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Honors Thesis

FORGETTING THE MINE WARS: ERASING INSURRECTION IN WEST
VIRGINIAN HISTORY

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

Department of History
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ABSTRACT

FORGETTING THE MINE WARS: ERASING INSURRECTION IN WEST VIRGINIAN HISTORY

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History Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis examines the concerted effort in the West Virginia school system to forget a massive labor movement in the early 20th century. Business leaders and government leaders turned to the classroom to try and control the memory of future generations to ensure a positive perception of the coal industry and avoid anymore violent confrontations. After a brief summary of the Mine Wars for context, this thesis uses textbooks to analyze how the authors omitted the conflict and instead used patriotic propaganda to create loyal citizens. Although the Mine Wars have since been included in state history textbooks, the impact of their absence in textbooks for over 50 years is undeniable. The current relationship that West Virginia has with coal stands as a testament of the power of selective memory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

In February 2018, a quarter of a million students in West Virginia stayed home from school due to a state-wide teacher strike that would go on for two weeks. Called by two of the largest labor unions in the United States, the strikers protested low pay and the high cost of health benefits for teachers in the state. Teachers were fed up with the state government's empty promises. Any proposed legislation that raised pay for teachers also included unwanted components regarding the promotion of charter schools or the diminishment of their insurance. The teachers garnered national attention, significantly, they even drew support another union all too familiar with unfair treatment and empty promises in the state of West Virginia.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) sent members to protest alongside the teachers. The President of the Union, Cecil E. Roberts, in the face of threats from the state senate to fire striking teachers declared: "From the Baldwin-Felts thugs at Paint Creek and Cabin Creek to Sherriff Chafin at Blair Mountain[...] the UMWA has a long history of standing up to union-busting bullies in West Virginia... the Senate [is] no different, and we will never back down to their kind."¹ The events referenced by Mr. Roberts are collectively known as the Mine Wars of West Virginia, a number of conflicts that spanned two decades and were responsible for many deaths, untold destruction of property, and what ultimately became the largest armed insurrection since the Civil War. In 2018 miners stood with educators when they faced injustice, but the tragic irony is that

¹"West Virginia's Senate leadership's union busting is an embarrassment to our state," *United Mine Workers of America*, last modified June 4, 2019, <http://umwa.org/news-media/press/west-virginias-senate-leaderships-union-busting-is-an-embarrassment-to-our-state/>.

for years teachers had failed to honor, or at times even acknowledge the history of the miners when they too fought for fair treatment under the law.

I am a product of the West Virginian public school system. I took a state history class, as is customary at the 8th grade level, and was “knighted” by the state superintendent for scoring in the top one percent on a comprehensive exam all about West Virginia. The West Virginia Studies course accomplished its primary goal in my case: to instill a sense of pride in being from the Mountain State. I felt deceived when in college, half-way across the country from my home, I learned about the violent history of the Mine Wars. For years after the conflict, the history of labor in West Virginia was deliberately suppressed by state officials and coal companies. Even today as a growing scholarly body of work and public educational material focuses on the Mine Wars, the damage of wiping history books for 50 years has been done— West Virginia has forgotten one of the most formative chapters in its own history.

Though there are many recent articles that reference the Mine Wars as “forgotten,” none explore why and how that happened. The New York Times called the conflict “among the best and largely forgotten American stories.”² The Smithsonian published an article in 2017 titled “The Coal Mining Massacre America Forgot” and the Saturday Evening Post another in 2017: “The Buried History of West Virginia’s Coal Wars.”³ But none of these articles address *how* an entire state and nation forgot a

²Dwight Garner, “A Deep, Dark Fight for Dignity,” *The New York Times*, last modified Jan 29, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/books/james-greens-the-devil-is-here-in-these-hills.html>.

³Lorraine Boissoneault, “The Coal Mining Massacre America Forgot,” *The Smithsonian*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/forgotten-matewan-massacre-was-epicenter-20th-century-mine-wars-180963026/>; Nicolas Gilmore, “The Buried History of West Virginia Coal Wars,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, Sep 8, 2018, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2018/09/buried-history-west-virginias-coal-wars/>.

movement that mobilized thousands to arm themselves and fight against mistreatment. Knowing what happened in the years following the Mine Wars is essential to understand its current place in the state and country's memory and the implications for the West Virginians.

