

# Introduction

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*John Williams*

THE WEST VIRGINIA mine wars—and particularly their climactic episode, the miners' march on Logan in August and September 1921—make for a rousing good story, and no one has told it as well or as fully as Lon Savage does in *Thunder in the Mountains*. Drawing on his years of experience as a professional journalist, Savage has written a masterful narrative, full of apt description and colorful characterizations, yet based solidly on the historical record.

History is more than a story, however. Historians ask why as well as how events happened. Approached from this angle, the mine wars and the march on Logan appear as episodes in larger narratives. They were episodes in American labor and business history and in the social and cultural history of Appalachia and of West Virginia, the Appalachian region's prototypical state.

An essential first step toward understanding these episodes is to understand the place of the West Virginia coal industry in that American economy and in the nation's labor relations during the first decades of the twentieth century. American industry ran on coal in 1921. So did the nation's railroads and streetcars (the latter through coal-fired, steam-generated electrical power). Most homes and businesses were heated by coal. It was therefore always puzzling to observers that this essential commodity did not confer wealth and stability on the people and communities that drew their livelihood from coal. Far from it. Coal communities were impoverished and disorderly, and coal

companies competed in a market which seemed to spiral endlessly between boom and bust. In this age of emergent Big Business, there was no U.S. coal corporation of comparable scope to giants like Standard Oil, U.S. Steel, or General Motors. The four largest coal companies in the country controlled less than six percent of the market in 1920. West Virginia's four largest coal companies accounted for less than fourteen percent of the Mountain State's production.<sup>1</sup>

A simple fact accounted for the paradox of coal. It was an essential commodity, but it was also plentiful in the United States. The richest markets for coal were the Northeast and Midwest, in the growing industrial cities of the Atlantic seaboard and the Great Lakes. The "river trade" of coal barged to Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other Mississippi Valley cities provided a third market, although a much smaller one than the "seaboard" and "lake" trades. West Virginia industries consumed only a small proportion of the state's output, but many of the coal-consuming states—Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—also had mines of their own. In fact, of the major coal-consuming regions, only New England lacked local mines. And even New England could have imported coal more cheaply from Canadian mines in neighboring Nova Scotia were it not for tariff barriers that West Virginia politicians had worked hard to erect and maintain.<sup>2</sup>

Some southern West Virginia mines produced coal of superior steam-raising qualities, and so succeeded in capturing what today we would call a "niche" market, like the bunker coal market for large seagoing vessels. (The proximity of West Virginia coal was one of the factors that made Norfolk the country's greatest naval base during this era.)<sup>3</sup> But generally—except in boom times—West Virginia coal competed at a disadvantage in all three of the major coal trades, owing to the fact that the state's mines were more distant than competing mines from the biggest markets on the seaboard, lakes, and rivers. This meant that the transportation costs of West Virginia producers were higher. Since the only other significant factor in the wholesale price of coal was the cost of mining it, this geographic pattern led to consistent downward pressure on the wages of West Virginia miners. Only if their wage bill were smaller could West Virginia's coal producers gain and keep a share of the national coal mar-

ket proportionate to the state's share of the nation's bituminous coal reserves.

Another factor that shaped the outlook of West Virginia coal producers was their dependence on the railroads. Prior to the canalization of the Ohio and Kanawha rivers, most West Virginia coal traveled all or part of the way to market over the rails. There was no rail competition at the mine mouth, and even those producers who had managed to take advantage of railroad competition once their coal cars reached places where competing lines crossed found their options limited after 1900 as northeastern and midwestern railroads consolidated into a few large corporations and the price of transportation came increasingly to be administered by federal regulators. Moreover, all but the largest producers were dependent upon the railroads for coal cars or gondolas. Nothing reduced producers and miners to feelings of angry frustration more than to have a mine shut down during the height of the fall stockpiling season because of a shortage of "gons."<sup>4</sup>

It is also important to note that the demand for coal was inelastic relative both to prices and the national economy. Lowering the price of coal did not increase demand during periods of sluggish national economic growth, and after 1910 coal began to lose ground in the national energy market to fuel oil, hydroelectric power, and natural gas. Only during periods of extraordinary economic boom did coal producers and workers enjoy the prosperity which had once seemed guaranteed to them. The era of World War I was one such period, but by 1921 the coal boom associated with the war was over. During the next two years, the number of days that the average miner could count on working each year fell to 142 days, compared with a 1918 peak of 249. During the next fifty years, total national demand for bituminous coal rose only one percent, compared with 662 percent for crude petroleum and 2,589 percent for natural gas.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the violence in West Virginia was symptomatic both of a sharp short-run downturn in the coal industry and the onset of long-term stagnation.

