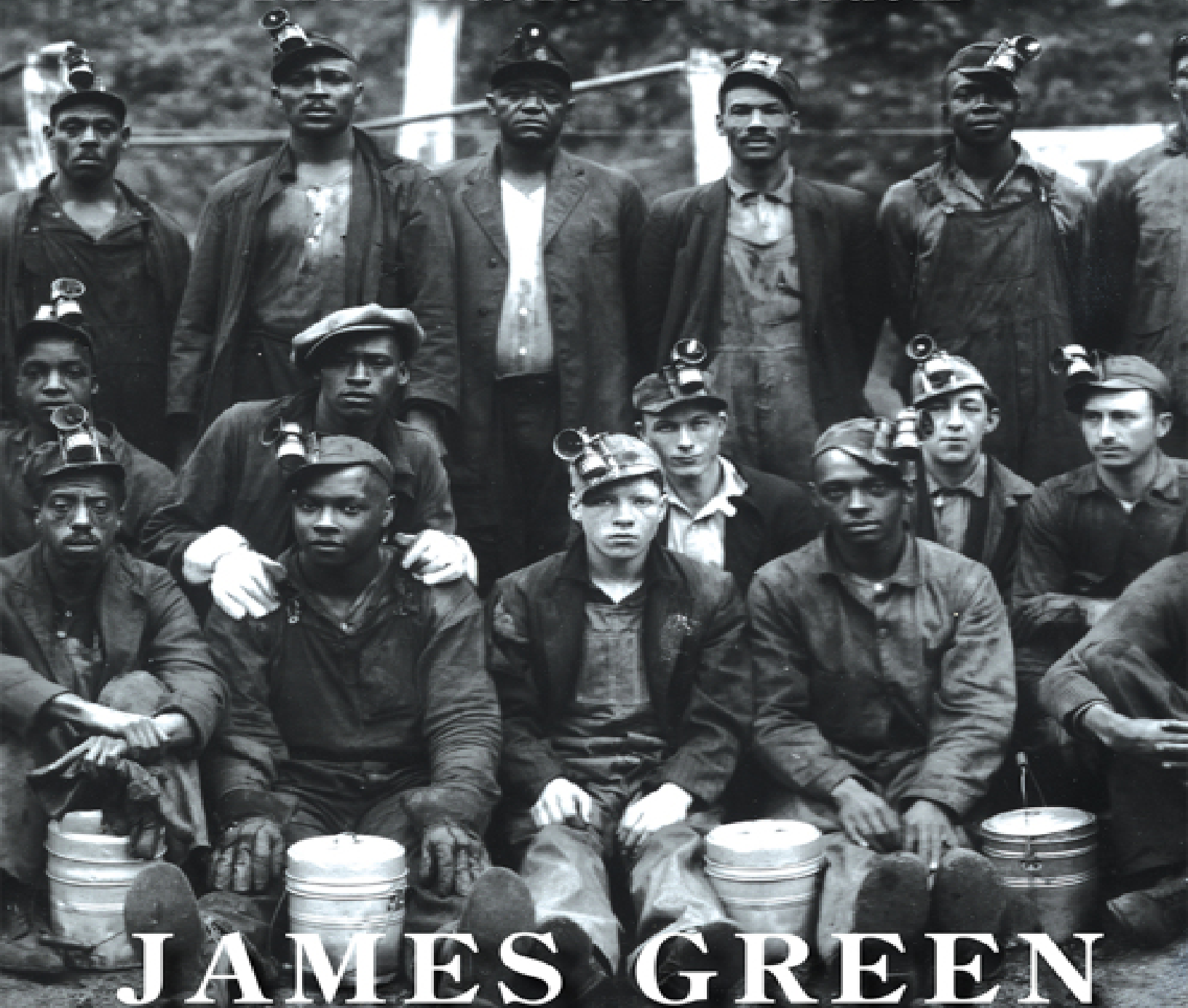


"James Green has resurrected an important, searing piece of our heritage—and just the kind of thing your high school American history teacher didn't teach you."

—ADAM HOCHSCHILD, AUTHOR OF *TO END ALL WARS* AND *KING LEOPOLD'S GHOST*

The Devil Is Here in These Hills

West Virginia's Coal Miners and
Their Battle for Freedom



JAMES GREEN

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Gerald R. Green
1922–2012

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The Devil Is Here in These Hills

Prologue

One autumn morning in 1922, a middle-aged man with wavy hair and horn-rimmed glasses waited in Baltimore's smoky Camden Station for a B&O limited that would take him to Huntington, West Virginia. He looked like an artist or college professor. In fact, James M. Cain had dreamed of being a professional singer like his mother, an operatic soprano, but writing came more easily to him. After editing an army newspaper during the war in France and teaching at a prep school, Cain took a job with the *Baltimore Sun*, covering police court and filing crime stories. But when he boarded the B&O's westbound limited that fall morning, Cain left the city on a different kind of assignment. He was headed over the Allegheny range, bound for the coal country of southern West Virginia. His mission: to search out the truth about what had caused a massive insurrection of armed coal miners the previous summer. In late August 1921, nearly ten thousand workers had marched over fifty miles of rugged terrain to liberate fellow union members who had been jailed under a martial law decree imposed on Mingo County, where a vicious mine war had raged for more than two years.¹

After the reporter passed through Huntington, he switched railroads and headed due south on the Norfolk & Western, along the Tug Fork River, and into the rugged valley where the Hatfields and McCoys feuded after the Civil War and "whole families were exterminated," as Cain put it. This bloody history, and the folklore it produced, shaped outsiders' impressions of the wild Tug River country, even after the region had become heavily industrialized and linked to the national economy. The legend of the feud led Cain, like other writers before him, to portray the Appalachian coal country as "an American heart of darkness."²

In the prose that would later make him famous as writer of hard-boiled murder mysteries and film noir screenplays, Cain described a setting fit for an epic drama.

As you leave the Ohio River at Kenova, and wind down the Norfolk and Western Railroad beside the Big Sandy and Tug rivers, you come into a section where there is being fought the bitterest and most unrelenting war in modern industrial history.

Rough mountains rise all about, beautiful in their bleak ugliness. They are hard and barren, save for a scrubby, whiskery growth of trees that only half conceal the hard rock beneath. Yet they have their moods. On gray days, they lie heavy and sullen, but on sunny mornings they are dizzy with color: flat canvases painted in gaudy hues; here and there tiny soft black pines showing against the cool, blue sky. At night, if the moon shines through a haze, they hang far above you . . . They are gashed everywhere by water courses, roaring rivers, and bubbling creeks. Along these you plod, a crawling midge, while ever the towering mountains shut you in.

Above the railbed, blue-black streaks of coal laced the hills for miles, “jumping across rivers and creeks, now broken by some convulsion an eternity ago, now tilted at crazy angles, but for the most part flat, thick, regular, and rich.” And along every ascending creek Cain saw curving ribbons of steel rails crawling up the mountainsides to mining operations wedged into the hollows. Here was a region where industry had been organized on a “gigantic” scale. “To see it,” he remarked, “is to get the feeling of it: the great iron machinery of coal and oil, the never-ending railroads and strings of black steel cars, groaning and creaking toward destination.” There was a “crude outdoor poetry about it,” but Cain knew that this marvelous achievement had been marred by a bloody industrial struggle that had lasted more than two years.

On his way up the Tug River Valley, Cain passed coal mines, some of them still closed down by “die-hard union strikers,” and he observed “occasional clusters of tents—squalid, wretched places, where swarms of men, women, and children are quartered.” And at nearly every train station, men in military uniforms scrutinized each passenger who alighted; they were state policemen, part of a strong force still on duty there, for the bloodshed in this valley had been so severe that Mingo County remained under martial law. The constables always walked in pairs and constantly looked over their shoulders. Everywhere, the reporter felt an “atmosphere of tension, covert alertness, sinister suspicion,” and he soon realized why.

In this untamed section of West Virginia two tremendous forces have staked out a battle ground. These are the United Mine Workers of America and the most powerful group of nonunion coal-operators in the country. It is a battle to the bitter end; neither side asks quarter, neither side gives it. It is a battle for enormous stakes, on which money is lavished; it is fought through the courts, through the press, with matching of sharp wits to secure public approval.

But more than this, it is actually fought with deadly weapons on both sides; many lives have already been lost; many may yet be forfeited.

Some of the residents who were willing to speak with Cain told him grim tales of what they had witnessed.

[They] will tell you that this struggle has been going on for three years. They will tell you of the bloody day at Matewan, May 19, 1920, when ten men, including the mayor of the town, fell in a pistol battle that lasted less than a minute. They will tell you of guerrilla warfare that went on for months; how Federal troops had to be called in twice. They will tell you of the “three days’ battle,” which resulted, in May, 1921, in the declaration of martial law. Union partisans will tell you of the exercises on May 30 last [Memorial Day], when the graves of a score of union fallen were decorated with all the ceremony accorded soldiers who have died for the flag. The [mine] operators will tell you . . . how their men have been shot down from behind; how witnesses for trials were mysteriously killed before they could testify.

The “atrocities list” was long and the volume of propaganda was so great that Cain thought it “very hard to sift out the truth.”

Frustrated with his inability to explain what had caused this terrible trouble, the reporter from Baltimore chose to entertain his readers with a story he scripted as a three-act play and staged on a frontier set filled with rugged but “lovable” mountaineers who spoke a “quaint language” and fought “strange feuds . . . [for] incomprehensible causes.” Onto this wild mountain stage burst the railroads and mining companies, whose agents grabbed the land and forced the frontiersmen into the mines to make a living, according to the rules made by their “new masters.” Before long, the coal operators “adopted the law of the rifle themselves, hired armed gentry to watch him and police him and curtail his liberties.”