A Concise Summary of the Mine Wars

Scholars, including Dr. James Green, a labor historian at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and Dr. David Corbin of University of Maryland, have written comprehensive works on the history of the Mine Wars. Their books, and most others that recount the plight of these miners, have been published within the last decade. The insurrection has received increased attention recently in academia, but there is a vast disconnect between scholarly publications and public-school curriculum. These accounts are not being used in the classroom. As follows, I describe major events, people, and themes to give context and appreciation to the scale of the conflict. I relied heavily on Green and Corbin's works in this description.

Prior to the year 1903, miners in West Virginia were for the most part docile. Though the conditions they faced were inhumane, resistance was unorganized and never lasted long. "For miners, the system resembled something like feudalism. Sanitary and living conditions in the company houses were abysmal, wages were low, and state politicians supported wealthy coal company owners rather than miners."⁴ In many coal towns the common practice was to pay miners with company currency called scrip and forcing them to purchase goods only at the company store. This allowed coal companies to maximize profits and ensure that miners remained poor and loyal to their jobs. By the

⁴Boissoneault, "The Coal Mining Massacre America Forgot."

turn of the century, many miners were fed up with the horrendous conditions and the state became a powder keg requiring only a spark to ignite full-fledged insurrection.

That spark arrived in West Virginia in 1903 in the form of a fiery Irish immigrant named Mary Harris Jones. Nicknamed the “miners’ angel” or just affectionately referred to as “Mother Jones”, she was welcomed to West Virginia as an experienced labor organizer and powerful orator.⁵ Early attempts to unionize failed. Mother Jones described the carnage when coal companies hired private detectives to break the strike: “On a mattress wet with blood lay a miner. His brains had been blown out while he slept. In five other shacks, men lay dead. In one of them, a baby boy and his mother sobbed over the father’s corpse.”⁶ Mother Jones, though temporarily defeated, would play a key role in the ongoing conflict.



Mother Jones speaks to a large crowd in Montgomery, W.V.

⁵James Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia’s Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom*, (New York City: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015), 18.

⁶Philip S. Foner, *Mother Jones Speaks: Speeches and Writings of a Working-Class Fighter Collection*, (New York City: Pathfinder Press, 1983), 94.

Tensions flared once again in 1912 when two strikes simultaneously broke out in Paint Creek and Cabin Creek. Violence from both sides escalated as private detectives threatened, beat, and even killed striking miners. Miners retaliated violently in response. In one case a local sheriff and several detectives boarded a train outfitted with rifles and a Gatling gun, driving it up the Paint Creek holler and unleashing a hail of bullets on the tent town there, killing one miner and injuring many more.⁷



Striking miners in Scott's Run, W.V.

⁷Fred A. Barkey, "The Bull Moose Special," *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*, 11 January 2011, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/707>.

By the summer of 1920, tensions finally boiled over in the town of Matewan. A pro-union sheriff named Sid Hatfield repeatedly thwarted private detectives attempting to evict miners, and when they produced a warrant for his arrest, a deadly gunfight broke out. No one is sure who shot first, but the fight left ten men dead. The state government seemed to have sided with the coal companies and their hired detectives as illustrated by one district court report which outlined that Hatfield planned to murder the detectives from the beginning when he said before the altercation “we’re gonna get them God-damned sons of bitches,” and placed men on the rooftops with rifles for a surprise assault.⁸ Regardless, Sid Hatfield was subsequently hailed as a hero by miners everywhere for having stood up to the invincible coal companies and their thugs. His newfound fame didn’t last long, however. When appearing in a nearby town to defend himself in court, he was shot dead on the courthouse steps by Felts detectives. All of this led the Governor to declare martial law in “Bloody Mingo” county where this all transpired: “I, Ephraim F. Morgan[...] do hereby declare and proclaim a state of war, insurrection and riot still exists in the said County of Mingo.”⁹

⁸“Matewan Massacre: May 19th, 1920,” original is housed in the West Virginia Archives and History Library.

⁹Ephraim F. Morgan, “State of West Virginia A Proclamation by the Governor,” May 29th, 1921, original is housed in the West Virginia Archives and History Library.

Armed miners prepare to march south toward Mingo.



West Virginia & Regional History Center

Outraged by Hatfield's murder and the unjust imprisonment of many miners under martial law, a local leader of the UMWA called miners from all over to assemble in the state's capital city of Charleston and prepare for a march down to Mingo to free their brothers. The rhetoric was violent, and the miners were armed and prepared for war. About 5,000 men were gathered when they started marching south, gaining numbers all along the way. While the miners continued their militant march southward, the state government charged Sheriff Don Chafin of Logan county to stop the miners from entering Mingo. He enlisted the help of detectives, policemen, and even local townspeople to set up a defense at Blair Mountain. Now 10,000 men strong, the miners arrived at Blair Mountain and immediately engaged the defenders. Casualties were low, but the battle stretched across a 25-mile front, as men on both sides refused to back down.

