"The Boys'll Listen to Me"
The Labor Career of William Blizzard

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate School of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
History

by

Shae Ronald Davidson

Marshall University

Huntington, West Virginia

May 4, 1998

This thesis was accepted on May 4, 1978
as meeting the research requirements for a Master of Arts degree
in History.

Advisor [signature]

Department of History

Reader [signature]

Department of History

Reader [signature]

Department of Sociology / Anthro

[signature]
Dean of Graduate School

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 1892, Timothy and Sarah Blizzard gave birth to a son.[1] Timothy and Sarah began their family during a transitional period in West Virginia's history. The couple started their lives as farmers. However, the potential income from West Virginia's coal industry encouraged them to abandon this lifestyle and to plunge into the new industrial economy. Timothy became a miner, while Sarah took on the role of a mother living in a company town. Both became involved in the earliest organization drives of United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), whose efforts to organize the state had started only two years before the birth of the couple's son, William.[2]

As he matured in the coal fields of southern West Virginia, William Blizzard's life became linked to the UMWA. His parents' involvement in the organization shaped his early development. His own participation with the organization led him to circles far removed from his birth in southern Kanawha County. In time, William would join his parents as organizers,

---

[1] William Blizzard delayed birth certificate, William Blizzard Collection. MS 97-24. West Virginia Division of Archives and History, Charleston, West Virginia. Hereafter cited as WBC.

[2] William Campbell Blizzard oral history, *Even the Heavens Weep* research materials. West Virginia Division of Archives and History, Charleston, West Virginia. Debbie Anderson. The Blizzard Family, (no publication data, 1988) 71.

struggling at their side during one of the worst episodes of labor violence in American history, the strikes at Paint and Cabin Creeks in southern Kanawha County in 1912 and 1913. The decades of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s would see William Blizzard assume the offices of District 17 Vice President and President, and he rose to become a fixture on the state's political landscape.

Bill Blizzard's involvement with the United Mine Workers of America lasted virtually his entire life. The evolution of the UMWA over the first half of the twentieth century played a significant role in influencing Bill Blizzard's attitudes towards the nature of power and the needs of the state's workers. He started his career as a field organizer, heavily involved in a rank-and-file movement which would come to dominate southern West Virginia. However, as he rose through the UMWA's hierarchy, he seemed to have lost his ties to the rank-and-file, evolving into a labor bureaucrat in the decades following the infamous Mine Wars. Beginning in the early 1930s, he would come to be known as a staunch defender of centralized power within the union. Even though he became the champion of the union's centralized bureaucracy under John L. Lewis, he attempted to use the increased political efficiency of the organization to improve the lives of the state's workers through channels unavailable to him earlier in his career.

Moreover, he strove to become the voice of the state's downtrodden within the bureaucratic structure of the UMWA.

The change in Blizzard's attitudes towards organized labor and his efforts to utilize the power structure of the United Mine Workers of America to provide assistance for the state generates valuable insights into both the history of West Virginia during the first half of the twentieth-century, and the relationship between an individual's psychological development and organizational structure. Careful analysis of William Blizzard's relationship to the United Mine Workers of America, both in a professional and personal sense, reveals the complexity of these issues.

His career falls into three broad categories: first, his earliest involvement as an adolescent and ending with his 1922 treason trial for his role in the Armed March on Logan County. During this twenty year period, Blizzard believed he acted directly on behalf of the workers, and gained a reputation as a violent rank-and-file leader. Following the trial, Blizzard entered a second phase. As alternative labor movements called into question the power of the UMWA, and as the union became more politically active, he reexamined his attitudes towards the growing influence of John L. Lewis and the trend towards centralized power within the union. Blizzard became a staunch defender of these new trends, but at a terrible personal cost.

The third period can be seen in his term as district president. Even though he now stood as a highly visible representative of both the United Mine Workers and John L. Lewis, he tried to find a path which would allow him to be responsive to the needs of all people within the state.

Just as the lives of Timothy and Sarah Blizzard represent a change in the state's history, William Blizzard's life corresponds to a period of transition in the United Mine Workers of America. Labor historian Mel Dubofsky claims that the status of labor officials evolves as an organization becomes more established. In the early phases of development, officials had little support and "fell from office as easily as autumn leaves." Later leaders could use their status as a means of gaining economic and professional security.[3] William Blizzard bridged the chasm between these two periods of development, representing both but not fully belonging to either. Despite being caught between two worlds in the evolution of American labor, William Blizzard spent his entire life struggling to meet what he saw as the needs of the state's workers.

The genesis of this project can be found in the months I spent as an intern at the West Virginia Division of Archives

---

[3] Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine. *John L. Lewis: A Biography*, (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986) 72.

and History. Despite having little background in labor history, I was assigned to sort and catalog the materials in the newly arrived William Blizzard collection. Each day and each new item changed my understanding of Blizzard as an individual as well as his role in the state's history. This thesis is largely an attempt to come to an understanding of his motives and his ultimate impact. It reflects the evolution of my perceptions during my internship, when my basic understanding of Blizzard and the UMWA was still shaky, as well as recent insights which have only emerged as the full context of William Blizzard's life has come into focus.

Many people have helped me in this process. The staff of the West Virginia State Archives deserve special praise for their patience in answering my questions and guiding me towards new areas of research. They played an invaluable role in helping me during the initial periods of research. Alan Rowe served as an audience for my first attempts to understand Blizzard's career, and aided me greatly in questioning the relationship between Blizzard's personality and his professional motivations. Elizabeth Davidson has been supportive and extremely patient during the entire process which led to the creation of this thesis, even allowing me to disappear for extended periods to hammer out its form. The members of my thesis review committee have also left their mark

on its final form. David Duke and Robert Maddox of Marshall University's History Department, and Carrie Uihlein Nilles of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, have played important roles in shaping the tone and structure of the final work.

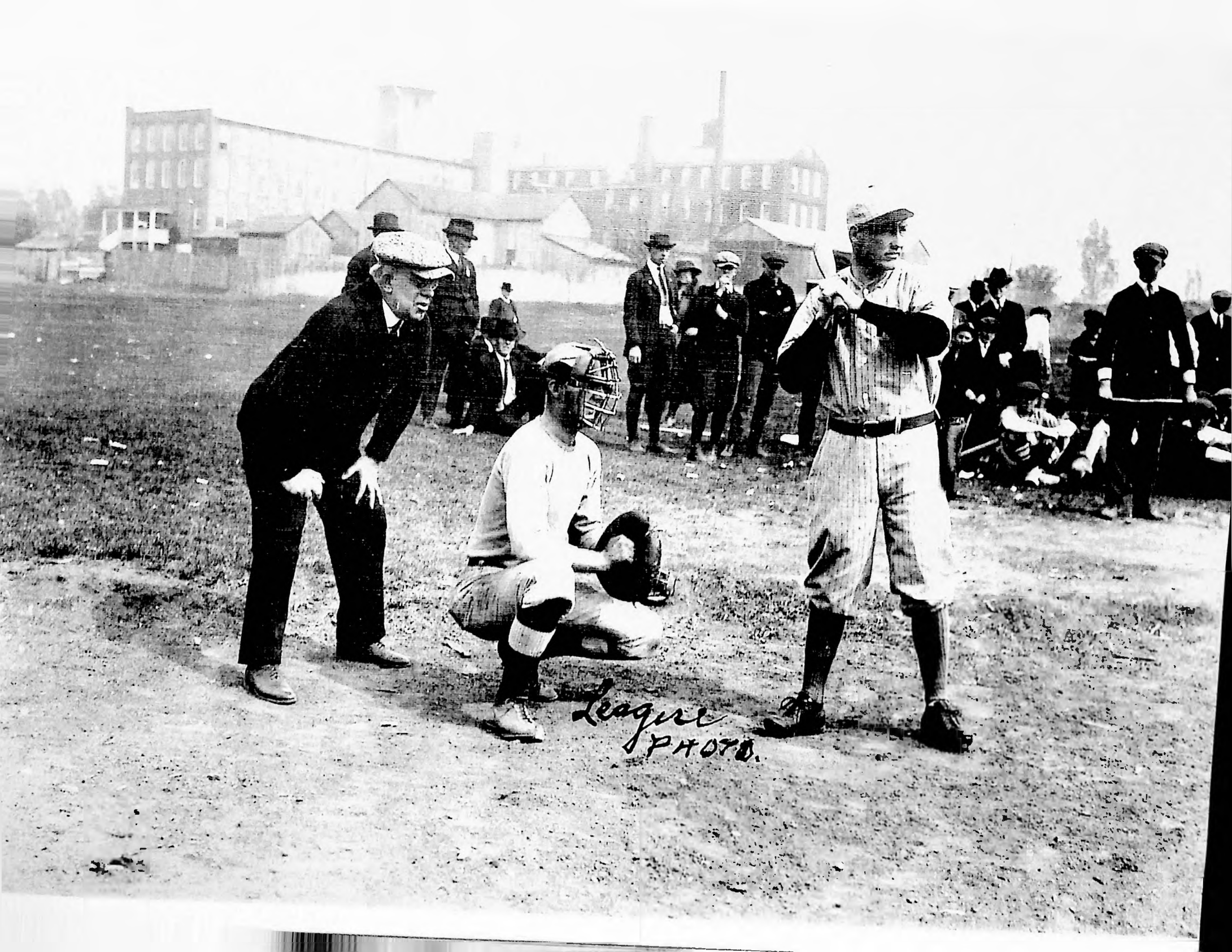
Jean Thomas, granddaughter of William and Rae Blizzard, has singlehandedly made this project possible. She donated the collection to the West Virginia Division of Archives and History which led me to chose this topic and which serves as the core of all my research. Mrs. Thomas has also helped me understand Blizzard as a person, placing the often disparate pieces of my research in perspective. Her willingness to share her family's past has made this project possible.

Illustrations

Guyan Cr
Union Ridge
Waldo
Redhouse
Kettle
Pocatalico
Sandy
Amma
WINFIELD
Plymouth
Bancroft
Sissonville
Wellford
Osbornes Mills
Ivy
Black Betsey
Brilliant
Little Sandy Cr
Hunt
Raymond
Poca
Legg
Aarons
Glendenin
Procious
Mayse
PUTNAM
Rocky Fork
River
Queen Shoals
Bomont
Milton
Teays
Scott Depot
Elkhurst
Ona
Mud
Hurricane
Blue Creek
Culloden
Lock Seven
Dial
Dorfee
Mandyville
Guthrie
Elk
Coco
St Albans
Institute
Glen
Mound
Villa
Gazil
Trace
Burdett
Quick
Salt Rock
Portersville
Tornado
CHARLESTON
Serens
Spring Hill
Fivemile
Coal
Lizemores
Campbell Cr
West Hamlin
Eggleton
Byrnside
Ruth
Dana
Malden
Putney
Blakeley
Garnet
Scotford
HAMLIN
Priestley
KANAWHA
Pond Gap
Mammoth
Vaughn
Guyandot
Tango
Chilton
Dixie
Sheridan
Griffithsville
Dungriff
Marmet
Belle
Ward
Belva
Swiss
Branchland
Train
Olcott
McCorkle
Hernshaw
Eastbank
Cedar Grove
Wyndal
Jenks
Emmons
Quincy
Pratt
Martine
Midkiff
Bernie
Chelyan
Coalburg
Carbondale
LINCOLN
Ashford
Handley
Vanetta
Julian
Winifrede
Sharon
Donwood
Montgomery
Gauley Bridge
Bradyville
Spurlockville
Cabell
Racine
Eagle
Boomer
Kanawha Falls
Ranger
Peytona
Standard
Mt Carbon
Allen
Giles
Deepwater
Seth
Ohley
Cotton Hill
Robson
Gill
Foster
Andrew
Eskdale
Powellton
Mud
Danville
Elmo
Leet
Tomsburg
Elk Ridge
MADISON
Page
Atenville
Turtle Cr
Orange
Warrior
FAYETTEVILLE
Rector
Burnwell
Kincaid
Ferrellsburg
Low Gap
Uneeda
Acme
Wake Forest
Nuttall
Mahan
BOONE
Kayford
Carlton
Big Creek
Deepwater
Wriston
Stuart
Kitchen
Greenview
Whitesville
Wevaco
Republic
Kingston
Oak Hill
Chapmanville
Jeffry
Jarrolds Valley
Dorothy
Dothan
Curry
Hewett
Thurmond
Clear
Colcord
Scarbro
Clothier
Hilltop
West
Pond
Glen Jean
Whirlwind
Pecks Mill
Roseville
Harvey
Spruce
Paintsville
Sun
Bend
Clear Creek
Macdonald
Pond
Herberton
Kilsyth
Mt Hope
Hughey
Dingess
Seng
Bald Knob
Marsh
Curtsville
Price Hill
Ethel
Dry Creek
DOGAN
Oswald
Foley
Prosperity
Cora
Sweeneyburg
Holden
Slagle
Arnett
Dameron
LOGAN
Echart
Harper
Cranberry
Skelton
Trace Fk
Manbar
Buffalo
Craneco
Marshes
Eccles
BECKLEY
Pine Cr
Surveyor
Sylvia
Bolt
Mabscott
Raleigh
Oilville
Man
Huff
Swope
Fitzpatrick
Ragland
Crany
Lester
Glen White
Blue Jay
Rockhouse Fk
Fork
Branch
RALEIGH
Island
Oceana
McGraws
McAlpin
Affinity
LAMSON Cr
Laurel
Slab Fork
Stotesbury
Christian
Winding Gulf
Big Cub Cr
Gulf
Jesse
Red Jacket
Clear
Mountview
Matewan
Meador
Sun Hill
Gilbert
Mullens
Thacker
WYOMING
Tommy Cr
Odd
Glenalum
New Thacker
Justice
Guyandot
Baileysville
PINEVILLE
Slab
Edgarton
Hanover
Indian
River
Devils Fk
Cedar
Okeefe
Wharncliffe
Little Huff Cr
Egeria
Camp Cr
Dunn
War Eagle
Woosley
Pinnacle
Bud
Mohawk
Herndon
Panther
Camp Creek
Twin Branch
Davy
Iaeger
Big Sandy
Pando
Dott
Rich Cr
Panther Cr
Dry Fk
Clear
Hemphill
Widemouth
Spanishburg
WELCH
Kimball
Vivian
Crumpler
Avondale
Premier
Keystone
North Fork
Matoaka
Kegley

Chapter 1

"We Both Wanted to Free the Slaves"


League
PHOTO.