These new boss men were often strangers, flatlanders from strange places up north or back east, men who now told the mountaineer miner “where to go to church and where to send his children to school. They told him what he must take for his labor, how much he must pay for his food, and where he must buy it. Lastly, they told him what organizations he might join, and those that he must not join,” particularly the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

Act I of Cain’s “mine-field melodrama” opened with the appearance of the first UMWA organizers in 1892. These men would return again and again over the next two decades, attempting—always in vain—to win the union pay scale for West Virginia’s poorly paid coal diggers. Each foray,

wrote Cain, “was repulsed with medieval ferocity by the [coal] operators, who could make more money if they didn’t have to pay the union scale.”

The union finally broke through in 1902 with a strike that gained union recognition and contractual rights for more than eight thousand miners in the Kanawha County mines near Charleston. Peace prevailed in that district for ten years until coal operators in the Paint Creek Valley refused to give union members a tiny pay raise that other companies had granted their employees. A routine work stoppage followed, but what happened next was anything but routine. When private mine guards started evicting families from their homes, union miners took to the hills and launched repeated attacks against the men they called “gun thugs.”

A few weeks later, fighting broke out over the ridge in the Cabin Creek Valley, and by midsummer of 1912, union miners and their employers were engaged in what would become one of the longest and deadliest labor conflicts America had ever experienced. The struggle on Paint Creek and Cabin Creek became a prime example of a development President William Howard Taft had bemoaned in an address to Congress: a situation in which the public and its elected officials allowed an industrial dispute to lead “inevitably to a state of industrial war.”³

The conflict in West Virginia seemed warlike because of the huge arsenals assembled by both sides, the number of mercenaries the mine operators employed, the guerrilla tactics the strikers adopted, the four deployments of National Guard troops the governor ordered, and the abiding hatreds the clash created. As a result, the first West Virginia mine war embodied all the evils of class warfare that frightened so many Americans during the Progressive Era.

After a thirteen-month struggle, strikers in the Paint Creek–Cabin Creek district won an unexpected victory by practicing a form of solidarity that united white mountaineers, black miners, and Italian immigrants. The spirit of that strike inspired a poet to write a song that became labor’s national anthem: “Solidarity Forever.” Although the union miners prevailed in the end, their success came at a high cost: twelve strikers and thirteen company men lost their lives in the conflict.

During the first term of Woodrow Wilson’s presidency, the UMWA expanded by leaps and bounds in the Kanawha and New River coalfields southeast of Charleston; it was an exciting time when labor activists hoped that progressives in Washington, DC, would enact reforms to protect

workers' right to organize. That hope became a reality during World War I when the federal government assumed virtual control of the coal industry and ordered the mine owners not to resist union organization. Those federal controls were still in place when the union launched a new offensive in Logan County in September 1919, a drive that was met with fierce resistance by the mine operators and an army of deputy sheriffs.

A few months later, miners began forming union locals in Mingo County, where James Cain would later come to write his feature story. Coal company managers immediately fired new union recruits and employed men from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to evict these workers from their homes. The arrival of these detectives provoked a showdown on May 19, 1920, in the little town of Matewan, where the police chief, Sid Hatfield, and his deputies created a national sensation by gunning down seven Baldwin-Felts agents who had just thrown scores of strikers out of their homes. For the next year, a brutal industrial war raged in what came to be known as "Bloody" Mingo County. The fighting subsided only when federal troops, National Guardsmen, state police officers, and hundreds of vigilantes imposed martial law and "began clapping union men in jail" without charges.

Act II in Cain's drama began with thousands of union miners assembling in a valley near Charleston in August 1921, armed and ready to launch their "grand offensive" on company territory. This huge uprising of citizens, unprecedented in modern American history, culminated in a three-day battle on Blair Mountain in Logan County between an insurgent army of at least eight thousand workers and a force of three thousand deputies, volunteers, and conscripts, which had been mobilized to stop the miners' army from invading company-controlled territory. The military conflict on Blair Mountain shocked the nation and embarrassed West Virginia's elected officials.

The Battle of Blair Mountain ended when President Warren G. Harding reluctantly sent twenty-one hundred army infantrymen into West Virginia to halt the warfare and disarm the insurgents. "It was the best second act that had ever been staged," Cain declared, marred only by the deaths of at least a dozen combatants, mostly young coal miners, including two young men who died wearing the army tunics they brought back from France. But this battle was not the end of the show. There was another act to come, wrote Cain: "the great courtroom scene."

A few days after the miners' army dispersed, a grand jury met in special session and "indicted whole pay rolls," according to Cain. Hundreds of insurgents were charged with high crimes and then tried "in the same room at Charles Town where John Brown had been convicted of treason." Cain's "melodrama of coal" ended with those sensational trials, but the same characters—the miners and the union organizers, the mine operators and the company guards—remained onstage throughout the following decade to act out another kind of drama with a much different third act.

The mining industry's domination over its employees during the 1920s troubled a number of prominent liberals, who began to search for some way of saving the coal miners of Appalachia from what they termed "indentured servitude." During this time, no group of American workers attracted more sympathy from reformers than West Virginia's coal miners, and no group stood to gain more when Congress granted industrial workers the right to organize in June 1933. Within days after the law changed, UMWA activists motored through the Mountain State's company towns, sweeping aside all opposition while they organized nearly every coal miner in West Virginia without a shot being fired in anger.

The West Virginia coal miners' story has never been recounted in full from its origins in 1892, when the first UMWA organizers appeared in the coal camps, to those thrilling days in the first spring of the New Deal, when union forces emerged victorious after forty years of struggle.⁴ *The Devil Is Here in These Hills* is a history of that enduring struggle and of the diverse community of working people who carried it on for so long.

The events described here took place in Appalachia at the height of the American industrial age, a time when the nation's economy depended entirely upon coal and upon the men who went into the depths of the earth to bring it out; a time when the nation's industrial workers engaged in mass actions on an enormous scale; a time when the nation grappled, as never before, with the moral and political consequences of industrial capitalism and the class hatreds it spawned. But this book is more than a litany of strikes and lockouts, evictions and blacklists, gun battles and armed marches—more than another gruesome chapter in the history of American violence. It is, above all, the story of a people's fight to exercise freedom of speech and freedom of association in workplaces where the rights of property owners had reigned supreme.

During the first years of the twentieth century, writers like James M. Cain and a host of influential Americans recognized that a battle of enormous import was taking place in West Virginia's minefields. The nation's largest labor union and some of America's most powerful corporations had invested millions in winning the loyalty of the state's eighty thousand coal miners. Four governors of West Virginia bent the state's constitution to the breaking point in their efforts to suppress mine worker insurgency, and two presidents of the United States sent federal troops to halt the violence on several occasions. The board of the American Civil Liberties Union, along with some of the most influential journalists of the time, made West Virginia union miners a cause célèbre, and several progressive U.S. senators made the state's coal industry the subject of two exhaustive investigations.

Yet for all the significance the West Virginia mine wars held for Americans during the Progressive Era and the early 1920s—and for all the meaning those conflicts still hold for Appalachians—knowledge of this enduring conflict has been all but lost to American memory. This is surprising because of all the lethal industrial clashes in our history, few were as protracted as those that occurred in West Virginia; few took as many lives (at least seventy-nine men died in those wars); and few attracted as much attention in the halls of Congress. Furthermore, no other strike generated an armed insurrection on the scale of the miners' march in 1921, and no other strike provoked a political crisis that so closely resembled a civil war.⁵

Today, outsiders seem to pay attention to the people of West Virginia when a mine explosion attracts television cameras to some little white church building in the hills, where viewers see the worried faces of the miners' friends and family members awaiting news of their loved ones trapped underground. News reports of impoverished conditions and chronic diseases, flooded creeks and toxic rivers, mine disasters and exploding mountaintops, have conditioned many Americans to see the people of coal country as pitiful casualties of modern history, not as a mindful people who made their own history.

Decades of seeing Appalachia as “a strange land with a peculiar people” have blinded most Americans to the fact that these mountains have been, in the words of author Jeff Biggers, “a stage for some of the most quintessential and daring American experiences of innovation, rebellion, and social change.”⁶ The Mountain State's mine wars were one of those

experiences, a series of rebellions arising from Appalachia that played out on the national stage. This is one of the reasons why the time has come for the West Virginia coal miners' story to be told in full, so that it may finally take its rightful place in the larger history of American freedom.

PART I

Casus Belli, 1890–1911

Chapter 1

The Great West Virginia Coal Rush

1877–1890

After his visit to the “fight front” in Mingo County, James M. Cain returned to Baltimore and attempted to explain to his readers why southern West Virginia had become a war zone “where murder, dynamiting, arson, and insurrection [were the] usual order of the day.” It was coal, he concluded; coal had “brought about this state of affairs.” For in this part of America, he wrote, coal was the staff of life. “It is coal on which a third of the population depends directly for its living . . . It is coal that has converted the State into one great pock-mark of mines.”¹ And it was the cost of mining coal that had turned the rolling hills of southern West Virginia into an industrial battleground.

