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The Battle of Blair Mountain: A New Narrative on the Forgotten Civil Uprising of Twentieth- Century America

AIDEN DUFFEY
Worcester State University

On August 25th, 1921, at Blair Mountain in Logan County, West Virginia, a battle was fought between union workers of the United Mine Workers of America and a collection of local police, mercenaries, and federal troops, an event that was part of the larger conflict: the West Virginia Mine Wars¹. While only taking place over the course of a week, the Battle of Blair Mountain, as it came to be known, was the largest labor uprising in American history, as well as the largest armed uprising to this day since the Civil War. Despite its scale and significance, the Battle of Blair Mountain has faded into relative

obscurity over the years, placing its history at a risk of being forgotten entirely. This fact directly inspired the writing of this piece as its goal is to call new audiences’ attention to the battle’s history and ideally, inspire further study of the subject. As we fast approach the hundredth anniversary of the battle, now seems like as great a time as any to revisit its history, by constructing a new narrative based on a critical analysis of the primary and scholarly accounts of the battle that exist, in an effort to examine not only the battle’s immediate impact on the coal industry, and public perception of the American labor movement as a whole, but also to explore how the challenges presented by the battle mirror current events in our society.

While the West Virginia Mine Wars is a topic that is at least familiar within American labor history circles, the Battle of Blair Mountain is an event severely lacking in scholarship, especially considering its fame and impact at the time it occurred. West Virginia maintains extensive records and accounts of the battle both in the state archives and at the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, but unfortunately, most of their resources have not yet been digitized, although those that have, provided a wealth of information in the form of first-hand accounts or newspaper articles written immediately following the battle. The museum was beginning the process of moving to a new building when the Covid-19 pandemic occurred, which has provided challenges in accessing their archives. Fortunately, the museum has quite recently reopened their doors to the public, meaning their resources are more readily available. A visit to the museum in the

near future will hopefully yield follow-up research to this piece in the form of an additional article. The one academic source that has been most beneficial to this study from a historiographic standpoint is Robert Shogan’s (2006) book, *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*. Unlike most books on the West Virginia Mine Wars, which briefly touch upon Blair Mountain, Shogan’s work, as the title would suggest, is exclusively dedicated to the Battle of Blair Mountain, making it by far the most valuable scholarly account for the purposes of this research². While Shogan’s work, similarly to the primary-source accounts utilized in this project, does express bias, in his case in favor of the United Mine Workers of America, he approaches the issue in a unique manner. During an interview in 2004 for *Focus*, an Illinois University radio talk show, when asked why the Battle of Blair Mountain was significant to labor history, Shogan clarified that he viewed the battle as an important part of American history, as a whole, that has ramifications beyond the confines of labor itself³. This perspective, in addition to his excellent research, is what makes Shogan’s work so creditable, as while he does show a greater degree of sympathy to one side

in the conflict, he approaches the subject of the battle with a nationwide view that relieves him of the burden of being bogged down by local politics and economic interests. While this present article is nowhere near as in depth a study of the battle as Shogan’s, his work is more focused on the experience of the miners themselves, whereas this article seeks to examine all parties involved as well as analyze the impact the battle has left over the past hundred years.

To better understand why the Battle of Blair Mountain was fought, and how it escalated to such a large conflict, some context is needed both on a national and a local level. Leading up to 1921, when the Battle of Blair Mountain was fought, unions were in a position of great turmoil. During World War I, which ended only a few short years before, unions, especially those related to mining and in particular coal production, gained a great deal of power and national influence. This may have in part been due to national sympathy towards industrial work as a whole that was heavily featured in wartime propaganda but was primarily due to the national high demand for coal at a time when labor was in extremely short supply⁴. As coal mining companies did not have the luxury of large amounts of

¹Robert Shogan. *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2006), 168. Miners began assembling and marching on Blair on August 24th, but the first exchanges of fire did not occur until August 25th between Sheriff Chafin’s men and UMWA miners.

