



LESSON PLAN

WEST VIRGINIA MINE WARS MUSEUM

wvminewars.org

401 Mate Street Matewan, West Virginia 25678

Lesson 7: The Battles of Matewan and Blair Mountain

Objectives:

- In this lesson, the students will develop an understanding of the underlying causes of the Battles of Matewan and Blair Mountain.
- In an interactive role-play with maps and historic accounts, students will be interjected into making a tough decision: should they join the march on Blair Mountain or sit it out? Students will weigh the options.

Materials Needed:

- [Historical background student handout](#)
- [Guiding questions student handout](#)

Activity 1: Warm Up

(Synchronous) Distribute the handout with the background on the story of the Battle of Matewan and the murder of Sid Hatfield. Ask students to read it, silently, and think about how they would react if they were the miners and their families at Paint Creek and Cabin Creek. Having role-played these characters in previous lessons, encourage them to put themselves in the participants' shoes in thinking about how they might feel during this event.

(Asynchronous) Distribute the handout with the background on the story of the Battle of Matewan and the murder of Sid Hatfield. Ask students to read it, silently, and think about how they would react if they were the miners and their families at Paint Creek and Cabin Creek. Having role-played these characters in previous lessons, encourage them to put themselves in the participants' shoes in thinking about how they might feel during this event.

Activity 2:

(Synchronously)

1. Instruct students to read the description of the miners beginning to assemble at Marmet to march on Blair. Explain the points in favor of marching to Mingo armed versus those against, including the resistance being planned by Don Chafin in Logan County. ([A projected map may be useful here](#)).
2. Ask students to discuss with a partner what they think they should do: join the march or sit it out.

3. Next divide the class into two groups, those for and those against. (If you're in a classroom, it might hang up signs to represent the opposing sides.)
4. Have each group make a list of reasons for their position and try and convince some on the other side to come over to their side.

Next, tell students what actually happened:

When the two armies met, the most intense fighting occurred at Blair Mountain. Chafin's army held the advantage of defensive trenches and machine guns. They also had use of a private air force that dropped homemade bombs on the marching miners. The battle raged for several days and though no official account exists of casualties, at least several dozen were likely killed on both sides in the fighting.

Although the miners nearly won the day, a last-minute deployment of the US Army by President Harding averted a union victory. The miners gave up their arms peacefully to the army, hoping they would restore order and constitutional rights. However, they were mistaken and several hundred were arrested for murder and treason against the State of West Virginia. In trials held in the same courthouse where John Brown went on trial for his raid of Harpers Ferry, most of the miners including Bill Blizzard were acquitted. Following the trials and battle, the UMWA lost its influence, and it was not until the New Deal of the 1930s that the previously un-unionized areas were organized. However, the experiences of the 1910s and 20s were influential in creating a culture of sacrifice and solidarity that served the UMWA well in its later organizing drives as well as in its continued militancy in the interest of miners' health, safety, and wages.

(Asynchronously)

1. Instruct students to read the description of the miners beginning to assemble at Marmet to march on Blair. Explain the points in favor of marching to Mingo armed versus those against, including the resistance being planned by Don Chafin in Logan County. ([A print-out of this map may be useful here](#)).
2. Assign the students a particular view point: half the class should receive instruction to argue in favor of joining the march and half the class should receive instruction to argue in opposition of joining the march.
3. Have each group make a list of reasons for their position, speaking to the opposing side, trying to convince them to join the march. The deliverable of these arguments can come in many forms: a video, a mind map, a poster, song, skit, etc., as long as the medium is convincing and equipped with reasonable arguments. The students can then present it to the class or submit it to the teacher.

Once the exercise is completed or during the next synchronous period, tell students what actually happened:

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Concluding Discussion: Debrief this exercise by facilitating a discussion on what students learned from this exercise. Some guiding questions might include...

- Knowing how things turned out, would you still take that position? Why?
- What other courses of action were possible?
- Compare Blair and the Cabin Creek-Paint Creek Strike 1912-13?
- What lessons could be drawn from the differences?
- Why do you think the miners did what they did?
- Ask students especially to analyze what role previous struggles might have played in causing the march on Blair.
- What role do you think women might have played during and before the march on Blair?
- How did this compare to their roles in Cabin Creek-Paint Creek in 1912-13?

