

Labor Pains

During a United Mine Workers of America strike in the 1980s, a coal company hired replacements for striking workers. State troopers watched as the nonunion coal truck drivers passed picket lines. Old-timers around Matewan, W.Va., say those trucks would have remained idle “in my daddy’s day.”

The United Mine Workers of America today organizes other occupations as well as miners, including health care workers, truck drivers, and power plant workers. In 2003, about 23.6 percent of coal miners in the nation were union members, according to Barry Hirsch and David Macpherson, who compile union membership statistics based on the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey.

Early union organizing stories are the stuff of legend, with countless books and even a Hollywood movie depicting the “mine wars” of the 1920s. The labor strife that accompanied the industrialization of Appalachia mirrored those from around the globe as a new working class, only a generation or two removed from agricultural fields — even slavery — struggled against long hours, hazardous working conditions, and low wages.

Trails to Rails

Early settlers were few in West Virginia, which broke off from Virginia to become its own state in 1863. West Virginia’s isolated mountains, layered by ice and continental drifts over millions of years, are slashed by streams and seams of coal in all but two of the state’s 55 counties. But coal was virtually useless until the rails were laid to transport it. In 1883, when the

major rail lines were completed, coal production reached 3 million tons. By the early 1890s, West Virginia had nearly 9,800 miners producing more than 10 million tons.

Railroads turned coalfields into powerful investments, and wealthy industrialists acquired mineral rights or outright ownership of fields. Land bought at \$1.50 to \$2 per acre in some areas was worth \$100 per acre after the railroads came five years later, according to historian Ronald Lewis. Rails could send carloads of coal to the rivers, where barges shipped the fuel to the North and East.

By 1900, coal had become king of the mountain. In 1927 West Virginia produced about 146 million tons.

Some pioneer coal operators were keen small businessmen. As late as 1920, the state’s four largest coal companies controlled less than 14 percent of the market. A few mine owners, though,



WEST VIRGINIA AND REGIONAL HISTORY COLLECTION, WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

hewed to social Darwinism, a sort of survival of the fittest for business, with a bit of paternalistic “welfare capitalism” thrown in for good measure. This meant that many thought of employment as a form of charity. The notion partly

The long and often violent struggle for unionization in West Virginia’s coalfields

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

Early miners screen coal, separating slate and removing clay. By 1893, there were nearly 9,800 miners in West Virginia, producing more than 10 million tons of coal.

explains the coal operator's reaction when coal miners began to organize.

In his book, *In the Kingdom of Coal*, Dan Rottenberg wrote, "By this logic, it followed that unionization, by distracting and restraining management, threatened the effectiveness of a business and thus threatened workers themselves (who would lose their jobs if their employers and investors lost money). Consequently, in the minds of owners, almost any countermeasure against union organizers seemed justified."

And some operators were former coal miners themselves. For instance, Jack Dalton, the feisty owner of 27 mines in Logan County, W.Va., fought the union. Boyden Sparkes, who covered West Virginia's mine wars for a New York newspaper, described Dalton's opposition to unions as having a very personal flavor: "I think that the important thing is that he used to be a miner, a nonunion miner, and that he is determined that his miners shall continue to be nonunion. When the unions are willing to use force to effect organization, Jack Dalton is willing to use force to prevent it."

As the coalfields expanded, mine owners recruited labor. Immigration brought Poles, Slovaks, Italians, Welshmen, and Belgians. Word of work spread and black people seeking steady work and escaping Jim Crow laws farther south poured into West Virginia. The black population of West Virginia was about 3,769 in 1860, but grew to 21,584 by 1900 and to 60,400 by 1920.

Historian Lewis has studied this phenomenon and describes the towns: "Many early coal towns actually resembled semi-agricultural villages. More than half of the black migrants who came to these coalfields had been sharecroppers and most of the European immigrants and local white mountaineers had been farmers as well."

