

Shootout in Matewan

By: R. Marc Kantrowitz March 18, 2021



'Smiling Sid' Hatfield

"The Man" owned everything: the homes in which their families lived, the store in which they shopped, the mine where they worked, the school their children attended, the church where their families prayed, and the cemetery in which they most assuredly would be buried at an early age.

Their lives as coal miners were unduly harsh, often descending into dark, dank and deep holes before the sun rose and arising after sunset, covered in soot and grim and despair.

For their efforts, they received a pittance while the rich and powerful who owned the mines, and the equally rich and powerful who bought the much-needed coal, stuffed their bottomless pockets.

1920 found American workers in the throes of crisis. Wanting a decent salary, safe working conditions, and the value of their worth recognized, they lobbied and often struck to get their point across. Unfortunately, those sitting on

the other side of the bargaining table often held the upper hand and rarely lowered it.

Thus, when police struck in Boston in 1919, Calvin Coolidge, who rarely said anything (when approached by a person who said he had a bet that he could get Silent Cal to say three words, Coolidge replied: “You lose”), uttered a phrase that would later propel him from the governorship of Massachusetts to the presidency of the United States: “There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime.”

With anarchists taking a far more violent stance — from bombing Wall Street in New York City to bombing the house of the attorney general in Washington, D.C., to Sacco and Vanzetti in Boston — the nation was on edge, wary with the agitators and Bolsheviks intent on tearing down the capitalist system.

For a coal miner in West Virginia, thoughts of Russian, communist and socialist ideology were undoubtedly surpassed by the far more pressing and personal issues of making enough money to support a family. What they knew was what they saw: that when a worker was crushed on the job, his penniless widow and children were evicted from their home to make room for a replacement.

The United Mine Workers of America’s attempts to unionize the coal miners were being met with great resistance by the coal owners, who knew that they made less money when paying union wages. The unrest boiled over for the striking coal miners of Matewan on May 19, 1920.

Securing a court order to evict six or so striking coal miners from housing belonging to the Stone Mountain Coal Corp., management called in the professionals — 13 hated and reviled strikebreakers from the Pinkerton-like Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. One of its leaders, Albert Felts, carried the air of authority, also serving as a deputy sheriff.

Disembarking the train, the gang immediately went to work, lawful notices of evictions in hand, attacking shanties in which the strikers and their families

eked by, and heaved them and their meager and rickety possessions out, using whatever means to accomplish their goal.



The crime scene

Stories quickly spread — whether true or not, or not true now but true in the past and assuredly so in the future — of ailing babies and sick children and pregnant and overwhelmed mothers ruthlessly evicted.

After successfully completing yet another mission, members of the group collected their bounty and trudged off to a local restaurant, waiting for the 5 o'clock Northern and Western Railway Co. train to whisk them away. Little did they know that vigilante retribution was gathering, many of the locals just deputized by the mayor and sheriff and told to run off and return with guns.

Led by the pro-miner town mayor, Cabell Testerman, and his hard-nosed sheriff, William Sidney “Smiling Sid” Hatfield of the famed Hatfield clan, a group of now-armed miners, some secreted behind and in nearby buildings, confronted their enemy. The 30-or-so-year-old Hatfield, himself a former miner and later a blacksmith, gained his nickname due to some gold encrusted upper teeth.

Stares, chatter and bravado ensued, with both Fells and Hatfield threatening to arrest the other, using as their authority warrants either real or imagined. The slow dance of intimidation progressed until suddenly and without provocation or warning a single shot rang out. Seconds passed and then a hailstorm of gunfire.

Sid, living up to his name, fired straight and true, felling the two Felts brothers, quickly diminishing the leadership of the detective agency. Five others quickly died, some riddled with bullets. On the opposite side, two miners and the mayor perished. Four bystanders and another detective were also wounded.

As the days passed, the authorities investigated the mass killings, trying to discern how the bloody confrontation started. Meanwhile, the violence throughout the area continued, strikers and owners each trying to establish superiority.

The governor, perhaps taking his cue from his Massachusetts counterpart, mobilized the State Police. The coal owners utilized a new form of anti-union warfare, employing planes to dive bomb and shoot the protesters, killing many from above. The miners countered with grenades, submachine guns and bombs. The battle that started in May now stretched into July.

