

# Rednecks Without Race

## The Forgotten History of Cross-Racial Working-Class Solidarity at Blair Mountain, 1921

by Christopher Kessinger; mentored by Dr. Cedric Tolliver

UNIVERSITY of  
**HOUSTON**

### Background

The Battle of Blair Mountain was fought in late August through early September of 1921 in Logan County, West Virginia. As many as 10,000 miners, up to 2,000 of them black, took up arms against the mining companies' private security forces. Called "rednecks" after the red bandanas they wore as a uniform, they showed an almost unprecedented degree of cross-racial solidarity. The battle was one of the largest domestic conflicts in the US since the Civil War, and yet it is little-known today.

### Abbreviated Timeline

- January 20, 1920 - The United Mine Workers of America begins to campaign in the Mingo coalfields. In retaliation, union miners are fired and evicted from their homes. They begin to form tent colonies.
- May 19, 1920 - Battle of Matewan. A shootout between an armed posse led by union-friendly sheriff Sid Hatfield, which included at least one black miner, and agents of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency leaves 10 dead, seven of them detectives. Hatfield and his men arrested for murder.
- March 21, 1921 - Hatfield and all other defendants found not guilty.
- August 1, 1921 - Hatfield publicly assassinated by Baldwin-Felts agents. None were ever convicted.
- August 24, 1921 - Miners begin an armed march, intended to avenge Hatfield.
- August 25, 1921 - March intercepted by anti-union sheriff Don Chafin and his private army. Battle of Blair Mountain begins.
- August 25-September 2, 1921 - Battle rages. Miners begin to surrender when the US Army is deployed.
- Late 1921-1922 - Miners face trial for a variety of crimes, including murder and treason. Most are acquitted; none of those convicted serve more than three years. However, the UMWA presence in the area collapses, and the local fields are de-unionized.

### Methodology

I investigated a variety of writings on the subject of Blair Mountain, both contemporary to the event and more recent, fictional and nonfictional, with the intention of discerning how the battle was discussed and remembered, particularly with regards to race. In doing so, I hoped to discover commonalities between them that might illuminate why this incident goes largely ignored.

### Race and the Battle

Black miners were active participants in all of the events related to the conflict, from the first skirmishes to the last trials. They were willing to fight and die for their white compatriots; the white miners showed a similar willingness to stand with their black comrades-in-arms. One white miner referred to the striking army as "a darn solid mass of different colors and tribes [...] glued together in one body."



Two miners man a machine gun during the battle.  
Source: libcom.org



A trio of miners, two of them black, in Logan county. Photo taken 1918.  
Source: Library of Congress

### Selected References

- Blizzard, William. *When Miners March*. PM Press, 2010.
- *Chronicling America*. The Library of Congress.
- Giardina, Denise. *Storming Heaven*. Random House, 1987.
- Green, James. *The Devil Is Here in These Hills*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015.
- Savage, Lon. *Thunder in the Mountains*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990.
- Trotter, Joe William. *Coal, Class, and Color*. University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- U.S. Congress, Senate. Committee on Education and Labor. *West Virginia Coal Fields: Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor*. 67th Congress. 1921.

### Conclusions

The reality of the situation appears to be mundane: then, as now, Appalachia was regarded as a backwater, and its citizens as unimportant. Though the event received some press coverage as it occurred, the coal operators' statements were accepted largely without question and attention moved elsewhere once the marchers were suppressed. There was no grand conspiracy.