²Thomas, G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), Chap. 5, *Out of the Depths and on to the March* touches upon the Battle of Blair Mountain, although the book is primarily focused on the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, an earlier conflict in the greater labor struggle surrounding the coal industry. Corbin, David. *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989),182, 218, 219, 221. Corbin’s book covers the West Virginia Coal Wars as a whole, and, as such, does not focus on the Battle of Blair Mountain. Lane, Winthrop D. *Civil War in West Virginia*. (B. W. Huebsch, inc.) New York, 1921, 105-109. Lane discusses escalation to the Battle of Blair Mountain and addresses previous conflicts in Logan County specifically, but as *Civil War in West Virginia* was released in 1921, the same year as the battle, it is unlikely Lane would have had the time or resources to include the Battle of Blair Mountain into their work in any further capacity.

³*Focus*; “The Battle of Blair Mountain: *The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*,” 2004-07-07, WILL Illinois Public Media, American Archive of Public Broadcasting.

⁴Robert Shogan. *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2006), 140. While the coal industry hit a boom during the war, the highest average income of skilled miners in West Virginia was only \$1,060 annually. These, even for the period, extremely low wages were a motivating factor for union resistance to the coal industry, but also an indication of the lack of success the UMWA had in West Virginia when compared to other states.

easily hireable labor during the war, coal miners were able to negotiate better wages and more rights that led to expansive growth in union power.

As industrial unions rose in power, one in particular gained national influence, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA)⁵. While the UMWA had mining operations across several states, they made minimal inroads into West Virginia as coal corporations in the state managed to maintain control of their operations during World War I⁶. After the war, as the number of people in the job market increased once more along with a reduction in the demand for coal, union expansion was somewhat diminished⁷. The UMWA was still by far one of the strongest unions in the country, but their growth, especially in West Virginia, stagnated as the nation’s reliance on unions lessened. This left West Virginia a divided state, where counties were either strongly sympathetic to union operations or strongly opposed. This divide between union workers and sympathizers against the holdout

corporate mining operations and their allies laid the foundation for the West Virginia Mine Wars.

While other clashes over mine labor preceded the Battle of Blair Mountain,⁸ the most important event happened in the neighboring county, Mingo, in the coal mining town of Matewan⁹. On May 19th, 1920, a group of men from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, operating on behalf of West Virginian coal operators, arrived in Matewan¹⁰ to serve eviction notices to residents living at Stone Mountain’s coal camp.¹¹ The detectives’ second objective, and reason for coming to Matewan, was to break up efforts at unionizing the coal fields. The detectives were fully prepared to carry out both these tasks as they served the benefits of their contractors, non-union coal companies operating in the southern West Virginia coal fields. Matewan’s Chief of Police, Sid Hatfield, along with Matewan’s Mayor, Cabell Testerman, both union sympathizers and supporters of the UMWA,¹² confronted the detectives and opposed the legality of

the evictions they were dispensing. This disagreement led to a shootout, in which the identity of the aggressor is up for debate, between the Baldwin-Felts detectives and Matewan locals including Hatfield, coal miners, and members of the UMWA. The conflict left seven detectives and three locals dead, including Albert and Lee Felts and Mayor Cabell Testerman.

The Matewan shootout could have easily been a stand-alone conflict in the history of the West Virginia Mine Wars, but due to the direct results of the conflict, it sparked even larger events.¹³ Several members of the UMWA local leadership were arrested and held in jail in Mingo County with charges relating to the shootout. Sid Hatfield also had charges brought up against him, which some sources claim were unfounded and had only been drawn up as an excuse to get Hatfield out in the open. While Hatfield’s participation in the Matewan shootout is undeniable, and charges against him could reasonably be considered at the very least, suspicions as to the dubious nature of the charges against Hatfield could be seen as valid considering the following events. Upon arriving for his court hearing, Hatfield was murdered on the courthouse steps by members of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. A coverup to give the appearance of a shootout between Hatfield and the detectives was staged but was unsuccessful in fooling the UMWA, who were outraged at these actions.

