony were cut off.

After more violence at a coal camp at Mohawk in McDowell County, just over the Mingo border, Hatfield and Chambers were brought up on what most consider trumped-up charges. When they were gunned down in Welch, all hell broke loose. Hatfield had been one of the few lawmen to stand up for the miners. He became the most prominent martyr of the Mine Wars, and his murder was a call to arms. In the miners' eyes, local governments in southern West Virginia had lost their legitimacy, and Hatfield's killing was a very brash signal they were in the coal companies' pockets and didn't care who knew it. As Gordon Simmons observes later in this issue, "By this stage, miners saw armed confrontation as their only recourse to shift the lopsided balance of power in which the coal industry continued to rely on mine guards—with the full support of the state government and local law enforcement in southern West Virginia—to prevent union organizing."

Blair Mountain

On August 7, six days after the murders, a large crowd gathered at the site of the recently burned state capitol in Charleston [see our Winter 2020 issue]. Already-angry miners were further rallied by fiery speeches from union leaders Frank Keeney, Mother Jones, and Bill Blizzard, a young protégé of Keeney's who'd soon become the "miners' general." This time, the UMWA threw its full, if not open, support behind an Armed March. Lawyer Harold Houston, who represented the union, told the national UMWA that "the boys need guns" and asked for money from the union's "burial fund."

Armed miners began assembling at Marmet, where the abandoned march had begun two years earlier. Many had served in World War I and knew the basics of military maneuvers. They collected medical supplies, organized supply lines, and listened to battle cries from union leaders—with one exception. Mother Jones suddenly had a pacifistic change of heart and, counter to her fighting words of a couple weeks earlier, urged the miners not to march; this remains one of the more debated episodes of the Mine Wars [see p. 38].

Ignoring her, thousands of miners started up Lens Creek Mountain on August 24 toward their ultimate destination,

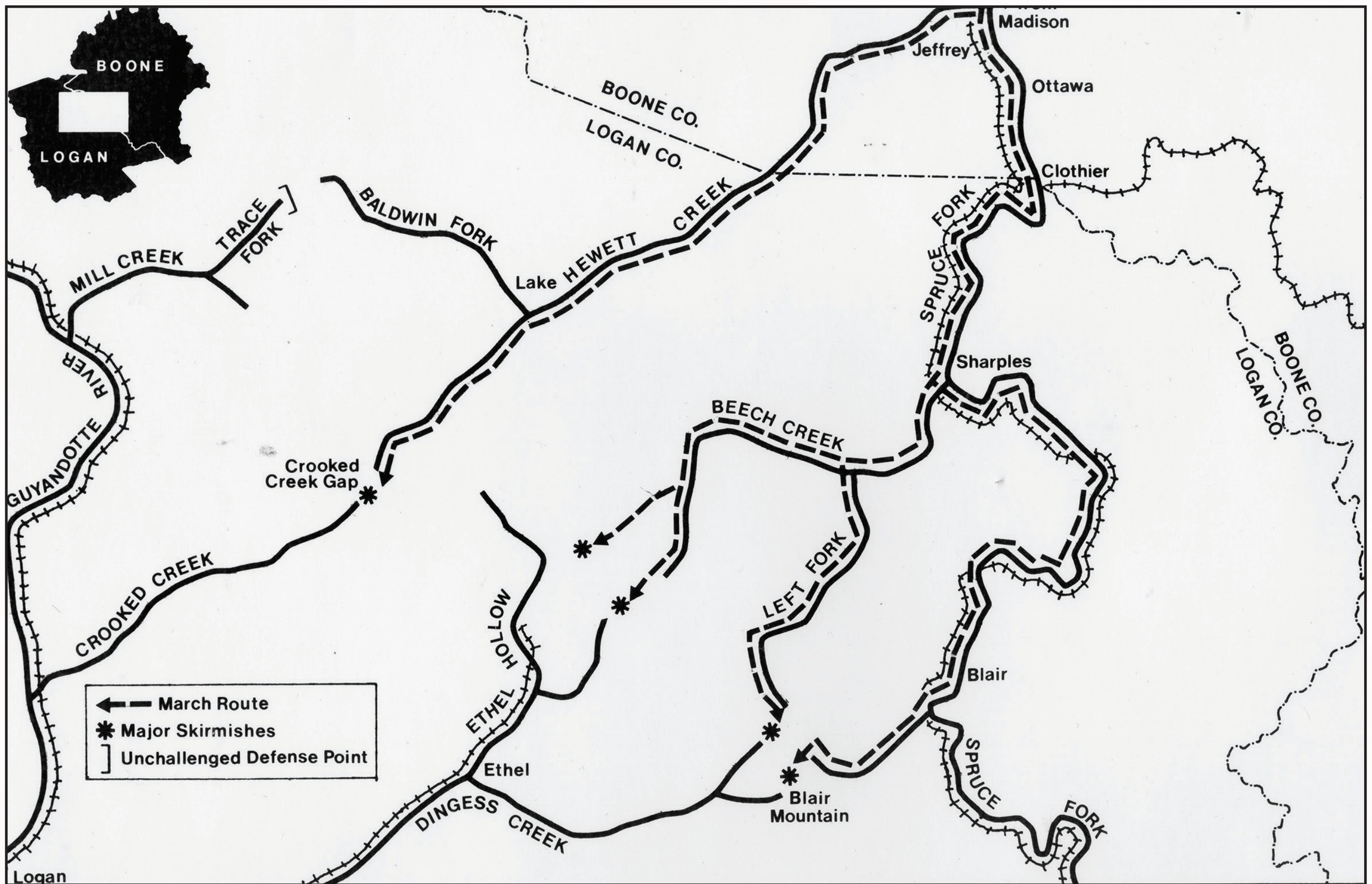
Miners on the march from Marmet to Blair Mountain, 1921. From *The Outlook*, Sept. 14, 1921.