Amid the ongoing violence, the coal companies used their control of the press to try and shape the narrative. Local papers like the Logan Banner and the Williamson Daily News were flooded with pro-mining articles during the Mine Wars. These articles downplayed the significance of strikes: “Happily, the strike is nearing an end” even as the exact opposite was happening.¹⁰ Another article played to the patriotic nature of West Virginians,

“In these days of universal unrest and frequent outbreaks of open violence it is important that the substantial and law-abiding citizen should know and do his duty as a protector and guardian of the public peace... it is to the decided interest of the people of Mingo county that the violence and lawlessness that is being practiced here should be brought to an end. The reputation of the county is at stake.”¹¹

Mine operators also sought to discredit union leaders like Mother Jones by claiming she was inciting anarchy and violence, even as she later begged miners for peaceful demonstration.¹²

Coal barons not only flexed their muscles through their control of the press, but also tried to exploit the divide between unionists and non-unionists. Coal companies often rounded up miners that they themselves had brought in to replace striking miners and had them officially testify of the violence of the unions. Curiously, these affidavits of scab miners are all nearly identical. Only blank lines are provided so that the miner could provide pertinent dates and his signature, but every single document contained the phrase, “I was and am satisfied with the working conditions and wages offered by the

¹⁰Williamson Coal Operators Association, “Nobody Wins, Everybody Loses,” *Williamson Daily News*, July 20, 1920.

¹¹Williamson Coal Operators Association, “The Duty of a Citizen.” *Logan Banner*, August 19, 1920.

¹²Williamson Coal Operators Association, “Mother Jones’ Mission.” *Williamson Daily News*, June 22, 1920.

company.”¹³ Undoubtedly, there were tensions between union miners and those who refused to join, but the coal companies sought to control the narrative by choosing exactly what was written and published and then using it in the courts.

Sheriff Chafin’s men dig in at Blair Mountain, setting up machine gun nests across the ridge.



West Virginia & Regional History Center

The miners surrendered quickly at Blair Mountain when 2,500 federal troops and air power sent from President Harding arrived. Many of the miners were veterans themselves and had no quarrel with the national government. The consequences of the Mine Wars were many; though final tallies of death counts are disputed, hundreds of men, both miners and detectives, fell victim to the violence. Coal companies reported hundreds of thousands of dollars lost in one coal field alone due to the strike.¹⁴ About 1,000 miners were sentenced for treason against the state and country and many of them served jail time. Most notably, Union membership decreased drastically, from over 50,000 before the battle of Blair Mountain to under 1,000 the year after.¹⁵ After all the arrests and nothing to show for it, people in West Virginia simply didn’t see unionizing as an effective way to improve working conditions. The crushing blow to union resistance left the door wide open for

¹³W.M. Collins, “Affidavit of W. M. Collins,” June 6, 1921, original is housed in the West Virginia Archives and History Library.

¹⁴Williamson Coal Operator Association, “\$447,000,” *Williamson Daily News*, Aug. 24, 1920.

¹⁵Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 147.

business and state leaders to try and implement a new system to control the narrative and ensure nothing like this would ever happen again.

Phil Conley, the ACA, and West Virginia Education

Amid the chaos of the Mine Wars, 150 businessmen, many coal operators among them, met on March 4th, 1920 in Charleston to discuss the concerning circumstances and possible solutions. It was determined that propaganda in the newspapers was not enough to ensure an obedient workforce in the future; they needed to turn to the schools. With the Governor's full support, the American Constitutional Association was formed. Though this was not a state agency, it enjoyed quasi-official status in the school system, controlling selection of textbooks and what was taught about the state's history.¹⁶

The organization's purpose was clear: to spread the ideal of "Americanism" in West Virginia schools. Americanism was defined by the Governor as a "respect for the constituted authorities, obedience to the law and the preservation of order."¹⁷ Under that definition, he went on to qualify who could teach in his state, "I want to go on record as being unalterably opposed to the employment of any teacher or instructor, male or female, in any of the educational institutions of this state who is not one hundred percent American." The First Red Scare was in full swing in America, and the Governor and his associates feared any communist influence on their future workers. The ACA and the state government effectively rebaited union activity in West Virginia and condemned the recent uprising. Government and business leaders wanted a docile workforce, and any variance of that taught in the schools would not be tolerated. The state passed a law

¹⁶John C. Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia: Creating a Modern Industrial State 1916-1925*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 97.