With two of their allies, Testerman and Hatfield, both dead along with their leadership imprisoned, not to mention years of previous tension and hostility with coal operators, the UMWA began planning retaliatory

action. Within a year of the Matewan shootout’s explosive conclusion, and mere months since the imprisonment of UMWA leaders and the murder of Hatfield, UMWA miners were called upon by their leadership to arm themselves, mobilize across the southern West Virginia coal fields, and began to march on Mingo County. Their goal was to free their fellow UMWA members who were imprisoned there and take revenge on those who fought against their efforts to unionize the southern West Virginia coal fields. Beyond the coal industry, itself, the UMWA sought revenge on local West Virginia government officials, especially law enforcement and judges who were either in the pocket of coal operators or assumed to be. These were the types of people UMWA believed to have been responsible in orchestrating Hatfield’s murder as well as being the men in charge of detaining their fellow union members. To reach Mingo, the UMWA workers needed to cross through neighboring Logan County. Knowing this and selecting the most strategic point of defense, Logan County police, local residents, and mercenary vigilante forces, some in the employ of the coal corporations, bunkered down in the town of Blair at the base of Blair Mountain and armed themselves. The UMWA marchers, who were also armed, upon arriving in Blair, quickly realized they would need to fight their way over the mountain to reach Mingo, and thus, the stage for the Battle of Blair Mountain was set.

Accounts of the Battle of Blair Mountain provide drastically different narratives of the events due to a combination of bias and perspective skewing

⁵ Ibid, 2. The Union Mine Workers of America were the most powerful union in the nation coming into the 1920s.

⁶ Ibid, 271. Post WWI, the coal industry, as a whole, experienced decline, but non-union operators were able to capitalize on this transition with more success than the UMWA.

⁷ *Bituminous Operators' Special Committee to the United States Coal Commission*, “The United Mine Workers in West Virginia.” [S.l. : s.n., 1923], 3. The UMWA failed to attain exclusive rights to mining operations in West Virginia in 1919, which was a major loss for the union and an escalation factor in hostilities between union and non-union coal operators in the state.

⁸ William C. Blizzard *When Miners March*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 358. In addition to the Matewan shootout, the incident at Lick Creek was a contributing motivation to the Battle of Blair Mountain, especially due to the fact that it prompted the implementation of martial law in the environment of its occurrence.

⁹ Robert Shogan. *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006), 3. Matewan, being in the direct center of the richest coal fields in West Virginia, became a focal point for the greater West Virginia Coal Wars due to massive commercial value.

¹⁰ Ibid, 1. The Baldwin-Felts Detectives, seven in total, were all armed and “had all been tried and relied on” according to Tom Felts, brother to Albert Felts. Blizzard contests the number of detectives present, citing their numbers as “more than a dozen.” (Blizzard 131).

¹¹ William C. Blizzard *When Miners March*. (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 125. Six families in total were evicted under the authority of Circuit Judge James Damron, who acted as an attorney for the coal operators in later case against the UMWA.

¹² Ibid, 130. While Mingo County as a whole was primarily controlled by non-union coal operators, Matewan, itself, was known to be very sympathetic to the union cause, making it a focal point of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency’s union-busting campaign on behalf of the coal operators.

¹³ Robert Shogan. *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2006), 121. May 19th, 1921. Morgan County declared martial law a year to the day after the Matewan shootout, which further escalated tensions between coal operators and miners only a few short months before the Battle of Blair Mountain broke out.

the facts. While no account is without its issues, the three majority perspectives to be taken into consideration are the UMWA, coal operators, and Blair locals. A fourth, extremely important perspective is that of the United States military as they were the largest deciding factor of the outcome of the battle, but unfortunately, documentation of the battle from a military perspective is not as readily available and as such cannot be discussed for the purposes of this research, although it will be referenced in context of other sources. Before detailing the events of the battle, itself, it is worth mentioning context behind each of the three factions' sources.

The UMWA's account of the Battle of Blair Mountain is best detailed in William Blizzard's book, *When Miners March*, which contains his narrative of the battle and its aftermath. What makes Blizzard's account so valuable is the role he played during the battle as he was both one of the leaders of the march itself, as well as the UMWA's military commander during the battle, and, after the fact, stepped forward to take primary responsibility for the UMWA's actions during the subsequent trials. Unsurprisingly, Blizzard's book is heavily biased in favor of the UMWA, but his account is no less valuable for it contextualizes why the union decided upon armed resistance in the first place.