Williamson (Mingo County), where many union activists had been imprisoned. During the march, their numbers kept swelling as other miners and non-miners joined in. To help identify themselves, they wore red bandanas, earning the title "Red Neck Army" in the press.

Governor Ephraim Morgan alerted President Warren Harding to intervene. Both had been in office less than six months. National UMWA President John L. Lewis asked Harding to pull together union activists and coal operators to settle things peacefully. In his typical hands-off style, though, Harding declined to mediate and instead dispatched Gen. Henry Bandholtz to further assess the situation, which was already on the verge of civil war. Morgan warned Keeney and Mooney that the Army was on its way and that the marchers and their leaders could be tried for treason.

On August 26, Keeney spoke to a large group of marchers at a baseball field in Madison (Boone County), about halfway to Logan. Publicly, Keeney instructed them to turn back for their own sake, meaning not only their physical but legal safety. This, too, is one of the more debated episodes of the Mine Wars. Although some miners ended their march at the ballfield, most continued on. Most historians think that despite Keeney's public pronouncements, he was privately urging the marchers on [see p. 22].

For any miners still wavering, events the next day reignited their rage. Word arrived that state troopers had killed two miners and wounded three others at Sharples, just over the Logan County



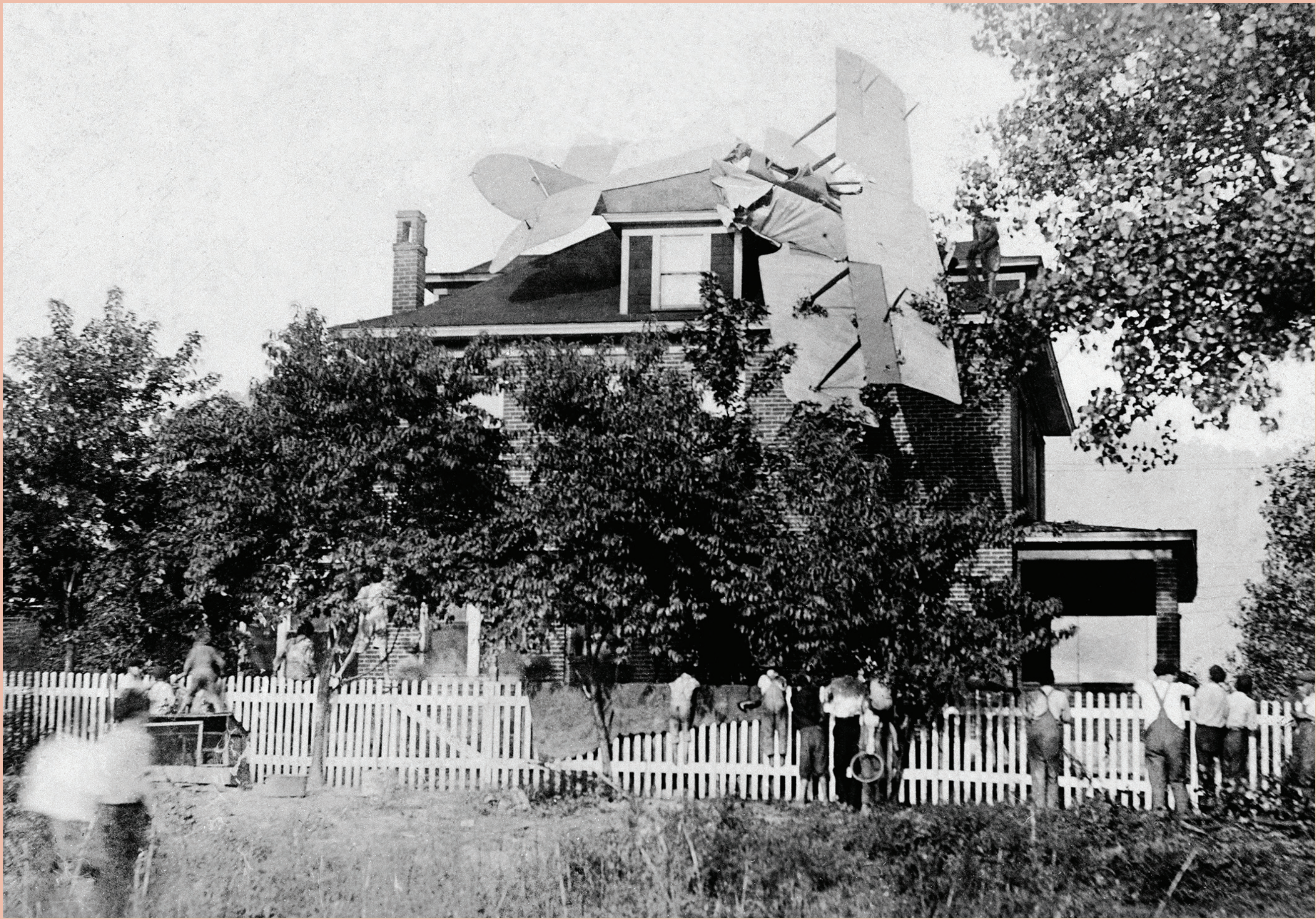
Movement of troops descending on Blair Mountain, 1921. From *The GOLDENSEAL Book of the Mine Wars*.

