There are many myths and stereotypes about Appalachia, and the legacy of coal that people think is the true history of the region. One of the myths and stereotypes was that Appalachia is a poor region because the economic growth that elevated America to a world power simply bypassed the region. Another stereotype was that Appalachia is made up of a never changing folk culture that came from British stock. Another myth was that Appalachians were too individualistic and fatalistic to organize themselves for collective action. A final stereotype was that Appalachians were so attached to the mountains that they prefer being poor at home than relocating to find a better life.

The truth is Appalachia was at the leading edge of the industrial expansion because it had the four major railroad systems. West Virginia had a very diverse culture with immigrants from all over the world. West Virginians organized by creating the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Many people did relocate to find better paying jobs. One of the most important truths was that the West Virginia miners were willing to fight for their rights by being part of the United Mine Workers union, during the Mine Wars. One of the people that made a profound impression on West Virginia and the Mine Wars was the agitator Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, a leader in the American labor movement from the 1890s until her death in 1930.



“Mother” Jones was born in Cork, Ireland approximately August 1, 1837. Her exact birthdate is unknown, the date of her baptism is used to estimate her age. She had to leave her home country as a teenager because of the Great Potato Famine. “Mother” Jones and her family moved to Canada where she finished her schooling. At the age of 23, she moved to the United States to be a teacher. In 1861, “Mother” Jones married George E. Jones, a member and organizer of the National Union of Iron Moulders. She later had to watch her husband and four children die from the Yellow Fever Epidemic in 1867. This was one of the major tragic events in “Mother” Jones’ life. The other tragic event that changed her life happened four years later when she lost her home, dress shop, and all of her possessions in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. At the age of 65, “Mother” Jones reinvented herself by becoming a labor organizer. She became involved with the UMWA by frequently organizing and leading miners to strike against mine management who had unfair practices.

 “Mother” Jones had a great impact on the unionization of Southern West Virginia mine workers. She made it her mission to motivate the miners to believe that there was something to fight for, and that they had a right not to be abused by the mine owners. In 1901, she came to West Virginia to get the miners to join the UMWA. “Mother” Jones quickly found out that this would not be an easy mission because there were private guards at the southern mines that carried guns and threatened to kill anyone who wanted to start a union. She had guns waived in her face, however, she was always there to help people when there was struggle and she would not give up.

 One of the strategies that “Mother” Jones used to get the miners to join the union was to promote the idea of collective bargaining to the southern miners to protect their rights. She held open public meetings where she spoke in social revolutionary terms, by telling the miners that the mine owners: did not own the towns or the mines, and that the mines belonged to the people. “Mother” Jones was very motherly to the miners and they really liked her because she was loud and cussed and was very passionate when she spoke. In six months’ time, she said that the miners went from being meek men who would not look her in the eye to strong men who were willing to stand up and fight for their rights. This movement and change in attitude was the start of the twenty year Mine Wars.

 In May 1902, “Mother” Jones led the charge for thousands of southern West Virginia miners to strike in support of and along with UMWA eastern Pennsylvania miners who were striking. The coal operators asked for help from the local authorities to stop the strike. The local authorities arrested “Mother” Jones to try and end the strike. She was arrested for organizing an illegal shutdown. At her trial, the prosecutor said that she was, “the most dangerous woman in America.” In spring of 1903, the mine operators ended the strike by sending armed men to kill many of the striking miners and scaring those who weren’t killed into returning to work.

 In July 1912, the regional UMWA officials in Charleston, WV refused to go to Cabin Creek, WV to help the miners. Frank Keeney, a union leader at Cabin Creek, asked “Mother” Jones to come there to help. On August 6, 1912, she arrived in Cabin Creek, the only town in the south that was not controlled by a mine operator. “Mother” Jones, known as the Miner’s Angel, gave a speech that inspired the miners at Cabin Creek to fight for their rights and go on strike the very next morning. A week later, she and Frank Keeney led 3,000 of the striking miners to Charleston, WV to hold a rally on the steps of the capitol to try and persuade the Governor of West Virginia to abolish the mine guard system. “Mother” Jones made an ominous warning to the governor stating that there would be much bloodshed if he did not make this change. After a year, the strike at Cabin Creek ended and the mine operators agreed to implement new operating procedures and the union officials were pressured to accept them.



There were two events that led to the Blair Mountain War of 1921: the Matewan Incident and the murder of Sid Hatfield, the police chief of Matewan. In the Matewan Incident, there was a deadly shootout in downtown Matewan, WV between miners and members of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. BFDA was an agency that was hired by mine operators to evict the family of miners from the mining towns that they were living in. During the incident, Albert and Lee Felts, brothers of Thomas Felts, owner of the detective agency, were killed. To avenge his brother’s deaths, Thomas Felts had men murder Sid Hatfield and his wife outside a McDowell County courthouse on August 1, 1921. After the Matewan Incident, on June 21, 1920, “Mother” Jones came to Mingo County, home of Matewan, to organize the miners. She held a meeting with over 1,500 miners where she inspired them to fight for their rights. In August 1921, after Sid Hatfield was murdered, “Mother” Jones and Frank Keeney called for a rally in Charleston, WV. Soon after the rally, many union miners gathered in a small town outside of Charleston to plan a march through Logan County to help miners in Mingo County. “Mother” Jones had second thoughts about this and thought that it would hurt the UMWA’s reputation. She tried to get someone to help her but nobody would so she took matters into her own hands. On August 24, 1921, “Mother” Jones arrived at the miner’s camps in the small town outside Charleston and she spoke to the miners that she had a telegram from President Harding stating that he was going to abolish the use of mine guards in West Virginia if the miners agreed to call off the march. Frank Keeney did not believe that the telegram was authentic. He contacted President Harding’s office and they said that the President never sent a telegram. Frank Keeney then sent out a public notice stating that the telegram was fake. “Mother” Jones left West Virginia that night because she realized that “her boys had turned into men with rifles” and would not listen to her. The miners ended up ignoring her warning and as many as 20,000 miners marched 90 miles through Logan County and engaged in two-week battle with more than 5,000 Logan County deputy sheriffs, mine guards, and state police. The Battle of Blair Mountain ended when President Harding placed the region under martial law and ordered 2,500 federal soldiers and a bomb squad to enter West Virginia and end the conflict. This resulted in the end of the Mine Wars and led to the collapse of the UMWA in southern West Virginia.

 Before “Mother” Jones came to West Virginia, the southern West Virginia miners did not feel that they had a right to fight the mine operators against their abuse. The miners thought that they had to accept what was being done to them and their families and that nothing would change. After “Mother” Jones came to West Virginia and taught the miners about collective bargaining, taught them how to stand up for their rights, and gave them hope of a better life. The miners became a very strong, independent group that was willing to do whatever it took to make a better life for them and their families. The twenty year Mine Wars resulted from “Mother” Jones’ influence on the miner’s attitudes and many positive changes were made to the mine industry during that time. However, they became so strong willed that they were willing to turn on even her and the UMWA if they felt the fight was important enough. It broke “Mother” Jones’ heart that her miners turned on her and she never returned to West Virginia again.

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