Contrasting Blizzard's account is the *Bituminous Operators' Special Committee to the United States Coal Commission*, "*The United Mine Workers in West Virginia*," which was a report written two years after the battle that both details some of its events as well as makes a case for more aggressive legal action to be carried out against unions, in particular, the UMWA,

for their part in the armed uprising. Unlike Blizzard's book, which reads as a more chronological history of the UMWA in West Virginia, the coal commission report touches on a wide range of labor conflict across the country, and while it focuses primarily on the UMWA and was penned in response to the Battle of Blair Mountain, it is not strictly an account of the battle itself. A clear goal of the report is to paint the actions of the UMWA as dangerous and in direct opposition to American laws and values. The most obvious, and all together inaccurate means of conveying this message, is the claims in the report that the UMWA were communist. No direct evidence to support this claim was presented outside of the fact that the UMWA sought better wages and working conditions for miners, and some of their membership expressed radical views, although those same beliefs were not necessarily held union wide. Framing the UMWA as a communist union was done with the intention of painting the union as anti-government, a commonly held stereotype about communism at the time. In this regard, the claim could not be more inaccurate as the UMWA was a fiercely patriotic union with a large veteran membership and a history of complying with and supporting federal legislation and action. Communism absolutely had a significant role to play within the greater picture of the American labor movement, but this stereotypical assertion that all communists were anti-government absolutely does not hold true, especially in context of the UMWA specifically, and to categorize the union under the umbrella of communism, in this context, is inaccurate and intentionally manipulative. The claims of communism brought up in the coal commission report were intended both as rationalization for the

coal industry's actions during the Battle of Blair Mountain and as a means of discrediting the UMWA's calls for fairer wages for miners. The strategy here was to paint the UMWA as an anti-government organization by leaning into the stereotype at the time that all communists actively sought the destruction of government. This inaccurate assertion about the nature of communism and its relationship with government was far from accurate, but an easily exploitable avenue of justification at the time. While, once again, the report is heavily biased in favor of coal mining operations and denounces the UMWA, it has the additional advantage of contextualizing the Battle of Blair Mountain in relation to nationwide labor struggles.

The last, and possibly most important perspective is that of Blair locals. The residents of Blair, based on first-hand accounts, were somewhat divided in their loyalties when it came to the actual battle itself, but for the most part, they either actively or passively were against any disruption to the coal industry, which could produce serious consequences to the local economy. Blair residents' loyalty to the coal operators was therefore either grudgingly performed out of self-preservation, or, in the case of local law enforcement, tied directly to monetary benefit. The organization of Blair's defenses against the UMWA was spearheaded by Sheriff Don Chafin, a divisive figure feared by everyone involved in the conflict, and most of the Blair residents' first-hand accounts center their narratives around his actions more than anyone else's¹⁴. This

research does not focus on a single narrative from Blair residents, but rather a compiled account put together by the Logan County West Virginia Genealogical Society and the *Matewan Oral History Project*¹⁵ in the form of a series of interviews with residents who lived through the battle. Therefore, accounts from Blair residents are woven from multiple narratives as opposed to a singularly compiled source like Blizzard's book or the coal commission report. Incorporating a local perspective on the battle is extremely important because it may be the least biased account out of any that appears, but the greatest shortcoming is their lack of comprehensiveness, necessitating a more cobbled together approach at constructing their narrative as opposed to the very clear and straightforward accounts by Blizzard and the coal commission report.

The events that collectively can be referred to as the Battle of Blair Mountain truly began on August 25, 1921, when the first exchanges of gunfire occurred between UMWA miners and Chafin's deputies. While the UMWA was still mobilizing towards Blair, most of their numbers, estimated anywhere between ten and fifteen thousand strong, were not yet present, giving Chafin's forces, roughly two thousand troops, a rare instance of superior numbers. Whereas the UMWA vastly outnumbered the Blair deputies throughout the majority of the conflict, Chafin was backed by the Logan County Coal Operators Association, representing anti-union mining operations in the area, who essentially provided Chafin with a heavily armed,

¹⁴ Rebecca Bailey. Interview with Gladys Hood. *Matewan Oral History Project*. (Matewan Development Center, Matewan, 1990.) Gladys' recollection of Sheriff Chafin stressed his anti-union sentiments and the fear he inspired throughout Logan County.