line [see p. 44]. The "Sharples Massacre," as the miners dubbed it, strengthened their resolve, and they marched on with growing fervor.

Twenty miles from Madison and six miles from Sharples stands Blair Mountain, a 2,000-foot citadel guarding the city of Logan. More pertinent to this story, it was a natural barrier between the miners and the heart of Logan and Mingo counties. Don Chafin, the Logan County sheriff, was as anti-union as it gets. Coal operators reportedly paid him kickbacks on every ton of coal mined in Logan County as long as he kept the UMWA out. As the miners marched his way, he assembled an army of his own deputies (largely bankrolled by coal companies) and newly deputized citizens on the ridgelines of Blair Mountain. He also hired pilots to drop improvised gas and explosive bombs on the miners, but none hit their targets.

Chafin's forces were joined on Blair Mountain by more than 100 state troopers, who took up military positions at the crests of the mountain gaps. For days, the miners and Chafin's army fought to control these gaps. The miners divided into two columns at Jeffrey, just north of Sharples. One column headed up Hewett Creek and fought fiercely at Crooked Creek Gap. The second one split once again at Sharples and spearheaded three attacks. At one point, full-on battles were occurring in five locations along Blair Mountain as the miners tried to outflank Chafin's men.

On August 28, the miners captured their first prisoners: four Logan County deputies and the son of another. Three days later, local Baptist minister John E. Wilburn led a small platoon he'd recruited into a small skirmish, killing three of Chafin's men, including deputy John Gore,



Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin hired pilots to drop bombs on the miners. None hit their targets, and one of his biplanes crashed into the house of Logan resident K. F. Deskin. Courtesy of the WVSA, Don Cheek Collection.

Airplanes at Blair Mountain

One common misnomer about the Armed March is that the U.S. military dropped bombs on its own citizens—the marching miners. While Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin attempted this (unsuccessfully), there's no evidence of bombs actually being used by U.S. armed forces. Brig. Gen. William "Billy" Mitchell wanted to show off the Army's nascent air corps and potentially bomb the miners to demonstrate the military value of airpower. While Mitchell was a visionary in the future role of aircraft in war, his superiors resented his over-the-top posturing attempts such as this.

As leader of the U.S. Army's First Provisional Air Brigade, Mitchell established a base of operations in what is now the Kanawha City section of Charleston. He recommended dropping mustard gas, a lethal agent used in World War I. In the end, 21 Army biplanes (Martin MB-1 bombers) and tear-gas bombs were sent to Kanawha City. Mitchell, viewed internally as a self-glorifying loose cannon, was ordered to stay out of any maneuvers and to use the planes primarily for reconnaissance. His pilots got lost in the unfamiliar air space of West Virginia and played little role in the march other than dropping leaflets informing miners of the Army's intervention.

So, the U.S. military did not bomb its own citizens, although it was prepared to do so. Only Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin had the temerity to attempt this reckless escapade, and, fortunately, his ineptitude saved countless lives.