¹⁷Ibid, 140.

in 1931 that “prohibit[ed] study of social problems, economics, foreign affairs, world government, socialism or communism until basic courses in American state and local geography and history are completed.”¹⁸ Although the Mine Wars were not explicitly listed here, law makers clearly had in mind the dangerous organization of workers and wanted to keep that history out of the schools at least before the state’s official Americanism-infused curriculum was taught.

An educator named Phil Conley was chosen as the first Managing Director of the ACA and was tasked with filling the schools with pro-business literature. Conley had graduated from West Virginia University in 1914 and spent four years as a superintendent of schools in a small district in Northern West Virginia.¹⁹ He was a Great War veteran, and a staunch believer in the order of government and the power of education.

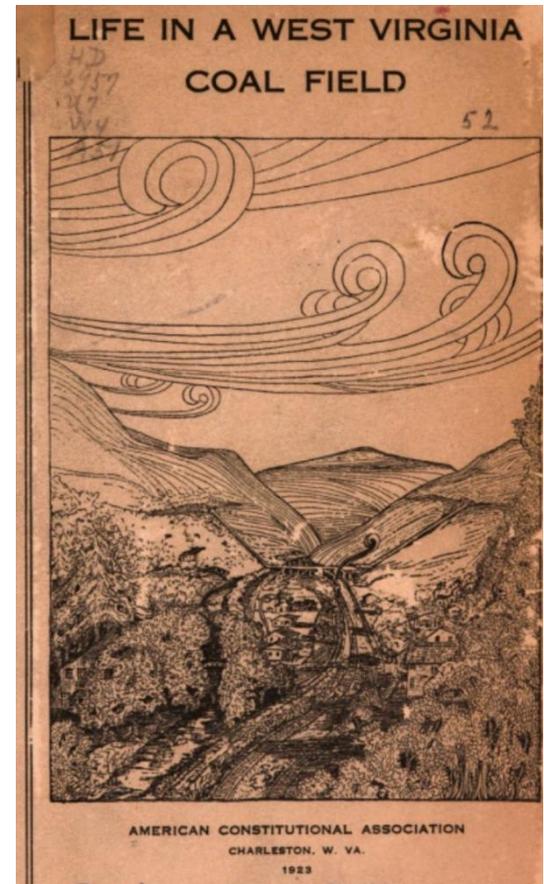
Conley first published through the ACA in 1923 a pamphlet in response to the negative reputation coal companies had earned for deplorable conditions in company towns. Titled, “Life in a West Virginia Coal Field,” this document is 73 pages of propaganda reminiscent of that in the coal-owned newspapers. The Governor endorsed

¹⁸“West Virginia Code 18-2-9- Required courses of instruction,” *Lawserver*, 1931, https://www.lawserver.com/law/state/west-virginia/wv-code/west_virginia_code_18-2-9.

¹⁹Marshall Bucklaw, "Phil Conley," *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*, Oct. 5, 2012, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1503>.

Conley's "unbiased study" in the preface of the pamphlet and urged West Virginians everywhere to believe its findings.²⁰ Conley not only discounted the "dark foreboding, drab picture," of company towns that was given by "welfare workers, reformers and agitators from other states," but went as far as to claim that mining towns were better in almost every way to other small communities.²¹ Schools, churches, houses, all provided by the coal companies, were said to be of the highest quality. Even the company stores "do not make unfair charges for merchandise."²² There was no mention of conflict or private detectives in the pamphlet, only that state and company enforcers of the law made "our section of the coal field[...] a different, and a happier place in which to live."²³

Conley went to work quickly distributing the pamphlet to every school in the state. He also began publishing a patriotic newsletter titled "The American Citizen" that was also distributed state-wide.²⁴ The ACA President and J.P. Morgan employee explained the newsletter "would be invaluable in ACA efforts to preach a doctrine of law and order and Americanism."²⁵ Conley was the only employee on payroll for the ACA, making 6,000



²⁰Philip Conley, *Life in a West Virginia Coal Field*, (Charleston: American Constitutional Association, 1923), ii.

²¹Ibid, 12, 14.

²²Ibid, 44.

²³Ibid, 48.

²⁴John T. Harris, *West Virginia Legislative Hand Book and Manual and Official Register*, (Charleston: Jarret Printing Company, 1921), 544.