Chapter 1[1]

At the end of the Civil War, the coal industry in West Virginia gave no portent of the importance it would later play in the state. Until the late nineteenth century, the handful of operations which existed in the state were privately owned and employed only a small number.[2]

However, rapid advances in industrial technology as well as the growing demands the industrial sector placed on the coal industry would change the nature of mining in West Virginia. In the last two decades of the century, the development of an extensive network of railroads opened the state's coal supply to the outside world. At the same time, the damming of some rivers, including the Kanawha, made previously inaccessible coal supplies available to this growing demand.[3]

The growth of the coal industry pushed it beyond its roots as a collection of small, family operated, mines which existed only to provide a small supplement to the owner's income and

---

[1] Blizzard uttered the title quote while on trial for treason in Charles Town, West Virginia, in the same courthouse where John Brown had been tried for treason in the previous century.

[2] Otis K Rice. *West Virginia: A History,* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985) 186.

[3] Ibid., 187.

meet the low demand of neighboring farmers. As the industry grew, it became necessary to expand the meager labor force which had existed until this time. The initial profitability of the mines lured many away from the subsistence agriculture which had previously marked the lives of many of the state's inhabitants.[4] The late century boom in mining drew Timothy and Sarah Blizzard away from the farms which had supported their families in previous generations.

Unionism actually antedated the existence of the coal industry in the state. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, craftsmen along the Ohio Valley allied to assure the payment of all due wages. However, the movement only existed in relatively advanced centers of commerce such as Wheeling, and even in these areas it had a difficult existence.[5]

As the coal industry grew in the last third of the century, the Knights of Labor made tentative moves towards organizing the state's miners. The union had moderate success, and served to prepare the state's workers for the advent of the United Mine Workers of America. The UMWA appeared in 1890 as a branch of the American Federation of Labor, a group traditionally associated with craft rather than industrial

---

[4] Ibid., 183.

[5] Ibid., 220-221.

unions. The UMWA immediately began an organization drive, but limited resources hampered the group's efforts. Due to the group's impotence, its membership stagnated at slightly over two hundred by the end of the century.[6]

Bill Blizzard's involvement with the United Mine Workers of America started at a young age. Timothy and Sarah Blizzard were quite active in late nineteenth century organization efforts, probably playing a role in the first organization drives in the state.[7] Timothy Blizzard attended the 1896 national convention in celebration of the eight hour work day.[8] The family became a visible symbol of the UMWA in the company towns of Cabin Creek.[9]

In 1902, anthracite coal miners in Pennsylvania embarked on a strike which gained fame due to President Roosevelt's arbitration.[10] As the violent strike wore on, bituminous coal miners left the mines in sympathy with the Pennsylvania

---

[6] Ibid., 221-222.

[7] Anderson, *The Blizzard Family*, (no publication data, 1988) 71.

[8] William Blizzard artifact collection, West Virginia Museum Commission.

[9] William Blizzard artifact collection.

[10] "Strike Declared." *Charleston Daily Gazette*, 2 April 1902. G. Wallace Chessman. *Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Power*, (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1969) 88-93.

workers. Organizers in West Virginia eagerly pushed for a sympathy strike in frustration over their failed efforts in the state.[11] A small number of men left the mines following the beginning of the anthracite strike.[12] This number increased after delegates at a Huntington meeting vowed to strike in support of the Pennsylvania miners.[13]

The miners of Cabin Creek initially ignored the move for a nationwide strike. Prior to the June deadline, workers in the area vowed to stay at their jobs.[14] Workers remained in the mines for the first week of the strike.[15] However, in mid-June the miners of the Cabin Creek district left work in compliance with the strike vote.[16]

The strike caused a great deal of suffering among the miners. The relief offered strikers, as low as $1.00 per day

---

[11] "Bad Outlook." *Charleston Daily Gazette,* 9 April 1902.

[12] "449,000 Coal Miners are to be Called out at Once." Ibid., 17 May 1902.

[13] "Meeting at Huntington." Ibid., 24 May 1902.

[14] "The Strike Order to be Effective Today." Ibid., 7 June 1902.

[15] "The Order to Strike Became Effective." Ibid., 8 June 1902. "Reports from All Sections." Ibid., 10 June 1912.

[16] "The Cabin Creek Miners are Reported to be Out." Ibid., 13 June 1902.

in some cases, was not adequate to support families.[17] Coal companies immediately began to evict families:

> Evictions from the homes are being made every day, and those who are being set out in the road are beginning to take serious thought over the matter, but for the most part the union men are standing firm.[18]

Company officials in Kilsyth evicted the Blizzard family in the middle of the night. According to Bill's younger sister, Lana:

> One of my first memories is being thrown out of the house by company guards. I was only [seven] at the time, but I still can remember it. My mother had potatoes on the stove and biscuits in the oven when the coal company men came to the house. They threw out the biscuits and 'taters, shoveled the coals out of the stove, and set us out on the road after dark.[19]

According to Timothy Blizzard's descendants, he crossed the mountains separating Fayette and Kanawha Counties that night in search of a new home for his family. The family would eventually settle in the southern Kanawha County town of Eskdale. Despite his strong loyally to the United Mine Workers and his high visibility as an organizer in the Kilsyth area, Timothy Blizzard found employment in area coal mines. He served as a supervisor for groups of immigrant laborers used in

---

[17] Ibid.

[18] "The Strike Situation." Ibid., 14 September 1902.

[19] Strat Douthat. "A War Between Miners." *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel*, 9 March 1980.

the mines.[20] Both Sarah and Timothy continued their union activities in their new home.

The family quickly purchased property just outside the company owned area of Eskdale. The family's strong unions ties may actually have helped them acquire property. The family, already struggling to survive, had been forced to flee their home and possessions, yet mysteriously had enough money to purchase property when they settled in Cabin Creek. It is possible that the United Mine Workers gave the family the money needed for the purchase of a home on the condition that the land could be used by the union in the event of a strike.[21] Timothy's position in the mine and the location of the family's new home allowed them to live in relatively better conditions than their neighbors.[22]

The violent eviction strengthened the family's devotion to the union and Sarah Blizzard's empathy for the workers of West Virginia. Her daughter stated that following the eviction, she vowed that her family and the families of other workers should never suffer through eviction again. Likewise, the eviction

---

[20] Jean Thomas personal interview, January 1998.

[21] Stanley Bumgardner, historian at the West Virginia Division of Archives and History, posed this theory in light of the fact that a sizable tent colony was established on the land in the next decade.

[22] Ibid.

left a deep impression on Bill Blizzard. He stopped attending school at approximately the same time as the family's eviction, having reached only the third grade.[23] According to most sources, he began attending UMWA meetings at age ten or eleven.[24] The age given by these accounts would imply that his involvement was directly linked to his experiences during the 1902 sympathy strike.

Timothy and Sarah Blizzard's activities continued to overshadow their son's involvement until the period following the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek strikes prior to World War I. The family purchased land near the southern Kanawha County town of Eskdale following the 1902 strike. Sarah and Timothy Blizzard continued their organization efforts, and were joined by Bill as he entered his teen years. Bill Blizzard met, Frank Keeney, a young Eskdale native who also shared his interest in the UMWA. Keeney joined the movement after an encounter with the virulent Mother Jones. Blizzard and Keeney both served as field organizers in Eskdale, and immediately formed a close friendship.[25]

Conditions in the Eskdale mining camp served only to

---

[23] William Campbell Blizzard oral history.

[24] Anderson, *The Blizzard Family*, 96.

[25] Chuck Keeney personal interview, Fall 1997.

strengthen the devotion of Bill Blizzard and Frank Keeney to the United Mine Workers of America. Timothy and Sarah Blizzard purchased land in a privately owned section of the town.[26] The businesses and residences in this area existed as an enclave in an area that was described as the "hell hole" of West Virginia.[27] Sanitation was nonexistent in a town whose air and water had both been polluted by the mines which attracted most of the town's residents. Observers found the conditions indescribable. Most who saw the town found themselves sympathizing with union organizers who wished to improve work and living conditions.[28]

The relationship of the two men would serve them well as southern Kanawha County entered one of the worst episodes of labor violence in American history. In April of 1912, miners in neighboring Paint Creek walked out after company officials attempted to continue using non-union wage scales.[29] Company officials quickly withdrew recognition of the UMWA and imported

---

[26] Douthat, "A War Between Miners."

[27] "Three Scalps for the Striking Miners." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 15 August 1912.

[28] "The Strike in West Virginia." Ibid., 29 August 1912. "Slavery in West Virginia Mines." Ibid., 5 September 1912.

[29] "News Exchange." Ibid., 18 April 1912. "Strike in the Kanawha Valley." Ibid., 25 April 1912.

several hundred Baldwin-Felts detectives as strike breakers.[30] The detectives began a campaign of evictions and random violence directed at the strikers.[31]

Even though Cabin Creek miners first seemed reluctant to engage in a sympathy strike, the treatment of the Paint Creek miners so moved them that they walked out in the Summer of 1912.[32] Within a week, approximately two hundred detectives arrived in the Cabin Creek area. The guards mounted machine guns overlooking towns in the area.[33]

The United Mine Workers saw this as the perfect opportunity to organize the Cabin Creek area. Mother Jones later claimed "that for nine years no organizer had dared to go up that creek, and if he did, he came out on a stretcher or a corpse."[34] She traveled to the area and held a successful

---

[30] David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981) 87.

[31] "The Strike is On." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 2 May 1912. "The Strike Situation." Ibid., 16 May 1912.

[32] "The Strike Situation." *The Kanawha Citizen*, 12 August 1912. "Three Scalps for the Striking Miners." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 15 August 1912.

[33] "The Miners' Strike." *The Kanawha Citizen*, 19 August 1912. "Miners Petition Governor." Ibid., 19 August 1912. "West Virginia Miners Petition Governor." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 22 August 1912.

[34] Testimony Before the United States Commission on Industrial Relations, 13 May 1915. Reprinted in John Gabriel

organizational meeting at a church.[35] Large numbers of miners in Cabin Creek joined the United Mine Workers following her visit.[36] The struggle in Kanawha County so invigorated Mother Jones that some observers said she had the energy of a fifty year old.[37]

Miners in the area immediately organized resistance to the brutal tactics of the companies and county officials. Evicted families found shelter in tent colonies at Holly Grove and Eskdale. The Blizzard family provided land for several dozen tents.[38] The United Mine Workers used the opportunity to gain a foothold in the area. Union organizers became leaders for the striking workers, and union membership grew dramatically in the southern area of Kanawha County.[39]

The communities created by evicted miners enraged company officials. Evictions had seemed the most effective weapon

---

Hunt, ed. *The Dissenters: America's Voices of Opposition.* (New York: Random House: 1993) 203.

[35] Ibid., 203-204.

[36] "The Strike Little Changed." *The Kanawha Citizen*, 26 August 1912.

[37] "Hot Times in West Virginia." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 4 July 1912.

[38] Douthat, "A War Between Miners."

[39] "The Strike Little Changed." *The Kanawha Citizen*, 26 August 1912.

available to mining companies at the beginning of the strike.[40] However, union sympathizers who owned private property allowed miners to gather in encampments. County officials and company employees decided to directly attack the tent colony at Holly Grove. In early 1913 union employees at the Chesapeake and Ohio locomotive shop in Huntington became concerned when work began on an armored train. Officials working at the shop assured the men that the train, even though it was bound for the area affected by the strike, was only to be used to deliver mail and help transport workers.[41]

Over the course of its construction, workers mounted machine guns to the armored cars. The train, soon known as the "Bull Moose Special," crept out of Huntington, carrying several company guards as well as Kanawha County Sheriff Bonner Hill. Arriving at the Holly Grove encampment shortly after midnight, the darkened train slowed to a crawl while the guards fired wildly into the tents. Families ran to safety while miners scrambled to find weapons. The train moved further up the line after miners injured its engineer. The victory was short lived

---

[40] "Resume of Miners' Strike in the Kanawha Valley." *United Mine Workers Journal,* 27 June 1912.

[41] Howard B. Lee. *Bloodletting in Appalachia: The Story of West Virginia's Four Major Mine Wars and Other Thrilling Incidents in its Coalfields,* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1969) 38.

when the miners realized that the train would take the same route on its return journey.[42]

Fortunately for the encamped miners, the train did not return. According to one account, Sheriff Hill, horrified at the violence of the train's assault, forbade the men from making a return raid.[43] However, most accounts give Sarah Blizzard credit for preventing a return visit. Most historians claim that she led a group to the tracks, where they pried up the rails and rolled them down an embankment.[44] Others say that she dragged a rocking chair to the tracks, where she acted as a human barricade to block the train's journey.[45] In either case, her actions immediately made her a legend among the miners. "Ma Blizzard" became a symbol of the strike and the perseverance of the miners.

The actions taken by state and county officials soon rivaled those of company employees in their brutality. Kanawha County Prosecutor Thomas C. Townsend stood out for his actions during the conflict. Townsend was instrumental in creating "drumhead" military courts which were used to quickly prosecute

---

[42] Ibid., 38-39. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion,* 88.

[43] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia,* 39.

[44] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion,* 92. Anderson, *The Blizzard Family,* 71.

[45] Jean Thomas personal interview.

and warehouse striking miners and their supporters.[46] The courts, later declared unconstitutional, especially targeted out of state labor organizers, such as Mother Jones or the Socialist party organizer John Brown. However, the courts also caused incalculable suffering among the rank-and-file strikers.[47] Townsend's infamy increased when he publically stated his regret that he had been unable to ride on the Bull Moose Special.[48]

The strike ended in April of 1913. International UMWA President John White met with newly elected Governor Henry Hatfield to work out a compromise solution. Company officials, tired of the conflict and concerned about lost profits, agreed to reform pay practices. However, coal operators did not recognize the UMWA.[49] When many of the strikers refused to recognize the compromise, Governor Hatfield threatened to deport them from the state.[50]

The violence which erupted during the strike captured

---

[46] Edward M. Steel. Introduction to *The Court-Martial of Mother Jones*, Edward M. Steel, ed, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995) 3.

[47] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 95-96.

[48] "What Every Voter Should Know about Townsend." undated political pamphlet. WBC.

[49] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 97.

[50] Ibid., 97-98.

headlines and horrified its participants. The night journey of the Bull Moose Special especially stood out in the minds of the public as well as the strike's participants. A horrified General Elliot, sent to break the strike, stated, "God walks on the seas and on the land, but the devil is here in the hills."[51] While contemplating the stark contrast between the squalid, violent, conditions of southern Kanawha County and the normalcy of life in the state capital, General Elliott lamented:

> Fifteen miles away from here is the civilized city of Charleston, where there are many automobiles and ladies who have poodle dogs, and where there are churches and preachers. And here--well, you see what we have here. Humanity has been degraded in the struggle for dividends.[52]

Looking back on the struggle while a district official, William Blizzard simply stated that "At least fifty men died violent deaths in those desolate gorges, while the death toll among women and children from malnutrition was appalling."[53]

The violence that erupted in southern Kanawha County would have a lasting impact on the residents of the coal mining district. The escalation of the guard's brutality, as well as

---

[51] "Bull Moose Special." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 12 September 1912.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 16.

the mercenary involvement of county officials desensitized many the area's residents. When Blizzard married another Eskdale inhabitant a few years after the strike, both were accustomed to the regular presence of weapons and the use of violence.[54]

Sarah Blizzard's reputation would benefit Bill Blizzard for the rest of his life. Sarah Blizzard's efforts to save the miners strengthened the relationship of her and her family to the people of southern West Virginia. This served to give Bill Blizzard a certain legitimacy and respect lacking even among native labor leaders. Even in the later years of his career, the specter of his mother's actions would appear, drawing connections between the United Mine Workers of the mid twentieth century and the violent, early years of organization.