Virginians had known about the mineral wealth buried beyond the Blue Ridge since the mid-eighteenth century, but it took another century and a half for industrialists to exploit the rich deposits of “black gold” laced through the mountains of the Allegheny Plateau. The wealthy men of the Tidewater first learned of this buried treasure in 1750 from Christopher Gist, a famous explorer and trader, whom they had hired to inventory the most valuable real estate in the territory west of the Alleghenies. Upon his return from the highlands, Gist offered his clients lavish descriptions of the dense forests and fertile valleys he had surveyed, and he presented them with two impressive objects: a tooth from one of the woolly mammoths that roamed the region in the Pleistocene epoch and a lump of coal that had been hardening since the Pennsylvanian subperiod a million years before. Gist’s survey put a gleam in the eye of well-endowed investors back east, the kind of men whose capital would one day transform the Appalachian wilderness into a vast industrial domain for the extraction of West Virginia’s bounteous natural resources.²

The first coal deposits in the region formed during the Late Devonian period, more than 350 million years ago, when forests first covered the mountains of what became the Cumberland Plateau. The woody tissues of

dead trees produced accumulations of peat, and the area that later would compose West Virginia became a subsiding basin filled with sediment. As these deposits were buried deeper and deeper, temperature and pressure increased, and over the centuries, the peat deposits became seams of high-quality, relatively low-volatility bituminous coal.*³

Few regions in the world were as well endowed with such vast carbon deposits, a commonly known fact by 1765. Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that the whole tract of land beyond Laurel Mountain in western Virginia would yield abundant quantities of the fuel. Three years later, in the Treaty of Hard Labour, the Cherokees relinquished their claim to land south of the Great Kanawha River, where the first coal deposits in western Virginia would eventually be mined by slaves and used as fuel for the salt furnaces south of Charleston.⁴

When the French and Indian War ended in 1763, hundreds of colonial soldiers who fought for the British poured into the lush valleys beyond the Blue Ridge, taking land that the vanquished Cherokee people had occupied for centuries. Along with them came hunters and traders, Pennsylvania farmers, Virginia slave owners, German immigrants, and Scots-Irish refugees from the rack-rented counties of Northern Ireland. These Ulstermen would create a new kind of religious movement in the mountains, one led by Presbyterian preachers who emphasized the personal quality of conversion and created a tradition of outdoor festivals, or “holy fairs,” that persisted in intensely communal forms of worship characteristic of mountain religion.⁵

Along with these pioneer settlers came the agents from the east who acquired land in great swaths, about three-quarters of Appalachia by 1800. As a result, nearly half of the white settlers worked the land as tenants and day laborers—the ancestors of Appalachia’s enduring population of poor whites.⁶ But other homesteaders thrived in the lush forests and fertile valleys of Virginia’s western counties, notably the Scots-Irish immigrants who brought Ulster’s agrarian ways with them to America. They combined livestock herding in “outfields” with raising crops along the creek and river bottoms. Besides growing food for their own consumption, crafty producers also sold various goods out of the region, including livestock, salt, grain, ginseng, hand-crafted wares, and pig iron—commodities that could be shipped via turnpikes and down rivers like the Kanawha that flowed into the Ohio.

Within these western mountain communities, a rough-and-tumble form of frontier democracy flourished, one that would shape the nation's politics during the Age of Andrew Jackson. When the man they called "Old Hickory" threw open the White House to the masses after his inauguration in 1829, the region's highlanders had already earned a reputation as cunning hunters, deadly sharpshooters, and fearless dissenters.

At the start of Jackson's second term as president in 1833, a Virginia farmer named Moses Keeney left the gorgeous hills of Greenbrier County and drove his wagon over the James River and the Kanawha Turnpike until he reached Charleston, a thriving river town with its own little aristocracy of families enriched by selling the salt produced by slaves. When he turned his team up the Kanawha River, Keeney saw salt furnaces belching smoke, mountainsides denuded of trees, long rows of drying sheds, and gangs of black men wheeling barrels and tending furnaces.⁷

A few miles upriver, Keeney entered a largely uninhabited region where thick forests sheltered an endless array of birds and animals—sixty-three species of mammals in all, ranging in size from the rare and tiny flying squirrel to the five-hundred-pound black bear.⁸ Wild fruit trees grew aplenty: the crab apple with its sweetly perfumed blossoms, the plum, the mulberry, and the pawpaw with its dark burgundy, bell-shaped blossoms and its sweet, nutritious fruit so highly valued by the Native Americans. Higher on the hillsides grape vines grew so thick they covered parts of the woods in darkness, and farther up the mountainsides were dense stands of eastern white pine, succeeded at higher elevations by black walnut, white oak, chestnut, and red spruce. Some sycamores, red oaks, yellow poplars, and buckeyes reached more than a hundred feet in height with trunks that measured two hundred inches in circumference.

Moses Keeney settled on land in this country, and when he died in 1849, his sons continued to farm, hunt, and cut lumber along Cabin Creek in a place where a little mountain community called Eskdale would emerge. In the mid-nineteenth century, none of the Keeneys could foresee the changes that would come to their valley or to the whole region in the decades ahead, when a wondrously diverse ecosystem would be destroyed by railroads that blackened the air, timber companies that clear-cut the forests, and coal-mining operations that laid waste to the valleys and streams.

Keeney's sons avoided taking sides when the Civil War erupted, even though most residents of Virginia's western counties voted against

secession. On June 11, 1861, leading Unionists called a convention in Wheeling, where they formed a provisional government for a new “free state.” A month later, federal troops under the command of General W. S. Rosecrans—who had been a pioneer mine operator in the Coal River Valley—triumphed over Confederate forces at the Battle of Rich Mountain. Yankee units then entered the Kanawha Valley, raided the Keeneys’ farm, and moved up the New River, where General Rosecrans’s soldiers defeated the Confederates at the Battle of Gauley Bridge that fall. A few months later, the state of West Virginia entered the Union with the motto *Montani Semper Liberi*, “Mountaineers Are Always Free,” emblazoned on its state flag. Upon the state’s great seal, the Founding Fathers placed the image of a coal miner with a pick on his shoulder.⁹

At the end of the Civil War, even the wealthiest landowners and merchants in the new state lacked the access to capital, railroad connections, and land titles they needed to exploit the fabulous wealth of coal reserves that lay beneath their mountains. These men yielded to entrepreneurs from the north and east who would furnish the capital and credit required to build the railroads that would link West Virginia to national markets and open its natural resources to exploitation by industrialists.

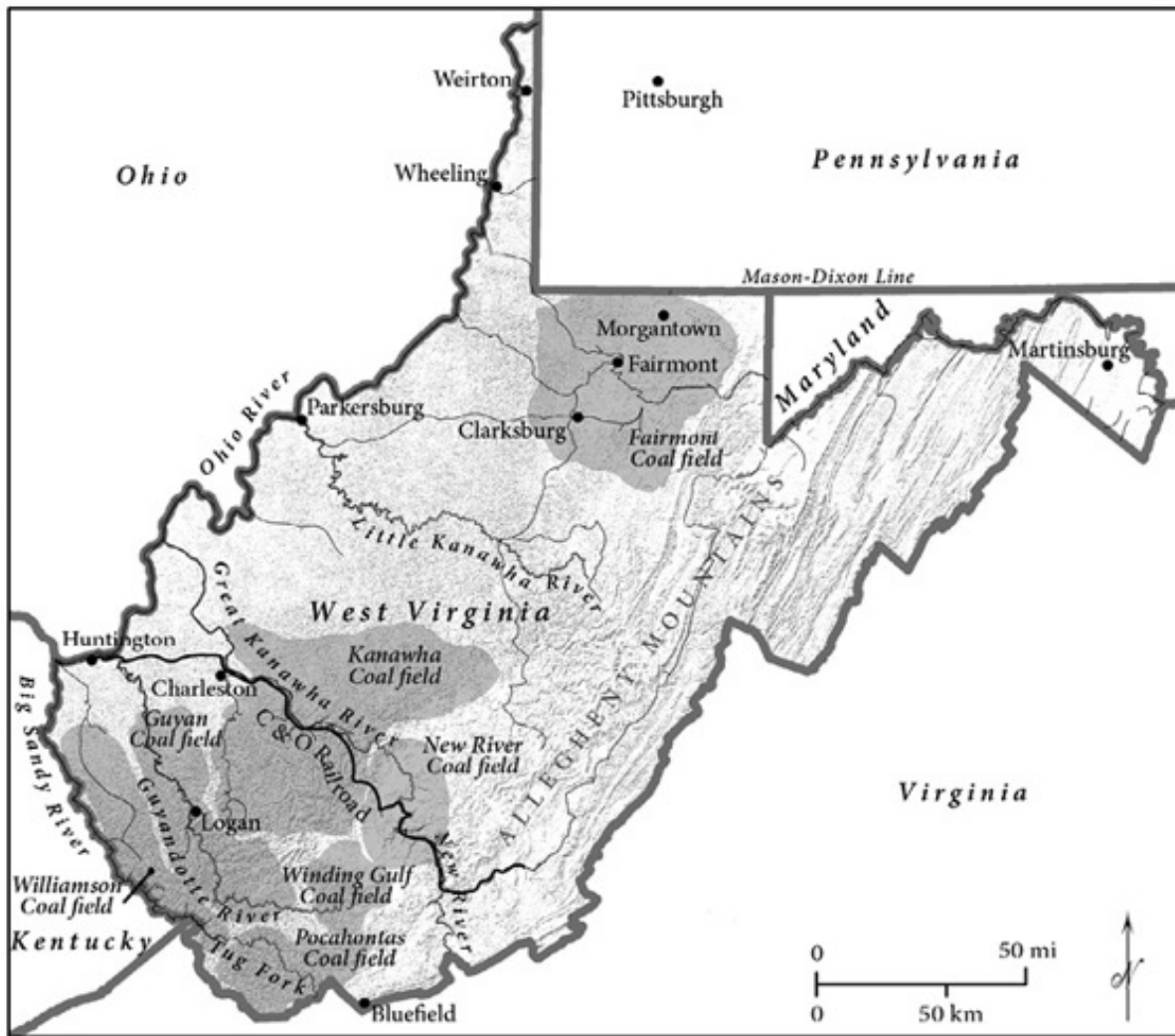
During the 1870s, battalions of “steel-drivin’ men” like the legendary John Henry tunneled through the mountains and laid down track for the westward extension of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway from Richmond, Virginia, to its new terminus on the Ohio River at Huntington. The town was named for the great railroad builder Collis P. Huntington, who needed West Virginia’s high-quality coal to fire his fleet of locomotives. He also knew that this fuel could be shipped around the world from the enormous coal pier he constructed in Newport News on the Atlantic Ocean, and that it could be taken to Cincinnati, where shippers could float the fuel on boats down the Ohio River or send it on trains to the Great Lakes and Chicago. In 1877, the C&O railroad extension up the Kanawha and New Rivers south of Charleston allowed seven new mine companies to begin shipping coal to national markets.¹⁰ The great West Virginia coal rush was on.