²⁵Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia*, 124.

dollars a year from his position as Managing Director alone, almost double what any coal miner or teacher was making at the time.²⁶

Textbooks

At the time of the Mine Wars, trained historian Virgil A. Lewis' *History and Government of West Virginia* was the standard book used throughout schools. Although updated repeatedly with newer editions in 1912, 1916, and 1922, Lewis' work was originally published in 1896 and focused mainly on the settling of West Virginia and its role in the Civil War.²⁷ The Mine Wars were too contemporary at the time to be included in the book and even though it was still being used 50 years after its original publication, no information after 1896 was ever included.²⁸

Even though Phil Conley had no formal historical training, he was encouraged by state officials and his business friends to write a new state history book for use in schools. To streamline the process and reduce critical scrutiny, Conley used his own publishing company, The West Virginia Publishing Company, to release his first book. Thus, *West Virginia: Yesterday and Today* was first published in 1931 and instituted as the new state history textbook. In the preface, Conley's commitment to the ACA's goal of spreading Americanism is evident:

“To be a patriotic citizen of the United States, a man must know our country, its past and present. To fulfill his duties and responsibilities to his state and to achieve the fullest pleasure and pride in it, the West Virginian must know West Virginia— its history, its government, its industries, its people.”²⁹

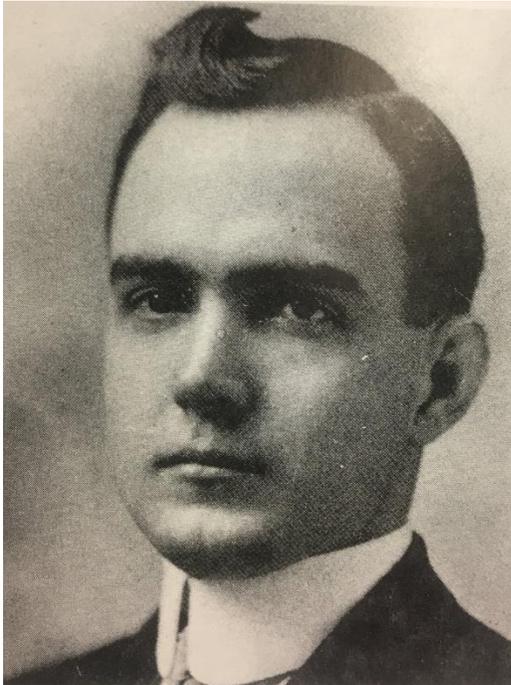
²⁶Ibid, 124.

²⁷Kenneth R. Bailey, "Virgil A. Lewis," The West Virginia Encyclopedia, Dec. 7, 2015, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1367>.

²⁸Virgil Anson Lewis, *History and Government of West Virginia*, (New York: American Book Company, 1912).

²⁹Philip Conley, *West Virginia: Yesterday and Today*, (Charleston: West Virginia Publishing Company, 1931), v.

Despite his statement of the necessity of knowing the past and present, Conley made no mention whatsoever of the recent Mine Wars, though he did include an entire chapter on West Virginia during WWI.



Phil Conley, Managing Director of the ACA
and publisher of a major WV Studies
Textbook, *West Virginia: Yesterday and Today*

Conley's book would be reprinted and "updated" a total of 11 times, all the while remaining the primary textbook used across the state for 41 years. Updates included sections on "Our Place in the Space Age" and "Our Future in Manufacturing," but still the Mine Wars remained completely omitted.³⁰ In the chapters entitled "The Early Twentieth Century" and "Changes after WWI" Conley only has this to say on labor: "**Labor Changes.** Women began to find jobs other than housework and teaching school. They obtained work in factories and offices. Workers from foreign countries came to West Virginia to take jobs in the mines and other industries."³¹ The rest of the chapter on the 20th century focuses on the "progress" of West Virginians. He describes the

³⁰Ibid, 245, 276.

³¹Ibid, 147.

expansion of businesses, the influence of the automobile and radio, and the impact of urbanization and electricity, but is silent on the massive labor movement that just recently made national headlines. In Conley's newer editions, he included this promise: "The amount of material requiring students to think, to form opinions, to express original conclusions is increased."³² Ironically, from his book it was impossible for students to form any opinion at all about the Mine Wars. Conley only provided them with propaganda that idealized West Virginia and the companies interested in her natural resources.

Parts of Conley's book read more like an advertisement to visit the state than a history textbook:

"People travel long distances to visit West Virginia, for here they find interesting natural features and many places of unusual beauty. There is no more magnificent scenery east of the Mississippi River than can be found in our state. Our mountains and hills and valleys present views which equal any in the world."³³

In Conley's chapter on WWI, he writes, "West Virginia's natural wealth was a powerful help in the winning of the war. Hundreds of thousands of tons of coal were needed. Our miners worked overtime to produce it."³⁴ Of course there is no mention of UMWA leaders telling miners to halt strikes and endure terrible conditions to support the war effort. Conley wanted to portray West Virginia as a united patriotic force working overtime to save the country.

