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## Mountaineer Mine Wars: An Analysis of the West Virginia Mine Wars of 1912-1913 and 1920-1921

¶ Professor Wheeler describes and analyzes the extreme violence that marked labor-management relations in the West Virginia coal fields.

The razor-back ridges and narrow valleys of the Appalachian border South have frequently been the scenes of industrial violence. In two extensive and bloody conflicts, which took place in the West Virginia bituminous coal fields in 1912-1913 and 1920-1921, this violence was of such a nature and on such a scale as to earn these conflicts the appellation of mine "wars." It is the purpose of this paper to describe and analyze these mine wars.<sup>1</sup>

A review of the events of these industrial insurrections is useful for two purposes. First, it furnishes a description of events that in themselves are important in the history of the American labor movement and the history of labor-management relations. Second, it enables one to examine, at least in a limited way, the historical causes of industrial violence in the American context. It is useful to note, for example, whether these events appear to be in any part attributable to a progressive "immiserization" of the workers.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this Marxist view, one American scholar, James C. Davies, postulates that social revolutionary activity occurs when need-satisfaction, as measured by income, has been rising and then suddenly declines (forming an inverted "J" on a graph), thereby creating an intolerable gap between expected and obtained satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> As might be expected, the underlying causes of the West Virginia mine wars are

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to express his appreciation to Robert Ozanne and Jack Barbash for their comments on a draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Marx & Engels' Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), 12-13, 19 and 14. See also, Alexander Balinky, *Marx's Economics* (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1970), 146-152.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 27, No. 1 (February, 1962), 6.

much more complex than suggested by these rather simple theoretical statements, which were, in any event, aimed at explaining action in a larger social context. These underlying causes, as well as the immediate precipitating causes, will be considered at some length.

#### CABIN CREEK AND PAINT CREEK — 1912–1913

West Virginia's first mine war was fought in the valleys of Cabin and Paint Creeks, which empty into the Kanawha River upriver ten and fourteen miles respectively from the state capital of Charleston. At the beginning of the strike that occurred in April of 1912, a population of approximately 35,000 people lived in coal camps located on these creeks. Fifty-five mines operated on Cabin Creek and forty-one on Paint Creek, employing a total of 7,500 miners.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to the strike, all of the Kanawha field except Cabin Creek was organized by the United Mine Workers of America. The Paint Creek miners submitted to their employers demands for: (1) union half cents per ton below the piece rate paid in other union areas. The Paint Creek miners proposed to eradicate this differential. The mine operators refused, and the miners struck. Apparently inspired by the action of the miners on the neighboring creek, the Cabin Creek miners submitted to their employers demands for: (1) union recognition, (2) rights of free speech and peaceable assembly, (3) an end to black-listing of union men, (4) an end to compulsory trading at company-owned stores, (5) an end to "cribbing" (the practice of constructing wooden cribs on the sides of the mine cars to make them hold more coal, and then paying the piecework miner as though the car were of ordinary size), and the establishment of 2,000 lbs. as the ton of coal for which they were to be paid, (6) the installation of scales at all mines, (7) the right to check-weighmen selected and paid by the miners, and (8) the joint setting by the company and miner check-weighmen of all "docking" penalties for impurities in the coal mined. The operators rejected all these demands, and the Cabin Creek miners struck.<sup>5</sup>

For nearly a month the strike was conducted without violence. Then, on May 10, 1912, the coal companies contracted with the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency for sufficient mine guards to break the strike. Three hundred were brought in. Howard B. Lee, a writer who conducted numerous interviews with persons on both sides of the conflict, has described these mine guards and their actions as

<sup>4</sup> Howard B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia* (Morgantown; West Virginia University, 1969), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

follows: "These guards were professional strikebreakers, all tried on a dozen industrial battlefields, and willing to shoot with or without provocation. . . . They immediately began a campaign of assault, intimidation, and terrorism."<sup>6</sup>

The first action of the mine guards was to evict miners and their families from company-owned houses. Personal belongings were loaded on trains, transported off company property, and dumped beside the railroad tracks. Miners and their families took up residence in tent colonies established by the United Mine Workers union.<sup>7</sup>

At this juncture, Mary "Mother" Jones, an aged but vigorous and profane labor agitator, was brought into the fray by the union. "Mother" Jones was a veteran combatant in the labor wars in which the United Mine Workers Union became involved. She is perhaps the most colorful character of this era of American labor history. At a speech on the steps of the State Capitol in Charleston she told a large gathering of miners: "Arm yourselves, return home and kill every goddamned mine guard on the creeks, blow up the mines, and drive the damned scabs out of the valleys."<sup>8</sup>

The union supplied the miners with six machine guns, 1,000 high-powered rifles, and some 50,000 rounds of ammunition. The coal operators also assembled arsenals. The Governor of West Virginia offered to arbitrate the dispute, but the operators refused the offer. Union miners took to the mountainsides overlooking the valleys, and began picking off mine guards at every opportunity.<sup>9</sup> The operators constructed forts and advertised for, and brought in, strikebreakers to work the mines.<sup>10</sup>

At Mucklow, on Paint Creek, a battle was fought in which some 100,000 shots were fired and sixteen people were killed. The climax came on September 1, 1912, when about 6,000 union miners from organized areas across the Kanawha River from the mouths of Paint and Cabin Creeks crossed the river and assembled at the heads of the hollows. They declared their intent to kill the mine guards and destroy the company operations. The operators hired additional armed guards and awaited the onslaught. In order to prevent a massive armed clash, the Governor proclaimed martial law on September 2, 1912.<sup>11</sup>