The strike also had a long lasting impact on the evolution of the United Mine Workers of America in West Virginia. UMWA officials initially believed that the strike would allow them to organize the miners of southern West Virginia. The existence of the large non-union operations in the state threatened the union's ability to negotiate contracts in other areas. However, as the strike wore on, both the International UMWA and District 17 lost their enthusiasm. As the union realized that a quick victory could not be had in the strike,

---

[54] William Campbell Blizzard oral history.

they abandoned the strikers in southern Kanawha County to their own resources.

Two months after the beginning of the strike, Frank Keeney approached the District 17 office seeking aid for organizing a rally. When the office refused to help, he vowed to lead the strike himself. International UMWA officials further angered the strikers of southern Kanawha County when they refused to include them in negotiations to end the strike. Only selected delegates could attend the conferences which ultimately led to the compromise solution. Hatfield had several men arrested who attempted to enter the meetings when he learned they opposed the compromise which had already been drafted. The UMWA leadership did nothing to protest.[55]

The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike allowed the rank-and-file to develop leadership skills which would later be used in a move to take control of the district. By mid-decade, Keeney and the other miners at Cabin Creek organized a rump district leadership. This group successfully challenged the Charleston office for control of District 17.[56]

---

[55] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion,* 97-98.

[56] David Alan Corbin. "'Frank Keeney is Our Leader and We Shall Not be Moved:' Rank and File Leadership in the West Virginia Coal Fields." *Essays in Southern Labor History: Selected Papers, southern Labor history Conference, 1976.* Gary Fink and Merl Reed, eds, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977). Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion,* 100.

The grassroots movement thrust the field organizers of Cabin Creek into a new realm. Keeney brought many of his old friends to the district office with him, including Bill Blizzard. The men who rose to power following the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike would soon chose different paths to meet what they believed were the needs to the miners in District 17.

In the years to come, many of the other participants in the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike would become involved in other labor struggles. Many of the private security guards who had worked in Kanawha County during the strike soon found work in Ludlow, Colorado, where tensions had been growing at a Rockefeller owned mine.[57]

The reputation of Kanawha County prosecutor Thomas Townsend suffered due to his involvement in the strike. His persecution of striking miners ultimately led to his defeat in the 1916 election.[58] Disheartened, he returned to his private practice following his removal from office.

At about the same time as the grassroots takeover of District 17, Bill Blizzard married. Rae Cruikshanks and Bill Blizzard had met at a general store in Cabin Creek where she

---

[57] Steel, *The Court-Martial of Mother Jones*, 63.

[58] "What Every Voter Should Know about Townsend."

had been working.[59] Her family background resembled his in some respects. Her parents had originally been farmers, but had entered the mines in the late nineteenth century.[60] Even though Rae sometimes opposed the tactics Bill used over the course of his career, she proved a vital part of his eventual success. Rae Blizzard managed virtually all of the couple's finances.[61] This allowed Bill Blizzard to focus his energies on UMWA as he rose in the organization.

Bill Blizzard at first seemed unsuited to office life. During the first years of Frank Keeney's presidency, he remained around the office for most of the day. Blizzard spent most of his time observing other district officers in a manner some viewed as paranoid. When asked about his continual observations, he responded he was "watching the officers so they can't put anything over on us." He also spent a great deal of time mimicking anyone who crossed his path. His behavior angered other district officials.[62]

Events in southern West Virginia would splinter the

---

[59] Jean Thomas personal interview.

[60] Anderson, *The Blizzard Family*, 96.

[61] William Blizzard financial file. WBC.

[62] Fred Mooney. *Struggle in the Coal Fields: The Autobiography of Fred Mooney*, (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press) 67.

District office even further. Organizers sent to Logan, Mingo, and McDowell Counties met with continual failure. Frank Keeney, during the district's 1919 convention, vowed that organization of this area would be one of his top goals. As more organizers entered the area, rumors returned to the district office that they had been met with violence.[63]

In November of 1919, several thousand miners gathered outside of Charleston at Lens Creek to march on Logan County and abolish the mine guard system by force. Frank Keeney and Governor Cornwell hurriedly arrived at the scene and convinced the miners to disperse. Before leaving, one miner stated

> There is a group of men in this audience who have been overseas fighting to save the world for democracy, but we found, we find the conditions here more hellish than they ever were over there.[64]

The abortive 1919 armed march led to a schism within the district. The gathering of the marchers and Keeney's attempts to disperse them revealed a split between the new district leadership and the rank-and-file over how to handle the issues emerging from the southern coalfields.[65] A handful of district leaders broke away from the main district office to form sub-districts. Bill Blizzard became the leader of Sub-District 2,

---

[63] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 199.

[64] Ibid., 199-200.

[65] Ibid., 200.

based in his then hometown of Saint Albans. His office represented miners from southern Kanawha County, including Paint Creek and Cabin Creek. Sub-District 2 immediately fell into open conflict with the main District 17 office.[66]

Blizzard believed that district officers were not acting to represent his men in wage agreements. He felt that contracts should be negotiated so that wage increases would be evenly distributed among the district's members. Profits from more successful operations should be used to increase the wages of miners at less profitable sites.[67] District 17 officials rejected the plan to create equal wages across the district. Rebuffed by the other leaders of the district, Blizzard led the miners of Sub-district 2 in a bureaucratic protest. Following their leader's orders, the men flooded the district office with bogus grievance claims. Under the weight of the false reports, the district's ability to operate faltered.[68]

The situation steadily worsened. Fred Mooney decided to stop representing Blizzard's men after one especially violent episode. Blizzard, frustrated over his belief that his men were not being represented, had told a company representative

---

[66] Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, 67-69.

[67] Ibid., 67-68.

[68] Ibid., 69.

to "Scab your damn mines!" during negotiations. He would have preferred for his men to work in a non-union mine than for them to remain in a union which did not respond to their needs. Mooney cut Blizzard off from the district following the outburst.[69]

Despite the open conflict between Blizzard and the district, the friendship between Keeney and Blizzard remained strong. The two men remained close friends throughout the entire crisis. However, their friendship angered and alienated other district leaders. Keeney often rushed to defend the actions of his friend, disturbing those who believed the sub-districts threatened to destroy the United Mine Workers in West Virginia. Their strong personal bond especially angered district secretary-treasurer Fred Mooney, who found Keeney's fondness for Blizzard a puzzling and disturbing character flaw. Mooney, who hated Blizzard on a profound personal level, almost viewed each sign of their friendship as an insult.[70]

The sub-district system would no doubt have destroyed the United Mine Workers in West Virginia if it had continued. The conflict among union members had taken the main office of District 17 to the brink of chaos. However, events in southern

---

[69] Ibid., 70.

[70] Ibid., 67, 70-71.

West Virginia would unite the leaders of the district against a common threat.

The deplorable situation in southern West Virginia had continued unabated during the conflict between Sub-district 2 and District 17. Organizers in Mingo county made limited progress, but union members faced lock-outs from company officials. Companies imported more guards as the number of union members grew, and the evictions which took place were marked with increasing violence.[71]

The officials of District 17 realized that the growing violence in southern West Virginia transcended the internecine feud which had worn down the organization. Blizzard immediately returned to the district fold, turning his energies towards the situation in the southern coal fields. Blizzard and Mooney even overcame their mutual antagonism. On 6 May 1920, the two men journeyed to Matewan to speak to newly organized workers. Over three thousand men gathered in the rain to listen, while miners held umbrellas over Mooney and Blizzard. Knowing that detectives would soon arrive in the area, the two men encouraged the miners to not allow the agents to supersede local law officials.[72]

---

[71] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 200-201.

[72] Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, 72.

Two weeks after their speech, the town of Matewan saw a dramatic conflict between detectives and the town's chief of police. Sid Hatfield, a UMWA sympathizer and the head of the local police, led a party which killed seven detectives sent to serve eviction notices. Three townspeople, including the mayor, also died. The "Matewan Massacre" led to national publicity for the union. The International sent funds to District 17 which allowed recruiting efforts to grow quickly in Mingo County. However, local mining companies responded by hiring an ever increasing number of guards.[73]

Hatfield immediately became a folk hero. During the trial which followed the incident at Matewan, the jury freed Hatfield and fifteen others. Union leaders and sympathizers viewed this as a victory, but soon learned during the trial that a bill had been introduced in the state legislature which would allow judges to summon a jury from another county for a criminal case. The "jury bill" would effectively destroy jury nullification, and was specifically aimed at union organizers.[74]

Shortly after the end of the Matewan Massacre trials, a group of strikers "shot up" the mining town of Mohawk in

---

[73] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 201-202.

[74] Ibid., 215-216.

McDowell County. The events at Mohawk gave company officials an opportunity to seek vengeance against Hatfield. Company guards later claimed that Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers had led a group of Mingo County strikers in the attack. Union members claimed that company guards had actually fired on the town, hoping to charge Hatfield in the hostile atmosphere of McDowell County. On 1 August 1921, a group of men murdered Hatfield and Chambers as they entered the courthouse at Welch, the county seat of McDowell County.[75]

Following Hatfield's murder, a group of miners gathered under the shadow of the burned capital building. Many saw the murders as a sign that the coal fields of southern West Virginia were beyond the pale of the law, and that violent action was needed to organize the area. Standing for ten hours in the rain, the group listened to speeches from Blizzard and other UMWA leaders.[76] Many of the speakers believed that the union should avoid rash action. The following day, an enraged Mother Jones accused Blizzard of calling the rally in order to goad the miners into action.[77]

Two weeks following the rally, several thousand armed men

---

[75] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 65-68. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 217.

[76] Ibid., 217.

[77] Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, 89-90.

gathered at Lens Creek, just south of Charleston. The armed miners had been inspired by Hatfield's murder, but little else of the miners' army is known for certain. The group planned to kill Sheriff Chafin of Logan County, viewed as a the origin of the worst violence against employees and organizers in the state, and then march into Mingo County and force recognition of the union. Over the next few days, they made their way to the system of ridges which border Mingo and Logan Counties. At Blair Mountain, they met a similarly armed and determined group of company guards and volunteers. Each side quickly settled into lines of defense and began firing. President Warren G. Harding, realizing the scale of the events, deployed several thousand federal troops at the end of August.[78]

The enthusiasm of the marchers and the rage they felt at the operators of southern West Virginia initially led Keeney and Blizzard to support the marchers.[79] Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney had fled the state to avoid charges of "shooting up" a Mingo County town, leaving Blizzard in Kanawha County to deal with the crisis. For the most part, he remained at district headquarters in Charleston, monitoring the situation. However, later reports reveal a more active role in the events unfolding

---

[78] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 218-224. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 97-101.

[79] William Campbell Blizzard oral history.

in southern West Virginia. Soon after the beginning of the march, many marchers reported seeing Blizzard driving near the area of their movement and asking for information about their progress. When a group of miners occupied a small isolated schoolhouse for the night, Blizzard entered the building with a supply of weapons. Unloading the arms, he murmured, "You have what you have been waiting for--now go get it."[80]

Blizzard played a key role in ending the battle after the arrival of General Bandholtz. War correspondent Boyden Sparkes described the scene which met the troops as they arrived in Madison. A figure in a black felt hat and a suit "that appeared to have been slept in for a week" approached an officer and introduced himself as sub-district president William Blizzard. One soldier inquired, "Are you the general of the miners' army?" Blizzard smiled and replied

> What army? I guess the boys'll listen to me, all right. I just told the captain here that if he'll send a squad of his Regulars up the line with me I can get all of our fellows out of the hills by daylight.[81]

He left Madison shortly after midnight on September 3. Returning later the same morning, he stated that the fighting

---

[80] "The Trial at Charleston," *Shepherdstown Register*. 4 May 1922. Fred Mooney claims the story of Blizzard's appearance so close to the fighting was exaggerated (Mooney 98).

[81] quoted in Cabell Phillips, "The West Virginia Mine War," *American Heritage*, August 1974.

was still in progress, but that the miners would surrender if granted protection by Bandholtz's men.[82] By the time the soldiers moved towards the front at daybreak, most of the miners had hidden their weapons and removed their bandannas, becoming "simply a swarm of stubbly-faced men getting out of the hills and back to their homes."[83]

During his absence from Madison, Blizzard ordered the marchers to lay down their weapons and surrender as soon as they saw federal troops.[84] Many people involved with the march and the subsequent trials claim that Blizzard was the only district leader with enough prestige among the miners to successfully call on them to end the march. His presence as the only district leader in the state, as well as the respect the miners held for his mother, allowed him to gain their cooperation. He also acted as a mediator between the miners and Bandholtz's men. Blizzard's willingness to cooperate made a profound impression on the soldiers. Many later commented on his crucial role in helping the soldiers gather weapons, as well as the deep loyalty most of the miners seemed to hold for

---

[82] "First Troops Advance towards Miners' Lines, *Charleston Daily Mail*. 3 September 1921.

[83] Boyden Sparks, quoted in Phillips "The West Virginia Mine War."

[84] "The Trial at Charles Town," *Shepherdstown Register*. 11 May 1922.

him.[85]

The shift in Blizzard's attitudes towards the Armed March can only have one cause. At the outset of the episode, the fury which led the miners to begin the march also affected the judgement of the district leaders. However, after seeing the condition of the marching miners and considering their chances, Blizzard backed down. He came to believe that any further action would only lead to the union's destruction. He viewed it as vital that the war end, and that the miners be the ones to bring about its peaceful resolution. By surrendering their weapons, the miners proved their willingness to fight while possibly saving the union from destruction by the state.

Blizzard convinced the miners to end the conflict peacefully. Men continued to either hide or surrender their weapons and quietly return home as troops moved towards the scene of the fighting. By Labor Day, the area around Blair Mountain was once again quiet. While General Bandholtz continued to establish a presence in the area, state officials as well as the governments of the counties affected by the march decided to prosecute the men involved in the march.[86]

---

[85] Ibid. Captain John Wilson, the officer Blizzard met at Madison, stated that the miners obeyed Blizzard without hesitation.

[86] "Labor Day Finds All Miners Dispersed; Bandholtz Goes to Inspect the Field; to Prosecute the Leaders of Insurrection."