The outlook of union men was shaped by many of the same geographic and economic factors that influenced coal producers. The United Mine Workers of America had originated in the

Midwest in 1890, and the union's headquarters remained in Indianapolis until it moved to Washington in 1933. Wage contracts negotiated in the Central Competitive Field, consisting of the mining districts of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and western Pennsylvania, were the yardstick against which coal prices and wages of other regions were measured. The union's leaders were from Pennsylvania or the Midwest, and union contracts signed with Central Field coal producers pledged the union to organizing drives in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky so as to prevent low-priced coal from these states from undercutting the price of union-mined coal from the Central Field. Beginning in the mid-1890s, the UMWA mounted a sustained effort which fitfully but steadily pushed the frontier of union organization southward through West Virginia. Frequently this drive was accompanied by violence, notably in the Cabin Creek–Paint Creek Mine War in the Kanawha coal field east of Charleston in 1912–13. Patriotic fervor and government edict called a halt to further organizing during World War I, but the war also brought high wages and plenty of work. In the immediate postwar era, union leaders were determined to hold the line on wages and to push the boundary between union and nonunion mines further south, through the Logan, Mingo, and Pocahontas coalfields along West Virginia's southern border. Coal producers in these districts were equally determined to resist.<sup>6</sup>

It is easy to see now that neither union organizers nor coal producers were realistic in their postwar aims. The conditions spawned by World War I had indeed been extraordinary. Without the war, coal production might have entered into a prolonged but perhaps more peaceful period of stagnation owing to the inroads of competing fuels in the energy markets. Instead, the war induced a feverish export boom. With French, Belgian, and German coal mines in or near the path of the contending armies, European wartime demand for coal soared past the level of the remaining European mines and manpower to produce it. American exports soared and for once—thanks to the recently expanded coal handling ports of Norfolk and Newport News—the mines of southern West Virginia faced no geographic handicap in grabbing their share. U.S. bituminous coal production peaked at 579 million tons in 1918, of which some ninety million tons came

from West Virginia.<sup>7</sup> Postwar dislocation in Europe sustained the boom for a few years after the war, but by 1921 the export boom was over and the domestic market was unable to absorb the excess productive capacity that the war had called into being. By 1923, the U.S. market for coal was down to less than half of what the nation was capable of producing. Prices fell accordingly and this increased the pressure on wages. West Virginia's characteristic position in the domestic coal market guaranteed that the effects of this change would be felt early and sharply in the Mountain State, particularly in southern West Virginia in precisely those counties along the union/nonunion frontier.

There was a nationwide recession—as we would now call it—in 1920 and 1921, and there were strikes in many other industries as workers and union leaders tried to hold on to the gains they had made during the war.<sup>8</sup> The West Virginia coal fields were therefore not exceptional in this regard. What was exceptional was the ferocity of the struggle and the character of the violence that ensued. Neutral and partisan observers alike compared the violence in West Virginia to civil war. The comparison was perhaps inevitable, but misleading.

The state of West Virginia was of course the product of civil war, and the stamp of irregular warfare and social violence is deep on its history and legend. Fifty years before the mine wars broke out, the coal fields of southern West Virginia had formed part of a rugged and thinly populated “interior” (as it was known to the residents of Ohio Valley towns). The interior had been a no-man's-land for the regular armies and a theater of guerrilla combat during the Civil War. A generation later, many of the same districts witnessed a determined and occasionally violent federal crusade against moonshining, as well as the celebrated outbreak of private warfare known as the Hatfield-McCoy feud.<sup>9</sup> Observers have tried to explain this pattern of violence in a number of ways, notably as some sort of outgrowth of regional character.<sup>10</sup> The presence of members of extended families such as the Hatfields in each of the episodes lends credence to such explanations, but accounting for the continuity does not require explanations grounded in personalities or the supposed psychological traits of mountain people. Notwithstanding the involve-

ment of men such as Sid Hatfield or Don Chafin who bore time-honored local names, most of the participants in the mine wars were new men, and the communities over whose future they struggled were as raw and new as frontier outposts. The continuity of the mine wars with earlier violent episodes of West Virginia history lay not with individuals or character but with issues, particularly the fundamental issue of who would control West Virginia's interior and who would profit from the development of its natural resources.

The coal boom of World War I and the preceding booms which punctuated the opening of the West Virginia interior to industrial development had naturally been accompanied by population booms. Southern West Virginia's population as a whole quadrupled between 1890 and 1920; the growth rate in coal-field counties such as Logan, McDowell, and Mingo was twice as high.<sup>11</sup> It was in fact by just such statistics that the people who flocked into the coal fields to open banks and law offices or to teach school or to sell dry goods or insurances or hardware or dental services measured their hopes and success. Dozens of new towns and hundreds of coal "camps" sprang up in southern West Virginia between 1890 and 1920. Each town had its complement of union men among the railroad workers or carpenters and each had its representatives of old families (among whom it was not uncommon to find a disproportionate share of office holders) who looked askance at the changes taking place around them. But both of these groups were far outnumbered by ambitious and optimistic newcomers, "people who live in two-story houses," as one journalist put it, overlooking the new bottomland towns and creekside coal tipples and miners' shacks. This middle class had supported modest reforms designed to prevent the worst labor abuses and tax evasions during the progressive first decade of the century. But its members reacted with intense hostility to the surge of union militancy after the war and particularly to the socialist rhetoric which sometimes accompanied it. Don Chafin and the other antiunion sheriffs of southern West Virginia had no lack of middle-class volunteers to man their militias. Had the federal government not succeeded in quashing the violence, southern West Virginia would have seen an outbreak of class warfare that was eager and bitter on both sides.<sup>12</sup>