¹⁵ Rebecca Bailey. Interview with Gladys Hood. *Matewan Oral History Project*. (Matewan Development Center, Matewan, 1990.) Gladys Hood, resident of Matewan, lived through the West Virginia Mine Wars.

private army. By comparison, the UMWA, while armed as well, were poorly equipped and nowhere near as collectively organized as Chafin’s better prepared forces were. These critical factors heavily played into the outcomes of the majority of skirmishes that made up the collective battle.

The initial conflict on August 25th was a decisive victory on Chafin’s part as the small UMWA forces were repelled from Blair. Following this exchange, President Warren Harding’s threat of deploying federal troops and even bombing union forces prompted the UMWA to disband their efforts and begin to return home¹⁶. Harding’s threat, driven primarily by his anti-union sentiments tied to his view that unionization was synonymous with communism, may have, at the time, been toothless as military intervention would have been viewed by the American public as too extreme of a response. Regardless of the seriousness of the president’s threat, it was successful in diffusing the situation and may have been the end of the conflict. However, rumor of Chafin shooting union sympathizers near Blair following the president’s threat reinvigorated the UMWA’s anger towards the sheriff. Word was spread quickly, and UMWA miners returning home from Blair made an about face and rushed back to the mountain to regroup. By Blizzard’s account, this was Chafin’s attempt to provoke the UMWA and instigate a full-scale battle with federal backing on his side.

Ironically, the idea of utilizing federal support

was shared by the UMWA, as many in their leadership hoped a demonstration of force would indicate the severity of their fight against non-union coal operations and bring the issue to a national level. This was a driving force behind why the UMWA decided to stand down when President Harding threatened to intervene with the army, as taking on the federal government went against the miners’ interests. While non-union coal operators and their allies, especially in the coal commission report, painted the UMWA as communists, the UMWA was in no way opposing the federal government and always remained democratic in nature. A second reason why army involvement deterred the UMWA from continuing their attack was the fact that many of the miners were veterans of WWI and had no interest in fighting against a military they had previously served. Shogan notes in an interview that the UMWA sentiment towards clashing with the army could be summed up in one simple phrase, “we won’t go to war with Uncle Sam”¹⁷.

Despite the previous threat of federal involvement, the UMWA did return to Blair, and on August 29th, the battle resumed in earnest. Chafin’s forces maintained defensive positions, taking advantage of the high ground the mountain provided, and were able to stop the miners’ advance a second time. Once again, this was accomplished by means of heavier firepower at Chafin’s disposal. Employing the use of private planes, Chafin’s troops hit the UMWA forces with a series of airstrikes, using military-grade gas and

explosive bombs presumed to be surplus from WWI¹⁸. The army, under orders from General Billy Mitchell, often considered the father of the American Air Force, deployed Martin bombers as well as contributing further to Chafin’s air support, but these planes were utilized strictly for surveillance, as it would still be several days before the federal government would take an active role in the battle’s resolution¹⁹.

This bombing campaign is a matter of great confusion, both for those involved in the battle and their subsequent accounts. Some assumed the bombs were dropped by the U.S. Army, having seen U.S. Army planes making flyovers during the battle. Mentions of army munitions being used in the bombing suggest U.S. military backing without direct involvement in the attack. The reality, as best understood by a consideration of all available sources, is that the bombs were homemade explosives created by Chafin’s forces and deployed by local pilots operating private planes. The U.S. Army’s Martin bombers, while armed, did not take any part in the bombing campaign and were present for reconnaissance purposes only, as Federal troops were not instructed to take aggressive action against the UMWA forces until days later on September 2nd²⁰.

Despite Chafin’s vastly superior arms, the UMWA continued fighting, and on August 30th, West Virginia National Guard Colonel William Eubanks was brought in to take charge of combined law enforcement and vigilante forces fighting the UMWA²¹. The swell in numbers to the anti-union forces did not deter the UMWA, however, and the miners continued their attack, almost managing to reach Logan during one assault, only a short distance from their goal of Mingo County.

