

INTERVIEW WITH ARNOLD MILLER

FR; Beth Nogay:

Nogay: What do you remember caused what would later become the mine wars in the early 1900s?

Miller: The coal industry dominated the whole state. Politics, schools, banks and everything else. They owned it all. The treatment of the miners was uncalled for. But they created a lot of problems for themselves. They hired thugs and paid the thugs more than they did the miners. The miners were opposed to this but couldn't do anything about it...had no weapons to fight with. Miners were not allowed to congregate. If three got together they came and started beating on them. My grandfather told me it's a good thing you didn't come along 10 years earlier. I said why? Because if a thug came along and started thumping you you'd probably have killed him. Which was probably right. There is a grave plot in Cabin Creek...a bronze placque in the grave plot commemorating service of mine workers of the mine workers but it doesn't say what for. It was for killing Don Slater the boss of the thugs. Three miners cornered him on the hill and killed him but he killed three of them before they got the job done. Cleve Woodard was buried in the middle of town, not in the cemetery and that is what the bronze placque is for.

Nogay: What would the coal operators do if they thought a miner was striking

Miller: They'd fire him and throw him out of the house and order him off the job. They owned everything...the company stores and forced the miners to work for them to buy the groceries from them ...either you bought groceries there or they run you off.

Nogay: How did the families help. Did the women ever help?

Miller: Yes they did. Before the union they'd slip around wherever they could and organize a union. If the companies found out they were doing that they'd beat them up shoot them whatever. It was no disgrace for a coal operator to shoot down a miner in cold blood.

Nogay: Do you recall the story about the Bullmer Special?

Miller: Yes. Paint Creek and Cabin Creek both. People were living in tents or anywhere they could find. Only time people used lights was when they had sickness. They had an armored car on the train where a machine gun was mounted.

Nogay: What do you remember your father telling you about the march on Logan County:

Miller: He was involved in both Logan Marches. The purpose of these marches was all nonunion. The miners resented the fact and they decided to go and do something about it. Mother Jones told them if you go they'll bring the army out on you....you can't win. They did bring the army in and they tried Bill Ritter for treason and a fellow named Sam Messer , the same place they tried John Brown, Harpers Ferry. The district had a good lawyer at that time named Tom Townson and he brought the trial back to Lewisburg. The jury couldn't find anything wrong with them. If I had lived back in those times I'd have been the same as they were cause I believe in treating people right and of course I believe in unions and I know why you have unions and I still believe in strong unions today.

Nogay: Why did it take so long to get the unions into WV?

Miller: When the union broke hereall that can be said about John Lewis he did nothing to get the miners to organize here. 1931 tried to organize the miners...there was a strike...they came to our house my grandfather's house the night before the strike trying to get him to join them. My grandfather told the district president your just like Bill Blizzard your head is harder than granite. Your a good union man but if you strike tomorrow you can't win. My back was broken in a mine accident and this is the only job I'm going to get ...no more jobs for me. Tomorrow at noon they'll set you out in the middle of the road...no doubt....as soon as this meeting is over someone will run and tell what is going on. In 1931 it failed because it was not organized. The union did not come back till 1933. But the next day at 12:00 the guys interested in the strike the thugs came and threw them into the middle of the road. The furniture they had i what they made. Miserable conditions...someone refers to me about those days as the good ole days but there wasn't a damn thing good about them. People were so miserable it wasn't funny. In those days if you didn' work you didn't eat. I was raised in a family of 5-2 working and we damn near starved to death.

That's the truth. Nothing to eat. I heard a story about miners taking potato peelings into the mines and that was the truth. I saw it. Didn't throw nothing away.

Nogay: How did the miners organize?

Miller: There backs were to the wall they had no choice. Been brow beaten and mistreated so much they knew they were risking their life and they didn't give a damn. Some would say they'd just as soon be dead as to go through the life they was living. I was just a kid buy my grandfather said to grow up and get unto the work force. Said boy you are going to have alot of trouble because you got a bad temper. My temper was formed back in those days and I saw them mistreat people it was terrible and no way could I stand for that. I wouldn't stand for it now.

Nogay: What was the misery? What was it like?

Miller: They done everything to them. There was a woman who was carrying a child and a thug kicked and beat her up.

Nogay: What do you, as a child, remember about what the men looked like?

Miller: Hand me down clothing, couldn't buy anything. Pay scale in the mines was about \$2.00 a day and you had..lucky to make that. Had to buy everyting from the company store the miners didn't have nothing.

Nogay: Do you remember about the march. How many men marched and how they organized it.