Officials in the counties affected by the Armed March issued warrants for the march's participants and leaders. They would be charged with murder in the deaths of the four deputies, as well as treason and conspiracy related offenses.[87]

Bill Blizzard surrendered to Kanawha County officials in mid November, joining Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney, who had surrendered a few days earlier.[88] The leaders of District 17 believed that they had enough close friends in Kanawha County to make their stay relatively safe.[89] This attitude towards the Kanawha County jail allowed the men to relax and satirize their plight by holding mock trials. Blizzard served as sheriff in the surrealistic proceedings.[90]

Reality soon dulled the men's enthusiasm. Jailers forced them to watch while other prisoners were tortured.[91] A blocked drain in their shared cell caused sewage to flood the floor, while the men often awoke to find rats sprinting along their

---

Charleston Daily Mail, 5 September 1921.

[87] William Blizzard legal folder. WBC.

[88] Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, 105-107.

[89] Ibid., 108.

[90] Ibid., 107. Mooney later stated that the "court's" inability to physically abuse suspects served to differentiate it from the courts of the southern parts of the state.

[91] Ibid., 109.

bunks.[92] The district leaders also wished to see their men.

Frank Keeney contacted Sheriff Chafin, who agreed to free the men for Christmas on the condition they surrender to him in Huntington the following day. A train would take the men from Huntington to the Logan County jail. Bill Blizzard left the Kanawha County jail in order to celebrate the holiday with his family, and then left for Huntington.[93]

On 26 December 1921, Bill Blizzard entered the Logan County jail. Keeney, Mooney, and Blizzard knew most of the miners in the Logan jail personally. As they entered the row of cells, one prisoner called out, "Boys, they always said that if we went to jail they would go with us, and here they are."[94] Blizzard's stay in Logan County proved uneventful, except for the occasional days when mine guards would drop by to see if he had horns.[95] On 18 January 1922, Logan County officials allowed Blizzard to post bail and leave the county. Due to his rank and presence in the state during the conflict, county officials set his bail at $15,000. He returned to Huntington

---

[92] Ibid., 108-109.

[93] Ibid., 110.

[94] Ibid., 111.

[95] Ibid., 112.

where Rae Blizzard met him.[96]

In April of 1922, the trials relating to the armed march began. The treason trials had been moved to Charles Town in Jefferson County, an agricultural area in the easternmost portion of the state. A special train left Charleston immediately before the trial, carrying about one thousand defendants and witnesses.[97] Hotels in Charles Town filled to capacity, and special telegraph lines were installed to handle press coverage of the ensuing events.[98]

Blizzard maintained a high profile during the trial at Charles Town. Since his case would be tried first, he became a visible symbol of the Armed March. A great deal was at stake for both sides during Blizzard's trial. Prosecutors believed that the treason charges against Blizzard would be easy to prove. However, they were aware that the outcome of his trial would set the stage for the later proceedings.[99]

The United Mine Workers of America also realized the

---

[96] Ibid., 117-118. Logan officials set Mooney and Keeney's bail amounts at $10,000 each.

[97] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia,* 107.

[98] "Circuit Court Begins." *Shepherdstown Register,* 20 April 1922.

[99] Melvin Triolo. *The Black Debacle: From a Thundering Voice to a Confused Whimper (Recollections and Observations on the United Mine Workers and Collective Bargaining in the Coal Industry,* (Parsons: McClain, 1991) 89-90.

importance of the trial's outcome. The union also saw the importance of the publicity surrounding the trial. John L. Lewis, newly elected president of the International UMWA, visited the site of the trial in a show of solidarity.[100] Blizzard used the publicity to gain support for the marchers' cause. Comparing his trial with the trial of John Brown in the same courthouse, he proclaimed, "We both wanted to free the slaves."[101]

Throughout most of the episode, the union leader maintained an easy going, relaxed demeanor which endeared him to the residents of Jefferson County.[102] His popularity grew when he became the star of a charity baseball game held between the defendants and a local team. Blizzard led the UMWA team to victory, despite being smashed in the head in a bizarre game related accident.[103] The teams donated money raised at the game to local hospitals. His jovial personality also won the hearts

---

[100] "The Trial at Charles Town." *Shepherdstown Register*, 4 May 1922.

[101] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 90.

[102] "The Trial at Charles Town," *Shepherdstown Register*. 1 June 1922.

[103] Note of back of photograph written by William Blizzard. William Blizzard Photograph Collection, West Virginia State Archives. "No Evidence of Any Treasonable Intent Disclosed in Trial of Miners at Charles Town, West Virginia." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 15 May 1922.

of corespondents sent to cover the trial. James M. Cain, sent from Baltimore to cover the proceedings, immediately formed a life-long bond with both Rae and William Blizzard.[104]

The trial itself went smoothly for Blizzard and his defense. The issues relating to the treason charges proved more illusory than the prosecution had expected. Blizzard also had a crowd of witnesses who stated that he had been in the District office during most of the march.[105] As the trial progressed, it became apparent that proving Blizzard's intent to commit treason and his actual involvement in the Armed March would be difficult.

The prosecution's closing argument shattered Blizzard's

---

[104] William Campbell Blizzard oral history. Philip Dubuisson Castille. "Too Odd for California." *Appalachian Journal*, Winter 1996. Blizzard so impressed Cain that he decided to abandon journalism and write a semibiographical novel detailing the struggle of labor in West Virginia. Cain says of the original plot

> My man was to be a radical union organizer, in the Mingo fields of the 1920s, winding up as part of the march of 1921, his mind set on the destruction of a system he felt was constrictive like a chain around the men. My whole novel was to highlight his compulsion to break things apart, and his final discovery that he couldn't. At this point he was to be alone in a woods above the mines, between two trees, that in a futile rage he kept trying to push apart . . . . But nothing happened--the trees just stood there (Castille 157).

Cain later abandoned this plot after many unsuccessful drafts, ultimately producing the sensationalistic novel, *The Butterfly*. A film adaptation appeared in 1981, starring Stacey Keach, Pia Zadora, and Ed McMahon.

[105] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 110.

carefree attitude about the events at Charles Town. Even though Blizzard felt relatively secure at the end of the trial, the dramatic final appeal from the prosecution seemed to raise the possibility of his conviction. The presentation had visibly shaken Rae, and, faced with the possibility of his own death, William became sullen when the jury left at 3:30 on Saturday, May 27, to begin deliberations.[106] The prosecution's comments had so upset him that he tripped and fell while rising to hear the verdict when the jury returned at 9:30 that evening.[107]

However, he had nothing to fear. As the jury declared his innocence, a cheer rang out which shook the courthouse. The crowd immediately lifted him into the air, and carried him through the streets of Charles Town. Joined by many of the town's African-American residents, the celebration lasted into the night.[108]

---

[106] "Blizzard Acquitted," *Shepherdstown Register*. 1 June 1922.

[107] Ibid. William Campbell Blizzard oral history.

[108] "Logan County Operators Fail to Convict William Blizzard on Treason Charges." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 15 June 1922. "Blizzard Acquitted," *Shepherdstown Register*. 1 June 1922.

Chapter 2

"Local Color"

Chapter 2[1]

The image of a victorious mob carrying Bill Blizzard through the streets marks the high point of his career as a popular leader of an insurgent rank-and-file movement. However, his experiences during the armed march and the subsequent trials dampened his grass roots enthusiasm. His willingness to supply weapons to the marchers and to remain in the state as the highest ranking district official during the events demonstrate his support for the miners' army. Yet his enthusiasm soon waned. He quickly advised the Marchers to surrender to federal troops, and personally became involved in negotiations, believing that a peaceful solution was the only way for the union to survive the March.

The trials drove home both the personal and organizational risk of the March. Blizzard realized that the insurgency of the Marchers had come close to destroying the UMWA in West Virginia and had almost cost a number of participants their lives. No doubt he looked back on the preceding years and questioned the rank-and-file movement which had brought him to power. Even though the movement had gained much, it had almost lost everything. This thought haunted him for the remainder of

---

[1] The title quote appeared in a resolution circulated among District 17 locals in May of 1931.

his life. Following the close of the trials, he never again discussed the march.[2]

While Blizzard led Sub-District 2, changes in the national structure of the United Mine Workers took place which forever altered the nature of Blizzard's career and which ultimately exacted a high personal cost for the successes Blizzard would achieve. In 1917, John L. Lewis obtained an appointment to the post of International Statistician for the United Mine Workers of America.[3] Later that year, Vice President Frank Hayes moved to fill the vacant presidency. He appointed Lewis to the vice presidency.[4] When health problems forced Hayes to resign, Lewis presided over the UMWA's 1919 convention. In 1920, he started his first five-year term as president. He remained International President until 1960.[5]

Lewis immediately took steps to consolidate his power. A bloc within the UMWA made up of Communists and Socialists had opposed his election. He amended the UMWA's constitution to prevent members of leftist organizations, such as the Communist

---

[2] William Campbell Blizzard oral history, *Even the Heavens Weep Research Materials.*

[3] Triolo, *Black Debacle,* 15. Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis,* 29.

[4] Triolo, *Black Debacle,* 15. Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis,* 31-32.

[5] Triolo, *Black Debacle,* 15.

Party, the Socialist Party, and the Industrial Workers of the World, from being members of the United Mine Workers. The union lost a number of skilled leaders, including a number of Lewis supporters, in this purge.[6]

Lewis tightened his grip on the UMWA by eliminating district level elections, a tactic he originally used only in select cases. Lewis created provisional governments in districts with leaders opposed to his presidency. This tactic allowed him to appoint leaders willing to follow his dictates. When his first attempts at creating provisional governments proved successful, he canceled all district level elections, essentially reducing all districts to provisional status. Over the course of the 1920s, one district after another fell to Lewis. Eventually only District 12 continued to function independently of Lewis' will. This Illinois district, long known for its strong sense of autonomy, proved to be the center of Lewis's opposition.[7]

Financial problems relating to legal expenses also faced the International United Mine Workers of America during the first years of Lewis' reign. A series of court cases at the turn of the decade raised the possibility that the UMWA could

---

[6] Ibid., 15-16.

[7] Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, chapter 6.

be held liable for corporate losses resulting from a strike. Even though the union successfully fought this claim, the Supreme Court ruled that strikes aimed at organizing non-union mines interfered with interstate trade. These and other legal battles plagued the UMWA throughout the 1920s. During only one year of the decade did the UMWA's legal expenses drop below $100,000.[8]

Like District 12, District 17 represented a major problem for Lewis. The leaders had risen to power in opposition to the established district leadership. The leaders, especially Blizzard, had a reputation for impulsiveness which would have made controlling them difficult. Even though Lewis made public appearances at the trials, he privately expressed bitter opposition to the March. The trials which followed the March, especially Blizzard's highly publicized treason trial, had rapidly drained the organization's coffers on both the district and international levels. In the period immediately following the trials, the district had to cut off relief payments to miners, and would ultimately have to stop recruitment due to a lack of funds.[9] The district could barely assist miners

---

[8] Ibid., 60-61.

[9] J. Johnson to William Blizzard, 9 October 1923. William Blizzard to District 17 locals, 24 March 1924. WBC.

engaged in the 1922 strike.[10]

The economic problems facing the district allowed Lewis to gain his foothold. In the summer of 1924, Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney requested that the international UMWA take direct control of the district's finances. Lewis dissolved the district's government within days of receiving the request and learning of its dire financial situation. He gave Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney the choice of either resigning or being fired. The two men left quietly, possibly believing that an open conflict would damage the district. Lewis also removed other district leaders who had been elected during the mid 1910s. Lewis appointed Percy Tetlow as District 17's first provisional president.[11]

District 17 came close to collapse during this period. The expense of the march related trials as well as the infighting which marked so much of the district's politics decimated the once vibrant union. By the end of the decade, only a few thousand members remained in the organization.[12]

The decline of the UMWA during the mid 1920s forced

---

[10] C. Hager to Frank Keeney, 8 November 1922. WBC.

[11] Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 77-78.

[12] Thomas Tull. "Van A. Bittner: A Labor Leader for Dynamic Times," (Unpublished masters thesis, Marshall University, 1979) 60-61.

William Blizzard to reevaluate his role in the organization. Faced with the union's possible collapse, he began to look into land speculation and entrepreneurship. He became involved in developing and renting land in south central West Virginia for the remainder of his life.[13] His other efforts proved to be short lived. Blizzard briefly became involved in a scheme to sell "magic gas," a gasoline additive with miraculous powers, but soon gave up on the enterprise.[14] However, labor organization seemed to be his true calling. Despite the changes in the district, he continued to work in his old post whenever possible.[15]

Even though Lewis had purged Frank Keeney from the United Mine Workers following the trials, Keeney and Blizzard remained close friends. Keeney often stopped by Blizzard's UMWA office after everyone else had left for the day. The two men would talk while Blizzard took care of his personal correspondence.[16] However, a series of events had been set in motion which would destroy their once strong friendship.

---

[13] William Blizzard financial folder. WBC.

[14] P. A. Lefebvre and Company to William Blizzard, 25 March 1926. Ibid., 1926. WBC.

[15] R. Williams to William Blizzard, 1 August 1925. A. Epps to William Blizzard, 21 May 1929. WBC.

[16] William Blizzard to W. F. Ray, 24 March 1925. WBC.

In the years following their purge, both Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney had come to believe that Lewis posed a direct threat to the needs of labor. Frank Keeney briefly became involved with the Reorganized United Mine Workers of America (RUMWA), an organization dedicated to combating Lewis's autocratic leadership style.[17] The RUMWA grew out of the opposition to Lewis in Illinois District 12. In October of 1929, Lewis suspended District 12's charter. However, a court ruling in January of 1930 supported the District's claims to autonomy. Following the conflict, several Illinois UMWA leaders as well as radical union supporters purged by Lewis at mid decade met in Chicago. The leaders claimed that since Lewis had not held the 1929 international UMWA convention, as required by the union's constitution, the UMWA did not have any officers at the international level. Rather than forming a dual union, this new opposition group claimed to be the "true" United Mine Workers of American. For the next several months, the Reorganized United Mine Workers of America had more members in Illinois than did Lewis's UMWA, but internal disputes and lack of backing prevented the group from gaining much influence outside of Illinois.[18]

---

[17] Tull, "Van Bittner," 54.

[18] Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 117-123.

Keeney had been involved in the creation of the RUMWA, and viewed it as an example for reforming the UMWA in West Virginia. Drawing from his experiences with the Illinois group, as well as his memories of the grass roots movement which had originally brought him to power, Keeney created the West Virginia Mine Workers (WVMW). Keeney and Mooney immediately returned to the state to begin organization efforts. Mooney traveled to northern West Virginia, where Van Bittner, a problem solver for Lewis, acted to counter any advance made by the West Virginia Mine Workers.[19]

Frank Keeney's West Virginia Mine Workers received a mixed reaction from the workers of the state. Some believed that Keeney only created the organization to gain personal power. Workers in some coal fields banded together in labeling Keeney a traitor to labor, and in vowing support for the United Mine Workers.[20] Other miners viewed the organization as labor's only hope. Believing that Lewis' rule threatened the UMWA, but that Communist-backed unions had lost touch with their needs, this group appealed to Keeney for expanded organization efforts.[21]

---

[19] Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields,* 146-147.