During the first few days of September the state militia seized

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

1,872 high-powered rifles, 556 pistols, six machine guns, 225,000 rounds of ammunition, 480 blackjacks, and a large number of daggers, bayonets, and brass knuckles.<sup>12</sup> Through three periods of martial law, military force was used brutally to suppress the strike. During the first period of martial law (lasting from September 2, 1912, to October 15, 1912), in spite of the fact that civil courts were operating, about sixty people were tried by military tribunals under military law, without regard for criminal statutes or constitutional rights. Most of those convicted were sent to jail for short terms. Three persons were sent to the state penitentiary for terms of up to two years. Fifteen of those tried were mine guards.<sup>13</sup>

By October 15, peace had been restored and the militia was deactivated. Many of the militia members stayed on, however, as mine guards for the coal companies. With the mines well guarded, the operators again began bringing in strikebreakers. The miners got their guns out of hiding, and a shooting war broke out once more.<sup>14</sup>

Martial law was declared for the second time on November 15, 1912. The militia members who had served as mine guards donned their uniforms again. At this point, the military ceased to be neutral in any respect.<sup>15</sup> During this second period of martial law, the military courts went into operation again. Some fifteen or twenty persons were arrested and tried by the military tribunals. Several were sentenced to long penitentiary terms. Some were tried and sentenced illegally for offenses that occurred between the periods of martial law and outside of the area covered by the proclamation. Although the civil courts were operating, it was claimed by the state authorities that they could not obtain indictments or convictions for offenses connected with the strike. The testimony of the county prosecuting attorney before an investigating committee of the United States Senate appears, however, to refute this.<sup>16</sup> Matters again became relatively peaceful, and the militia was withdrawn on January 10, 1913, with strikebreakers operating the mines and the strike broken.<sup>17</sup>

Violence soon broke out again, however. On February 10, 1913, martial law was again declared. Military tribunals tried 166 strikers. Many were given jail sentences. Some were sentenced for

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>13</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Investigation of Paint Creek Coal Fields of West Virginia*, S. Rept. No. 321, 63rd Congress, 2d Sess., 1914, I, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 33-34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *Investigation of Paint Creek Coal Fields of West Virginia*, 7-17.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 37.

longer terms to the penitentiary. Mother Jones was sentenced to twenty years in prison for inciting a riot.<sup>18</sup> A particularly brutal incident occurred on February 7, 1913. The Sheriff of Kanawha County, several of his deputies, a coal operator named Quinn Morton, and several mine guards traveled to Paint Creek in a specially armed and armored train called the "Bull Moose Special" to serve a "John Doe" warrant for inciting a riot. As the train passed through Holly Grove, a miners' tent colony, Morton and his mine guards sprayed rifle and machine gun fire into the colony. Morton was reported to have said, "We gave them hell and had a lot of fun. Let's go back and give them another round." One person was killed and several others were wounded.<sup>19</sup>

In March, 1913, Dr. Henry Hatfield, nephew of the infamous "Devil Anse" Hatfield of the feuding Hatfields, was elected Governor of West Virginia. Upon his election he visited the strike area alone, with his medical bag in his hand. The Governor found Mother Jones in a lockup, lying on a straw tick on the floor. She had lobar pneumonia, a temperature of 104 degrees, and no medical attention. He ordered her removed to Charleston to decent quarters and medical care. Hatfield spent two days in the strike zone, treating the sick and talking to the miners. The mine operators felt that he was "toadying to the miners," and sent a delegation to the Governor to tell him so. When one of the operators' representatives questioned the Governor's wisdom in entering the strike zone, the Governor gave him a "clout on the side of the head that sent him sprawling into a corner," and ordered him out of his office. The Governor ordered the operators to settle with the miners in a few days or he would dictate the terms. They failed to settle. The Governor disapproved all of the sentences of the military courts, and decreed that the miners should get much of what they had asked for. At great cost, the miners had obtained a modest increase in wages, the right to a check-weighman, and a temporary respite from forced trading in company stores.<sup>20</sup>

#### CAUSES OF THE STRIKE ON CABIN AND PAINT CREEKS

There appear to have been many and diverse causes of the strike and ensuing violence. Among these were blacklisting of union men, or men who demanded a check-weighman, even though a miners' check-weighman was required by law. "Cribbing" was a bitter

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

complaint. The workman, in short, felt that he was being crassly cheated out of his pay. Housing conditions in the company-owned coal camps were bad, as were sanitary conditions. The State Adjutant General reported: "I visited a camp that was in charge of a college graduate. He was a fairly intelligent chap, who thought he had a lot of animals in the village instead of human beings."<sup>21</sup>

Two governmental bodies investigated the causes of the strike, and came up with widely different conclusions. The Donahue Commission, appointed by the Governor of West Virginia in 1912, reported that the wages in the strike area compared favorably with those in other areas of the state and other states. It concluded: "And as to the main causes of the trouble: this arises, in our judgment, from the efforts of the United Mine Workers to organize the union in the whole chain of plants along said creeks. Their desire is to make the present strike region the place for the insertion of the thin edge of unionism, with the ultimate aim of organizing the whole State."<sup>22</sup> The testimony of the Governor himself before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor would seem to refute this, however. He testified, in answer to questions by Senator Borah:<sup>23</sup>

The trouble commenced after these operators on Paint Creek who had theretofore employed union labor and had a contract with the United Mine Workers declined to enter into a new agreement with them.

Senator Borah. Then it seemed to be that the mine guards were the disturbing element around which this trouble arose?

Gov. Glasscock. That was my impression, Senator; yes, sir.

Senator Kenyon described the causes as follows:<sup>24</sup>

Among them might be related the employment of mine guards, high prices charged the miners at company stores, mine guards acting as deputy sheriffs, post offices located in company stores, private roads to the schools and stores, no opportunity to purchase homes, cemeteries upon company grounds, attempts to unionize the miners, alien ownership of large tracts of land—in one instance 12,000 acres. All of these various things appearing in the testimony might be cited as causes leading up to the conditions which the committee investigated. However, it is the opinion of some of the committee that the cause of all this trouble is deeper and more fundamental. The basic cause is the private ownership of great public necessities, such as coal. This coupled with human greed, incident

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>22</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *Investigation of Paint Creek Coal Fields of West Virginia*, 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

to such ownership, has brought about the deplorable and un-American conditions in the West Virginia coal fields under investigation.