Miller: Alot 15 to 20 thousand. District 17, here in Charleston now, had 136,000 members that covered the whole state. Lewis didn't do a damn thing to get the union in here. Nothing. Franklin D. Roosevelt caused the miners to have a union in here.

Nogay: Why did it become so violent, so bloody, such a war here?

Miller: Mem had no leadership to get together. If someone had gotten them together there was enough of them here to clean them all out, thugs and everything else. But they had to direction. Just were scattered where you saw two miners you say 10 thugs. They paid thugs 10.00 a day. and a miner 2.00 a day

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They were just hired killers that's all they were. You couldn't find worse people in prisons than the people they hired for thugs and there were alot of them. My home town of Cabin Creek was full of them. They had a cemetery in my home town for thugs.

Nogay: How did the miners get guns to fight back.^{.Miller} The miners borrowed guns from the thugs in one instance.

Nogay: Did the army come from other states?

Miller: Some.

Nogay: What did your mother say about it was she scared?

Miller: My mother say 2 marches 1912 and 1922 and she saw all the problems they had up there. One time we were talking to mother and the one subject she got on was lack of medical service. One of her children died with apendicitis, simple things now.

Nogay: Do you recall the tent colonies there?

Miller: Oh yeah.

Nogay: How did the people survive the winter?

Miller: Just barely. In a book I read there is a story about finding Mother Jones living in a tent on Paint Creek and they found her lying on the floor with pneumonia. Does that tell you anything about how they treat the people. They hated with a passion. I'll tell you one thing she was tough. She was 80 years old then.

Nogay: What did she tell the miners when she came there?

Miller: She told them to get off there back and do something. She called it a pep talk. Stirr them up. She didn't have to do much because of the treatment they were receiving. You wouldn't believe the condition they lived under.

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Nogay: Tell me about it.

Miller: People was all time beating up people the thugs were. Starving to death the children had nothing to eat and no clothes to wear can you imagine kids going barefooted in the winter time? What else could they do. They couldn't buy shoes. The miners had there own problems. No houses...hovels ...most you could stand inside and see outside. How do you heat a place like that. They burned coal.

Nogay: How did the miners feel about the company store?

Miller: They knew they was being taken. I went through the same process. I went to work in the mines hand loading. Money was better that way.

Nogay: How did the miners know what was going on. It sounds like it was a war. Was it like that?

Miller: It was. The treatment they went through. They would fight back.

Nogay: Do you remember hearing about the actual battles?

Miller: They wouldn't talk much about the battles but there was alot of shooting going on. The big battle was Blair Mountain. He told me about being on Blair Mountain. My father was a Kentuckian born in Bell County. He went to the mines at 9 years old and was a veteran miner at 14. 10¢ a day...worked like slaves. The coal operators owned the damn state of Kentucky.

Miller: They didn't understand the fellows who came in to stop the fighting. They had a labor battle one time on Cabine and the Vice President of the company said they were going to bring in the National Guard. I told him we'd ship them out in pine boxes. They just wanted to dictate to you.

Nogay: What did the miners do with their guns on Blair Mountain?

Miller: They hid them. The army didn't get their guns. They still don't know where they are still in the mountains somewhere. My father told me they had good guns.

Nogay: How did the miners get from here to Blair Mountain?

Miller: Walked. You walked everywhere. No roads.

Nogay: Do you remember any other stores about the mines?

Miller: I called my uncle a couple of days ago but some of the stories he wouldn't tell. Some stories my father wouldn't tell I guess they were so disgusting.

Nogay: Why don't they want to talk about it?

Miller: It is not a very pleasant story. The way they treated the women and children. I'm partial to kids and I can't stand that kind of treatment. I got in a lot of fights over that.. Some of the miners would beat up their wives and I got in alot of fights over that too.

Nogay: The miners took an oath of secrecy. Do you recall that?

Miller: Oh yeah. You couldn't trust your neighbor. That's still true today

Nogay: What was the atmosphere back then. Were the people scared?

Miller: They were so downtrodden and mistreated abused that all they could do was fight back. It was nothing for a operator to have a miner killed. Easy... they owned the law too. There were no constitutional rights. People wanted to go to Cabin Creek to visit. No way. The thugs would stop you ...where you going... I'm going to Smiths house get out & down the hollow. You better go too. The only thing they didn't like when you shot someone was they had to bury them. They lowest form of humanity was them damn Baldwin thugs. There was nothing you could hear about them thugs that wasn't so. There was nothing too bad for them to do. And they were paid by the coal companies to do it. The current crop of management of coal operators today are more sneaking than years ago but are just as dirty. We've come a little ways in WV but not in Kentucky.