For the next decade, engineers and surveyors penetrated the Mountain State’s remotest valleys searching for coal seams. After the tracts were surveyed, agents followed to buy leases on the land occupied by pioneers, including military veterans who were given wasteland on the western

frontier. The state of West Virginia took possession of many old homesteads during the 1880s because the original settlers had not registered their deeds or paid taxes. When outsiders purchased the original deeds and claimed legal ownership, a protracted legal drama unfolded in the federal courts. At first, some judges sided with the pioneers, but when other judges began to rule for the speculators, the original owners started to sell out to agents, representing investors from New York City, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Cincinnati who coveted the state's bountiful natural resources. Other mountain families signed broad form leases that granted a coal, oil, or timber company the right to use the surface of their land in any way "convenient and necessary" to extract minerals, drill for petroleum, or cut lumber. These leases exempted the holders from taxes and from any liabilities for damages caused directly or indirectly by industrial operations.¹¹

In the early twentieth century, absentee owners controlled 81 percent of the collieries in West Virginia's southern counties. In McDowell County, for example, agents acquired forty-five thousand acres of land using capital invested by partners from London; Philadelphia; Hartford, Connecticut; and Staunton, Virginia. These capitalists then leased these lands to five mining companies ready to exploit one of the purest deposits of coal in North America—the low sulfur content of "smokeless" coal from the Pocahontas minefield that would produce the coke essential to steel making and fire the boilers of the nation's locomotives and steamships. Coal production in this region soared to even greater heights after 1895, when another railroad, the Norfolk & Western, reached down from the Ohio River along the Big Sandy River and followed the Tug Fork River deep into the Pocahontas coalfield.¹²

The Pocahontas coal district on West Virginia's southern border with Virginia represented one of that state's four major minefields, defined by surveyors and engineers as distinct and contiguous formations of coal separated from one another by mountains and rivers. North and east of the Pocahontas, the New River minefield stretched over a large section of Fayette County where, by 1900, more than eight thousand workers cut and loaded 5 million tons of coal, much of it going directly into a thousand red-hot beehive coke ovens.¹³ To the northwest in Kanawha County, an older coalfield covered both sides of the Kanawha River not far from Charleston, the state capital.



Map of West Virginia during the early 1900s, with cities, railroads, rivers, and coalfields indicated.

Approximately 140 miles northeast of Charleston lay the Fairmont minefield, which opened during the 1890s when Johnson N. Camden, a railroad builder, oilman, and former U.S. senator from West Virginia, formed the Monongah Coal and Coke Company. Camden's engineers cut five mines into the hills and built houses in the town of the same name. By the mid-1890s, Camden's Monongah mines employed the latest machinery and technology, setting the standard for high quality and high productivity.¹⁴ Within a few years, these collieries** would become part of the empire created by the Consolidation Coal Company (often called Consol), whose owners purchased or leased more than fifty thousand acres of coal land. Consol would become the largest producer of coal in the nation by 1907,

the same year one of its modern mines, Monongah, exploded and caused the deadliest disaster in America's industrial history.

Meanwhile, new minefields were also being prepared for development north of the Pocahontas field in the unsettled backcountry of Raleigh and Wyoming Counties. To the west, in Logan County, the new Guyan field opened when the C&O extended its line north along the Guyandotte River to the Ohio River. Farther west was the Williamson field, which extended along the Tug Fork River on the Kentucky border. By the time the Norfolk & Western Railway completed its line north to Huntington on the Ohio River in 1895, this new district in Mingo County was predicted to become the coal industry's El Dorado.

Because pioneer industrialists ran their businesses on very narrow margins, they often depended on the profits from their company stores to make up for losses in an unpredictable coal market. And because they had to pay higher transportation costs and absorb the expense of building collieries and whole communities in remote mountain sites, these businessmen depended upon keeping labor costs down so they could sell their coal at low prices and gain an edge in the national market. The operators' insistence on retaining this advantage led them to resist unionization with an extraordinary degree of force and determination.¹⁵

Small collieries proliferated in West Virginia during the 1890s, but after the turn of the century, syndicates of northern industrialists, bankers, and other investors built modern industrial operations that employed three hundred or more laborers.¹⁶ Like infantry units of an invading army, these well-endowed companies conquered rough terrain, laid down miles of track, opened dozens of mines, erected tipplers and company stores, recruited laborers, and constructed entire villages often in less than a year's time.

The rapid development of coal mining created a demographic explosion in sparsely inhabited mountain counties. In McDowell County—which contained most of the Pocahontas field—the population increased by 155.3 percent during the first decade of the twentieth century, compared with a statewide growth of 27.4 percent. The velocity and intensity of industrialization in West Virginia's coal country can be measured with such statistics. What cannot be so readily quantified are the effects this revolution had on mountain people and on the forests and valleys where they were born and raised.

Because industrialists needed to construct new towns in wilderness locations, more West Virginia miners lived in company housing than in any other section of the country—nearly 79 percent, as compared with 24 percent in Ohio. These workers were not ordinary tenants, however, for the state courts had ruled that the mine owner's relationship to his renters was not that of a landlord to a tenant, but rather that of a master to a servant. Therefore, the law allowed the owner to summarily evict families and to inspect miners' houses without a warrant.¹⁷

The mine operator's power extended over almost every other facet of life as well. He hired and fired his hands at will. He built the schools and selected the teachers, built the churches and selected the ministers, built the store and selected the store manager. He owned or leased every acre of land in and around his town except the creek and the railbed, where a railroad owned the right-of-way. He controlled access to the town and all activity within it, and he hit down with a heavy hand on any activity that might menace his business.

Mine operators like the Virginian W. P. Tams Jr. saw themselves as fair-minded men who were good judges of character and virtue, men who knew right from wrong. If miners had a complaint, "all they had to do was come to me," said Tams many years later. He would hear all complaints, resolve all problems, and levy all penalties, including the ultimate punishment: terminating a miner and, in some cases, putting his name on a blacklist. "To use the expression of the Middle Ages," Tams explained, "I was high justice, the middle and the low." He recalled many occasions upon which he would ask a recalcitrant miner if he wanted to take "company discipline" or face "a court-martial." "A sensible man would always say, 'I'll take company discipline.'"¹⁸

Mining companies constructed their own stores in most West Virginia coal towns and made sure no independent merchants opened shops to compete with their highly profitable mercantile enterprises. These establishments, often impressively built two-story structures with wide porches, served as community gathering places as well as commercial outlets, where miners purchased equipment and blasting powder and where women shopped for a variety of goods from canned foods to ready-made clothes. Congressional investigators later found that in remote locations, company store prices ranged from 5 to 12 percent more than they were in towns where independent stores existed nearby. Tams recalled that his

fellow operators “charged all the market would bear” so that profits on their merchandise would offset losses they often suffered when coal prices fell.¹⁹

West Virginia mine managers issued their own private currency, called scrip, redeemable only at the company store. Scrip was initially offered as a convenience to miners who could use it to acquire necessary items without having cash in hand and without paying interest on a loan. However, companies would not buy back scrip at face value, and if miners sold it, traders or independent merchants would buy scrip at 25 to 30 percent less than its dollar value. This system generated resentment among many miners, who complained about having to pay high prices at company stores and about lacking the freedom to spend their cash wages freely and buy goods from local farmers and independent merchants.²⁰

Company-owned mining communities were unincorporated towns with no elected officials. County sheriffs, commissioners, state representatives, and judges could exercise some legal authority over the area in which the mining camps were located, but these officials generally respected the coal towns as private property and allowed owners to govern the communities they owned. The coal operators assigned law enforcement in these rough company towns to deputy sheriffs, who were actually private guards paid by the coal companies. These men were employed to protect the company’s property and to track down thieves. They were also ordered to keep a close watch on the miners, who might slip out of the camps, leaving debts unpaid; on strangers such as peddlers who came to sell their wares; and on “outside agitators” who came to stir up trouble.²¹

These were the facts of life in West Virginia’s company-owned mining towns. At first, only a few people questioned the justice of the new order, but as the coal industry matured, the realities of industrial life ground against the experience of native-born Appalachians who had been raised in farming and village communities where various forms of civil society and local democracy had been well established.

Strung along river valleys or creek beds like little black islands in a vast sea of forest, West Virginia mining towns were shadowed by steep mountain slopes with sharp razorback ridges that blocked the rising sun for hours and made the valleys inaccessible to outsiders, except by the rough roads that ran along the streams. Miners’ houses were clustered together on bottomland or perched precariously on hillsides in the hollows. Some rows

of miners' cabins sat only a few yards from the railroad tracks, so close that dishes crashed to the floor when trains rumbled past. These Jenny Lind houses—named for the coal town where the prototypes appeared—were made cheaply without wall studs, horizontal siding, or insulation (usually provided by straw and plaster), only vertical pine planks. When these boards cured, gaps opened between them and were sealed by nailing narrow battens over the cracks.²²

Like other mountain villages and commercial towns, mining camps were nested in lovely wooded valleys, but unlike incorporated communities, these settlements had no paved sidewalks, playing fields, grass lawns, shade trees, or flower gardens. But every town featured a colliery tippie that groaned and rattled for hours each day with the sound of coal being funneled into railroad cars. A typical mining town also contained one or two simple whitewashed churches, a boardinghouse for single workingmen, at least one but often several saloons, as well as two one-room schoolhouses, one for white children, the other for “colored” children. Superintendents assigned miners to the segregated sections of their towns, sending new immigrants and blacks to places that came to be known as “hunktown” and “nigger hollow.”