In the eyes of the mine operators, the difficulties on Paint and Cabin Creeks were a result of aggressive union organizing by the United Mine Workers, working in combination with operators in the organized bituminous fields in other states, to destroy the competitive position of the West Virginia operators. At the urging of the mine operators, the Senate Committee investigated this charge.

Specifically, the charge was that the operators in the Central Competitive Field states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois had entered into an agreement with the union to increase wages in the unionized field on the condition that the union would organize West Virginia. It appeared from the report of the subcommittee investigating these charges that, in bargaining sessions with operators in the Central Competitive Field states, the union had agreed that it would attempt to organize the non-union operations in West Virginia.<sup>25</sup> It does appear, therefore, that the West Virginia operators were justified to some extent in their view of the union as an agent of their competitors, bent on damage to their competitive position. It can hardly be doubted that this stiffened employer resistance. It should be noted also, however, that the union felt that it needed to organize the entire bituminous coal industry in order to protect the jobs and wage rates of its members in fields that were already organized.

The operators were driven by the logic of their competitive position into a vigorous resistance to the union. The location of their operations in remote places was forced by the location of the coal. Location in these areas forced the construction of "camps," whose very name implies impermanence, and therefore the impracticality of constructing substantial housing. Of necessity, services had to be provided to the miners and their families by the coal companies. Occupational communities and oppressive paternalism helped to create an explosive situation.

It is of interest to consider the economic conditions existing at the time of this and the later mine war. As can be seen from Figure 1, the average annual earnings of bituminous coal miners, after rising in 1909 and 1910, fell slightly (from \$558 per year to \$533 per year) in 1911, the year immediately preceding the mine war on Cabin and Paint Creeks. This is consistent with the Davies hypothesis that revolutionary activity results from dashed expectations.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-27.

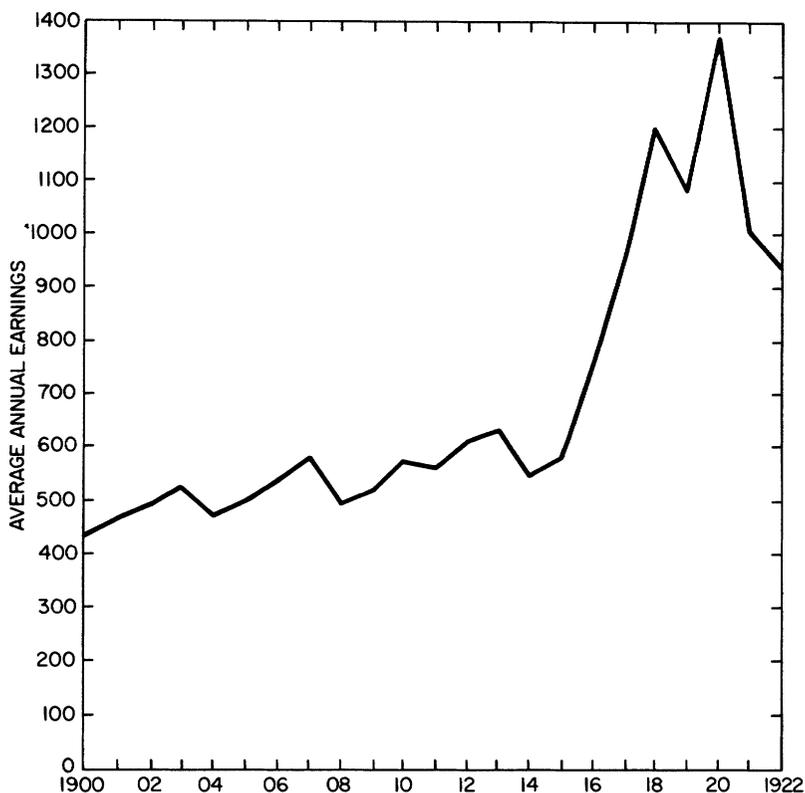


FIGURE 1  
Average Annual Earnings of Bituminous Coal Miners  
1900-1922

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957*, series 603-617 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 91.

#### MINGO AND LOGAN COUNTIES — 1920-1921

West Virginia's bloodiest mine war occurred in two remote counties in the extreme southern part of the state, "Bloody Mingo," and the "Kingdom of Logan." The coal fields lying in these counties were rich and profitable. Large tracts of land were owned by absentee owners. These fields were among the few remaining unorganized by the powerful United Mine Workers of America.

An augury of troubles to come occurred in September of 1919. Hearing of atrocities committed against union miners and organizers

in Logan County by Don Chafin, the sheriff of Logan County, and by his deputies, some 5,000 miners armed themselves and gathered at the town of Marmet in Kanawha County. Their purpose was an invasion of Logan County, and they actually began a march toward Logan. The Governor was able to dissuade them from the pursuit of this objective by the promise of an investigation of conditions in the county. The miners disbanded and returned to their homes. An investigation was made, but the State Legislature, which was dominated by the coal operators, failed to take any action to alleviate the deplorable conditions found by the investigators.<sup>26</sup>

In the spring of 1920, the union began vigorous organizing efforts in Mingo County. The operators responded by firing persons suspected of union activity and ejecting them and their families from company-owned houses. Frank Keeney, the president of District 17, U.M.W.A., wrote to the various coal operators requesting a meeting with them, but met with almost universal refusal. By the end of June, about 2,700 miners were on union relief and residing in tent colonies. Finally, on July 1, 1920, the union officially called a strike and attempted to prevent the mines from operating.<sup>27</sup>

One of the bloodiest incidents in this mine war took place at its very inception. On May 19, 1920, ten men were killed at Matewan, Mingo County, in what is known as the "Matewan Massacre."