Conley often portrayed industry very favorably, including sections that credited DuPont Chemical, Union Carbide, and the International Nickel Company for essential economic growth in West Virginia. But nothing commands Conley's respect more than

³²Ibid, v.

³³Ibid, 21.

³⁴Ibid, 155.

the resource that defines the state. “Coal has been the principal factor in the advancement of the human race. In the past two hundred years inventions depending upon the use of coal have changed the course of human history.”³⁵ Conley spends the rest of the chapter cementing West Virginia’s place as the nation’s power plant:

“If quality and quantity are considered, the Appalachian coal area is the greatest coal field in all the world... West Virginia is said to have more coal than all of Great Britain... Since 1931 West Virginia has led the United States in producing bituminous coal... People who use coal have learned that the purest coal in the world comes from West Virginia... Coal is used as a fuel to heat our homes and run our factories. It is used to produce electricity to perform countless services for man. Industry, science, and our homes depend upon coal as a most important source of chemicals.”³⁶

The Mine Wars did not fit into Conley’s desired narrative that the coal industry was inherently West Virginian, so he omitted them entirely. Interestingly, Conley did choose to include an entire chapter on the different grasses of West Virginia, valuing trivial knowledge over stories of sacrifice, blood, and inequality.

Out-of-state efforts to inform the public of the Mine Wars were thwarted as well. As part of a New Deal program, the Writers’ Project of the WPA produced guides to each of the fifty states. When *West Virginia: A Guide to the Mountain State* was being prepared for publication in 1939, local politicians and the press did everything they could to stop its publication.³⁷ The governor of the time called it “propaganda from start to finish,” and claimed it did not portray the state fairly.³⁸ The book was not published until any mention of the Mine Wars was completely purged from the manuscript.³⁹ Politicians

³⁵Ibid, 176.

³⁶Ibid, 177-178.

³⁷Jerry B. Thomas, “The Nearly Perfect State- Governor Homer Adams Holt, the WPA Writers’ Project and the Making of *West Virginia: A Guide to the Mountain State*.” *West Virginia History*, Volume 52, 1993, 91.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

worked hard to ensure that the coal industry was still portrayed in a favorable light in all histories of the state.

By the mid-1970s however, pressure from the scholars began to mount to acknowledge the state's darker past. Dr. William T. Doherty, a labor historian from Missouri that joined West Virginia University's faculty in the 1960s, was appalled at the lack of treatment on the subject.⁴⁰ The Department of Education allowed him to co-author a book with Phil Conley in 1974 simply titled *West Virginia History*. The book still contained familiar elements of Conley's previous works, but for the first time included a few pages on the Mine Wars.⁴¹ It wasn't until after Conley's Death in 1979 that Doherty was able to publish his own textbook, with an entire chapter dedicated to the Mine Wars including descriptions of Mother Jones, the Matewan Massacre, and the Battle of Blair Mountain.⁴² Though Doherty's book was published, most counties opted to use a different book by Otis Rice titled *West Virginia: The State and its People*. This book only contained two pages on the Mine Wars and limited its negative portrayal of coal companies.⁴³

One journalist and native West Virginian spoke on the general attitude among scholars about including controversial topics like the Mine Wars in their publications, "Few credible historians want their writing to be superficial, to serve some 'official story'

⁴⁰Samantha Raphelson, "William T. Doherty Jr., history professor, dies at 90," *Washington Post*, last modified Sept. 23, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/william-t-doherty-jr-history-professor-dies-at-90/2013/10/23/1f07b710-3b65-11e3-b6a9-da62c264f40e_story.html.

⁴¹William T. Doherty and Philip Conley, *West Virginia History*, (Charleston: Educational Foundation Inc., 1974), 333-337.

⁴²William T. Doherty, *West Virginia Studies: Our Heritage*, (Charleston: Educational Foundation Inc., 1984), 206-220.

