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# Blair Mountain

Location of the infamous Battle of Blair Mountain between mine workers trying to unionize their jobs and agents of the Baldwin-Felts detective agency hired by the mining operators.

Though tensions had been simmering for years, the immediate catalyst for the uprising was the unpunished murder of Sid Hatfield, police chief of Matewan, on the steps of the McDowell County courthouse in Welch in July 1921 by agents of the Baldwin-Felts private detective agency. Hatfield had been a long-time supporter of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and their efforts to unionize the mines.

\*photo from [www.friendsofblairmountain.org/](http://www.friendsofblairmountain.org/)

The Battle of Blair Mountain was the largest organized armed uprising in American labor history and led almost directly to the labor laws currently in effect in the United States of America. For nearly a week in late August and early September 1921, in Logan County, West Virginia,



between 10,000 and 15,000 coal miners confronted company-paid private detectives in an effort to unionize the southwestern West Virginia mine counties. Unionization had succeeded elsewhere as part of a demographic boom that was triggered by the extension of the railroad and was characterized by unprecedented immigrant hiring and exploitation in the region. The battle was the final act in a series of violent clashes that have also been termed the Redneck War, from the color of bandannas worn by the miners around their necks for friend-or-foe identification, and the likely impetus of the common usage of the original Scottish term redneck in the vernacular of the United States.

## The Battle Proper

At a rally on August 7, Mother Jones called on the miners to march into Logan and Mingo counties and set up the union by force. Armed men began gathering at Lens Creek, near

Marmet in Kanawha County on August 20, and by four days later up to 13,000 had gathered and began marching towards Logan County. Meanwhile, the reviled and anti coal union Sheriff of Logan County, Don Chafin, had begun to set up defenses on Blair Mountain. Chafin was supported by the Logan County Coal Operators Association.

The first skirmishes occurred on the morning of August 25. The bulk of the miners were still 15 miles away. The following day, President Warren Harding threatened to send in federal troops, and the miners began to leave. However, mistaken reports came in that Sheriff Chafin's men were deliberately shooting women and children - families had been caught in crossfire during the skirmishes - and the miners turned back towards Blair Mountain, many traveling in stolen and commandeered trains.

By August 29, battle was fully joined. Chafin's men, though outnumbered, had the advantage of higher positions and better weaponry. Private planes were hired to drop homemade bombs on the miners, though many of these failed to explode and none are believed to have caused any injuries. Sporadic gun battles continued for 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. Up to 30 deaths were reported on both sides, with many hundreds more injured. By September 2, however, federal troops had arrived. The fledgling United States Army Air Service dropped a few pipe and tear gas bombs as a demonstration meant to overawe the labor organizers. It was the only time in the history of the U.S. that the government ordered military aircraft used against its own people. Realizing he would lose a lot of good miners if the battle continued with the military, Bill Blizzard passed the word for the miners to start heading home the following day.

Following the battle, 985 miners were indicted for "murder, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, and treason against the State of West Virginia." Though some were acquitted by sympathetic juries, many were also imprisoned for a number of years, though they were paroled in 1925. In Bill Blizzard's trial, an unexploded pipe bomb was used as evidence of the government and companies' brutality, and ultimately resulted in his acquittal.

Short term, the battle seemed to be an overwhelming victory for management, and UMWA membership plummeted from more than 50,000 miners to approximately 10,000 in the next several years. Not until 1935 was the UMWA organized in Southern West Virginia, after the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

For more information about Blair Mountain, or the Battle of Blair Mountain try these websites.

<http://www.pawv.org/news/blair.htm>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Blair\\_Mountain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Blair_Mountain)

<http://www.friendsofblairmountain.org/>