West Virginia Coalfield Battle: Origin of the Term “Redneck”

By AppalachianMagazine -
Like so many other slang words in the American lexicon, the term “redneck” can have multiple meanings. Some wear the title as a badge of honor, while others use it in a derogatory manner to describe people they feel are beneath them. But where exactly did this term come from?

Far from tractor-pulls and junkyards, the term ‘redneck’ can be traced to the dusty coalfields of Southern West Virginia nearly a century ago.

While the rest of the nation had ridden itself from the scars of slavery in the latter half of the 1800s, the once proud and free-spirited Scots-Irish of West Virginia’s Tug Valley region had become victims of the industrial revolution — the limitless resources buried deep beneath their homes proved to be an irresistible lust to many of the nation’s wealthiest corporations.

The late Matewan resident, Joseph P. Garland, stated that his grandfather — who was illiterate — was tricked by corporate lawyers into giving up 1,666 acres of the family’s land for a single shotgun.

Garland’s story is not unique to Appalachia, at the turn of the century non-residents owned over half the land in Mingo County, West Virginia; as was the case in several other coalfield communities.

Observing this problem, William MacCorkle, West Virginia Governor, warned the state legislature in his inaugural address on March 4, 1893, that “the state is rapidly passing under the control of large foreign and non-resident landowners.”
He cautioned that “the men who are today purchasing the immense acres of the most valuable lands in the state are not citizens and have only purchased in order that they may carry to their distant homes in the North the usufruct of the lands of West Virginia.”

Sadly, MacCorkle, the son of a Confederate Major and sixth consecutive Democratic governor of West Virginia, witnessed his dire warning prove true.

Within a generation the coal barons had become so powerful in the region that they literally owned entire communities. Everyone, including the sheriff, school teachers, politicians and even local pastors, were on the payroll of the mine owners.

The miners themselves were viewed as an expendable commodity by the companies, who paid their employees in script (a form of private currency that could only be spent in company-owned stores). There the miners were forced to purchase essential goods at considerably marked up rates. In essence, the companies benefited from a nearly free workforce.

Giving no concern to the safety of their workers, early 20th century mines in West Virginia were among the the most dangerous in the world. One historian has suggested that a U.S. soldier fighting in World War I stood a better statistical chance of surviving in battle than did a West Virginian working in a coal mine.

With limited pay and hardly any safety standards, miners throughout the Appalachian region began standing up against mine owners — forming unions and striking, demanding better working conditions.

Fresh off their victories in northern West Virginia and Pennsylvania, United Mine Workers union organizers turned their sites toward the West Virginia counties of Mingo and Logan.
The Mountain State’s southern coalfields would prove a far more difficult task than union leaders expected, as entire law enforcement departments were on the payrolls of outside mining companies and strict policies were put in place forbidding unionization.

Following armed skirmishes throughout 1920 between local citizens and hired mine guns, the miners of Mingo County rallied at the state’s capitol building in Charleston on August 7, 1921.

Upon receiving news that their demands to unionize had been rejected by company leaders, the miners became restless and began making plans to march – armed – on the mines back in their home of Mingo County.

On August 24, 1921, an estimated 13,000 miners had gathered and began marching towards the mines in Mingo County.

“Impatient to get to the fighting, miners near St. Albans, in West Virginia’s Kanawha County, commandeered a Chesapeake and Ohio freight train, renamed by the miners as the ‘Blue Steel Special’, to meet up with the advanced column of marchers at Danville in Boone County on their way to Bloody Mingo.” Standing between the miners and the Mingo County mines they sought to capture, however, was the West Virginia county of Logan and its fiercely anti-union sheriff Don Chafin.

Chafin was on the payroll of the Logan County Coal Operators Association and had assembled the nation’s largest private armed force of nearly 2,000.

Taking the high ground, Chafin’s men positioned themselves atop Blair Mountain, along the path of the miner’s march.

By August 29th, the standoff had escalated into a full blown civil war between the mine-owned sheriff’s office and the marching miners.
In an effort to avoid friendly-fire, all the miners agreed to wear red handkerchiefs around their necks.

“I remember Daddy leaving home to join the marching miners and he was wearing that red cloth around his neck,” recounted one woman who was just a young at the time of the march. “The people who stood up to the mines were called rednecks.”

Sporadic gun battles continued for over a week, with the miners at one time nearly breaking through to the town of Logan and their target destinations, the non-unionized counties to the south, Logan and Mingo.

Unfortunately for the miners, who armed with nothing more than single-shot shotguns and hunting rifles, they were fiercely outmatched by the hired guns of the coal barons.

The Logan County Sheriff’s Office even hired multiple private airplanes that dropped homemade bombs onto the marching miners. A combination of gas and explosive bombs left over from World War I were dropped in several locations. At least one did not explode and was recovered by the miners; it was used months later to great effect during treason and murder trials following the battle.

Fearful that the conflict could escalate into a full blown national rebellion (the Bolshevik Revolution had occurred less than four years earlier), President Warren Harding dispatched federal troops to squash the uprising.

Realizing they stood no chance against such forces, union leaders called off the march and ordered the miners to return to their homes.

In total, up to 135 individuals lost their lives, approximately 100 miners and up to 30 lawmen.
Following the battle, 985 miners were indicted for murder, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, and treason against the State of West Virginia.

Some were acquitted by sympathetic juries, while others were imprisoned for years.

The immediate result of the battle was a decisive win for the mine companies, as union membership in the coalfields of West Virginia plummeted – but the rednecks of West Virginia never gave up.

In 1935, more than a decade later, the rednecks of West Virginia finally tasted the fruits of their labor — winning the right to organize.