⁴³Otis K. Rice, *West Virginia: The State and Its People*, (Hugheson: Appalachian RM, 1972).

that only included ‘good things’ about the state. Since the 1970s, at least, the goal is to give students a richer and more substantive understanding of their past.”⁴⁴ Even so, the state still ultimately controlled what books were approved in schools, and controversies with textbook selection persist today. The same journalist recounted the frustrating process of promoting a new state history book by celebrated Appalachian historian John Alexander Williams where they were beaten out by a twenty-year old, more “traditional” textbook.⁴⁵ Even as recently as 10 years ago, a bill brought before the state legislature sought to “reinstate” the 1931 law which made it illegal to teach “social problems” before essential American and state history.⁴⁶ Ultimately the bill didn’t need to pass because today the law still stands and it is technically illegal to talk about the issues surrounding the Mine Wars before students learned pro-American and pro-coal West Virginian history. The current textbooks written by a retired high school teacher give moderate attention to the Mine Wars, none of them exceeding six pages dedicated to the conflict.⁴⁷

Geography and the WV Studies Course

Despite the great lengths that state government and coal companies have gone to in attempts to erase their controversial past, there are some people that remember. Geography is important when it comes to remembering the Mine Wars. In Matewan, the site of the bloody shootout between Hatfield and Felts detectives, there now exists a Mine

⁴⁴Topper Sherwood, “Writing and Publishing in West Virginia,” last modified July 26, 2015, <http://toppersherwood.com/2015/07/26/writing-and-publishing-in-west-virginia/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶“House Bill 3260,” WV Legislature, last modified 2009 http://www.wvlegislature.gov/Bill_Text_HTML/2009_SESSIONS/RS/Bills/hb3260%20intr.htm.

⁴⁷See textbooks *West Virginia: 150 Years of Statehood* and *West Virginia: The History of an American State* both by retired teacher Vicki Wood. In my case, our West Virginia Studies teacher had amassed a large source of materials from different sources, if we used one textbook I have no memory of it.

Wars Museum entirely dedicated to preserving the memory of this crucial event. A group called Friends of Blair Mountain protested in 2011 when coal companies wanted to destroy the site of the battleground through strip mining.⁴⁸ It was saved only because it was put on the national registry for historical sites. These southern communities still have ties to the miners that once marched for their rights there.

Comparatively, the more removed from the former coal fields, the less prone people are to care. One teacher in the Eastern panhandle remarked, “We don’t teach coal mining. It’s not our history.”⁴⁹ Far from the coal fields and the families that remember, the coal companies are free to create their own narrative. The state museum in Charleston has notoriously angered UMWA leadership for its treatment of the Mine Wars. The Union’s president wrote to the museum in 2011:

“I have a number of very serious concerns with what is an inaccurate portrayal of the UMWA and our history of oppression and struggle against the coal operators of the 19th and 20th centuries. Your presentation makes it seem as if the scrip system was little different from a credit card[...] Nowhere is it stated that miners had absolutely no choice as to whether they used scrip or not. Nowhere is it mentioned that going somewhere else instead of the company store to purchase goods and equipment was an offense frequently punishable by a beating[...] followed by dismissal from employment and eviction from the company house.”⁵⁰

The museum receives funding from big coal companies like Massey Energy and the pro-coal lobbyist group the West Virginia Coal Association. Outside the museum, a large statue funded in part by the coal companies honors the idealized version of the obedient, hard-working coal miner.

⁴⁸Ron Soodalter, “In the Battle for Blair Mountain, Coal Is Threatening to Bury Labor History,” *The Progressive*, Jan. 31, 2018, <https://progressive.org/magazine/the-battle-over-blair-mountain-famous-labor-site/>.

⁴⁹Margaret Miller, Email to Sam Heywood, 2019, “Mine Wars Questions.”

⁵⁰Ken Ward Jr., “UMWA Blasts WV State Museum,” *Coal Tattoo*, July 28, 2011, <http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/2011/07/28/umwa-blasts-w-va-state-museum/>.

Another factor continues to influence how the Mine Wars are remembered across the state: the objective of the West Virginia Studies course. Taught every year to roughly 22,000 eighth graders, the primary goal of the course listed today by the Department of Education is to “promote pride in our state, develop intellectual and participatory skills as well as foster attitudes that are necessary for students to participate as effective, involved, and responsible citizens,” language that has hardly changed since Conley’s Americanism.⁵¹ In 1931, Conley himself instituted the award that remains incredibly influential in schools today, the Golden Horseshoe award. There is a test administered every year and only around 200 of the top-performing students receive distinction. The exam includes sections on Geography, Civics, Economy, and History, and the main excuse that current teachers give for not talking about the Mine Wars is that there isn’t “time” for them due a curriculum that is supposed to prepare students in every category.⁵² The respected historian David A. Corbin commented on his own experience in the West Virginia educational system:



“During a dozen years of public schooling in West Virginia, I never heard about the great West Virginia Mine Wars[...] Instead I was taught happy and pleasant things about our state. This included such bits of information like the location of the world’s largest clothespin factory or the world’s biggest ash tray[...] When we were told of the importance of West Virginia held in relation to the rest of the nation, we were not informed of the fact that our coal heated its homes, fueled its industries, and powered its battleships for decades. Nor were we told about the

⁵¹“About the WV Golden Horseshoe Award,” *West Virginia Department of Education*, <https://wvde.state.wv.us/goldenhorseshoe/about.html>.