For instance, on Paint Creek in the Kanawha field, Quinn Morton and his partners, owners of the Christian Colliery Company in Mahan and the Imperial Colliery Company in Burnwell, set aside some housing for white miners in a section called Frogtown (because it sat so close to the creek that frogs hopped through the doors) and another for blacks called Pecktown, where Imperial's owners built a “colored school.” They helped subsidize the construction of a beautiful two-story schoolhouse for whites on the rise above the company houses on the creek bottom, and they supported a YMCA facility, which would help to inculcate Christian values and a sense of fraternity among bosses and miners alike.²³

The creeks that flowed near the miners' cabins were polluted by mine runoff, manure, and human waste from outhouses. Since hillside privies drained into the streams, bacteria easily invaded bodies and caused diseases like dysentery and smallpox.²⁴

The clear, moist mountain air that blew down these valleys now carried a foul combination of smoke from locomotive engines and smoldering refuse dumps, as well as choking gas from superheated coke ovens that produced what one miner's wife called “an awful sickening scent.” Cinders from the

locomotive boilers fell like rain over the miners' houses, and coal dust from the mine tipples seeped under every door and through every crack, clinging to the miners' clothes and the laundry their wives hung out every day. Coal dust peppered people's food, coated their vegetable plants, and entered their lungs with every breath they took. "The relentless dust," wrote one historian, "never let anyone in a coal camp forget where they were or why the town existed."²⁵



The Frogtown section of Burnwell with the company-built schoolhouse in the background.

Frontier mining towns were often referred to as camps, as though they were military installations on a battlefield, or as coal patches, as though they were no more than sooty smudges on a mountain landscape. They were rough places to live, because they lacked amenities and were isolated from the larger world, but also because they were occupied by large numbers of single men living together in a raw new environment without any of the customs, rituals, and constraints provided by families and churches in settled communities. Most of these men were heavy drinkers—a “hard-bitten lot,” one mine superintendent recalled—who fought each other in “frequent brawls that often ended in serious injury, or even death.” These altercations were, however, “treated quite casually by local authorities,” as were cases of wife beating.²⁶

The novelist Mary Lee Settle recorded grim tales of coal town life she heard from her grandmother, the wife of a Kanawha Valley farm boy who had gone into the new mines and, like many of them, had become a drunkard. The miner beat his young wife until she cut out on her own, divorced her abusive husband, and then, like a character in a romance novel, married a wealthy landowner who brought her to his lovely home on Kellys Creek.²⁷ Other miners' wives were not so daring or so fortunate.

Despite the violence of coal camp life, the women who married coal miners didn't just feed their husbands, bathe and raise their offspring. Many of these wives and their daughters also emerged as strong personalities, especially when there was trouble with the company and collective action was required. These women organized the church activities so important to many mining families, and they played other roles as well, as Bible instructors and tutors, singers and gardeners, seamstresses and laundresses, faith healers and boardinghouse keepers. They were the ones who transformed primitive coal camps into communities of working people, homeplaces where, as one miner recalled, many miners and their families felt like part of a "tribe."²⁸

Although coal companies attempted to reproduce prevailing forms of residential segregation in their towns, African Americans, Italians, and Hungarians never lived more than a few hundred yards "up the hollow" from native-born whites, with whom they worked every day in close proximity and mutual dependency. Miners of different races and nationalities all lived in roughly the same type of company house, paid the same rent, and experienced the same hardships of coal town life. "Everybody felt a common kinship," one Appalachian miner remembered, "because they all had to work and fare together the same way." At one time, he added, "there was even a commonship between the mine operators and the men" they employed, but that relationship changed when small operations were consolidated by large corporations, which came to dominate the industry in West Virginia. Later on, during the 1910s, when some mine operators hired welfare workers to investigate their employees' values, one of them would conclude that life in coal camps was "too simple" and "too socialistic," in the sense that people all felt they were on "the same level." Each miner seemed to identify himself as part of a working team, not as a consumer who wanted something his neighbor possessed that he didn't.²⁹

Miners who wore overalls and lived in company houses could readily see that they belonged to a class apart from the well-dressed superintendents, who dwelled in well-built two-story homes, and from the mine operator, who lived in a beautiful home—sometimes referred to as “the white house”—on a hillside above the congested camp. And miners who spoke in Appalachian, African American, and Italian dialects could hear their bosses issuing instructions and commands in unfamiliar accents and using big words like “productivity,” “efficiency,” and “sobriety.”³⁰

A study of seventy-three colliery operators who did business in southern West Virginia during the early twentieth century indicated that 80 percent hailed from outside of Appalachia. More than half of these men came from the North and nineteen of them arrived from the non-mountain South, including a man named Justus Collins, who left Alabama in 1887 to make his fortune in the mining town of Goodwill, West Virginia. Though he had little formal education, Collins was “endowed with high intelligence and great ambition,” according to an admirer, and by 1892, he convinced Virginia financiers to back his first solo venture, a colliery he opened at Glen Jean twenty-five miles to the north in the New River coalfield.³¹

During those early years, Collins adopted a management style he described in a series of letters to his brother, Jairus, a young mine superintendent. “Habituate yourself to study carefully all the conditions and details of the business” and “maintain good discipline at all times at your places, especially around the stores,” where men congregated after work. “We are not running a Christian Endeavor Camp Meeting nor a Sunday School,” Collins remarked, “yet a certain amount of decency and order must be required of our people.” Tram cars should be kept in good repair and well lubricated, haulways drained and cleared, mules or horses properly cared for at all times. “See that railroad cars are loaded in the quickest possible time,” he added. “Speed saves unnecessary pay to the army of drivers, trappers, tipple men, etc., and is a most important factor in the production of cheap coal.”

Collins also instructed Jairus to keep a sharp eye on the time books and on foremen who might hire more men than were required or offer to increase wages for overtime work. A mine manager should “Remember, always, that to raise wages is a very simple and agreeable process, but to reduce them is altogether another question; in fact, absolutely one of war.”

Finally, Collins insisted, “Never lose sight of the fact that the sole purpose of the organization is to make money for their stockholders.”³²



Justus Collins, early 1900s.

Mine operators like Collins took pride in building and running well-ordered communities of workers who would produce coal with all possible speed and efficiency. The men they hired were accustomed to long hours of hard work—as *contadini* in southern Italy, peasants in Hungary, convict laborers in Alabama, and farmers in the hills of West Virginia—followed by periods of rest, for in their rural worlds, the pace of work and the length of the workday varied according to the nature of the task, the weather, and the season of the year. These men had little experience working from dawn to dusk at the same task day after day, month after month. Mine foremen were authorized to fire weaklings, drunkards, and slackers, but they did not exert the kind of supervision exercised by factory foremen. For the most part, miners imposed pressure on themselves to load enough coal to provide an adequate wage to support their families or to send money back home. This

compulsion may explain why West Virginia pick and shovel miners were more productive in 1901 than miners using machines.³³

Nonetheless, mine operators constantly complained about the persistence of “backward traits” among their employees, especially among the single men who had only themselves to feed. Managers were vexed by what they called the “shiftlessness and orneriness” of local folk who did not respond readily to commands or to the lure of earning “big money.” Mountaineers accustomed to passing the time hunting, fishing, and visiting did not shed these habits like dead skin when they entered a new industrial world where “time was money” and where time should be “spent” and not “wasted.”³⁴

During the early 1900s, employers hired far more African Americans and European immigrants than white Americans, hoping these new laborers would be more compliant and productive than the gnarly mountaineers. At the turn of the century, only 554 Italians loaded coal in the Mountain State, but a decade later their numbers had risen to 8,184 and nearly every coal town included a section called “Little Italy” or “Dago Holler.”³⁵ But these new recruits often failed to meet their employers’ expectations as well, and in some mines, “greenhorns” gave their supervisors fits. Foremen complained that “colored men” tended to work just long enough to fulfill their basic needs, sometimes only three days a week, and then took time off “to enjoy themselves,” wrote one historian. “Foreigners, on the other hand, worked as long and as often as they could but insisted on celebrating numberless religious and national holidays by getting roaring drunk.”³⁶

Most coal towns had one or two saloons and some had as many as six to eight, places where “a man could get whiskey for a dime a glass” or buy a case of bottled beer for his friends. In addition, the mountaineers produced plenty of corn liquor in moonshine stills and the Italians brewed their own beer and made their own wine. Miners imbibed on many occasions: on paydays, at weddings and christenings, on holidays like Independence Day, May Day, Christmas, and New Year’s Day, and on what the immigrants called “saints days” and “Big Sundays,” which often led to “Blue Mondays” when absenteeism ran high.³⁷



Italian miners at a Big Sunday festa at Glen Jean in the New River field.

Controlling unruly wage hands was simply a fact of life for mine managers in this frontier industry—an annoying challenge, but not a serious threat. Slackers, weaklings, and drunkards could simply be sent packing at any time. The real troublemakers were the talkers, the agitators, the men who spoke against the boss and who dared to break a taboo by uttering the words, “Boys, we ought to get together and have a union down here.”

The first men who talked this way were skilled colliers the coal operators recruited from Pennsylvania, where the earliest miners’ union had been formed and where, as one industry historian noted, the mine owners engaged in “a bitter struggle with the Molly McGuires [*sic*], a secret group of Irish terrorists”—his term for an organization of immigrants from Ireland who fought bloody battles with the mine owners and their private police in 1875. In 1880, some troublemakers from the “Molly McQuire fields”

organized a march at the mines around Hawks Nest on West Virginia's New River, where they urged other miners to join them in striking for a wage increase. The mine operators beat back this challenge and learned a lesson in the process: They would stop recruiting experienced men from the northern fields, especially British, Scottish, and Irish miners, who were "well schooled in the promotion of strikes."³⁸

Union talk began again in 1886, when the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor organized assemblies of coal miners in the Pocahontas field, where the mine owners employed thousands of black workers without realizing these men had been active in African American labor organizations and civil rights groups like the Union League in the Richmond area. The Knights called two strikes in the Pocahontas field that year in which it became evident to union organizer Michael F. Moran that the "colored men here are not as cowardly as the white men." But black militancy was not enough. Both protests failed and employers imported Hungarians to replace the troublesome African Americans.³⁹

To make matters worse, Moran and the Knights also had to contend with a rival labor organization affiliated with the newly founded American Federation of Labor (AFL). Whereas the Knights practiced an inclusive brand of industrial unionism, the AFL affiliates concentrated mostly on recruiting skilled workers. The Knights saw trade unionism as a means to an end—the creation of a "cooperative commonwealth" and a democracy controlled by "honest producers" instead of "plutocrats"—whereas the business-minded craftsmen who founded the AFL's affiliates saw trade unionism as an end in itself. Neither of these approaches proved very effective in the coalfields of the Midwest or Appalachia, and when wage earners conducted a massive general strike for the eight-hour day in May 1886, most of the nation's colliers remained underground hard at work.