The massacre was prompted by the eviction by mine guards of several miners and their families from company houses in a coal camp near Matewan. Twelve Baldwin-Felts guards, led by Albert Felts, evicted the miners and their families without incident. They dismantled their rifles and returned to Matewan to wait for a train. According to what appears to be the most reliable version of the incident, Sid Hatfield, Chief of Police of Matewan, signaled the beginning of the shooting by walking up to Albert Felts from behind and shooting him in the back of the head. A fusillade then broke out from places of concealment on both sides of the street. Five mine guards were killed in the first volley. Two others were pursued and shot. Five escaped, some by mingling with a crowd which had assembled to board a train. Two miners and the mayor of the town were also killed. Sid Hatfield's version of the shooting was that Felts had attempted to arrest Hatfield on a false warrant, and had started the shooting by gunning down the mayor of the town when he interceded on Hatfield's behalf. Hatfield's version was supported by other union sympathizers. It was refuted by a Baldwin-

<sup>26</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 94-95.

<sup>27</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, S. Res. 80, 67th Congress, 1st Sess., 1921, 15-16, 113, 115-123.

Felts spy named Lively, a local dentist, and several bystanders. Some witnesses stated that it was Hatfield who shot the mayor. In this connection, it is interesting that Hatfield married the mayor's beautiful young widow only two weeks after the massacre, after having been arrested in a Huntington hotel for illicitly cohabiting with the young lady prior to their marriage.<sup>28</sup>

The union made Hatfield a hero. A propaganda film called "Smilin' Sid" was filmed and shown in the camps as an organizing weapon. Newspapers pictured him brandishing his two revolvers. A friendly, or perhaps fearful, Mingo County jury acquitted Hatfield and his cohorts. Their acquittal was aided by the timely death by violence of several of the witnesses against them.<sup>29</sup>

The operators were not to be denied vengeance. Baldwin-Felts operatives framed Hatfield and his deputy, Ed Chambers, on a charge of the destruction of some coal company property in neighboring McDowell County. Hatfield and Chambers were required to come to McDowell County, which was controlled by the operators, in order to stand trial on the charges. As Hatfield and Chambers climbed the steps of the McDowell County courthouse, they were gunned down by a group of Baldwin-Felts mine guards that included the labor spy, Lively. McDowell County justice was as friendly to the mine guards as Mingo County justice had been to Hatfield, and they were acquitted of murder charges.<sup>30</sup>

As a result of the Matewan Massacre and other acts of violence, martial law was declared on August 29, 1920. At that time, 500 Federal troops arrived and, except for a three-week period in November, they remained until February 15, 1921.<sup>31</sup> Because of continuing violence, martial law was again declared in March, 1921. As the state had no militia, some 780 special deputies were appointed by the County Court of Mingo County to enforce the law. These volunteers were said by the union to be former Baldwin-Felts detectives and criminal types. It appears that at least those who were recruited from the county seat of Williamson were a blue-ribbon assemblage of business and professional people.<sup>32</sup>

On May 12, 13, and 14, 1921, the "Three Days Battle of the Tug"

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106, 206-207, 382-383.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 56-64.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-72.

U. S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 731-733.

<sup>31</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 202-203.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 233-236.

Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 74.

was fought between some 2,000 strikers and 1,000 deputies and mine guards. Several thousand shots were fired. Four men were killed.<sup>33</sup>

On June 14, 1921, the deputies and state police raided a miners' tent colony on Lick Creek, in Mingo County, because residents of this colony had allegedly been shooting at strikebreakers. Tents and belongings were destroyed. Fifty-six men were herded into the county lockup and held under crowded and unsanitary conditions. One miner, a man named Breedlove, was killed. According to the deputies, Breedlove was shot while resisting arrest. The miners' account, which was read on the floor of the United States Senate during the debate over the institution of a Senate inquiry into the strike, was stated by a miner named Williams who: "saw James Bowles, state policeman, shoot him: Bowles was about 6 or 7 feet from Breedlove, and Breedlove had his hands up above his head at the time he was shot; Bowles said to Breedlove, 'Hold up your hands, God damn you, and if you have got anything to say, say it fast,' and Breedlove said, 'Lord, have mercy,' and instantly the gun fired and Breedlove fell."<sup>34</sup>

Logan County in 1921 has been described as: "a leer in the face of liberty, a feudal barony defended by soldiers of fortune in the pay of mine owners."<sup>35</sup>

The ruler of this feudal barony was the Sheriff of Logan County, Don Chafin. It has been said of Chafin that: "In his heyday, when clothed with official power, he was a hard-drinking, swaggering, bragging, bullying gunman, who ruled his 'Kingdom of Logan' with a mailed fist."<sup>36</sup>

In Logan County, it was the practice for coal companies to pay the salaries of deputy sheriffs. These deputies were used systematically by Chafin to prevent union organizers from operating in Logan County. Organizers were beaten and jailed at will.<sup>37</sup>

On August 7, 1921, Frank Keeney and Mother Jones led a meeting of some 5,000 miners at the State Capitol in Charleston. They urged the miners to arm themselves and invade Logan and Mingo Counties. Mother Jones told stories of atrocities allegedly committed in these counties. When she later learned that Federal troops might be coming to stop the march, and that the leaders were to be arrested for treason, she attempted to prevent the march through the use of a false telegram from the President of the United States. The tele-

<sup>33</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 228.

Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 74.

