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The Legacy of the Mine Wars

By Stan Bumgardner

The summer after my father graduated from Charleston High School in 1946, he got a job digging footers for an apartment building along MacCorkle Avenue in the Kanawha City section of town. He and his buddies had to break up asphalt from the airfield Billy Mitchell once used as a staging area during the Armed March. Someone said it was the old airstrip, and that's all he knew about it. They didn't have jackhammers, just pickaxes, sledgehammers, and sweat.

When he was a kid, he used to play sandlot baseball a couple of blocks from there. The local ground rules were that any ball hit onto the 15-foot-high Adena burial mound was a homerun. The mound was demolished a couple decades later when Kroger built a supermarket at 38th Street and MacCorkle—now home to a Walgreens. In the late 1800s, more than 100 prehistoric burial mounds and other earthworks existed in the Kanawha Valley—among our few clues as to how people lived here 2,000 years ago. Today, only three mounds remain in the valley, the others bulldozed by the march of time.

My father often talked about long-vanished places and the life lessons he'd learned from them. We can't save all the past, nor should we, but maybe we need to preserve a bit more of it? One thing I've learned from this issue of the magazine is that, collectively, we've done a really poor job of preserving and communicating history.

In this case, it's the West Virginia Mine Wars. In only a few decades, though, historians have recorded countless interviews with those who were there; dug up long-lost documents and other objects; written books, plays, and songs; made films; developed a museum and a school curriculum; and started preserving and interpreting key sites.

These stories are important because coal miners—the hard-working backbone of our state and nation—demanded their right to fair wages and less-dangerous working conditions. In the end, the concepts of both capitalism and workers' rights survived in different ways, and a struggle between the two will always exist. This tug-of-war played out violently in places here at home: Holly Grove, Mucklow, Matewan, Blair Mountain.

The crucial question to me is why did a dispute between workers and business owners descend into a civil war? And why did others continually look away as miners aired their grievances? And more broadly, how do we address suffering and anger before things escalate into deadly violence?

The Mine Wars, like the Civil War, are a lasting reminder never to allow something like this to happen again. Problems are problems because they are difficult, and kicking the can down the road just builds up tension. Perhaps knowing more about the Mine Wars will motivate us to tamp down hatred, solve problems, and calm frustrations respectfully rather than instantly choosing sides. Here in West Virginia, especially, we can't afford to turn on one another. While we may not agree on everything, remember that West Virginians stick up for one another, particularly when others are trying to divide us. 🍀