In 1890 at the height of the Gilded Age—a year when the AFL declared the nation's coal miners in worse shape than any group of wage earners—the popular social critic Henry Demarest Lloyd drew attention to the plight of these nearly invisible workers in a letter addressed to the public:

You for whom the coal is dug . . . far away from the toil and trouble of the miner. [The coal diggers] spend ten hours a day in their caverns—pitch dark—except for the flicker and glimmer of the little lamp each carries in the front of his cap . . . They have to work upon their knees, or lying on their side, or stooping low, and sometimes are obliged to lie flat on their backs while digging at the ceiling.

This hard work in a room three feet or three feet six inches high, hundreds of feet below the surface, in the gloom of perpetual night, with air to breathe got only by artificial and imperfect ventilation, is the human price that has to be paid on all our coal. You know this coal only as light, heat, power, profit, comfort, a means of longer life or greater wealth. To the miner it is a black and obdurate enemy, a jailer that imprisons him, shutting out his sunlight . . . ; threatening him daily with death or mutilation in strange and terrible forms, and rewarding his . . . toil with less than the cost of subsistence . . . [40](#)

American coal miners found their first national champion in Lloyd, but before long these workingmen would choose their own spokesmen from the ranks of tough-minded, self-taught colliers who decided the time had come to form one big union for all the coal miners in North America.

[*](#)The bituminous or soft coalfields located in Appalachia, the lower Midwest, and the far West produced most of the nation's fossil fuel. Bituminous coal was classified as thermal fuel used in steam engines and power plants and as metallurgical fuel used to produce coke for iron and steel making. Southern West Virginia mines produced a high grade of low-sulfur "smokeless" soft coal, mainly for export to the national market. Higher-priced anthracite or hard coal contained relatively pure carbon and burned with little flame or smoke; it was mined mainly in eastern Pennsylvania.

[**](#)A colliery included offices, mine tunnels, tracks, and tipples, where haulage cars were tipped into railroad coal cars. "Collier" was the Old English word for a coal miner, which made its way over to the Pennsylvania anthracite fields in the 1800s.

Chapter 2

The Miners' Angel

Winter 1890–Winter 1903

On the morning of January 23, 1890, scores of short sturdy men wearing black coats and cloth caps filed into the city hall in Columbus, Ohio. Some of these 240 mine workers were English, Scottish, and Welsh immigrants, including many who carried a strong tradition of labor solidarity with them when they left the collieries in Durham, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Lanarkshire, and the Rhondda Valley. Some were first- and second-generation Irishmen who nursed a grudge over the fate of the Molly Maguires—the twenty immigrant miners hanged in the mid-1870s for crimes they had allegedly committed while waging war against the mine owners and their private police. And many were American-born Protestants who embraced Abraham Lincoln's belief that honest toilers were the backbone of the Republic and that "capital is the fruit of labor."¹

Half of the delegates were idealistic Knights of Labor like Michael Moran, who came up from southern West Virginia to the convention. The other half were "pure and simple" trade unionists like John McBride from Ohio's Hocking Valley, a founder of the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers, who had helped to engineer the first interstate labor agreement for his new union four years earlier.² Visionaries like Moran and pragmatists like McBride came to Columbus that winter day in order to merge their rival organizations into one big industrial union that would include all the men and boys who toiled in and around the mines.

After old grievances were aired and lofty speeches delivered, McBride hammered out a fusion agreement, and when the deal was done, pandemonium broke out. "Men banged one another on broad backs," one of the founders reported. They "wept unashamedly, climbed up on collapsing chairs and yelled 'Unity! Unity!'" Two miners who had led rival organizations in Ohio shook hands and swore allegiance to the new union, and then, to demonstrate their sincerity, they kissed each other on the lips.

With this gesture of brotherhood, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was born.³

Although they were unschooled, the UMWA's founders had honed their intellects by reading newspapers and books, debating politics and religion, and studying economics at the point of production. These colliers had come to a shared understanding of what was happening in their highly competitive industry and what had to be done to protect the men they represented. In the four years preceding the UMWA's founding, railroad mileage had increased by 30 percent and pig iron and steel production had grown by 62 percent—two of the reasons why the demand for bituminous coal soared and output doubled. At the same time, the expansion and reorganization of the large railroad corporations had created an intensely competitive national market for fuel. The nation's largest mine owners and their financiers yearned to corner this market by consolidating the ownership of mines and controlling the means of shipping and marketing the coal.

Union miners had responded to these changes by conducting broader strikes in solidarity with other mine employees, engaging in more job actions aimed at multiple employers, and organizing black and immigrant strikebreakers, who were excluded from most other AFL trade unions. The UMWA's leaders adopted a policy of inclusion, even as a color line was being drawn across the land. "No local union or assembly," the UMWA constitution declared, "is justified in discriminating against any person in securing or retaining work because of their African descent."⁴

Two years later, after the new miners' union gained a foothold in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, UMWA executive board member William B. Wilson traveled deep into West Virginia to assist with a recruitment drive headed by Michael Moran, who had hired an African American to work as the district's first paid organizer. Wilson, a Scottish immigrant who would one day become the nation's first secretary of labor, had a keen intellect and sharp eye, and he could see that white miners were laying "back upon their oars . . . of unionism." The most "persistent unionists" in the field were the blacks, he reported.⁵

When he returned from his journey, Wilson asked the national office to send the union's most effective black organizer to West Virginia. Richard Davis was born a free man and raised in Roanoke, Virginia. He later moved to southeastern Ohio, where he loaded coal and joined the union, urging his

fellow African Americans to become union men as well. Davis had earned the respect of many white miners, who helped elect him to his district's executive board, where he waged a persistent fight against racism. In one of the many stirring letters he wrote to the new *United Mine Workers Journal*, Davis proclaimed that it was "high time for the color line to be dropped in all branches of industry, for until then, there will be no peace." But he found it nearly impossible to cross that yawning divide in West Virginia's New River field. "The whites say they are afraid of the colored men," Davis lamented, "and the colored men say they are afraid of the whites."⁶

Racial fears and hatreds were not the only obstacles Davis and his fellow activists faced in southern West Virginia. Most of the miners, he reported, were so afraid of their employers he "could do nothing." Although he was a gifted speaker, Davis concluded that it would take more than enthusiasm and "flowery speeches" to move these miners toward unionism.⁷

The possibilities for UMWA expansion vanished in 1894 when a brutal depression caused massive layoffs and deep wage cuts. Forced to defend their members, the union's elected leaders called for a job action in all the bituminous coalfields. But in West Virginia the strike had little effect, and a few weeks after the walkout began, Ohio miners watched, incensed, as long trains of coal cars rolled north filled with "scab coal" from the Mountain State's collieries, where production "increased phenomenally" during the strike.⁸

Three years later, with their organization wasting away, the UMWA's officers took a desperate gamble and called for another general strike; to their amazement, thousands of miners, union and nonunion men alike, responded in what UMWA president Michael Ratchford called a "spontaneous uprising of an enslaved people."⁹ A few thousand West Virginia miners answered this call, but most men stayed at work; they were reportedly afraid to attend the meetings since foremen recorded the names of those present and fired them. In any case, union activists were often run out of town by deputy sheriffs or guards paid by the mine operators before they could even rent a hall.¹⁰

Some embittered UMWA officials blamed West Virginia's miners themselves for the failure of the strike. They complained that these backwoodsmen were "no-good scabs" who were bamboozled by their bosses, intimidated by mine guards, divided by racial hatreds, and ignorant of their true interests as workers. "We have often wondered what kind of

animals they have digging coal in West Virginia and have never been able to successfully solve the problem,” wrote one disgusted union man. “Their ignorance must be more than dense, their prejudice more bitter and their blindness more intense than that of any other body of miners we have ever heard tell of.”¹¹

While discouraged union supporters in West Virginia returned to work under the old pay scale, midwestern strikers held firm and compelled the bituminous coal operators to negotiate and sign a trade agreement that would ensure labor peace at a time when coal prices were expected to rise. This historic contract allowed regional market forces to help determine various fair-wage scales in an industry that had been crippled by cutthroat competition. In return for a no-strike agreement by the union, the mine operators sacrificed some of their traditional management prerogatives and granted a host of new job rights to union workers, including the long-desired eight-hour day.¹²

To administer this new agreement, mine operators and union delegates formed an unprecedented “industrial parliament” to govern the nation’s most important industry. Infractions by either side would be punished by fines, arbitration hearings would settle disputes, and miners who were judged to have been unfairly dismissed would be awarded back pay. This labor-management accord provided a model for the kind of industrial cooperation favored by political kingmaker Marcus Hanna, national boss of the Republican Party, and by financier J. P. Morgan, the most powerful man in the country at the time.¹³

From the very start, however, there was “a gun pointed at the heart of the industrial government in the bituminous coal industry,” as two eminent historians once put it.¹⁴ This was cheap, clean-burning coal that had flowed north from nonunion mines in West Virginia during the 1897 strike. That year, nineteen thousand men produced roughly 12 million tons of fuel in the Mountain State, enough to win some customers away from the midwestern coal companies shut down by the great strike. During the next fifteen years, however, those shipments would appear as little more than ripples in the river of coal that would flow out of West Virginia’s collieries; in that period of time, the workforce would expand by fifty thousand and production would rise by more than 1,000 percent.¹⁵

The threat posed by this swelling volume of “scab coal” pressed hard upon the mind of John Mitchell, the twenty-eight-year-old Illinois miner

who had vaulted up the ranks to become the UMWA's acting president. Intelligent, well spoken, and good-looking (some Catholic miners said he looked like a young priest), Mitchell became the union's "boy president" in 1898 with the support of veteran officials who admired his negotiating skills. The new leader promised to work cooperatively with unionized companies and then boldly set out to expand the union's domain into the anthracite coalfields of eastern Pennsylvania, where the mine owners, large eastern railroads, had defeated one organizing drive after another. Moving fast and with devastating effectiveness, union officials pulled out more than one hundred thousand anthracite miners, including thousands of immigrants who idolized "Johnny d'Mitch." It was a surprising show of force that compelled embittered coal companies to accept the UMWA's terms.