Many men saw the wage-earning work in the mines as an improvement compared to squeezing crops from worn-out soils. They worked for themselves. Mining was independent, supervision was light, with the miner in control of his hours and pace. He leased his tools from his employer or provided

them himself, built his own explosives, and generally worked as an independent contractor. Time spent securing his own safety and that of others would not put food on the dinner table, though, since he was paid only for coal extracted. And few knew that lung disease could be caused from long-term inhalation of coal dust.

Miners couldn't control the price of coal and the fairness of those who weighed it. One practice that short-changed miners was a system called cribbing: Mine cars held a certain weight, but sometimes cars were altered to hold more than the specified amount.

Ultimately, labor strife erupted over nearly every aspect of mining, from miners' shorted wages to life-threatening working conditions to prices in the company store, and, of course, to the right to assemble.

A Miner's Life

In recent years, economic historians have reviewed some features of early mining life. Price Fishback of the University of Arizona has studied mining's dangers, the sanitation in coal camps, and company stores.

Mining was risky business. Before the industry's stagnation in the 1920s when coal demand dropped after World War I, between 1,500 and 2,000 miners were killed in U.S. coal mines annually. That's three to four deaths for every thousand miners who worked a full year, according to Fishback. But miners who worked dangerous jobs in the industry got paid about 14 percent more than similarly skilled workers outside the mines.

In West Virginia, with its comparatively new and weak state government, mines were regulated poorly, if at all. Between 1890 and 1912, the state's mine death rate topped all other mining states. And in 1907, the nation's worst coal disaster killed 361 people in Monongah, W.Va.

Fishback has also studied mining towns — places where the company owned the town and everything in it. In 1924, 80 percent of West Virginia miners lived in such towns, compared with 9 percent in Indiana and Illinois.

Although the towns were controlled by the coal company, the communities offered recreation and social events, especially baseball. Companies recruited players, several of whom wound up playing in the major leagues.

Another point of contention among miners were prices at the company store — and the forms of payment accepted. Miners were typically advanced wages in scrip redeemable only at the company store, although Bill Boal, an economist at Drake University, says his research has found that some private stores also accepted scrip.

Isolated mining camps and company stores typically charged more for goods partly because of transportation costs, according to Fishback. He has compared prices of stores in coal areas with stores in manufacturing areas of nearby cities in 1922, following the mine wars in West Virginia. Price differences were lowest in four union districts. "Price differentials were also generally low in nonunion districts, less than 2 percent in three of the five comparisons," Fishback notes in a journal article.

But in the remote regions of southern West Virginia, the coal company controlled nearly all aspects of a miner's life, and social tensions simmered.

Matewan

Daisy Nowlin's parents came to Mingo County, W.Va., in 1898 hoping for work. Her uncle entered Stone Mountain Mine in the town of Matewan at 9 years of age. "They worked them like slave labor," Nowlin, now 75, says. "But they worked because they had to work. That's the only way they could put food on the table."

Ultimately labor tensions exploded. In May 1920, the mining company dispatched private detectives from the Baldwin-Felts agency to evict striking miners from company-owned houses. Matewan sheriff and former miner Sid Hatfield, a former sweetheart of Nowlin's mother, tried to stop them. Ten people were killed that day outside the town's railroad depot, including seven detectives, two miners, and the town's mayor. (Hatfield was killed by detectives from the same agency a year later.)

Today, Matewan has rebuilt and relocated the depot, turning it into a museum to remind people of its railroad and labor history. The “Matewan Massacre,” as it came to be known, was only one bloodstain in a long line of labor struggles, including mining struggles, in U.S. labor history. Those include the 1914 Ludlow Massacre in Colorado when striking miners were attacked by hired mine guards, killing 20 people. Nineteen people had died in 1897 in northeastern Pennsylvania when striking miners were killed by police. And widespread rail strikes in 1877 led to riots in several cities, while 10 people were killed by Pinkerton detectives during a steelworkers’ strike in 1892 in Pennsylvania.