<sup>34</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 166-167, 306-307, 309-310.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> Winthrop D. Lane, *Civil War in West Virginia* (New York, 1969) 52-53, 5-8.

gram was exposed, and she left West Virginia discredited, never to return.<sup>38</sup> In response to this call to arms, on August 24, 1921, 2,500 to 3,000 armed miners gathered on Lens Creek, in Kanawha County, about sixty-five miles from the Logan County line, and began marching in the direction of Logan. Keeney and Fred Mooney, officers of the union, were persuaded by the Governor and Federal military officers to call off the march. Keeney travelled to Racine, a town along their line of march, spoke to the marchers, and turned them back. Not content with this state of affairs, Sheriff Chafin sent his deputies, along with some state police, into a small union area of Logan County and attempted to arrest some union miners who had previously been involved in a shooting scrape with the state police. A battle ensued; two men were killed.

The ranks of the miners swelled to 6,000 men. The attempted invasion was revived and began in earnest. Armed miners were transported by train to the vicinity of Blair Mountain, a sharp ridge separating the small union section of Logan County from the non-union section. The strikers constituted a full-fledged proletarian army, complete with a uniform consisting of overalls with a red bandana, with red flags tied to their guns, a medical corps, and a variety of arms, including one machine gun. Bill Blizzard, a union official, was the "General" of the army.<sup>39</sup> One graphic description of the assemblage of this army was given in testimony before the Senate investigating committee: <sup>40</sup>

One big red-headed fellow hopped off the train and got up on the platform and waved his high-powered rifle, and said: 'The Coal River hell cats have arrived. Now watch us work!' He called for 'Detail No. 74.' He got up on some high ground and kept hollering for Detail No. 74 and there were about 20 men, all armed. They had on the customary overalls and a belt cartridges and a couple of big 44's stuck in their belt, and high-powered rifles. He called those men in and called the roll, and then started off up Coal River, and word was being passed around through the crowd.

On the Logan side of Blair Mountain, Chafin was marshalling his forces. Some 800 to 1,000 men were deputized. A citizen army of some 2,000 men, including deputies, special deputies, and state police, armed with high-powered rifles and several machine guns, formed a battle line estimated by some to be about fifteen miles long.<sup>41</sup> A few commercial airline pilots in the pay of the operators

<sup>38</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 96-97.

<sup>39</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 512-519, 1032-1034.

Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 97-98.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 848.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 800, 874.

attempted to bomb the proletarian encampments, but were unsuccessful.<sup>42</sup>

Battle was joined at several points along the mountain. The defending Logan County forces were well dug in. The miners, after three days of battle, were unable to reach the top of the mountain. Three men were killed on the Logan side, and several were wounded. By one report, ten of the union miners were killed. Federal troops arrived on September 3, and the fighting stopped upon their arrival.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the miners and union officials were tried for treason and murder. Bill Blizzard and others were acquitted, some were convicted. John L. Lewis' national organization put up funds for the defense of the accused, but Lewis later fired Blizzard, Keeney, Mooney, and Harold Houston, the union's attorney. Union finances were seriously impaired. Don Chafin securely ruled the roost once more. Union organization in the southern fields was dealt a death blow from which it did not recover until the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933.<sup>44</sup>

#### CAUSES OF THE WAR IN MINGO AND LOGAN COUNTIES

The causes of the violence arising out of the union's attempts to organize miners in Mingo and Logan Counties range from economic conditions in the nation as a whole to the eviction of miners' families from their homes in remote mountain hollows.

The methods used by the mine operators to prevent union organization were among the immediate causes of violence. The use of labor spies, the discharging of men for union sympathies, and the eviction of these employees from their homes, also strongly contributed to the violence. One can hardly fail to shudder at the testimony before the Senate investigating committee of C. E. Lively, a Baldwin-Felts undercover operative. Lively had ingratiated himself with union officials and had even served as a union officer, in order to report to the operators on the activities of the men whom he befriended. He testified against them in court and participated in the murder of Sid Hatfield.<sup>45</sup> Lively and other Baldwin-Felts operatives acted on occasion as *agents provocateurs*, encouraging violence on the part of the miners in order to entrap them.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 100-101.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-101. U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 874, 1032-1034.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 104-115. McAllister Coleman, *Men and Coal* (New York, 1921) 104-105.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 356-360.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 751.

The eviction of miners and their families from their homes was a logical necessity, given the need to furnish housing for strikebreakers. It was performed on short notice, however, or no notice at all, on the legal theory that the miner occupied the same position as a servant in one's household, who lost his right to occupy his master's premises the moment he lost his job. It was performed in an unnecessarily brutal manner. One writer gives the following description of the nature of the evictions:<sup>47</sup>

I once drove up on a union truck loaded with tents and food to the outskirts of a town where an hour before sunup six families had been set out. Through slashing rains, our truck slobbered along a valley trail to the coal camp where we found the women in drenched house dresses trying to calm their frightened children. They had taken refuge under the shed back of a small church. The men were standing ankle-deep in the creek water that had overflowed its banks and was swirling past the doorsills of the company houses. In the sulphur-yellow water there was a confusion of broken bedsteads, cribs, chairs, tables, toys.

Firing men for union activities, beating and arresting union organizers, increasing wages to stall the union's organizational drive, and a systematic campaign of terror produced an atmosphere in which violence was inevitable.<sup>48</sup> Of course the violence was not all on one side. There was clear proof of a great deal of violence, from the destruction of property to murder, on the part of union miners, armed and instigated by union officials.<sup>49</sup>

In order to find the underlying reasons for this confrontation between labor and capital, and for its violent nature, it is necessary to go behind the immediate acts of the combatants during the conflict. This was a fight to the death. Powerful absentee owners, who, significantly, included the giant United States Steel trust, confronted the 550,000-member United Mine Workers of America. The southern fields undermined the union's bargaining power and threatened its very existence. Major capitalists could have asked for nothing better than the destruction of the miners' union. The union, on the other hand, adopted the position, whether as a matter of ideology or last resort, that the mines should be nationalized, thus threatening the position of the capitalists and the very existence of the operators.<sup>50</sup>

The year 1920 saw a great boom in the coal industry. The number of men employed rose, tons mined increased, and profits in-

<sup>47</sup> Coleman, *Men and Coal*, 101-102.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 26-28, 85, 87, 93-95, 159-164.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 259, 323-324, 327, 366-367, 803-805, 808-809.