Skirmishes continued until September 2nd, when federal troops were officially deployed to combat the UMWA, which prompted Bill Blizzard to call a withdrawal of his forces. The miners disbanded and began returning home, many of them stowing their weapons away in the secret caches in the woods in an attempt to avoid detection. Casualty counts differ from source to source, but anywhere between ten and thirty members of Chafin’s forces were killed along with another fifty to a hundred UMWA miners. Charges of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, and treason against the state of West Virginia were brought up against a total of nine hundred and eighty-five miners including Blizzard himself, who, once again, assumed a leadership role for the UMWA²².

¹⁶ Robert Shogan. *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising*. (New York City: Basic Books, 2006), 271. President Harding: “It looks to me as though we are coming to a crisis in the conflict between the radical labor leaders and the capitalistic system under which we developed our Republic.”

¹⁷ *Focus*, Shogan describing the UMWA’s refusal to fight against federal forces deployed to Blair Mountain at the end of the engagement.

¹⁸ William C. Blizzard *When Miners March*. (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 303. W.F. Denim and Earl Halloran, two of the three pilots hired by the coal operators, maintain they used their planes for “observation” only, while R.S. Haynes, the third pilot, admits to the pilots using explosive and gas bombs on the miners.

¹⁹ Ibid, 311. Blizzard attests that Mitchell was present in the hopes of finding an excuse to test out the effectiveness of new planes in a military setting.

²⁰ William C. Blizzard *When Miners March*. (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 313. One of the pilots operating in this mission stated that before returning to base, the crew jettisoned their bombs in the James River, presumably in an effort to disguise the fact they had been armed in the first place. The only active participants in the bombing campaign were the planes under Chafin’s command, although this would not be made clear to many on the ground during the battle until after its conclusion.

²¹ William C. Blizzard *When Miners March*. (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 303. Eubanks estimated that over the course of the battle, his forces fired anywhere between 500,000 and 600,000 rounds of ammunition, and that the miners “wasted as much as we did.”

²² Ibid, 342. Having been positioned as the leader of the UMWA forces during the Battle of Blair Mountain, Blizzard had to be the center point of the coal operators’ prosecution of the union. However, unless Blizzard was found responsible for the actions of all the miners at the battle, the case against him personally was not strong, which led to his eventual equal.

Some UMWA members were imprisoned for years, but the last to be paroled were released in 1925²³. During Blizzard’s trial, unexploded bombs dropped by Chafin’s forces that were recovered by the miners and were used as evidence in defense of the UMWA²⁴, painting Chafin, and, by extension, the coal industry as brutally violent and tyrannical²⁵. In April of 1922, at Jefferson County Circuit Courthouse, after having been held at the same jail²⁶ where John Brown had been tried for his role in the battle at Harper’s Ferry years before²⁷, all charges against Bill Blizzard were dropped, and he was released from the state’s custody²⁸. Blizzard’s release was met with mixed responses from the gathered crowd, with some lauding him a hero of workers’ rights, while others felt justice had not been served. Perhaps the most sobering comments from the court’s proceedings that day came from Colonel C. W. Osenton, principal counsel for the state in Blizzard’s

case. Osenton, referring to the first skirmish that began the Battle of Blair Mountain, stated:

But your men did not give John Gore, [Logan County Sheriff’s Deputy], Munsey or Cafalgo, [both Blair locals working as part of Chafin’s militia], a chance, when Munsey, dying with a bullet through his neck, pleaded for mercy, your men put a high-powered rifle to his head and pulled the trigger on the ammunition you probably gave him the night before, Bill. His head bounded eight inches off the ground, and then he died. I ask you, jurymen, to show Bill more mercy than his army did those men or the women and children of Logan valley.”²⁹

Osenton’s comment here, in many ways, can summarize the entire experience of Blizzard’s trial. Blizzard himself was not present at this skirmish and had no direct connection whatsoever to the deaths of

the aforementioned men, but as Blizzard had assumed responsibility for the actions of the UMWA during the events of the Battle of Blair Mountain, he would have to bear the responsibility, due to the fact that Gore, Cofago and Munsey were killed by UMWA forces. Since Blizzard was not involved directly or indirectly with the event itself, he could not be found guilty of their murder. Much of Blizzard’s trial proceeded in a similar fashion, where the state was unable to link Blizzard directly with the most serious crimes they attached to the UMWA’s actions.