⁵²Margaret Miller, Email to Sam Heywood, 2019, “Mine Wars Questions.” In addition to Mrs. Miller I communicated with 7 other WV Studies Teachers, including my past teacher. All of them referenced “time” as an issue when covering the Mine Wars.

thousands of West Virginians who died getting that coal out of the ground. We were not told of the struggle these people underwent for safer working conditions and a better standard of living; that is, the struggle for their union. No, nothing about that. ‘The typical mountaineer’s historical education has been a process of trivial pursuit,’ notes Charleston Gazette columnist Rick Wilson, ‘While we were busy memorizing the counties in alphabetical order, we were certainly not taught about how our ancestors were swindled out of their mineral rights and land by outside coal interests or any unpleasant consequences thereof. Real history, like sex, was something you learned on the streets, if at all.’”⁵³

Though textbooks have since been updated to include information on the Mine Wars, the basic structure of the state pride-promoting class has remained unchanged for decades. It is highly unlikely that the system in place that prioritizes pro-West Virginian trivia over controversial social issues will likely give the Mine Wars the attention that they deserve.

Conclusion

The implications of this erasure of such an important chapter in West Virginia history are many. West Virginia’s ties to the coal industry are still incredibly strong. Current Governor Jim Justice is the wealthiest person in West Virginia and owner of 23 coal companies.⁵⁴ President Donald Trump needed only mention his intentions to revive the coal industry for crowds of people to erupt in frenzied applause. He won 68.5% percent of the vote in West Virginia, the largest share in any state in the country.⁵⁵ The general attitude toward coal in the state is overwhelmingly positive, even as it becomes

⁵³David Allen Corbin, *The West Virginia Mine Wars: An Anthology*, (Charleston: Appalachian Editions, 1990), i.

⁵⁴Brad McElhinny, ”Federal lawsuit goes after 23 Justice coal companies for unpaid safety fines,” *MetroNews*, May 7, 2019, <http://wvmetronews.com/2019/05/07/federal-lawsuit-goes-after-23-justice-coal-companies-for-unpaid-safety-fines/>.

⁵⁵Victoria Gennuso and Ryan Schmitt “Did Donald Trump Win West Virginia by 42 Points in 2016?” *Politfact*, Oct. 2,2019, <https://www.politifact.com/west-virginia/statements/2019/oct/02/donald-trump/did-donald-trump-win-west-virginia-42-points-2016/>.

increasingly damaging to the environment and less viable economically.⁵⁶ The objectives set by Conley and the ACA long ago were largely accomplished: teach West Virginians not to question the industry on which they depend. American Scholar F.B. Kaye mused over the effects of this type of patriotism in the school system,

“Another element which enters into rendering naïve patriotism the mere tool of popular prejudice is the universal *resistance to breaking habits of any kind*. Thus it comes that an indiscriminating campaign for patriotism may become a campaign for conceit, provincialism, and intolerance[...].”⁵⁷

Until West Virginians face the past in its entirety the potential for beneficial change in the present is limited.

I look back now on the day that I received the Golden Horseshoe award. I excitedly knelt before the superintendent as he tapped my shoulders with a broadsword in an arcane ritual and committed myself to be the ideal West Virginian. I beamed with pride dressed in my Sunday best as my mom took pictures with the state capitol looming behind me. The award I received that day represented a major accomplishment of my youth, but now things are not so simple. The award has come to represent the effort that private companies and state officials to whitewash the Mine Wars for their own interests. It represents a preference for blind patriotism over historical accuracy. It represents the fear of what presenting students with “controversial” history will do to our society. Though historical censorship is not confined to the Mountain State, it has existed there for too long. All West Virginians, especially young students, deserve to know the facts about the Mine Wars, and should think critically about the miners’ dire circumstances

⁵⁶Ken Ward Jr., “The Coal Industry Extracted a Steep Price From West Virginia,” *ProPublica*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/west-virginia-coal-industry-rise-of-natural-gas>.

⁵⁷Hennen, *The Americanization of West Virginia*, 127. Italics added.

and their violent reactions. Buried within the history of these events, there are lessons on the human condition from which future generations can only stand to benefit. It is time for the Mine Wars to come out of the dark in West Virginia.

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