<sup>50</sup> A. F. Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields* (New York, 1919), 110.

creased tremendously. In 1920, there were 1,059 firms (about one-third of those reporting for tax purposes) earning a profit of 50 per cent or more and 498 firms reporting profits of 100 per cent or more.<sup>51</sup> Although wages increased, there was a tendency for wages in non-union areas to lag somewhat behind those in union areas. This could well have exacerbated the gap between workers' rising expectations and the extent to which their needs were satisfied.

Viewing economic conditions in the years immediately preceding the mine war of 1920–1921 is of some interest, particularly for theoretical purposes. Figure 1 shows that average annual earnings of bituminous coal miners had increased substantially in 1915, 1916, 1917, and 1918. In the year immediately prior to the mine war, 1919, earnings dropped substantially, from \$1,211 in 1918 to \$1,097 in 1919. Once again, violence seemed to follow a downturn after several years of improvement. The operators were willing to use any means to prevent organization of the mines. The miners lived and worked in an area of West Virginia where every man carried a gun and was quite accustomed to settling disputes with bullets. Mingo County is the home of the Hatfield clan, which engaged in the famous feud with the McCoys of Kentucky. According to one writer, “from earliest times, the inbred contempt of many Mingo mountaineers for the law and their disregard for human life earned for the county the unenviable sobriquet of ‘Bloody Mingo.’”<sup>52</sup> The miners were men of muscle who performed physically strenuous work. They lived constantly with danger in the mines. They had access to an instrument of violence, i.e., dynamite, and were expert in its use.

An examination of the conditions of life and work in the southern West Virginia coal fields in particular appears to show that these conditions had improved considerably in the several years immediately preceding the mine war of 1920–1921. The eight-hour day had become common. The gross abuses of the company store system had, for the most part, been eliminated. Pay days were more frequent. Mine safety had improved. Child labor had been abolished. Wages had increased substantially. Money wages increased in West Virginia from an average annual wage of \$275.58 in 1897 to \$1,335.56 in 1918. Real wages had increased at almost as great a rate.<sup>53</sup>

An all-pervading paternalism was perhaps the most important, and yet the most difficult to describe, of the conditions in the coal fields. An almost feudal situation was of necessity created by coal com-

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 93. Coleman, *Men and Coal*, 98–99.

<sup>52</sup> Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields*, 81–83.

panies building operations in the remote areas where the coal was located. The company had to construct houses, stores, churches, schools, and recreational facilities. Having spent its money on these facilities, the company quite naturally retained control of them. With this control went the power to pull the purse string tight. The nature of this control, and the fact of its existence, is shown in the testimony of a Mr. Coolidge, an operator, before the Senate investigating committee. Coolidge was asked what would happen if a teacher taught that the United Mine Workers was a beneficent organization. Coolidge stated that anyone espousing such views would be discharged. He testified as follows:<sup>54</sup>

Mr. Walsh . . . Suppose a preacher begun next Sunday . . . to declare . . . that the conduct of those corporations was immoral to the last degree and that what they advocated with reference to the application of law outside the courts and by officers, such as Mr. Chafin, was anarchistic, that it was an attempt by force to overthrow the government of the United States and to bring into contempt the principles upon which our country is founded as expressed in the Constitution, and preach it Sunday after Sunday, would you longer contribute to their support?

Mr. Coolidge: I do not believe that we — I am very sure that we would not contribute any money for that kind of a minister who so misused the cloak of religion.

The situation of the coal miner under this form of paternalism is well expressed by journalist Winthrop D. Lane, who extensively investigated conditions in the coal fields: "He cannot escape the dependent position in which it places him. The coal company touches his life at every point. If there is a playground for his children, it is because the coal company has generously supplied it. If the prices charged him for food at the company store are reasonable, it is because the coal company decrees it. If the physical aspects of his life, on the whole, are tolerable, it is because he is fortunate enough to have a beneficent employer."<sup>55</sup>

The political implications of the economic realities were profound. Polling places were placed on company property, votes were bought, and the company looked after the affairs of the miners politically as well as socially and economically.<sup>56</sup>

Although company housing was sometimes adequate and sometimes inadequate, its constant quality was that it produced a state of dependence on the company. The power to evict the worker from his home, to control what persons he had in his home, and to have all of the employees housed in one area, were all important sources

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 936.

<sup>55</sup> Lane, *Civil War in West Virginia*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 694.

of employer control.<sup>57</sup> There was a dreariness and dirtiness connected with camp life that could hardly be anything but oppressive. Sanitary conditions in many camps were appalling.<sup>58</sup>

The company store, necessary when the camps were first established, formed an important part of the paternalistic system. Several abuses of the company store system were prevalent. Workers were sometimes directly pressured to buy from the store. At times the pressure was indirect, with favorable positions and shifts being given to workers only if they shopped at the company store. A dependence on the company store was also fostered by the practice of many companies of not paying a new employee until he had been employed for a month. As he could get credit only at the company store, he started out, and frequently remained, in the debt of the company. However, one investigator found, and evidence presented to the Senate investigating committee indicated, that prices in company stores were not higher than those in neighboring stores.<sup>59</sup>

The mine guard system formed a part of an oppressive system in some areas. Under it, deputy sheriffs, paid by the coal companies, operated, at least in Logan County, to prevent union organization and to control elections.<sup>60</sup>

It is extremely difficult to make a comparison between wages in union and non-union fields. There is considerable variation in the number of days worked by miners, both because of fluctuations in the market for coal, and because of the irregular work habits of the miners. Miners were at that time paid on a piece rate basis. In union fields they were paid by weight. In non-union fields they were paid by the car. There are two difficulties with measurement by the car. First, the rate might be low as compared to the rate per weight, as to which there is some evidence, but it is impossible to determine this with any degree of certainty. Second, because reasonable men may differ over what constitutes a full car, it is a system that breeds ill-feeling.<sup>61</sup> The operators claimed that a check-weighman representing the miners was not necessary, and not required by law, since the miners were not paid by weight, but by the car. One of the functions of the check-weighman, however, is to check on the "docking" of the miner for impurities. This function would appear to exist even where pay was by the car.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields*, 63-64.