Blizzard’s release and the resilience of union sympathy in West Virginia would perhaps be the most resounding success for the UMWA with regard to the outcome of the Battle of Blair Mountain, for while they lost the conflict itself, their goal of presenting the coal industry on a national stage as cruel and unjust was largely successful. Despite this fact, the Battle of Blair Mountain was the nail in the coffin for the UMWA as a whole. The fight to unionize the West Virginia coal fields was a resounding loss, which was later followed by Pennsylvania’s and Kentucky’s unions hold on coal mining operations collapsing and leaving Illinois as the only unionized state remaining.

The Battle of Blair Mountain and the West Virginia Mine Wars as a whole left a stain on the reputation of unions, whether affiliated with the conflict or not, as violent communists seeking to overthrow the government. This fallacy was propagated by anti-union coal operators and featured heavily in the coal commission report which, along with newspapers reporting on the event, received national attention. Much in the same way the Haymarket Affair in Chicago created the misconception of anarchists as bomb

throwers, the Battle of Blair Mountain was presented as the inevitable outcome of any union activity. In this sense, the Battle of Blair Mountain can be considered a complete victory, both militarily and politically, for the coal industry, but the impact of the battle did not end there.

While the battle damaged the reputation of unions as a whole for years, it also exposed the plight of mine workers, and the terrible conditions they worked under that motivated them to armed resistance in the first place. As a result, a new wave of the labor movement was established during the 1930s, starting with more progressive labor laws under the New Deal in 1933 and continuing with the founding of even larger and more prominent unions such as the Steel Workers, whose founding incorporated former UMWA members. In this sense, the Battle of Blair Mountain, while a loss for the UMWA in accomplishing their short-term goals, was successful in their larger effort of swaying federal support to their side, albeit long after the conflict itself ended.

While understanding who the victor of the battle was is fairly straightforward, responsibility for its instigation is far more muddled. As is the case in most conflicts, blame changes hands depending on which event in time is considered the instigation point. If the battle is only considered to have begun when the first shots were fired, then the UMWA could be considered responsible, as they made the conscious decision to arm themselves and march on Logan County, with the explicit intention of carrying out a jailbreak and vigilante justice. Stepping back further, the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency could be considered the instigators when they murdered Sid Hatfield, which

²³ *Bituminous Operators’ Special Committee to the United States Coal Commission*, “The United Mine Workers in West Virginia.” [S.I. : s.n., 1923], 67. Lists the acquittals of several prominent members of the UMWA including Blizzard, J. E. Willburn, and Walter Allen.

²⁴ William C. Blizzard *When Miners March*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 341. The state’s forces openly admitted to dropping bombs on the miners when the recovered homemade explosive was displayed as evidence in Blizzard’s trial.

²⁵ State of West Virginia v. William Blizzard, Indictment No. 4, Special Plea No. 2

²⁶ *Bituminous Operators’ Special Committee to the United States Coal Commission*, “The United Mine Workers in West Virginia.” [S.I. : s.n., 1923], 66. Charles Town, WV.

²⁷ Karen Whitman. “Re-evaluating John Brown’s Raid at Harpers Ferry” *West Virginia Archives and History* Vol 34, number 1. Charleston: 1972, 46. On October 16th, 1859, John Brown, led an attack on the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia with the intention of supplying slaves with weapons and staging a revolt against slave owners in West Virginia. John Brown has been lauded and vilified for his actions throughout history as he is depicted as either a champion of liberty, an enemy of the state, or a roadblock for the Abolitionist movement and peaceful negotiations between the North and South over the issue of slavery.