[20] T. Scarbro to William Blizzard, 28 March 1932. WBC.

[21] T. Miner to Frank Cheney (sic), 22 October 1932. WBC.

Keeney's involvement with another grass roots challenge to the United Mine Workers' power structure presented a hard choice for William Blizzard. Keeney's organization threatened to split the state's miners, as had Blizzard's sub-district in the years leading up to the Armed March. Blizzard had seen the chaos which could result from an intra-union feud, as well as the economic and personal cost of the Mine Wars. In some respects, the events of the previous decade were being relived before his very eyes.

Bill Blizzard ultimately yielded to the voices crying for a single union to represent all miners. Realizing that there would be no turning back once the decision had been made, he decided to openly condemn his former friend's actions and declare his support for a united UMWA. In the Spring of 1931, he undertook a course of action which would both combat the rise of dual unionism and strengthen his position within the UMWA. He contacted Charlie Payne, a local UMWA official in Ronda, West Virginia, and ordered him to pass a resolution in all of the locals he could influence. The resolution would then be sent to Van A. Bittner, Harold Houston, and John L. Lewis.[22]

The resolution had two parts. First, it declared that

---

[22] William Blizzard to Charlie Payne, 2 May 1931. WBC.

Keeney and his followers posed a direct threat to the UMWA in West Virginia. The resolution then stated that someone from the state should be appointed to either district or international office in order to add "local color" to the UMWA, and presumably to restore some faith in the organization. Of course, one individual could both combat Keeney and represent the workers of the state. Because of his origins in the state, and the fact that he knew the "intrigues of Keeney and his crowd sufficiently to meet the situation successfully," the resolution recommended that Bill Blizzard receive an appointment to a post in the United Mine Workers of America.[23] Using his close friendship with the dissident leader, Blizzard began to monitor Keeney's activities for the International United Mine Workers of America, providing information about his funds and general levels of support in West Virginia.[24]

A cursory reading of the resolution could lead to the conclusion that opportunism played a role in the resolution. However, mere opportunism did not drive Blizzard to abandon one of his closest friends. An interesting episode also gives evidence that Blizzard's main motivation in ordering the

---

[23] Local 1633 to John L. Lewis, 4 May 1931. Charlie Payne to John L. Lewis, 5 May 1931. Charlie Payne to Van Bittner, 5 May 1931. Charlie Payne to Harold Houston, 5 May 1931. WBC.

[24] E. Houck to William Blizzard, 12 December 1931. William Blizzard to E. Houck, 16 December 1931. WBC.

resolution was not to gain office in either the district or international office.

In 1931, WVMW members embarked on a disastrous strike. Blizzard's very public efforts to gain support for the evicted strikers and to help them relocate would have attracted the attention of UMWA officers. If he had wished to use the threat posed by the WVMW as a tool to gain power, he could not have taken these actions. Other leaders identified any connection with the dual union as a sign of tacit support.

Blizzard attacked Keeney and the WVMW for the motives of its leaders and the perceived threat to the hegemony of the United Mine Workers of America. Pleas from miners who believed Keeney had betrayed them gave impetus to Blizzard's actions. However, he did not allow what he saw as a political dispute to disrupt his efforts to help workers he believed were suffering. Even after he publically denounced the leadership of the West Virginia Mine Workers, rank-and-file members of the organization still believed they could approach him seeking aid.[25]

The failed 1931 strike virtually destroyed the West Virginia Mine Workers. Even though the group continued its organization efforts for two more years, the disastrous strike

---

[25] T. Thompson to William Blizzard, 19 June 1932. WBC.

drove many of Keeney's supporters back into the United Mine Workers of America. The collapse of the WVMW would cause many of the state's workers to question the effectiveness of dual unionism. Ironically, the failed struggle of the West Virginia Mine Workers served to strengthen the power of John L. Lewis by consolidating the state's miners in the UMWA.

The early 1930s saw the political maturation of the United Mine Workers in West Virginia. District 17 had taken a few halting steps into the political arena in the previous decade. While still involved in the trials stemming from the Armed March, Bill Blizzard and Fred Mooney had tried to run for the state's House of Delegates.[26] The 1932 election saw the development of a sophisticated political apparatus which would become a powerful fixture on the state's social landscape. The UMWA became involved in politics in support of one candidate in particular, a candidate with an ironic past.

Thomas Townsend, the Kanawha County prosecutor who oversaw the attacks on the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strikers two decades earlier, had made a deep impression on Bill Blizzard during his involvement in the 1922 treason trial. Townsend's abilities had so impressed Blizzard that he suggested to friends an interesting way to repay the attorney for his services.

---

[26] Mooney, *Struggle in the Coal Fields*, 129-130.

Blizzard stated that the UMWA should reward Townsend's invaluable role in the trial by helping him return to public office.[27]

The two men also developed a close personal relationship. When Townsend took office as state tax commissioner, he remembered his friend from the trials, and appointed William Blizzard to serve as an office assistant. Even though Blizzard's post officially resembled that of an office errand boy, it gave him an opportunity to observe closely events at the Capital and to make connections which would prove useful in the future.[28] However, many criticized Blizzard for using his plush office as the site for union lobbying. Many more wondered why a lowly office assistant had even received a plush office.[29]

Van Bittner, originally a UMWA official from Pennsylvania who had come to the state to organize the northern coal fields, called for a meeting of labor officials in Parkersburg during the winter of 1931. The group planned to examine the needs of the state's workers in light of the growing economic crisis and

---

[27] William Blizzard to John Easton, May 1922. WBC.

[28] *West Virginia Blue Book*, 1930. Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 90-91.

[29] K. W. Snedegar to William Blizzard, 25 February 1931. WBC.

to determine which individuals could best serve labor in the upcoming election.[30] Following the Parkersburg meetings, Van Bittner and Bill Blizzard informed Thomas Townsend that the group wished him to run for governor, pledging its full support for his campaign if he chose to run.[31]

Townsend drew the strengths of his campaign from his own past. He had rendered invaluable service to the defendants at the Charles Town treason trials.[32] Many believed his decade of involvement with organized labor would yield a solid bloc of votes which would serve as the core of his campaign.[33]

Townsend utilized his recent experience in state government to develop his economic platform, pushing for a major revision of land tax valuations. Townsend had started this crusade while state tax commissioner, and he believed it would bring relief to the victims of the depression.[34]

The Republican Townsend developed a campaign which

---

[30] Van Bittner to William Blizzard, 9 December 1931. WBC.

[31] Non-Partisan meeting of Labor to Thomas Townsend, 20 December 1931. WBC.

[32] "T. C. Townsend's Historic Defense of Labor at Charles Town May 22, 1922." pamphlet. WBC.

[33] "Nominee Makes Labor Pledge." *Coal Valley News*, September 1932.

[34] "Does Townsend Offer Tax Redemption?" *Coal Valley News*, 21 November 1929. "Townsend on Taxes." Ibid. "The Real Issues in this Campaign-by Thomas Townsend." pamphlet. WBC.

attempted to combine public works with reduced taxes and government spending. He proposed an elaborate series of locks and dams which would provide hydroelectric power, foreshadowing Franklin Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority.[35] In one of his more controversial campaign maneuvers, he declared that the state's schools should not update their texts during the course of the depression. This would allow parents to avoid the major expense associated with the beginning of each new school year.[36] He hoped to make these issues the focus of his campaign.

Two major obstacles stood in Townsend's way. The public immediately associated the Republican Townsend with the campaign of the reviled Herbert Hoover. Townsend limited the impact of this issue by simply avoiding any reference to the national campaign.[37] His campaign materials, in the few instances they do mention the national election, make only passing references to the candidate and no references to his platform. Townsend simply disassociated himself from the national Republican party.

---

[35] "The Real Issues in this Campaign-by T. C. Townsend." pamphlet. WBC.

[36] "School Patrons and Taxpayers Saved $500,000 Annually . . ." pamphlet. WBC.

[37] "The Republican State Campaign." pamphlet. WBC.

Townsend's past politic record proved to be his campaign's other major liability. Of course, Townsend's past conflicts with organized labor became a focal point for his opponents. Pamphlets immediately circulated reminding voters of the military courts, and of Townsend's disappointment at not being able to ride the Bull Moose Special as it attacked Holly Grove. One historically minded broadside proclaimed, "Townsend follows the line of labor--in a Pullman!"[38] Townsend's political past seemed incongruous in a campaign which relied on the support of organized labor.

Blizzard served as one of the main coordinators of the Townsend campaign. He traveled widely in the coal fields, attempting to combat propaganda which reminded voters of Townsend's previous background in public office. Blizzard stood as a living symbol of labor's more violent struggles in the state, and he used this to offset criticisms of Townsend's record from the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike. Pamphlets immediately appeared which reprinted portions of Thomas Townsend's closing argument at Charles Town and which bore testimonials from Bill Blizzard describing Townsend's value to

---

[38] "What Every Voter Should Know About Townsend." pamphlet. WBC.

the UMWA during the Mine Wars.[39] Blizzard also made several personal appearances in coal camps, where he described his relationship to Townsend and attempted to refute the claims of his opponents that Townsend still represented an enemy to organized labor. He also gathered information from all quarters of the state concerning Townsend's popularity and tracked down any lead which he felt could result in even a handful of votes. The campaign came to dominate Blizzard's time in the months before the election.[40]

Even though Townsend's appeal seemed to be far reaching, it could not counter the unpopularity of the Republican party. Despite the fact that T. C. Townsend had tried to distance himself from the national ticket, he became caught up in the backlash of rage targeted at anyone even vaguely associated with Herbert Hoover.[41] However, his campaign proved to be significant in two ways.

First, the Townsend campaign allowed Van Bittner to further his vision of a politically active labor movement.

---

[39] The best example is "T. C. Townsend's Historic Defense of Labor at Charles Town May 22, 1922." WBC.

[40] Beginning in late March 1932 and continuing through the election, the campaign dominates Blizzard's personal correspondence. Blizzard Correspondence File, 1932. WBC.

[41] Ben Moore. *Heritage of Freedom: An Autobiography of Judge Ben Moore*, (Minneapolis: T. S. Dennison, 1957) 135.

Bill Blizzard both proved his ability as Bittner's assistant and developed his own feel for state politics during this period. Over the next decade, Blizzard and Bittner used the skills honed in the campaign of 1932 to turn District 17 into an important political entity. By the early 1940s, the district's leaders played a major role in national politics.

The Townsend campaign also had an impact on West Virginia's Democratic Party. Matthew Mansfield Neely, Democratic United States Senator from the state, believed that Townsend's campaign would demolish the efforts of Guy Kump. Neely virtually ignored Kump's campaign, and failed to develop a personal relationship with the candidate. When Kump assumed office in 1933, he remembered Neely's scorn. Kump would use his time in the state capitol to develop a Democratic machine independent of the machine controlled by Neely and his associates in Washington. The two factions, the" statehouse" and the "national" parties, openly competed for political patronage and votes. The schism continued well into the next decade.[42]

While the UMWA's political power grew in West Virginia, Blizzard's power within District 17 also increased. The suggestions of the 1931 resolution would come to fruition in

---

[42] Ibid., 134-136.

1933. John L. Lewis appointed Van Bittner district president for his services in West Virginia.[43] Bill Blizzard became district vice president.[44] The two men had developed a close friendship. Van Bittner had a family, but his frequent travels and the possibility of violence led him to leave them in Pennsylvania. Even though Van Bittner had a strong relationship with his family, their long separations troubled him. Labor historian Thomas Tull has suggested that Bittner tried to compensate for the separation by viewing his coworkers as a surrogate family.[45] His relationship with Bill Blizzard supports this argument. Bittner arranged for Blizzard to receive a furnished office in district headquarters, and maintained a close personal relationship with all of the Blizzard family.[46] Bittner admired Bill and Rae Blizzard's ability to maintain a close family despite Rae's entrpreneurial activities and Bill's union involvement. He felt that both Rae and Bill were indispensable for the other's success.[47]

William Blizzard rose to the district vice presidency at a

---

[43] Tull, "Van Bittner," 63-64.

[44] Van Bittner to William Blizzard, 19 October 1933. WBC.

[45] Tull, "Van Bittner," 54-57.

[46] Van Bittner to William Blizzard, undated memo. Van Bittner to William Campbell Blizzard, 12 February 1934. WBC.

[47] Van Bittner to Rae Blizzard, 6 June 1934. WBC.

time when the beleaguered United Mine Workers of America experienced a reversal of fortunes. The failed dual union movement only served to draw more workers into the UMWA. Even though some of Keeney's followers later joined the Progressive Miners of America after the WVMW's collapse, the dual union movement never again rose as a serious threat to the UMWA's power in West Virginia.

More important to the development of the UMWA as a whole, Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) allowed the United Mine Workers of America to engage in an unprecedented recruitment campaign. Section 7(a) of the industrial recovery plan guaranteed the right to collective bargaining and stipulated minimum wages and maximum hours for workers.[48] John L. Lewis had campaigned tirelessly for industrial recovery legislation since before Roosevelt's inauguration. Section 7(a) proved to be one of his greatest triumphs.[49]

In the period immediately following the Act's passage, Van Bittner led a highly successful campaign in northern West Virginia, while others took the union into the southernmost coalfields of West Virginia. Virtually overnight the United

---

[48] William E. Leuchtenberg. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 57-58.

[49] Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis,* 131-134.

Mine Workers strengthened its hold on the state and made dramatic advances into areas which had been beyond the pale of unionization only a decade earlier.[50]

Following the passage of the NIRA and the subsequent recruitment campaign, Van Bittner and William Blizzard came to believe that *all* of the state's workers needed to be organized. Organization of the entire state would eliminate competition from non-union mines, operations whose effectiveness endangered each contract negotiation.[51] It would also transform the UMWA into a powerful political entity. Representing the workers and bearing direct influence on corporate interests in the state, a UMWA which spoke with a monolithic voice would wield political power beyond the imaginings of the union's first organizers.

Van Bittner's close relationship with his office staff allowed him to place his confidence on their abilities and judgments. The staff of District 17, especially Bill Blizzard and Charlie Payne, would become invaluable to Bittner during his term as district president. Following the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Van Bittner became involved in efforts to organize the workers of other industries, most notably steel. His work in this area often

---

[50] Ibid., 134.