<sup>58</sup> Lane, *Civil War in West Virginia*, 36-40.

<sup>59</sup> Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields*, 63-64.

U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 246-247.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 720-721.

<sup>61</sup> Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields*, 17-20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 25-26.

The coal operators claimed that wages were higher in non-union operations than in union operations, and submitted evidence in support of this position to the Senate Investigating committee. The union, of course, disputed this.<sup>63</sup>

In relation to wages, one writer concluded: <sup>64</sup>

We are forced, therefore, to the rather ambiguous conclusion that wages in the non-union field may be as high as in union fields during periods of prosperity. There appears to be a lag in the granting of increases in the non-union fields. But in a long-continued period of prosperity wages in the two fields will probably be about the same. The union's charge of gross under-payment has certainly not been substantiated.

But we may say with absolute confidence: it is the union field which sets the upward pace of wages in the coal industry. It is the non-union which sets the downward pace.

One matter that exacerbated the difficulties between the miners and their employers was the existence of injunctions in McDowell and Mercer Counties, counties bordering the fields in question. These injunctions were issued under the doctrine of the case of *Hitchman Coal & Coke Co. v. Mitchell*.<sup>65</sup> In that case, the United States Supreme Court upheld the use of an injunction to protect the "yellow-dog" contract, whereby an employee agrees with his employer not to join a union. These injunctions effectively prevented union organizers from exercising even the simplest forms of free speech. They convinced many union men that the state was indeed merely an instrument of their employers.<sup>66</sup> Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the workers showed little respect for the law.

It can be readily seen that there was a bewildering array of issues between the coal operators and their employees. The principal issue, however, was whether the operators were to retain their hegemony over the terms and conditions of employment of their employees, and retain the paternalistic system that they had created. A classic confrontation on paternalism appears in the record of the examination of Jett Lauck, an economist serving as a consultant for the union, before the Senate Investigating Committee.<sup>67</sup>

Mr. Lauck: I think you are the most beautiful example of industrial autocracy in Logan County, as you described that situation.

Mr. Coolidge: Still it is a pretty good place to live.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 25-26, 32, 65, 241.

<sup>64</sup> Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> 245 U.S. 229 (1917).

<sup>66</sup> Lane, *Civil War in West Virginia*, 1-10 (Introduction by John R. Commons), 68, 70-71.

<sup>67</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *West Virginia Coal Fields*, 1046.

Mr. Lauck: It may be a pretty good place to live, but you are a benevolent despot.

Mr. Vinson: Is not that an ideal situation anyway?

Mr. Lauck: What might please Mr. Coolidge would not please me.

Mr. Walsh: Why not have Mr. Coolidge act as king for us, if that is the popular conception.

The union view of the matters at issue was investigated thoroughly by the United States Senate Committee on Education and Labor. In addition to taking testimony in formal hearings, members of the committee went into the strike areas and discussed the union position and other questions with the miners. Senator Kenyon of the Committee was told by miners that the reasons for the strike were the lack of check-weighmen, the firing of workers for failing to trade at company stores, the inability to make a decent living, and the mine guard system, whereby the guards would evict a worker if he missed work because of illness.<sup>68</sup> Senator Kenyon also had the following interview: <sup>69</sup>

The Chairman: And what is the trouble down here anyway?

Mr. Echols: I will tell you. The miners asked the contractors or operators to give them an opportunity to weigh the coal, and they announced that they will not weigh it.

. . . They promised to pay us by the ton but they don't do it. They promised according to whatever the coal is to pay us by the ton, and we want them to put it on the scales. All they do is to say that so and so much, and we have to take it.

. . . There is some things that we cannot stand for. I was raised a slave. My master and mistress called me and I answered, and I know the time when I was a slave, and I felt just like I feel now.

Union officers stated their demands more formally, if not more effectively. Fred Mooney, vice-president of the Union district, testified before the committee that the issues were the right to a check-weighman, freedom from discrimination against union members, and the abolition of the guard system.<sup>70</sup> Shortly before the Senate hearings, the union offered to settle the strike for: (1) the right to a check-weighman, and a ton to be defined as 2,000 lbs., (2) the return to work of all employees without discrimination against union members, (3) an 8-hour day, (4) a semi-monthly pay day, (5) the right of employees to trade where they pleased, and (6) the estab-

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 472-474.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 469-470.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

lishment of a joint commission to arbitrate wages and to decide methods of dispute adjustment.<sup>71</sup> These terms did not include a closed shop. They did, of course, imply union recognition.