²⁸ State of West Virginia v. William Blizzard, Indictment No. 4, Special Plea No. 2

²⁹ “‘Disgrace to State,’ Some Yell, But Great Mass Cheer Verdict. Never Had Intention to Commit Treason, Blizzard Says.” *Charleston Gazette*, May 28th, 1922. The event Osenton is referring to was part of the initial skirmish that snowballed into the Battle of Blair Mountain in which John Gore, a Logan County sheriff’s deputy, along with John Cofago and Jim Munsey, two local miners who sided with Chafin’s forces, were discovered by UMWA forces, after having fired upon the UMWA camp at night. Upon being discovered, Gore called for a standoff and Reverend John Wilburn, a Blair Baptist preacher and leader of the UMWA forces, advanced forward to meet with Gore. A shootout erupted, believed to be initiated by either Cofago or Munsey, which left Gore and Cofago dead along with Eli Kemp, one of the UMWA miners. Munsey, badly wounded and pleading for mercy, was shot through the head where he lay by Henry Kitchin, a UMWA miner. One of the miners described Munsey’s body as looking “like water out of a hose where you turn it on and the pressure is light.”

prompted the UMWA to march in the first place. Sheriff Chafin could be considered the escalator when he allegedly shot union sympathizers and provoked a reignition of the conflict after the UMWA had already stood down. Bill Blizzard could be considered responsible for his organization and command of the UMWA's armed forces and encouragement to return to Blair after the UMWA had initially disbanded their forces. President Harding and the federal government, including the U.S. Army and National Guard, could also be considered culpable for the Battle of Blair Mountain, both for their lack of involvement in resolving the conflict between the UMWA and coal industry before it turned violent, as well as their incitement of violence against the UMWA, especially the suggestion of bombing the union, which doubtless inspired and encouraged Chafin's own bombing campaign. As such, responsibility for the Battle of Blair Mountain, and the loss of lives on both sides of the engagement, cannot fall solely on a single person's or organization's shoulders and is instead shared by all who were involved.

When considering the issue of responsibility for the Battle of Blair Mountain, reflect once more on Colonel Osenton's remarks about Bill Blizzard during his trial, "show Bill more mercy than his army did those men or the women and children of Logan valley."³⁰ Osenton had no sympathy towards Blizzard's cause and clearly believed that Blizzard and the UMWA bore the responsibility of instigating the battle, but, despite that fact, still felt that Blizzard did not deserve the same fate as those killed by his forces.

This could point to Osenton's capacity for mercy, but more likely indicates the extremely complex issue of ascribing blame to an event with a history as complex as the Battle of Blair Mountain. Certain individuals played instrumental roles in both the escalation and perpetuation of the conflict as well as its aftermath, but this does not change the fact that the Battle of Blair Mountain was the product of numerous individual and collective decisions carried out by a wide range of parties, each with their own interests and motivations. This created a tangled web of a conflict that its origin points is a matter of perspective and opinion rather than concrete fact.

Since its conclusion in 1921, the Battle of Blair Mountain, while a national story at the time, has been relegated to the fringes of labor history. Both Blair Mountain, where the battle was fought, and the Charles Town courthouse, where Blizzard along with many other miners were tried, are both at risk of being destroyed. The courthouse's status on the National Historic Register is up for debate, and Blair Mountain, a formerly protected site, is slowly being demolished as part of new coal mining operations. Blair and Logan County have both vanished, being transformed into union-incorporated territory and absorbed into other communities, along with dozens of other towns and counties in West Virginia that have experienced massive economic decline over the past hundred years. Tragically, erasure of the history of the Battle of Blair Mountain is being spurred on by the locations and communities involved in the event. This summer marks the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Blair

Mountain, and its passing should serve as a reminder that continued study, discussion, and awareness of the West Virginia Mine Wars, the most critical conflict in U.S. labor history, are needed now more than ever to help preserve these historical sites before they are relegated entirely to the past. The inspiration and goal of this piece was to call new audiences' attention to this fascinating chapter in American history and ideally inspire further research of the study, so that its legacy and history can continue to be explored and shared with future generations of scholars and students of history.

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About the Author

Aiden S. Duffy is pursuing his Master of Arts in History at Worcester State University. He completed this article in the spring 2020 under the mentorship of Dr. Tona Hangen. He plans to pursue his Ph.D. in medieval studies following completion of his master's thesis.

³⁰ "'Disgrace to State,' Some Yell, But Great Mass Cheer Verdict. Never Had Intention to Commit Treason, Blizzard Says." *Charleston Gazette*, May 28th, 1922.