[51] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 43-44.

drew him away from West Virginia. His long absences, combined with health problems, forced him to rely on William Blizzard to manage the affairs of the district.[52]

Bill Blizzard proved extremely capable of managing the affairs of the district. In Van Bittner's absence, he attempted to expand the political role of the UMWA, and he continued to push for organization of the state's remaining non-union mines. Blizzard also handled the more routine aspects of district administration. He planned public functions and rallies, and investigated grievances. In all cases, Blizzard acted in a manner which only increased Van Bittner's respect for him on both a personal and professional level.

Blizzard's performance gained the approval of Bittner, and also of Bittner's superior. As Blizzard took over more and more of the district's affairs during Bittner's extended absences, he gained the attention of John L. Lewis. Lewis came to trust Blizzard as his eyes and ears in the district, and as a defender of the union.

A rather bizarre episode illustrates Blizzard's growing importance to Lewis. A group of miners in western Kentucky

---

[52] Charlie Payne oral history. Interview conducted by Thomas Tull. Marshall University Morrow Library Special Collections, Huntington, West Virginia.

Local 1204 raised the ire of their colleagues in a dispute over their pay scale. This seemingly small, personal feud blossomed into a crisis when the majority of the miners at the site refused to work when the four machine operators were present. Local, district, and international officials all became involved in investigating the incident and trying to resolve the problem. The situation worsened after someone placed a caustic substance in the four men's uniforms and defecated on their equipment. The four were fired after union and company officials observed them vandalizing their own equipment in order to gain attention.[53]

Blizzard acted to coordinate the efforts of union officials during this surreal crisis. He remained in constant contact with Lewis, international representatives, and local officials. He maintained a smooth flow of information between all of the participants. Blizzard's service in this and other episodes, as well as his close relationship with the district's provisional officials, dramatically improved his standing in Lewis' eyes.

William Blizzard's period of tutelage under Van Bittner ably prepared him to take over the district as president. In the Fall of 1945, John L. Lewis appointed him to head the

---

[53] Local 1204 incident correspondence folder. WBC.

district he had served since his early teens. Charlie Payne, a local official from Ronda, West Virginia, who had aided Blizzard in the past, rose to fill the position of district vice president. Many field representatives of the district believed that Percy Tetlow had played an important role in convincing Lewis to promote the two men.[54] Lewis appointed his youngest brother, Raymond Lewis, to the position of district secretary-treasurer. Telegrams and letters of congratulations immediately poured in for the new officers, while the local press quickly published stories of the new appointments. Many believed that Blizzard's leadership would unite the disparate elements of the district and would lead to great advances.[55]

One paper made a mistake which, in hindsight, served as a disturbing portent. In the rush to announce the changes taking place at the district office and give proper coverage to the new officers, an incorrect caption slipped past editors. The text which ran below a photograph of Bill Blizzard and Raymond Lewis seated on a couch had the two men's names reversed.[56]

---

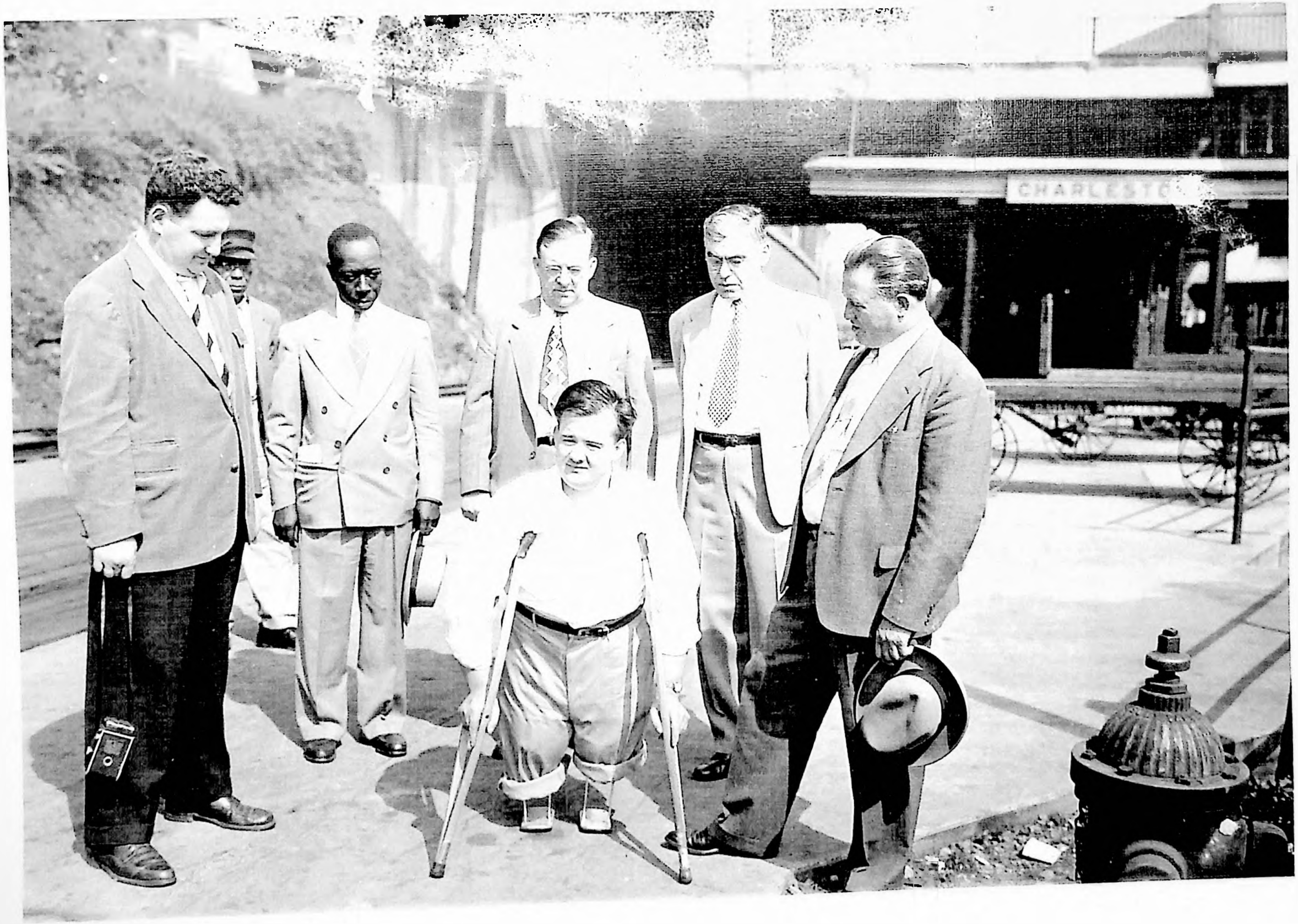
[54] Kiser, Allison, and Kirk to Percy Tetlow, 2 November 1945. WBC.

[55] Cassidy, Triolo, and Beatty to William Blizzard, 3 November 1945. WBC.

[56] William Blizzard clipping file, no publication data. WBC.

Chapter 3

"We Will Tell Them What They Want"


CHARLESTON

Chapter 3[1]

William Blizzard had survived the trials following the Armed March, the purge of District leaders in the mid 1920s, and the turbulent period in which low membership and dual unionism threatened the United Mine Workers' very survival in the state. As has been shown, the period following the purges saw him taking steps towards a more bureaucratic view of labor. By his ascendency to District 17's highest post, the rank-and-file leader of the late 1910s and early 1920s had disappeared. Only the occasional chance encounter with long forgotten friends brought memories of his early days in the union.

Blizzard's tendency towards a more structured, centralized view of unionism can best be seen in his relationship with John L. Lewis. Blizzard's public opinion of John L. Lewis and the actions he took to defend Lewis' reputation helped further the development of a cult of personality around the union leader. Blizzard especially tried to use children to improve Lewis' image. He collected autographs from Lewis during meetings, which he would later distribute to children.[2] While district

---

[1] The title quote comes from a speech given by William Blizzard to the members of a District 17 local.

[2] William Blizzard to M. S. Smith, 1 June 1949. WBC.

president, Blizzard became involved in a plan to raise money for a fine Lewis had incurred while simultaneously demonstrating Lewis' support among the people of West Virginia. School children in southern West Virginia would be asked to donate pennies to help Lewis pay his fine. If the plan succeeded, it would also prove the loyalty of the state's residents.[3]

Blizzard also became one of Lewis' most stalwart public defenders. During World War II, Lewis' popularity plummeted due to his support of wartime strikes. William Blizzard publically stated that John L. Lewis' contributions to the labor movement and society in general made him one of America's greatest citizens. He also compared his bushy-browed leader with Christ.[4] Former state attorney general Howard Lee claimed that Blizzard's loyalty to Lewis moved him to automatically defend any action or opinion of Lewis. Lee stated that Blizzard did not even read important labor legislation, instead waiting for Lewis' opinion before making a statement. Even though Lee's claims are exaggerated, they do fit Blizzard's relationship with Lewis.

---

[3] J. T. Jones to William Blizzard, 5 December 1946. WBC.

[4] William Blizzard to F. R. Thompson, 26 May 1943. WBC.

In many respects, Bill Blizzard public persona became closely identified with John L. Lewis. Many of his contemporaries refer to him primarily as a lieutenant of the union leader.[5] In one somewhat bizarre case this public identification threatened his life.

The Progressive Miners of America had virtually disappeared from West Virginia by the Second World War. However, in 1940 a lone man approached District 17 headquarters to ask about the miners' union. When a United Auto Workers organizer who was standing by the entrance told him that the UMWA was the only miners' union, the man drew a knife and charged the building. The UAW organizer disarmed him and the assailant disappeared. Staff members later saw the same man wandering in front of the building. When approached, he asked to see Blizzard and Bittner. He left after being disarmed and thrown to the ground by district staff members and the visiting UAW official.[6]

However, in some cases his close association with Lewis inhibited his abilities. William Blizzard developed a close professional and personal friendship with Senator Harley

---

[5] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 88.

[6] N L. Harris to *Fayette Tribune*, 22 January 1940. N. L. Harris to William Blizzard, 23 January 1940. WBC.

Kilgore. Many people who approached Blizzard as gateway to the senator were surprised to learn that his influence fluctuated with shifts in Kilgore's relationship with Lewis and the UMWA.[7]

Overall, Blizzard felt a deep personal relationship with the UMWA chief. He wrote about his loyalty to Lewis in letters to his family.[8] His sense of devotion would ultimately make the end of his relationship with Lewis a much greater burden to bear.

Beginning with his return to the district hierarchy in the mid 1930s, Blizzard's attitudes towards the relationship between union members vis-a-vis union leaders underwent a dramatic change. Soon after becoming vice president, he described the needs and desires of union members by saying, "We will tell them what they want."[9] His activities in the effort to unionize the mines at Widen are a striking progression of this sentiment.

At about the same time as Bill Blizzard's birth in Kilsyth, the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company began to

---

[7] William Blizzard to G. Hickey, 8 July 1943. WBC.

[8] William Blizzard to William Campbell Blizzard, 18 May 1943. WBC.

[9] undated minutes of local meeting. WBC.

purchase land in Clay County. The company discovered a rich supply of coal in the central West Virginia County, and began installing a rail line to the remote areas of its new holding. After the turn of the century, J. G. Bradley, an official with the Buffalo Creek and Gulley Railroad, became president of the Elk River Company.[10] Virtually overnight, he transformed a county which had no high school, running water, electricity, or roads "worthy of the name" into a model of industrial development. Swandale became the center of Bradley's logging operation, while Widen became one of the most prosperous mines in the state.[11]

Bradley maintained a strong personal presence in the area. His accessability and strong sense of paternalism cast his shadow over the people of Clay County. Unlike other coal barons, Bradley lived near his operations. However, he tried retain his own sense of personal space while he tried to influence the lives of his workers. Bradley would often give money to his workers when they met dire circumstances. On the other hand, he avoided developing personal relationships with

---

[10] Betty Cantrell, Grace Phillips, and Helen Reed. "Widen: The Town that J. G. Bradley Built." *Goldenseal*, volume 3, number 1.

[11] "Elk River Coal and Lumber Company Develop County." *Clay Messenger*, 28 September 1937. "History of Clay County Hi School." Ibid., 2 May 1939.

anyone in the county and would carefully stage his public appearances. Some even suggest that he wore especially opulent clothing when visiting workers who rarely saw him in order to further their sense of awe. While puttering around his home, he often wore shabby clothes bearing many patches. Clay County became a sort of totalitarian fairy tale.[12]

Over the first decades of the century, Bradley came to dominate the social and economic life of the county. His mining operation at Widen and logging operation at Swandale literally made it possible for the county to function. His company provided employment to many county residents and Widen and Swandale alone accounted for seventy five percent of the county's income.[13] The county even named an athletic field after its benefactor.[14] By the 1930s, local newspapers openly reflected his opinions on a wide range of social, political, and economic matters, most notably his distaste for John L. Lewis and the CIO. Clay County papers ran editorial cartoons critical of the machinations of Lewis, and local citizens and

---

[12] Betty Cantrell, Grace Phillips, and Helen Reed. "Widen: the Town that J. G. Bradley Built," (*Goldenseal* 3:1, January-March 1977) 2-3.

[13] "Coal Company and Its Employees Contribute Much to Clay County." *Clay County Free Press*, 12 September 1940. "Coal Company has Excellent Record." Ibid., 21 September 1939.

[14] "Donkey Basketball at Bradley Field." *Clay Messenger*, 17 August 1937.

writers accused the CIO and the UMWA of being dominated by outside interests and of using immigrant laborers to intimidate workers. Bradley, the press, and the residents of Clay County all believed that the workers did not need the UMWA to defend their interests.[15]

Van Bittner and Bill Blizzard believed that even a single non-union mine in West Virginia would threaten the negotiating ability of the United Mine Workers of America as well as the group's growing political hegemony.[16] Of course, Bradley's operation was not simply any non-union mine. The bond of loyalty between Bradley and his workers allowed him to operate company owned towns, a feature which had been disappearing from West Virginia's landscape since the 1920s. Bradley's operations also proved highly successful in relation to the state's union mines. Year after year, Bradley received praise for total operating days, mean worker income, or the quality of coal produced.[17] The Elk River Coal and Lumber Company had a far greater symbolic importance to the UMWA than any other non-

---

[15] "The City Slicker" (editorial cartoon). Ibid., 28 September 1937. "Elk River Coal and Lumber Develop County." Ibid., 28 September 1937. "League of Widen Miners Recognized." Ibid., 28 February 1939.

[16] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 44.

[17] "Widen Operation had High Rating." *Clay Messenger*, 22 June 1937.

union mine in West Virginia.