The charge was made by the union and by one of its witnesses, Samuel Untermeyer, that the entire source of the resistance to unionization in Mingo County was the House of Morgan, United States Steel, and the Norfolk & Western Railroad, which were engaged in a conspiracy to defeat unionism in the United States. Untermeyer offered some considerable evidence in proof of this charge.<sup>72</sup>

The case of the operators against the union is well summarized by A. F. Hinrichs. As stated by Hinrichs, the operators felt that the union was engaged in a conspiracy to put the non-union fields out of business. This conclusion was based primarily on a provision in the joint agreement of 1898 between the union and the operators in the Central Competitive Field. It provided "that the United Mine Workers' organization, a party to this contract does hereby further agree to afford all possible protection to the trade and to the other parties hereto against any unfair competition resulting from failure to maintain scale rates."<sup>73</sup> It is clear from this and other evidence that the union did agree with the union operators to attempt to organize the West Virginia non-union fields. What was a fairly usual understanding between a union and organized employers in an industry not completely unionized, understandably appeared to the West Virginia operators to be an attack upon their very existence. The manipulation of freight rates to their disadvantage by operators from other states had made the West Virginia operators rightly wary.<sup>74</sup>

The second problem in the view of the operators was that there was a fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between the interests of the union and those of the operators. The union was proposing to increase wages, shorten hours, eliminate competition, establish the right to organize and bargain collectively, and, most importantly, nationalize the mines.<sup>75</sup>

The operators further charged that the union had a contempt for law and government and was thus unworthy of respect. The charge of contempt for government may well have been true, and perhaps understandable. The Supreme Court decision in the *Hitchman* case and the use of local police against strikers may well have convinced

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 604-605, 697-719.

<sup>73</sup> Hinrichs, *The United Mine Workers of America and the Non-Union Coal Fields*, 113, 144-162.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

the union that government was indeed on the side of the companies.<sup>76</sup>

Irresponsibility in the keeping of its agreements not to strike was another charge leveled against the union. The large number of wild-cat strikes in the unionized areas lent considerable support to this charge.<sup>77</sup>

The employers felt that the union wanted to take over the management of the mines and guide company policy. In that the arbitrary power of the employer to treat employees as he pleased would have been terminated, this was true. Certainly the union would, like all unions, trespass on some of the rights that management felt that it needed in order to run the business efficiently.<sup>78</sup>

The final charge leveled against the union was that it would make it impossible to operate the mines in such a manner as to produce a profit. Experience elsewhere would appear to prove this untrue.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to the main problems outlined above, many of the operators were firmly convinced that their employees did not want a union, and that a union would not serve their best interests. The operators were able to produce an anti-union petition signed by the great majority of their employees stating that they did not want a union. In the light of modern experience in labor relations, such a petition may seem laughable, but it may well be that many of the operators were naive enough to believe that this petition represented the wishes of their employees. They saw themselves as protecting their employees from the violent coercive tactics of the union.<sup>80</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is hardly surprising, or even of particular interest, that the miners in the southern West Virginia coal fields attempted to organize. That the employers resisted union organization is not unexpected or particularly worth noting. What is of special interest is out-and-out industrial warfare, which extended over a considerable period of time and took many lives. That this was more than just random violence is indicated by the perceptions of at least some of the participants, by the underlying issues, and by the extensiveness of the mine wars. Frank Keeney, local union president during the 1920–1921 mine war, in an interview with Winthrop Lane, expressed an abiding conviction that this was outright class

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–154.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

war.<sup>81</sup> The issues included the very survival of the United Mine Workers union and the survival of private capital in a major segment of the coal industry. The broad extent of these wars argues for their reflection of broad underlying structural concerns of a basic nature. Whether the immediate causes of the conflict were bread and butter issues, and whether the workers saw themselves as engaged in class war, they were in fact attacking the very foundations of capitalism in one of the nation's basic industries. It was perhaps not an accident that the workers tied red bandanas around their rifles and wore these red bandanas around their necks as the only uniform of the miners' army in the battle of Blair Mountain. It is the element of class war that makes it a particularly useful historical specimen in which to study the phenomenon of industrial violence in the American context.

The paternalistic system and the exploitation of the worker flowed naturally, if not necessarily, from the location and mode of production of coal. The occupational community, the work group working under dangerous conditions, the sense of being cheated and exploited, and the unbearable conditions of life gave rise to a strong class feeling.

It does not appear that the mine wars arose from progressive "im-miserization." As can be seen from Figure 1, the existing economic conditions as reflected in average annual earnings of workers were more consistent with the Davies "J-Curve" hypothesis. Prior to both mine wars, conditions, which had been improving, took a downward turn. This is quite pronounced in the case of the 1920-1921 mine war.

A more concrete basis for the violent nature of the confrontation between labor and capital in West Virginia is that both sides considered that they were locked in a struggle to the death. The union correctly perceived that its continued existence depended upon complete organization of the bituminous fields. The operators correctly perceived that the radical position of the mine workers on nationalization of the mines was a threat to their existence. Both sides suspected, with good reason, that the other was a party to a conspiracy with outside forces, and was therefore bent not on the immediate economic issues under discussion, but rather upon destruction of the other side for broader reasons. For these and other reasons, both sides were intransigent and unwilling to compromise.

The violent nature of many of the mountaineers and their access to, and expertise with, the instruments of violence perhaps helped

<sup>81</sup> Lane, *Civil War in West Virginia*, 87.

to make the workers' protective reaction a bloody one. These hardy mountaineers were not easily cowed by Baldwin-Felts thugs and company-owned deputy sheriffs. Such men were likely to, and did in fact, respond to oppression with violence.

Perhaps the best capsule summary of the positions and feelings of the parties to these strikes appears in Winthrop Lane's book. Lane interviewed Frank Keeney, the local union president, who stated: <sup>82</sup>

I'm a native West Virginian. There are others like me working in the mines here. We don't propose to get out of the way when a lot of capitalists from New York and London come down here and tell us to get off the earth. They played that game on the American Indian. They gave him the end of the log to sit on and then pushed him off that. We don't propose to be pushed off.

They say we shall not organize West Virginia. They are mistaken. If Frank Keeney can't do it, someone will take his place who can. But West Virginia will be organized and it will be organized completely.

The attitude of the operators is shown by the following statement, which Lane obtained from an operator: "‘You may tell the union,’ he said, ‘that when it sends its organizers in here, I’ll get an army.’ ‘And I’ll lead it,’ echoed his mine superintendent.” <sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.