Bill Blizzard and his wife, Lava Rae, outside the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town during his treason trial, 1922. Courtesy of the WVSA, Blizzard Family Collection. For more about Blizzard, see our Summer 2006 issue.

the father of one of the deputies captured on the 28th. In turn, Eli Kemp, one of Wilburn's men, was killed by Chafin's deputies.

On September 1, President Harding, having avoided the fray as long as possible, finally deployed U.S. Infantry troops to the battlefield. They began arriving in Logan on the 3rd, and by the next day, almost all the marchers had laid down their guns rather than fight the U.S. Army, which many had served in only three years earlier. Some marchers simply returned home with the rifles they'd brought. Most of those who surrendered were sent home on trains, but the government decided to make an example of the perceived leaders. Special grand juries handed down 1,217 indictments, including 325 for murder and 24 for treason against West Virginia. The total number of dead and wounded will never be known.

The most prominent treason trial was that of Bill Blizzard, who'd allegedly served as the de facto field general of the miners' army. Since it was impossible to field an objective jury in southern West Virginia, Blizzard's trial was moved to the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town—about as far away as you can get from Blair Mountain and still be in West Virginia. Coincidentally, it was held in the same building where John Brown had been found guilty of treason against Virginia in 1859. Unlike Brown, Blizzard was not convicted. In fact, the only person convicted of treason in connection with Blair Mountain was Walter Allen, who skipped bail and was never recaptured. Among the few ever convicted of anything was the coal-mining Baptist preacher John Wilburn. He and his son were sentenced to 11 years in the state penitentiary for murder; they were pardoned by Governor Howard Gore, Morgan's successor, after serving three years.

Fearing the government would still come after them years later, most participants never talked about Blair Mountain again. In southern West Virginia, the Mine Wars weren't discussed publicly much at all. As Matewan resident Margaret Hatfield once commented about Clare Overstreet, a key player in the 1920 Matewan shootout, "How do you explain to a child that the nice old man who runs the post office was once indicted for murder?" The Mine Wars became an unspeakable topic, a key reason why so many questions still remain.

Blair Mountain itself was a clear loss for the UMWA. John L. Lewis used the opportunity to expel more radical union leaders, such as Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney, who'd go on to work for rival unions but never again for the UMWA. Mooney later wrote that Lewis took the union "into the gutter." Mooney committed suicide in 1952 after a failed murder attempt on his wife. Blizzard stayed in the UMWA but with his wings initially clipped. He eventually rose to become president of District 17 and relived his early career on a smaller scale with a strike that turned violent at Widen (Clay County) in 1952-53. A few years later, near the end of his life, Blizzard resigned as District 17 president after punching Lewis' incompetent brother in the nose.

Miners at Cannelton Coal No. 2 (Fayette County) in the early 1900s. Photo by Red Ribble, courtesy of the WVSA, Burgess Collection.

The UMWA struggled in the years after Blair Mountain due largely to a drop in coal-mining jobs. Those who suffered the most were miners and their families. As coal production declined through the 1920s, many already impoverished West Virginians found themselves out of work, ushering in a Great Depression in West Virginia several years before it slammed the nation. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal gave new life to unionism, and the UMWA finally organized southern West Virginia in a matter of days in 1933.

In the end, the U.S. Army seemed to point the main finger of blame at Don Chafin. Bandholtz said he believed that Keeney and Mooney had done what they could to stop the march and placed the fault primarily on Chafin for instigating the "ill-advised and ill-timed" shooting at Sharples. Chafin went to prison in 1924 for Prohibition violations—turned in by his cousin, future sheriff, and bootlegging partner-in-crime Tennis Chafin, a son of the famed feud leader Devil Anse. Chafin became a coal operator and retired in Huntington, where he died in 1954 as a millionaire.

While the Mine Wars are often portrayed as a tale of industry vs. labor, this is only one piece of a much bigger puzzle that emerged during the Industrial Revolution. Starting in the late 19th century, disposable income became more readily available. Our desire to have more things at the lowest possible cost kept growing steadier. Americans soon had cars, radios, appliances, and other comforts of modern living. Dr. Rebecca Bailey describes this attitude better in her superb dissertation on the Matewan shootout and the causes of the Mine Wars: "The average American was more interested in the maintenance of a steady supply of coal than in the individual human rights of West Virginia's miners."

Perhaps that's the hidden lesson of the Mine Wars. Still today, we all want to pay as little as possible, but what about the unintended consequences—from pay and work conditions to human and environmental costs? What's the real cost of the world we live in? Regardless of our individual politics or viewpoints, the answer might make us all a bit uncomfortable. ❧

STAN BUMGARDNER is the editor of GOLDENSEAL.