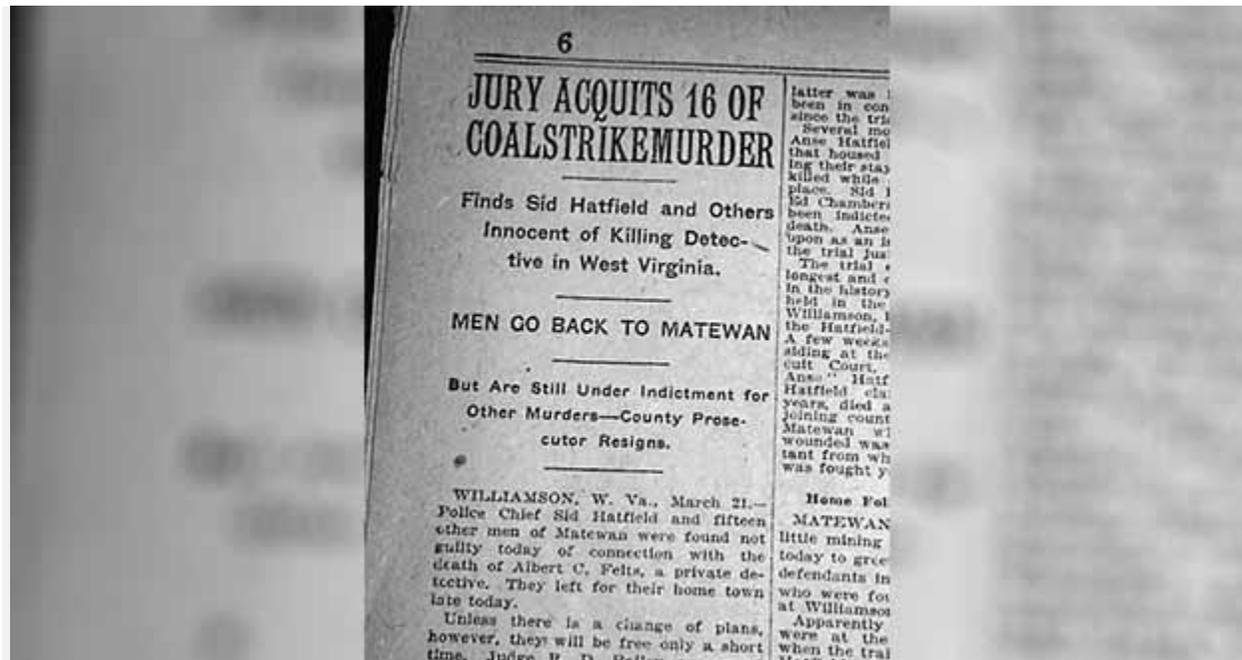
And in Matewan, it came to an end with a whimper, with the imposition of an injunction and the superior forces of a pro-coal owner government as well as the simple economic need of the miners to go back to work and make money to support their stressed families.

While the violence continued, culminating in the Battle of Blair Mountain, the bloodiest labor uprising in American history, it did so away from Matewan, where its miners returned to work at lower wages.

Epilogue

Two weeks after the gun battle, Sid Hatfield had reason to smile, marrying the mayor's widow, leading some to opine that perhaps the bullets that killed the mayor didn't necessarily come from the enemy but from the sheriff himself.

Others disputed that, saying Hatfield married the widow as a prior promise to take care of her and her young child should anything happen to her outspoken pro-miner mayor husband.



A newspaper account of the outcome of the case

The state gathered those who saw the melee, leading to 16 miners being charged with murder. The key question of who fired first would never, to this day, be resolved. The testimony of the many witnesses, both for the state and defense, was often riddled with conflicting recollections, caused by uncertainty, confusion, fear and ideology.

Sheriff Hatfield, Deputy Sheriff Ed Chambers and their fellow defendants were all found not guilty.

A year or so later, on Aug. 1, 1921, while Hatfield and Chambers, accompanied by their wives, were on the courtroom steps to answer yet another criminal charge, shots again rang out, this time striking and killing its two intended male targets.

As before, no one was convicted of the assassinations. The remaining members of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency had, however, exacted their own revenge.

The above column is based on "1920: The Year that Made the Decade Roar" by Eric Burns, documentaries of the event, and various internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a retired Appeals Court judge, can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.