Van Bittner first began organization efforts in the early 1930s.[18] However, Blizzard's growing importance in District 17 became an obstacle for the first field organizers to enter Clay County. The residents and workers of the county still held memories of the Armed March and the widely publicized trials which followed. Bill Blizzard stood as a symbol of union inspired violence and the disintegration of the paternalistic ethic.[19] The residents of Clay County hated Blizzard, and his rising power within the UMWA made them even more reluctant to associate with the organization. Field organizers openly blamed William Blizzard for their failure among Elk River Workers.[20]

The situation became more volatile after the National Labor Relations Board recognized an independent union among the Widen miners in late 1938. The Employees League of Widen Miners emerged as an entity independent of both Elk River officials and the United Mine Workers of America. In February of 1939, the National Labor Relations Board recognized the League as the legitimate bargaining agent for the Widen

---

[18] Triolo, *Black Debacle,* 44

[19] "A Mother of Miners" to William Blizzard, 25 November 1934. WBC. Editorial letter. *Charleston Daily Mail*, 11 April 1941.

[20] E. H. Foley to William Blizzard, 28 January 1944. WBC.

miners.[21]

By the next decade, UMWA organizers who entered the area faced conflict from local police, company officials, and League members. Employees who sought organization by UMWA officials feared for their livelihoods.[22] Many efforts at organization ended in violence. In one instance, police wielding axe handles threatened to attack United Mine Workers members on a hillside.[23] Brawls became common.[24] In the days before one NLRB election, UMWA organizers killed a company employee and injured his son following an argument.[25]

The most violent episode of the decade came when UMWA pickets, imported from other counties, seized the shower room at the Widen mine in order to enforce a shutdown in the Appalachian field.[26] Over the course of the conflict, union

---

[21] "League of Widen Miners Recognized." *Clay Messenger*, 28 February 1939.

[22] R. R. C. to Van Bittner et al, 28 November 1933. WBC.

[23] Nick Aiello to William Blizzard, 30 August 1941. WBC.

[24] R. J. Smith et al to Van Bittner, 1 November 1933. WBC.

[25] "Unionist Gives Up after Widen Miner is Slain." *Charleston Gazette*, 2 March 1944. "Labor Organizers Shoot Two Widen Miners." *Clay County Free Press*, 2 March 1944. Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 46.

[26] *Clay County Free Press*, 3 April 1941, 10 April 1941, 17 April 1941.

organizers set about a dozen fires in the forest around the town and then fired on the townspeople as they tried to extinguish the multiple blazes.[27] The level of violence seemed reminiscent of earlier decades, and the loyalty of the workers and residents of Widen made organization seemingly impossible.

Despite continual pressure from the UMWA, internal factors led to the collapse of Bradley's industrial fiefdom. Following the Second World War, the workers began to feel that the managerial class of Clay County no longer reflected their interests. The situation worsened when rumors began circulating in the Summer of 1952 that League and Bank of Widen officials had conspired to embezzle money set aside by union members. The county exploded when a supervisor unexpectedly fired a miner. Hundreds of miners left their jobs and openly protested conditions in Widen.[28] The brutality of the year long strike which followed easily dwarfed earlier episodes.

Workers in Clay County turned to J. G. Bradley for help, despite the fact they now struck against him. The Widen miners approached Bradley with information concerning the alleged

---

[27] "Widen Men Fight Fires; Save Homes." *Clay Messenger*, 22 April 1941. "Pickets are Held for Jury Action." *Clay County Free Press*, 24 April 1941. "More State Police Sent to Widen." *Clay Messenger*, 22 April 1941.

[28] "350 Employees Go on Strike at Widen, Local Grievances Given as Reason." *Clay County Free Press*, 2 October 1952.

theft of union funds, and pleaded for an investigation. However, Bradley had lost touch with his workers. He immediately proclaimed that outside agitators had caused the strike, and that the strike did not reflect conditions within his county.[29]

The strikers demanded that a new independent union be formed among the workers at Widen. The proposed union would replace the old League, and would still not be affiliated with the United Mine Workers. The workers vowed to remain out of the mines until their demands were met.[30]

As the strike wore on, the leaders realized that the protesting workers needed a source of outside aid if they wished to continue their struggle. Some workers turned to an unexpected source for aid. The leader of the impromptu movement approached Bill Blizzard seeking money and food for the protestors. Blizzard saw this as the perfect opportunity to gain a foothold in the Elk River Coal and Lumber operation. He immediately sent money and provisions to the strikers.[31]

His optimism caused him to overestimate the UMWA's chances

---

[29] Ibid. J. G. Bradley to A. Bell, open letter published in 14 October 1952 *Clay Messenger*.

[30] "Miners Continue Strike at Widen." *Clay County Free Press*, 9 October 1952.

[31] Ibid. "350 Employees Go on Strike at Widen." Ibid., 2 October 1952.

in Widen, and directly influenced his ability to objectively evaluate the situation in Clay County. He proudly proclaimed that the strike had dramatically increased UMWA membership in the area. At one point, he claimed that more than two thirds of the miners in the area had been organized.[32] He made these claims despite the fact that the workers held fast to their vision of an independent union, and only viewed the UMW as a stepping stone on the path towards that goal. During the strike he told an acquaintance, "Widen is my baby. . . . If we don't win this time, I'll try again, and I'll keep trying until I bring that damned 'Big Mogul' up there to his knees."[33]

Several months into the strike, he exploded in anger at the West Virginia press, believing they had ignored his leadership of the Widen strikers. In the same speech, he also claimed that he bore the entire financial burden for the strike. The verity of the statement concerning the economic backing of the strike is unclear.[34] Some claim that he made the statement to prevent Bradley from suing the UMWA to recoup

---

[32] "Widen's 'True' Story Not Told, Blizzard Informs Press." Ibid., 21 May 1953.

[33] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 202.

[34] "Widen's 'True' Story Not Told." *Clay County Free Press*, 21 May 1953.

his lost profits.[35] Even though his surviving financial records do not reveal that he gave massive amounts of aid to the miners, it is possible that he did donate a great deal to their cause.

The motives behind both statements remain unclear. Perhaps Blizzard believed that his efforts in the prior two decades had laid the groundwork for the events which unfolded in Widen during the early 1950s. Perhaps frustration at past failures and the violence of the current strike drove him to make the statement. In either case, Bill Blizzard overlooked the local leadership which had started the strike and which oversaw its day-to-day operation.

Violence marred the long strike. Both sides fired random shots at one another. Strikers blew up two bridges owned by the company. Miners loyal to the company retaliated by setting fire to strikers' homes, cars, and livestock. A stray bullet struck a nine year old girl in the chest, killing her as she played with friends.[36] A burst of gunfire from a line of passing cars killed two men while they stood near a cook

---

[35] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 202.

[36] "Railroad Bridges Blown Up at Sand Fork, Robinson Thursday." *Clay County Free Press*, 23 October 1952. Ibid., 6 November 1952, 5 February 1953, 26 February 1953, 26 March 1953.

shack.[37]

These murders marked the end of the strike at Widen. The brutality and seeming endlessness of the strike drove away many of its supports. During the trial, Blizzard stated that the violence of the strike could have been averted if the state had intervened early in the crisis.[38] The statement only served to highlight the pointless violence which had taken place in the area. As the murder trial wore on, strikers left the picket lines, and company officials began to consolidate their power by seizing strategic locations from the dwindling numbers of demonstrators. The few protestors who remained were unable to withstand well organized attacks from company officials.[39]

By December, the only strikers left in the area were loyal members of the United Mine Workers of America. The men began pressing Blizzard to allow them to leave the picket lines. Realizing the futility of the situation, he finally relented. On Christmas Eve, 1953, he notified the remaining pickets that the strike was over. By this time, roughly one hundred

---

[37] "Widen Miner Killed, Two Wounded." Ibid., 7 May 1953.

[38] "Defense Attorney's Rests Case Wed., Widen Murder Trial May End Today." Ibid., 4 August 1953.

[39] William Blizzard to W. Edwards, 23 May 1953. WBC.

striking men remained.[40] The sparse crowd which remained to the end of the strike seemed to mock Blizzard's claim that he had made great headway in organizing the area. Bradley soon sold the operation to a company that had approached him during the strike.[41] The mine closed by the end of the decade, effectively destroying the area's economy.[42]

The press immediately trumpeted Widen as a defeat for both John L. Lewis and William Blizzard. Until his death, the failure of the Widen strike represented both a professional and a personal defeat. Press accounts depicted the action as a ruthless bid for power and relished the bitter failure which met the UMWA's efforts. Accounts of the strikes conclusion portrayed Blizzard as an opportunistic lackey, humbly riding on John L. Lewis' coattails.[43] Five years later, many of William Blizzard's obituaries included detailed retellings of the Widen crisis.

Despite his views that only a highly centralized organization could meet the needs of the state's workers,

---

[40] "Strike Against Elk River Coal and Lumber Called Off." *Clay County Free Press*, 31 December 1953.

[41] "Cleveland Financier Inquires about Purchase of Widen Operations." Ibid., 7 January 1954.

[42] Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia*, 202.

[43] *U. S. News and World Report*, 29 January 1954. *Saturday Evening Post*, 20 February 1954.

Blizzard believed that the United Mine Workers of America should use the power gained from its dominance over the workers for a larger social good. The organization should use the power granted by miners as a mandate for changes which would ultimately benefit all of the state's residents. Blizzard worked within the even more stratified hierarchy of the UMWA to make this vision a reality.

Rae and Bill Blizzard had long taken an interest in the welfare of the state's children. Rae Blizzard donated money and materials to hot lunch programs in underfunded rural schools.[44] The prestige that accompanied his rise to District President allowed him to raise this issue in more public forums.

As president of District 17, he became involved in the public debate over the necessity of providing hot lunches to children in rural, economically desolate areas of the state. He became an ardent defender of the program when a Kanawhwa County official tried to cut funds for school lunches. The official rationalized his move by claiming that feeding the children of striking miners drained the county's resources. Blizzard, enraged, countered by pointing out that the program was funded by federal monies. He believed the proposed cutback

---

[44] J. W. Gray to Rae Blizzard, 19 October 1945. WBC.

was a direct attack on the children of the state's workers.[45] His angry outburst would ultimately have beneficial results. After papers carried news of the confrontation to the public, letters of support began to pore into the district office. Many began to view the conflict as a the contemporary equivalent of the struggle between miners and company guards in the first third of the century.[46] Support for hot lunch programs among the public and the state's politicians gained momentum following the controversy.[47]

Bill Blizzard used his office to raise awareness of the need for interdisciplinary courses in all levels of the state's schools. He hoped to develop programs which drew from both natural and social science to teach the state's background. Using the coal industry as a point of departure, the program would discuss the economic impact of extractive industries on the state, and their social and cultural impact on the state's residents. These themes would be further developed as school children examined the state's pre-industrial history. If successful, the program would help students develop a

---

[45] "Removal of Flinn Asked by Blizzard." *Charleston Gazette*, 9 October 1949.

[46] W. Edwards to William Blizzard, 10 October 1949. WBC.

[47] C. A. Branney to William Blizzard, 10 October 1949. WBC.

comprehensive understanding of the state's history and a sense of pride in their background.[48]

Implementation of the program would challenge West Virginia's teachers. The program would last throughout each child's public school career. The program's long range and interdisciplinary nature made additional training for teachers a necessity. William and Rae Blizzard pledged to use their own funds to help pay the expenses of any teacher who wished to undergo training for the interdisciplinary program.[49]

William Blizzard rarely failed to take any other opportunities to improve the lives of the state's children. During his years in District 17's headquarters, he often took time to give lectures to church youth groups or school groups. While district president, he became involved with a group seeking to combat juvenile delinquency in Kanawha County.[50]

William Blizzard's most notable contribution can be seen in the role he played in improving medical care in southern West Virginia. While vice president of District 17, Blizzard befriended Fayette County physician William Laird. Laird had

---

[48] R. Holland to William Blizzard, 3 April 1951. WBC.

[49] B. F. Wavely to William Blizzard, 12 June 1950. William Blizzard to B. F. Wavely, 13 June 1950. WBC.

[50] W. C. Haythe to William Blizzard, 12 November 1949. William Blizzard to W. C. Haythe, 14 November 1949. WBC.

realized that poor roads in Fayette County limited the effectiveness of an already inadequate hospital. In 1938, he opened a hospital whose goals were "the relief of suffering, medical education, and research."[51]

The regimen of care instituted by the new hospital greatly increased the quality of medical care available in Fayette County. The new hospital featured surgery and cancer clinics, and made special accommodations for the poor of the county. In 1940, Dr. Laird created the Laird Foundation. The Foundation's primary function was to pour the hospital's profits back into treatment programs.[52]

Blizzard developed a close personal friendship with Dr. Laird and took a keen interest in how the hospital, eventually named Laird Memorial Hospital, treated local miners.[53] Laird kept Blizzard closely informed of the condition of any miners who entered his care. Laird also kept Blizzard informed about health care bills being discussed in the state legislature. Dr. Laird's opinions were often key in shaping Blizzard's

---

[51] Robert Holliday, *A Portrait of Fayette County*, (Oak Hill: Fayette Tribune, 1960) 112.

[52] Ibid., 113.

[53] William Laird to William Blizzard, 25 June 1943. William Blizzard to William Laird, 26 June 1943. WBC.

reaction to the legislation.[54]

Over the course of time, Blizzard became involved in efforts to establish similar hospitals throughout the state. Following the death of his uncle, Reese Blizzard, he toyed with the idea of selling his uncle's farm to the government on the condition that it be made into a hospital. However, negotiations with Senator Kilgore broke down and the deal never took place.[55]

The creation of UMWA Welfare and Retirement Fund allowed Blizzard to pursue the development of rural hospitals further. The fund, established in the Summer of 1946, provided money for miners' medical and rehabilitation expenses. It also provided for the construction of a chain of hospitals which would be controlled by the union.[56]

Blizzard immediately became involved in the project. He arranged for publicity for the construction of hospitals in West Virginia. He also encouraged the development of rehabilitative programs for victims of spinal cord injuries.

---

[54] William Laird to William Blizzard, 3 February 1943. William Blizzard to William Laird, 18 February 1943. WBC.

[55] C. E. Arnold to William Blizzard, 27 February 1943. William Blizzard to Arnold, 4 March 1943. Arnold to Blizzard, 9 March 1943. Arnold to Blizzard, 17 March 1943. Arnold to Blizzard, 11 April 1943. Blizzard to Arnold, 14 April 1943. WBC.

[56] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 64-68.

