



Photo by Kenzie New Walker.

# The West Virginia Mine Wars Museum

By Stan Bumgardner

Some 30 years ago, the story of the Mine Wars was as absent from our museums as it was from our textbooks. Fortunately, we now have an entire museum dedicated to it. The West Virginia Mine Wars Museum (WVMWM) opened in 2015 in the old Chambers Hardware store, where the 1920 shootout started in Matewan (Mingo County). The founders, who originally coalesced while fighting to save Blair Mountain, recognized the need to tell the Mine Wars story in a museum setting.

After they announced plans for the WVMWM, Mine Wars relics began flowing in and haven't stopped. Much of the early material came from Kenny King [see p. 77], who's been studying and trying to preserve Blair Mountain for decades. Kenzie New

Walker, the museum's director, says "the museum literally would not exist without Kenny's work and dedication."

The museum recently moved into new digs in the UMWA Local 1440 building in Matewan; the local has been another key supporter. New professionally designed and fabricated exhibits—an impressive team effort led by creative director Shaun Slifer—really engage the visitor. Some of the more intriguing items are the remains of a Model 1873 Winchester carbine rifle found on Blair Mountain (with unspent rounds still in it), a billy club owned by Army General Henry Bandholtz, a poetry book Frank Keeney read while living in a tent colony (with his handwritten notes in the margins), a "Don Chafin for Sheriff"



campaign button, and an entire prison cell from the old Jefferson County Jail in Charles Town that held miners accused of treason after Blair Mountain.

For Kenzie—the daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of southern West Virginia union miners [see p. 56]—her work as museum director comes from a deeply held passion and commitment. Like most of us, she didn't learn about the Mine Wars in school and was bowled over when she finally heard that something like this had occurred in her own backyard while remaining a virtual secret.

One exhibit, in particular, speaks to Kenzie personally: a wall of 361 mine checks. Miners were issued metal tags (called checks) with their unique numbers on them. They'd place the tags on coal cars to get credit for the coal they'd loaded. More somberly, they'd also hang them on hooks when entering the mine; in case of an explosion or roof collapse, companies would look at the check board to determine who'd made it out alive and who might still be trapped inside. The 361 checks symbolize the minimum number of miners known to have been killed in our nation's deadliest mine disaster, the 1907 Monongah explosion in Marion County. One visitor gazed at the wall in disbelief and asked Kenzie if it represented all the miners killed in all our mine disasters, and she answered, "No, this was just one disaster." That wall speaks volumes without saying a word.

While artifacts are always a draw, the real heart of an interesting museum lies in the stories it tells. The WVMWM relates different sides of the story—the roles of union leaders, law enforcement, and the Army—but continually comes back to miners, their families, and why the right to unionize meant so much to them. One exhibit, for instance, relates how women, barred from working in mines at the time due to superstition, took part in union activities by chasing off replacement workers

## Welch, West Virginia

Anyone interested in the Mine Wars should also visit the city of Welch (McDowell County), about 60 miles southeast of Matewan. The county courthouse, where Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers were assassinated, appears virtually as it did in 1921; a reenactment of the shooting will take place at noon on September 4.

Just down the street is a relatively new facility: the Jack Caffrey Arts & Cultural Center at 143 Wyoming Street. This 7,500-square-foot space features coal-mining artifacts; art displays; and a performance / meeting area. For folks interested in historic preservation, it's a great example of adaptive reuse; in its past lives, the building served as the city's post office and as an automobile dealership.

"We are moving from a coal economy to a tourism economy," says Welch Mayor Harold McBride, Sr. "When people come to our city, they want to hear about the coal, about the people, about Sid Hatfield and the "Terror of the Tug." They want to hold a piece of coal in their hands." He adds that the Caffrey Center "is important for our people. We need the art, the plays, and the museum to draw people in and for our people to use."

Please call to inquire about the center's operating hours (304-436-5392) or check out its Facebook page. —*ed.*

(*scabs*, in labor jargon) and blocking railroad tracks to prevent non-union-mined coal from being delivered to market.

Museum cofounder and board member Wilma Steele is another proud daughter of the southern coalfields. She sees her role as getting folks "to tell stories that connect people with this history . . . so the stories aren't lost."

The museum's audio clips are a really compelling part of the experience. They're from oral histories that Drs. Rebecca Bailey and John Hennen conducted in the 1980s with people who lived through and participated in the Mine Wars. While transcripts have been available online through the West Virginia State Archives for



The West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, at 401 Mate Street in Matewan, is open on Fridays and Saturdays, April through October. It's available for school and other tours by appointment. Visit the museum's website ([wvminewars.org](http://wvminewars.org)) or call 304-691-0014. You also can follow the museum on social media and become a supporting member.

West Virginia Mine Wars Museum Director Kenzie New Walker. Photo by the WV Hub. Kenzie's article in our Spring 2020 issue details many more exciting things happening in Matewan these days.

years, this is the first time people can listen to the people's actual words in a public setting. Kenzie refers to the "tragedy" in their voices. For instance, one woman describes being evicted from her company house. Kenzie notes, "Her stove was placed on the railroad tracks with the kettle of beans that were still cooking."

Since the museum staff didn't learn about the Mine Wars in public school, they've made the exhibits particularly appealing to young people and developed a curriculum and lesson plans for teachers. School groups comprise a significant number of the overall visitors, and Kenzie hopes the museum will make her generation of West Virginians the last to grow up without knowing about this part of our history. She also encourages tourists interested in our mining heritage to visit other fine museums in southern

West Virginia, including the Coal Heritage Museum in Madison (Boone County), the Exhibition Coal Mine in Beckley (Raleigh County), the Bramwell Depot (Mercer County), and the reconstructed depot right here in Matewan, among others.

While the WVMWM is a must for all West Virginia history buffs, the museum's appeal reaches well beyond our borders. As word spreads, visitors are arriving from across the country. The museum tells a universal story of underdogs fighting against what they saw as an unjust system. In Kenzie's words, "A lot of people can relate to the idea of fighting for justice."

Wilma says the "civil rights issues" in the museum mean the most to her. She underscores the importance of the Mine Wars in our own history: "I think to myself, 'If anyone else had this history, it'd be everywhere.' And that's why I'm here."





The remains of this model 1873 Winchester carbine discovered on the Blair Mountain Battlefield are on display in the museum. Photo by Kenny Kemp.

The museum has professionally cataloged its artifacts and set up an archival room for researchers. In the future, the staff and volunteers plan to record more oral histories from the descendants of Mine Wars participants, develop a driving tour of key sites, and preserve more manuscripts.

In a time when museums, small and large, are struggling to survive, the WVMWM is an inspiration to any community that wants to preserve its history, heritage, and culture. Board member Lou Martin urges others just to start with what you have, beginning with the kinds of people who get things done: “Build the team. Not every museum

is going to get made, but if the history or art collection—or whatever it is—is significant and people respond to it, you can start small, plant seeds, and then bring people to the project as you go.”

Wilma adds one more piece of advice, “Don’t give up!”

Let’s hope West Virginia communities can build, grow, and support more museums like this great effort in Matewan. All it takes is some artifacts, compelling stories, and hard work (at little or no pay, of course). 🍁

Very special thanks for our author Carl E. Feather’s contributions to this article.