The union exerted little influence in the Mountain State before 1910, according to Richard Brisbin, a political scientist at West Virginia University. The UMWA had organized miners in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois between 1890 and 1900. But repeated attempts in the 1890s to organize West Virginia’s miners failed until 1902, when the UMWA organized the coalfields around Charleston. Coal operators banded together and hired guards to prevent union activities. Southern West Virginia mine owners aimed to block the union in an effort to keep production costs down and gain coal market share.

By 1906, union membership was about 12 percent but began falling for several years, until 1918, when organizing began to bear fruit and membership grew to about 20 percent. By 1921, 32 percent of coal miners belonged to a union. In 1912, Paint Creek operators tried to de-unionize their mines, leading to violent strikes and the re-unionization in the fields around the Coal River, a tributary of the Kanawha River. Miners fought for the right to organize, an end to blacklisting organizers, an end to the practice of using mine guards, and a stop to cribbing. Striking miners also wanted scales installed at all mines, along with a union inspector to prevent cheating, and alternatives to company stores.

The coalfields calmed during World War I, when a boom in production and



WEST VIRGINIA AND REGIONAL HISTORY COLLECTION, WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The National Guard was called out to quell violence between striking miners and company-employed police at Cabin Creek, W. Va., in 1912.

increased wages filled coffers. A national recession after the war sparked layoffs and wage cuts. This set the stage for the UMWA, with its legendary leader John Lewis, to begin serious efforts to organize southern West Virginia coalfields. Mine operators sealed off hollows and resisted the union any way they could.

Their struggles culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain after thousands of miners marched on Logan County at the southern tip of the state. In the end, federal troops were called in to quell violence. Though the violent strikes spotlighted the miners’ cause nationwide, they failed to bring union recognition. Union membership plummeted from nearly 50,000 in 1920 to about 600 in 1929, partly a result of the national anticommunist mood that swept the nation after the Great War.

Enter the New Deal

UMWA membership stalled until federal legislation — specifically, the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and the Wagner Act of 1935 — established what is now the basis of current labor laws. By 1935, according to Boal’s research, 100 percent of West Virginia’s coal was mined under union contract, compared to virtually zero in 1930.

“Eastern coal was the thing. And it wasn’t mobile. As long as they were able to organize all the mines, they could shift income from mine owners to workers,” notes Barry Hirsch, a professor of labor economics at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas.

But coal’s power of that era has eroded under competition not only from other fuel sources but also from other areas. Environmental concerns have pushed Wyoming’s low sulfur coal to the top in the past 20 years or so. Also, productivity gains have reduced the demand for mine labor. By 2002, the number of people working in the coal industry in West Virginia had fallen to 44,274 from a 1948 high of 125,000. Recently, though, demand and prices have begun to rise for West Virginia coal, higher in BTUs and closer to East Coast markets than coal from other sources. Demand for miners is growing, says Dan Miller, vice president of the West Virginia Coal Association. State-sponsored programs are training a new generation of miners.

“There are a disproportionate number of coal miners in their 40s and 50s,” Miller says. “We have to convince a new generation of young people that it’s a good career.” And whether it’s a union career will be up to the miners. **RF**

READINGS

Boal, William. “Estimates of Unionism in West Virginia Coal, 1900-1935.” *Labor History*, Summer 1994, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 429-441.

Corbin, David A. (editor). *The West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*. Charleston, W. Va.: Appalachian Editions, 1990.

Fishback, Price V. “Did Coal Miners ‘Owe Their Souls to the Company Store’? Theory and Evidence from the Early 1900s.” *Journal of Economic History*, December 1986, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 1011-1029.

Lewis, Ronald L. “From Peasant to Proletarian: The Migration of Southern Blacks to the Central Appalachian Coalfields.” *Journal of Southern History*, February 1989, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 77-102.

Rottenberg, Dan. *In the Kingdom of Coal*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Visit www.rich.frb.org/pubs/regionfocus for links to relevant sites.