The marching miners were likewise new men. While many of the leaders indicted for treason in the aftermath of the Logan March bore the names of long-settled West Virginia families, the marchers also carried the Irish and Welsh immigrant names which had populated the coalfields for a generation, and there were representatives of the Italian, Greek, and Slavic immigrants who had surged into southern West Virginia after 1900 and of the blacks who had come to the coalfields from the Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont. It was one of the union's great achievements to have forged a degree of unity among a heterogeneous working population thrown together only recently and under adverse circumstances. And though this unity was fragile and sporadic, its memory was fortified by the many tellings and retellings of the events of 1921 and helped to bring into existence the more militant and enduring miners' unity that emerged during the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

The character of the Appalachian coalfield community was another factor in shaping the character of the mine wars. A federal study completed in 1924 showed that eighty percent of West Virginia miners lived in company-owned towns, compared with nine percent in Indiana and Illinois. In southern West Virginia this proportion was even higher. Like the population mix, this pattern was an outgrowth of industrialization in a previously thinly populated country. It had been necessary to provide housing and other services in order to attract workers to newly opened mines, and it was also profitable to do so in most cases. But this meant that mine owners and miners confronted one another not only as employers and workers, but as landlords and tenants and as the purveyors and consumers of goods and services. This compounded the social tensions arising out of economics and labor relations and helps to explain why the worst violence—like the worst housing and the worst working conditions in the industry—seemed always to be found in the Appalachian states.<sup>14</sup>

The events which Lon Savage relates with such verve and skill were thus the product both of local forces and of national and world events. World War I was important not only because of the collapse of the export boom that shaped the goals of both sides in the mine wars, but because of its effect on individual outlooks and actions. Military training taught the rudiments of

military discipline to those who had previously shouldered a gun only for hunting. Savage's account, like the newspaper dispatches at the time, emphasizes the importance of veterans among the miners as well as among the middle-class volunteers. But, unlike the contemporary press, his account places this factor in perspective, pointing out that the miners' military experience was not enough to lend much order to their movements beyond the much-publicized drilling sessions and the operations of handfuls of men. There were no generals among the miners, notwithstanding the authorities' subsequent hunt for conspirators. There were only angry men, determined to do something, but unable—apart from commandeering trains and automobiles and digging trenches along the ridgetops—to figure out quite what to do.

The recent experience of war was a greater advantage to the other side. There were veterans among the state police and local vigilantes, and the war both directly occasioned and indirectly shaped the federal intervention that ended the march. The fact that West Virginia's National Guard had not been reorganized following its wartime federalization accounted for the frantic and eventually successful pleas of Governor Morgan for federal troops. The intervention of federal troops in labor confrontations was not in itself unprecedented, but the attempted use of Army Air Service planes was. Fresh from his triumphant demonstration that bombs could sink battleships, General Billy Mitchell saw in the West Virginia conflict an opportunity to demonstrate the value of air power in civil disturbances. Given the conservative mood in this first decade following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and the aborted worker insurrections which followed in Central and Eastern Europe, Mitchell correctly gauged that this prospect would appeal to his superiors, and so off the bombers went, heading for disaster en route.<sup>15</sup> If it had not been for the comic execution, Mitchell's scheme would have been thrown into a much more sinister light by later events, for in its plan to use air power against civilians, it was nothing less than a foretaste of Guernica, Dresden, and Hiroshima in the West Virginia hills.



# Acknowledgments

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THIS BOOK is the product of research done mostly in the 1970s, prior to its first appearance as a paperback, when I spent years combing through records and talking to persons who knew of, or had access to information about the West Virginia mine war of 1920–21. In 1989, preparing for its publication in this updated and more complete version, I was able to talk to several additional persons, to fill in a few gaps in the previous treatment.

The first person to help me was my late father, Joe Savage, who participated in the mine war (on the governor's side) and who told his children stories of it as we grew up. He actually did some research about the mine war himself and wrote a story of his involvement in it, a story that was not published until after this book made its first appearance and after he had died. A second person who also helped make this book possible, and who also did not live to see it published, was my first wife, Ellen, who gave much encouragement in her final years of life. My current wife, Ginny, has been of inestimable encouragement and assistance in the preparation of this second version.

While updating this book for its current appearance, I was fortunate to meet several persons whom I did not know in the earlier preparation and who helped in filling in a few holes in the narrative. They include Jack Testerman of Naugatuck, West Virginia, who was five years old when his father, Mayor C. C. Testerman, was shot to death in the Battle of Matewan; ten days later his mother married Sid Hatfield, who might be called the

hero of this story. Another is Paul J. Lively of Tucker, Georgia, who, although born after these events took place, made available valuable records and photographs about his father, Charlie Lively, one of the men who killed Sid Hatfield. Both of these gentlemen spoke freely and without rancor of the events that carried so much bitterness for their parents.

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