Historical Context/Background Resources on the Hatfield Contract:

- (Watch) [Matewan Unscripted: A Guided Walking Tour of Historic Matewan](#)
- (Research) Matewan Oral History Project Collection, 1989-1990 ([Transcripts available via WV State Archives](#))
- (Watch) John Sayles' MATEWAN
- (Analyze) [Map of fighting on Blair Mountain](#)

WV 8th Grade Curriculum Standards:

S.S.8.8 Analyze the impact of absentee ownership, renewable and nonrenewable natural resources, labor unionization and the development of infrastructure on the economic growth of West Virginia

S.S.8.15 Investigate climate, landforms, natural resources and population density in West Virginia's geographical regions using special purpose maps and evaluate the impact of people's lives and settlement patterns using Geographical Information Systems, topographical maps, climate and census maps.

SS.8.24 Demonstrate an understanding of West Virginia's development during the early twentieth century. (Analyze the evolution of the labor movement in West Virginia. Summarize the progressive reform movement in West Virginia

SS.8.25: Demonstrate an understanding of West Virginia's development during the mid-twentieth century.

For more resources on the Battles of Matewan and Blair Mountain, please visit our website at www.wvminewars.com

Student Handout #1: Historical Background on the Battle of Matewan and Blair Mountain

Historical Background:

While the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike had won union recognition for miners in much of Kanawha County; Logan, Mingo, and McDowell counties were still un-unionized in spite of similar difficult working and living conditions. During WWI, things were relatively quiet in the coalfields; however, after the war ended Southern WV, like much of the country, saw dramatic increases in labor strife. This conflict was due largely to large numbers of soldiers returning from the war in search of work and fears that the economy was slowing following the boom of wartime production. In this context of heightened labor conflict, the UMWA tried to extend its reach into previously un-unionized counties like Mingo.

In response to this organizing drive, on May 19, 1920, a dozen heavily armed men from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency arrived in Matewan, WV to evict miners from company housing because they had joined the UMWA. The evictions included driving a woman and her children from home at gunpoint and throwing their belongings into the rain. The detectives who carried out this work probably assumed that they could carry out their work much as it had during previous decades of company rule. However, they were unlike any other because on this day, while the detectives contentedly ate dinner, pro-union miners and chief of police Sid Hatfield organized to meet them. Matewan was unique, because unlike areas around it, it was an independent town that was not owned by a coal company. This meant it elected its own government and was at this time under a pro-reform, pro-union city government. When the detectives tried to arrest Hatfield with a bogus warrant, a shootout erupted that left seven Baldwin Felts detectives dead. One miner, Bob Mullins, and a bystander Tot Tinsley, as well as Mayor Cable Testerman were also killed.

Hatfield became a folk hero to miners who were tired of the iron fist of company rule. After a Mingo County jury refused to convict him of murder for the shootout at Matewan, Sid Hatfield was summoned to court in McDowell County on what many agree was a bogus charge of blowing up a coal tippie. Approaching the courthouse unarmed, Hatfield and his deputy Ed Chambers were gunned down by Baldwin Felts detectives. The murderers never faced justice.

To the miners, the murder of Hatfield symbolized the brutal use of violence and the law by the companies in Mingo County that had kept out the union. Soon, unionized miners from across the coalfields (many of whom had only recently won union recognition during the bloody Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike 1912-13), gathered near Marmet to march on Mingo County. Since the companies used force to keep the union out of those counties, the miners decided they needed to use force to bring the union and humanitarian aid in. Union miners eventually formed an army of thousands of "rednecks" (named for the red bandanas they wore). In addition to a high number of returned WWI veterans, the Paint Creek- Cabin Creeks strike had given the miners significant organizational experience. The main leader of the miners was Bill Blizzard who had played a key role in the 1912-13 strike.

However, to reach Mingo, the redneck army would have to pass through Logan County, which was controlled by close friend of the coal operator Sheriff Don Chafin. Chafin prepared an army of several thousand mine guards and company men who built a defensive line of trenches in the mountains above Logan.

Student Handout #2 - Guiding Questions

Guiding Questions:

Put yourself in the shoes of the miners and their families at Paint Creek or Cabin Creek who only recently won union recognition. Would you take part in the march on Mingo? Would you support other miners doing it? Why or why not?

Reasons FOR joining the Miners' March	Reasons AGAINST joining the Miners' March