Later that year, Mitchell decided to remove the gun that had been pointed at the union's heart in the organized fields of the North. He would launch a new offensive in West Virginia headed by two brave men with the know-how and the most experience as UMWA activists in Pennsylvania. The new president believed this venture also required someone with special qualities, someone who could instill courage and hope in the hearts of the frightened men who mined coal in the Mountain State. The person he hired to play that role would have amazed anyone outside the UMWA's ranks, for he chose a woman old enough to be his grandmother to lead this crucial campaign. Her legal name was Mary Harris Jones, but union men all over industrial America knew her as Mother Jones.



John Mitchell, early 1900s.

Mary Harris was born in 1837 and raised by poor Irish parents who lived off and on in the city of Cork and on a wild, barren country farm where Catholics “incorporated the old pagan gods into the cult of the saints.” When she was nine years old, Mary’s kinfolk talked in hushed tones of the blight on the potato crop and the stench that rose from the fields. A year later, when the Great Hunger spread, she boarded a ship with her father bound for Canada—two of the two hundred thousand people who left their island homes seeking a new life overseas in the year the Irish called “Black 47.”¹⁶

When Mary’s mother arrived in Toronto to join them, she sent her daughter away to a convent school. After two terms, the girl displayed an independent spirit by setting out on her own to make a living as a schoolteacher in Michigan. Prior to the Civil War, this adventurous young

woman moved to Memphis, where she met and married George Jones, an ironworker and union man. She gave birth to four children and raised them in the poor white area of Memphis known as “Pinch Gut.” Soon after her fourth child was born in 1867, foundry owners took advantage of an economic downturn to close their shops and lock out their union men. George lost his job, and Mary had to find a way to nourish three youngsters and an infant.

As the Jones family struggled to make ends meet, yellow fever raced through the river districts. Wealthy people fled the city, but poor folks in Pinch Gut stayed put and prayed that the angel of death would pass over their houses. Few were so blessed and many succumbed to what people called the “strangers’ disease,” so named because the fever struck immigrants hardest. One by one, the Jones children fell ill with the disease. First came the chills and aches, and then came the nausea, cramps, and, finally, hemorrhages. One by one, Mary held her babies as they died; one by one, she washed their little bodies and readied them for burial. Then her husband caught the fever and died. “I sat alone through nights of grief,” she wrote in her memoir. “No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine.” All day and all night long, she sat in her shanty listening to the grating sound of the death carts’ wheels. The experience could have destroyed this thirty-year-old widow, but it didn’t.

Leaving Memphis to the dead, Jones made her way to Chicago, where she earned a living sewing dresses for wealthy women until she lost her shop in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. She picked herself up and started again, but before long a depression gripped the economy and hung on for three years. She suffered through the hard times with her working-class neighbors, all the while hating the aristocrats who employed her because they ignored the plight of the jobless masses wandering the streets.

Chicago was a hotbed of Fenian activity, a place where nationalists set up the “Skirmishing Fund” to finance guerrilla warfare against British authority. The cause had many contributors among the city’s immigrants, including those from Jones’s native Cork and from other places in western and southern Ireland where the Great Famine and mass evictions had hit hardest and where immigrants were especially apt to see themselves as “exiles” from “British tyranny.”¹⁷

For the next two decades, the widowed dressmaker witnessed wave after wave of protest by Chicago’s working people. Jones was there during the

depression year of 1874 when the unemployed marched to city hall demanding “Bread or work!,” and she was there three years later when the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 rocked the city and the police killed more than thirty men and boys, most of them Irish Catholics.¹⁸

No city experienced more massive labor unrest during the Gilded Age than Chicago and no city produced more radicals. Mary Jones was destined to be one of them. She joined the Knights of Labor in the 1880s and took to the streets herself in 1894 to support the railroad car builders who lived and worked in George M. Pullman’s model city south of Chicago. These well-paid, well-housed workers stunned their patron when they left work to protest a wage cut and a speedup. The strikers asked for support from other trade unions, but only one responded: the American Railway Union (ARU), whose members voted to boycott all trains hauling Pullman’s sleeping cars. In a short time, this sympathetic action shut down most of the nation’s western railroads and created a national crisis.

Army troops occupied the city to enforce a sweeping federal injunction, and more than thirty Chicago workers died in the streets fighting; it was a tragedy that altered Jones’s life. For the next few years, she devoted herself to saving the life of an ARU striker who had been accused of derailing an army troop train. When the union activist was sentenced to death for this alleged act of sabotage, Jones traveled far and wide to seek clemency for him. She even gained access to the White House to plead his case directly to President Grover Cleveland. During the time she spent saving her adopted “son” from the gallows, Jones came to be known as the “Mother of the ARU.”¹⁹

Jones left Chicago for California, where she linked up with a column of unemployed workers as they marched toward Washington, DC, to demand relief. When she joined the tramps that year, Mother Jones kicked off a journey that would put her on the road for the next twenty-five years. She had traveled as far as Kansas with the unemployed when news reports suddenly drew her to the coalfields that surrounded the Birmingham iron and steel district in northern Alabama. There she found a spirited bunch of strikers whose interracial solidarity would amaze her and whose spirit would inspire her. That trip to Birmingham would be the beginning of Mother Jones’s lifelong love affair with America’s coal miners and their union.

Three years later, when the UMWA declared a general strike in the bituminous coalfields, Jones rushed from one western Pennsylvania coal patch to another, where she demonstrated a captivating speaking ability, organized food donations from local farmers, staged parades with strikers' children, and mobilized wives and daughters to harass strikebreakers.²⁰ In miners' lore, women brought bad luck or even death to the miners if they were seen around the pits, but President Ratchford was so impressed with Jones's work that he ignored this taboo and hired her to work as a "walking delegate" for the union; then he sent her off to West Virginia to spread the strike below the Mason-Dixon Line.

On July 27, 1897, Jones appeared before seventeen thousand striking miners and their supporters gathered in Charleston under a blazing sun at "a monster" rally. She took the platform that day and stood with the nation's most prominent labor leaders: the crafty little president of the AFL, Samuel Gompers; the aged Grand Master Workman of the Knights, the dignified James Sovereign; and the statuesque socialist Eugene V. Debs, who spoke, bald and hatless, for so long that he suffered from sunstroke. The lanky Debs had become a working-class hero three years before when, as head of the ARU, he had defied the federal government and the nation's most powerful railroads during the Pullman boycott. From then on, Debs and Jones would become two of the most inspirational labor orators and influential socialists in American history.²¹

In 1900, UMWA president John Mitchell promoted Jones to the rank of "international organizer"*** at a yearly salary of \$500; then he sent her to West Virginia on another vital organizing mission. In her autobiography, Jones provided a harrowing account of what happened when she entered the Fairmont field that year, a place where union sympathizers were threatened with death if they distributed handbills for her talks. After a few months of work, she left the field with a heavy heart, saddened that "the sacrifices men and women made to get out from under the iron heel of the gunmen were so often in vain!"²²

When she addressed the UMWA's convention early in 1901, Jones told the delegates gathered in Indianapolis that West Virginia's miners were not the dumb, frightened "animals" and "scabs" other northern organizers made them out be. "You may say what you please about the West Virginia miners being no good," but "I wish you could see how they live." These men worked and survived in wretched conditions and were oppressed by fellows

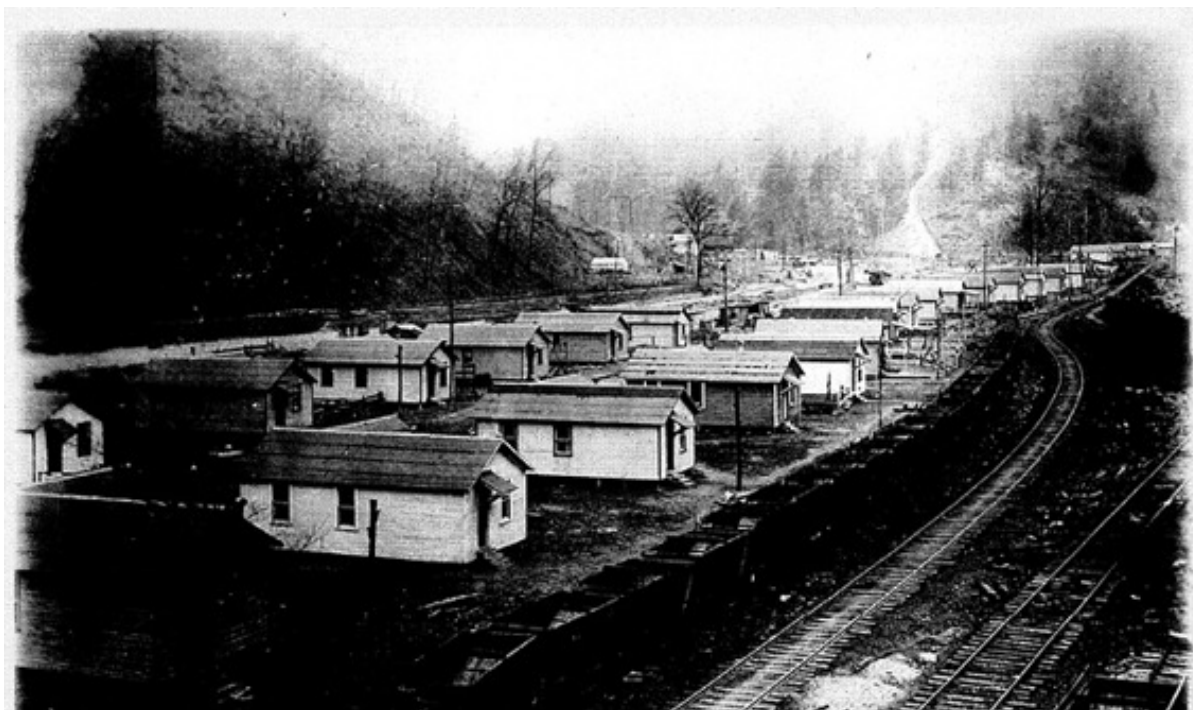
who made the czar of Russia seem like a “gentleman,” but she found “these mountain miners” to be “some of the noblest men” she had “met in all the country.” In closing, she urged the union delegates not to betray these fellow workers. “My brothers,” she concluded, “I shall consider it an honor if, when you write my epitaph upon my tombstone, you say, ‘Died fighting their battles in West Virginia.’”²³