The dimensions of most mine shafts required workers to stoop while working. If a slate fall occurred, it would literally snap each worker's body together. The regimen, which combined basic physical therapy with vocational training, offered hope to the men who had previously been abandoned by society. In addition to its remarkable advances in treating spinal cord injuries, the rehabilitation program also provided men with prosthetic limbs.[57]

William Blizzard's career ended in a single, unexpected instant. John L. Lewis had long used his relatives as a means of consolidating his power. Lewis' nepotism allowed him to place his siblings and children in union jobs, and in some cases extended to the relatives of his most trusted aids. Lewis appointed his youngest brother, Raymond O. Lewis, to the position of District 17 secretary-treasurer when he appointed Bill Blizzard to the presidency in 1945. Among his other duties, Raymond Lewis collected and distributed office mail at district headquarters. Raymond Lewis sometimes opened UMWA-related mail, and on some occasions delayed the delivery of Blizzard's mail.[58]

---

[57] UMWA Welfare and Retirement Fund promotional materials. WBC. "Welfare Fund Reports." *United Mine Workers Journal*, 1 April 1952. "Miner's Simple Story Impresses Solons." Ibid., 1 August 1953.

[58] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 91.

Bill Blizzard largely overlooked these behaviors. However, Raymond Lewis soon began to open Blizzard's personal correspondence. After receiving complaints, R. O. Lewis decided that Blizzard would only be allowed to receive his mail if a form were signed stating that each item was undamaged.[59] Blizzard did not receive his mail for several days following the decision, and had not seen Raymond due to a schedule conflict. One afternoon, Raymond Lewis barged into a meeting, waving a stack of mail and ordering Blizzard to sign for it. Enraged, Blizzard stated that he did not have to sign for his own mail. Raymond Lewis called Blizzard a "son of a bitch," and then fell unconscious after being punched once in the face.[60]

Rumors of the fight immediately began to circulate in Kanawha County. John L. Lewis called Blizzard to Washington. Lewis realized that Blizzard's public profile made it impossible for him to simply fire him as he had done with others in the past. Lewis told Blizzard that he valued his decades of loyal service, and asked him to retire with a pension. Blizzard knew that a refusal would result in reassignment to a different district. He tried to explain the

---

[59] Raymond Lewis to William Blizzard, 11 February 1955. WBC.

[60] Triolo, *Black Debacle,* 91-92.

episode to Lewis, but Lewis' angry refusal to hear his plea reduced him to stunned silence. Rather than face seperation from his family, he agreed to resign quietly. In Lewis' presence, he composed a letter announcing his retirement and asking all members and office personnel to cooperate fully with his replacement.[61] John L. Lewis appointed Raymond O. Lewis as the next president of District 17.

Bill Blizzard quietly retired to his farm in Putnam County. Even though cancer now ravaged his body, he was able to indulge in the love of nature which had occupied his few spare moments during the past four decades.[62] Blizzard even added to his eclectic menagerie of pets by acquiring a grey squirrel.[63]

Lewis cut the pension immediately after Blizzard left office. In the last days of Blizzard's life, Lewis decided to reward his invaluable service by restoring the pension to the amount of their original agreement.[64] However, Blizzard viewed this action as an insult. Before dying, he told Mel Triolo

---

[61] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 92. William Blizzard to officers and members of District 17, 31 March 1955. WBC.

[62] J. H. Walker to A. M. Cecil, 22 July 1955. H. H. Kuhn to A. M. Cecil, 22 November 1957. Ross Blizzard to William Blizzard, 20 July 1958. WBC.

[63] F. B. Sloane to William Blizzard, 11 January 1957. WBC.

[64] John Owens to William Blizzard, 19 September 1957. WBC.

that, in light of his purge and the pension reduction, he would not have become involved in the labor movement.[65] Immediately following his death, the United Mine Workers International office informed Rae Blizzard that Bill Blizzard had not collected all of the funds due from his retirement.[66] The UMW hoped to make amends by giving her the money it had denied her husband, and by offering to pay any outstanding medical bills.[67]

---

[65] Triolo, *Black Debacle*, 92-93.

[66] John Owens to Rae Blizzard, 11 August 1958. John Owens to Rae Blizzard, 18 September 1958. WBC.

[67] John Owens to Rae Blizzard, 15 August 1958. WBC.

CONCLUSION

William Blizzard died a spiritually hollow man. In the last days of his life, he surveyed the course of the previous six decades. The shock of his betrayal at the hands of John L. Lewis, still fresh after three years, as well as the mockery of the pension letter, led him to believe that his life had been a failure. All that he had fought for had vanished in an instant. Or so he believed.

It is true that in the course of his virtually life-long career, William Blizzard had suffered tremendous personal loses. His loyalty to John L. Lewis forced him to turn his back on one of his closest friends, C. Frank Keeney. His career, from the strike at Cabin Creek to the violence at Widen, had drawn him into some of the worst suffering in the state's history. One instant of nepotistic blindness had rendered all of these sacrifices worthless. William Blizzard had some justification for his feelings in the summer of 1958.

Beyond his personal life, it can be argued that his devotion to John L. Lewis weakened the integrity of the United Mine Workers in West Virginia. He worked to create a highly centralized, bureaucratic structure in the union beginning with his tenure as district vice president. As in any organization, as the hierarchy of the union became more professional and more centralized, the nature of the union's structure changed.

Rather than a tool used to gain power for the workers, the bureaucratic structure of the UMWA became an end in its own right.[1] As this progression continued, the gulf between the daily needs of the workers and the structural needs of the union widened, reinforcing the ouster of rank-and-file district officials following the treason trials in 1922.[2]

Even though he played a large role in the transition of the organization as a whole within the state, Blizzard himself never fully adopted the role of a labor bureaucrat. If Blizzard's path is traced in light of Max Weber's views on the origins and nature of authority in organizations, an interesting trend emerges.[3] The activities and reputations of Timothy and Sarah Blizzard overshadowed Blizzard's first appearance on the stage of the state's labor struggles. Their efforts in the union's earliest organization drives as well as their famous devotion gave Blizzard a certain legitimacy which others lacked. His strong connection to his parents, as well

---

[1] W. Richard Scott. *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, Third edition, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall) 325-326.

[2] It is interesting to note that some believe this progression can be seen in Keeney's efforts to stop the armed march of 1919 (Corbin 200).

[3] Background material on Weber's theory of authority has been drawn from Talcott Parsons, ed. *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press).

as to the miners of the state and the land itself, creates a sense of continuity which fits Weber's idea of traditional authority. In the early years of his career, and to some extent through all his life, Blizzard built upon the foundation created by his parents.

Interestingly, the authority of the Blizzard name also played a role when Bill Blizzard became involved in the political life of the state. William Blizzard's uncles played prominent roles in the state's political structure.[4] His familial connection with these men would have helped him gain entry to the world of state politics, despite his rabble-rousing background.

This sense of tradition and sense of belonging become especially striking when seen in light of attitudes towards Van Bittner. During the most violent period of conflict between District 17 and the West Virginia Mine Workers/Progressive Miners of America, Bittner's opponents repeatedly raised his "otherness" as a challenge to his authority. He had no experience working in the state's mines or living in the coal camps of southern West Virginia. His first appearance in the

---

[4] Jean Thomas's genealogical research shows that Bill Blizzard's ancestors were relatively affluent. Timothy Blizzard's working class status seems anomalous compared with the careers of his brothers, who were actively involved in the state's legislature and judiciary.

state was as a professional problem solver for Lewis. Bittner, an alien to the state who arrived with an established bureaucratic personality, became a favored target for dual union propaganda and a symbol of the growing abyss between the hierarchy and the rank-and-file.[5] In the eyes of the dissident unionists, he was simply an outsider whose lack of shared experience denied him any legitimacy.

Also, growing up in the early, non-bureaucratic UMWA, Blizzard gained a strong sense of personal involvement and of the importance of an individual, local leader. Even though his confrontational style limited the importance of charismatic authority in his career, his background in the early, pre-professional UMWA made it a part of his understanding of union leadership. Even though he does not exactly fit Weber's definition of charisma, Blizzard does seem to model Sidney Hook's Event-Making Man, an individual who can rise above a situation and offer a unique new course to the situation's development.[6]

The clearest example of this can be seen during the

---

[5] Frank Keeney file, WBC. Mother Jones seemed especially fond of raising Bittner's alien background. Materials she produced for the dual union movement feature some of the most violent attacks on Bittner's background.

[6] Sidney Hook. *The Hero in History* (Boston: Beacon), Chapter IX.

tragedy at Widen. After countless failed drives by the District machine to organize Clay County, the strike in the early 1950s seemed to open the door for the UMWA. However, when the UMWA failed to make rapid progress, an enraged Blizzard stated he was in total command of the strike. Frustration no doubt played a large role in his proclamation, but it is possible that his desperation pushed him view himself as the one decisive man who could rise above the tangled web of the strike and bring about a solution through sheer force of will.

Blizzard rose to power a combination of his background and strong personality, not through the legalistic structures of a bureaucratic system. It is a sad irony that Blizzard's dismissal came after a protest *against* non-legalistic forms of power within the United Mine Workers.

However, Blizzard left a lasting, positive, legacy for West Virginia. Even though he acted to defend the growing centralization on the United Mine Workers, he did not fall victim to the sense of personal alienation which afflicts members of organizations whose goals have been displaced by their evolution towards bureaucracies.[7] Most importantly, he maintained a sense of mission, a desire to forge a society

---

[7] Ibid., 321.

which would benefit all of the state's residents.

Perhaps it is this sense of mission which caused Blizzard's greatest accomplishments to fall outside of the traditional realm of labor organizers. His two greatest victories, his support of free and reduced hot lunch programs in the public school system and his backing of the UMWA's hospital program, stand independently of any of District 17's strikes or organizational efforts.

Rae and Bill Blizzard both donated money and supplies to early school lunch programs. Following his rise to the district's presidency in 1945, Bill Blizzard used his office to gain a public forum for the issue. West Virginia's free and reduced lunch program is currently operated by the state Child Nutritional Services office. Forty years after Blizzard's death, over half of the children who eat hot lunches in the state's schools benefit from the program.[8]

Blizzard's contribution to the hospital system created in central Appalachia by the United Mine Workers is a more visible symbol of his impact. During his lifetime, these hospitals gained fame for their quality of care and their revolutionary use of vocational rehabilitation. However, in the years following his death, UMW officials discovered that the union

---

[8] Dr. Harriet Beal telephone interview, February 1998.

did not have the resources to maintain the hospital system.

Fortunately for the communities which benefitted from the program, the impact of the hospitals had not gone unnoticed. Dr. S. M. Kerr, a United Presbyterian minister in eastern Kentucky, realized that closure of the hospitals would be an "economic and medical catastrophe" for rural Appalachia. He convinced the church's Board of National Missions to take temporary control of the sites while another agency was found to take permanent control of the program. Eventually, community activists, church leaders, and union officials created the Appalachian Regional Hospital Board as a cooperative venture to oversee the hospitals. The Board continued the tradition established by the United Mine Workers, and even engaged in a campaign of expansion and renovation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The hospitals continue to play invaluable roles in their communities.[9]

Blizzard's career spans a period beginning with the union's first efforts to organize the state and ending with the union a recognized part of the state's political landscape. Even though the accomplishments of his career came at great personal costs, and his methods may have often seemed too detached from the goals he sought, Blizzard survived the

---

[9] Reverand Leonard Hood telephone interview, February 1998.

turbulent changes which faced both the union and the state during this period. He survived both internal and external challenges to his role in the United Mine Workers, and managed to make positive contributions to the state while playing a game whose rules seemed to frequently change.

Bibliography

Primary sources.

Collections.

William Blizzard Manuscript Collection. MS 97-24. West Virginia Division of Archives and History, Charleston, West Virginia.

William Blizzard Artifact Collection. West Virginia Museum Commission, Charleston, West Virginia.

Government documents.

Mary Jones testimony before the United States Commission on Industrial Relations, 13 May 1915. Reprinted in John Gabriel Hunt, ed. *The Dissenters: America's Voices of Opposition*. New York: Random House, 1993.

Memoirs and autobiographies.

Mooney, Fred. *Struggle in the Coal Fields: The Autobiography of Fred Mooney*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1967.

Moore, Ben. *Heritage of Freedom: An Autobiogrpahy of Judge Ben Moore*. Minneapolis: T. S. Dennison, 1957.

Triolo, Melvin. *The Black Debacle: From a Thundering Voice to a Confused Whimper (Recollections and Observations on the United Mine Workers and Collective Bargaining in the Coal Industry*. Parsons: McClain, 1991.

Newspapers and magazines.

Charleston Daily Gazette.

Charleston Daily Mail.

Charleston Gazette.

Clay County Free Press.

Clay Messenger.

Coal Valley News.

Kanawha Citizen.

Saturday Evening Post.

Sheperdstown Register.

United Mine Workers Journal.

U. S. News and World Report.

Oral Histories.

William Campbell Blizzard oral history. *Even the Heavens Weep* research materials. West Virginia Division of Archives and History, Charleston, West Virginia.

Charlie Payne oral history. Interview conducted by Thomas Tull. Marshall University Morrow Library Special Collections, Huntington, West Virginia.

Secondary sources.

Books.

Anderson, Debbie. *The Blizzard Family.* No publication data, 1988.

Chessman, G. Wallace. *Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Power.* Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1969.

Corbin, David Alan. *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

Dubofsky, Melvyn and Warren Van Tine. *John L. Lewis: A Biography.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

Holliday, William. *A Portrait of Fayette County.* Oak Hill: Fayette Tribune, 1960.

Hook, Sidney. *The Hero in History.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1943.

Lee, Howard B. *Bloodletting in Appalachia: The Story of West Virginia's Four Major Mine Wars and Other Thrilling Incidents in Its Coalfields.* Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1969.

Leuchtenberg, William E. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940.* New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

Rice, Otis K. *West Virginia: A History.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985.

Parsons, Talcott. *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization.* New York: Free Press, 1947.

Steel, Edward M, ed. *The Court-Martial of Mother Jones.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995.

Articles.

Cantrell, Betty, Grace Phillips, and Helen Reed. "Widen: The Town that J. G. Bradley Built." *Goldenseal*, volume 3, number 1. January-March 1977.

Castille, Philip Duboisson. "Too Odd for California." *Appalachian Journal*, Winter 1996.

Corbin, David Alan. "'Frank Keeney is Our Leader and We Shall Not be Moved:' Rank-and-File Leadership in the West Virginia Coal Fields." *Essays in Southern Labor History: Selected Papers, Southern Labor History Conference, 1976.* Gary Fink and Merl Reed, eds. Westport: Greenwood, 1977.

Douthat, Strat. "A War Between Miners." *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel.* 9 March 1980.

Phillips, Cabell. "The West Virginia Mine War." *American Heritage*, volume 25, number 5. August 1974.

Interviews.

Dr. Harriet Beal telephone interview. February 1998.

Revenand Leonard Hood telephone interview. February 1998.

Charles Keeney personal interview. Fall 1997.

Jean Thomas personal interview. January 1998.

Unpublished manuscripts.

Tull, Thomas. "Van A. Bittner: A Labor Leader for Dynamic Times." Unpublished masters thesis, Marshall University, 1979.