That fall Mother Jones returned to the Mountain State and headed to the Kanawha field, where some of the earliest union efforts had taken place. Her first stop was the little town of Cedar Grove on the Kanawha River about twenty miles from Charleston. She arrived early, before the mist had risen above the water, and walked through a village that had once been a stopping point for pioneers who purchased supplies, boarded one of the town’s numerous flatboats, and continued their journey down the Kanawha to the Ohio River.²⁴ In 1895, when Mary Lee Settle’s grandmother, Addie Tompkins, arrived from Charleston in Cedar Grove, it was still a lazy village, but by the time Mother Jones arrived “the roads were already dark with coal dust, ground in by the weather, and the raindrops on the windowsills [of the old Tompkins house] were black.” By 1901, this river town with a boatyard and cottages built of slave-made redbrick had become a bustling commercial center, serving hundreds of mine workers who lived and worked in the new collieries located above the village at Ward, where the Kellys Creek Coal Mining Company had built new Jenny Lind houses for the miners and several tall wooden houses on the hillsides for the superintendents. A railroad from Ward’s original mine cut the town in half, and on one side of the tracks there were rows of company-built shacks spilling down to the river and the old boatyard.²⁵

Only a few early risers noticed the strange woman meandering through the streets with a shawl covering her shoulders and the top of her embroidered dress. She had a pretty face with bright blue eyes and white hair that fell down on her rosy cheeks, and she wore what one observer described as “a nice-lady black pot hat.” A woman of average height, sturdily built but not fat, she appeared to be in her fifties, but she marched along like someone much younger.²⁶

When the visitor saw a lamplight flickering through a window of a grocery store, she knocked on the door, and the proprietor, a Mr. Marshall, invited her into a back room and offered her some breakfast. She thanked

him for his hospitality and then introduced herself as Mrs. Mary Jones, a “walking delegate” for the UMWA. At that moment, the storekeeper realized that he was sitting face-to-face with none other than the notorious Mother Jones, the agitator who had been raising hell up north. “All the time he was frightened and kept looking out the little window,” Jones later wrote of the grocer. He told her that if the mine owners knew she was in his store, they would close it down; nonetheless, Marshall offered to help his famous guest by telling her how to get word out to the miners that she would hold a secret meeting on a hillside that night.



New Jenny Lind houses in the Badbottom section of Ward on Kellys Creek.

At nightfall Jones trudged up the creek bed behind a young miner carrying a kerosene lantern. When she came to the designated spot on a mountain slope, a group of forty men waited for her in the midst of some boulders. While her comrade held a light over her head, Mother Jones spoke about a great union movement that had lifted Pennsylvania coal diggers up out of poverty, and railed about the men and boys who had been “murdered” in a mine explosion at Red Ash by greedy West Virginia mine owners who valued profits more than human lives.²⁷

“Mother Jones was always angry,” a former coal miner recalled. “She’d swear at anybody,” not only at the bosses and their “bloodhounds”—the

deputy sheriffs and hired mine guards—but at union officials who cozied up to the employers and sold out their own members. Mine workers who encountered Jones for the first time were thunderstruck when this woman, who looked like a grandmother, spoke to them like a drill sergeant.²⁸

That night, on a rocky slope above Kellys Creek, Jones called upon her listeners to stand up and act like men, “not like cringing serfs.” She carried on until the time was right to ask who among them would come forward and take the “oath of obligation” to the miners’ union. To her delight, all of them lined up, and then one by one each man came before her and raised his right hand and swore to honor the principles of brotherhood; forbear any act of discrimination against a fellow worker on account of creed, color, or nationality and “defend freedom of thought whether expressed by tongue or pen.”²⁹

Mother Jones retired for the evening feeling pleased with her work, but when she awoke the next morning, a miner burst into her room with terrible news: There had been spies among the miners who took the union oath the night before, and when the men who had taken the pledge reported for work that day, the pit boss told each one to step aside; then he ordered them to clear out of the company’s houses. None of them would ever work in the valley again.

“This started the fight,” Jones noted years later. It was a fight she would carry to many other coal towns that fall and winter. It was a fight that would brand her “the most dangerous woman in America,” a hard and dangerous fight that would link her purpose on earth to the destiny of West Virginia’s coal miners, the men she would always call her “boys.”

As soon as Jones heard that the Kellys Creek Coal Mining Company had fired all the miners who had taken the union pledge, she planned a protest. “Mr. Marshall, the grocery man, got courageous” and rented his store to her as a place to hold “indignation meetings.” When word of this agitation reached company headquarters back in Columbus, Ohio, the general manager hurried down to Cedar Grove on his special railroad car and held a meeting of his own in front of the company store. When he told his miners they should be ashamed of being led around by an old woman, several of them defiantly shouted “Hurrah for Mother Jones!”

The next day was Sunday, and after prayer services ended that morning, Jones sent runners up the valley with word that she would hold a rally to support the men who had been fired. When the miners and their families

walked down from the company houses in Ward, Jones gathered them in front of the company's hotel and yelled for the general manager to come out. "He did not appear," she recalled in her memoir, but "two of the company's lap dogs were on the porch. One of them said, 'I'd like to hang that old woman to a tree.' 'Yes,' said the other, 'and I'd like to pull the rope.'"

"On we marched to our meeting place under the trees," she remembered. "Over a thousand people came and the two lap dogs came sniveling along too." Jones began to speak under the crimson cedars, but then stopped suddenly and pointed at the two men who followed the parade. She put her back up against a big tree and called out to them in a stage voice: "You said that you would like to hang this old woman to a tree! Well, here's the old woman and here's the tree. Bring along your rope and hang her!" Jones excelled at this kind of theatrical performance, and her antics thrilled and amused the crowd. By the time the meeting ended, she had gathered even more colliers into her flock.³⁰

A few days later, Addie Tompkins glanced out the window of her handsome home on the edge of Cedar Grove to the creek below and saw something that riveted her attention. There in the cold water of Kellys Creek stood Jones. She was wearing miner's boots, holding her skirts up with one hand and gesturing with the other like a bandleader, as she regaled a bunch of miners on their way to town. She had waded into the creek when mine company agents told her she could not speak on the roads or the railroad tracks because they were private property.³¹

By this time, Tompkins had heard many tales of Mother Jones's bravery, accounts of how she once "walked right by a copperhead and never paused," and how she strolled past an unsuspecting foreman and into the mine "with a carbide lamp on a miner's hat she borrowed." Jones found "her boys, sat with them on the gob pile [of slate], and organized while they shared their beans and fatback and cornbread with her." On another occasion, she "had to get out of one mining camp at night because her boys found out that the superintendent and his men were plotting to kill her and an organizer who was with her, [and] burn them in coke ovens . . ." Late in her life, it occurred to Addie Tompkins that Mother Jones behaved like "a woman who had replaced her past with zeal for what she was doing, as if she had already died and had nothing left to fear."³²

During the winter of 1902, Jones tested her limits by venturing back into the mountain hollows to preach the union gospel to coal town “wage slaves.” One rainy night, when she was heading down a steep goat path to a rally, she slipped and slid most of the way down. “My bones are sore today,” she wrote to President Mitchell, who replied like a worried son. He pleaded with her to take care and save her strength for this drive, because, he wrote, if the union failed in West Virginia this time, it would suffer the consequences in its next round of bargaining with the midwestern coal companies.³³

Mary Jones had reached the age of sixty-five in 1902—at a time when the life expectancy of American women was forty-eight—but she took pride in defying her age, ignoring her sore bones and carrying on. A fellow organizer, who admitted he often whined and thought the battle not worth the effort, reported that Mother Jones never complained: “No mountain seems too high, or path too rugged as long as she can find a receptive audience.” As winter turned to spring that year, she found many receptive audiences in the Kanawha coalfield. “Our people are responding like braves,” she reported to Mitchell that May. “After three weeks of hard work I feel Kellys Creek is ours . . .”³⁴

Mother Jones’s self-styled “invasion” of Kellys Creek represented one of the many grassroots campaigns trade unionists were conducting in minefields, rail yards, garment districts, factory towns, and seaports across the land. Prosperity had returned, unemployment had declined, and organized labor was on the march. Strikes and boycotts had never been more effective. By the end of the year, membership in the unions affiliated with the AFL had doubled in the span of just three years and the UMWA had emerged as one of the nation’s largest, most diverse labor organizations.³⁵



Mother Jones, 1902.

After she evangelized among the miners of Kellys Creek, Jones crossed the Great Kanawha and wended her way through scores of coal camps that lined Paint Creek and Cabin Creek. As her recruiting drive gained momentum, President Mitchell warned her that the UMWA faced a grave challenge from the anthracite mine owners in Pennsylvania, who refused to discuss an extension of the trade agreement they had grudgingly signed two years before. When the UMWA's executive board reluctantly called for a strike on May 12, President Mitchell wrote to Mother Jones: "I am of the opinion that this will be the fiercest struggle in which we have yet engaged. It will be a fight to the end, and our organization will either achieve a great triumph or it will be completely annihilated."³⁶

The great strike in the northern fields excited the newly organized miners of West Virginia, so much so that many of them wanted to act in support of the anthracite miners. Mitchell told them they were not ready to strike, but local union leaders decided to seize the moment anyway. On June 7, 1902, approximately sixteen thousand Mountain State miners shut down 408