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## West Virginia Miners Play Second Fiddle to the Molly Maguires

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In search of improved working conditions and livable wages, mine workers in two major coal producing states resorted to violence against coal mine owners and managers. The militants in one of those states are celebrated as heroic fighters of America's industrial age. In the other state, the miners' campaign for human progress is omitted from state history books.

In Pennsylvania, the state contributed funds to build a monument to honor the Molly Maguires, a secretive Irish organization that allegedly killed coal company officials as retribution for their treatment of miners. In museums and gift shops in the state's anthracite coal region, visitors can purchase t-shirts and other memorabilia honoring the Mollies, 20 of whom were hanged after they were found guilty of murder and other serious charges in the late 1870s. A big-budget Hollywood movie, titled *The Molly Maguires*, was released in 1970 with a radical coal miner, played by Scottish actor Sean Connery, as the hero and a Pinkerton detective, played by Irish actor Richard Harris, as the anti-hero.

In West Virginia, the state erased any mention of the miners who fought for better working conditions in the early 20th century. Veterans of the state's mine wars and their ancestors learned to keep their mouths shut for fear they would be targeted by powerful coal companies or vindictive state officials. Instead of a major Hollywood production, West Virginia had to settle for director John Sayles' low-budget, yet groundbreaking, independent film *Matewan*, released in 1987, to tell the story of the battle between company guards and coal miners in the southern part of the state.

In the 1930s, West Virginia Gov. Homer Holt took the radical step of threatening to reject New Deal money for his state if the federal government accurately depicted labor conditions in the state in official federal history books. Holt believed the Federal Writers' Project's portrayal of West Virginia, in its draft form, would discredit the state and was "propaganda

from start to finish.”



*Statue of Molly Maguire about to be hanged.*

Mari-Lynn Evans, director and producer of Blood on the Mountain, a new documentary about West Virginia’s industrial history, said she found letters from Gov. Holt saying that if President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not order the history book writers to remove any mention of the Hawk’s Nest disaster, the Battle of Blair Mountain, general labor strife, Mother Jones and other important events and people in the state’s history, he would not accept any New

Deal money.

“The rumor had always been that our history had been written out of our history books; we found the actual letters that prove it,” Evans, a West Virginia native, said in an interview. “And then we found the letters from President Roosevelt that said it’s better to have a mediocre history book of West Virginia than to have those people starve to death because the governor won’t accept any New Deal funding.”

Around the same time West Virginia’s governor was throwing a fit over the first draft of the Federal Writers’ Project’s history of his state, independent authors were taking a fresh and more even-handed look at the Molly Maguires. In the late 19th century, reporters and historians generally wrote from the perspective of the mine owners and the Pinkerton detectives, portraying the Molly Maguires as savage terrorists. In 1936, though, J. Walter Coleman wrote a book titled *The Molly Maguire Riots: Industrial Conflict in the Pennsylvania Coal Region* in which he paid notice to the class and ethnic issues behind the actions taken by the Molly Maguires.

Coleman’s book is among the most sympathetic and convincing accounts of the subject, historian Kevin Kenny wrote in his 1998 book *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires*. The story of the Molly Maguires became less one-sided against the coal miners in the succeeding decades. By the 1960s, Hollywood screenwriter Walter Bernstein penned a script that pitted Molly ringleader John Kehoe, played by Connery, and Molly Maguire infiltrator, James McParlan, a Pinkerton detective played by Harris.

Bernstein had been blacklisted in the McCarthy era of the 1950s and viewed his script for the movie, *The Molly Maguires*, as a response to film director Elia Kazan, who served as a friendly witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in which he identified alleged communists in Hollywood. The hero in Kazan’s *On the Waterfront*, Marlon Brando’s Terry Malloy, informs against his corrupt union bosses, while the hero in *The Molly Maguires* is hanged for fighting a corrupt coal business.

Historians traced the Molly Maguires back to early 19th century Ireland. Molly Maguire, an Irish widow, in the 1840s, protested against English landlords who tried to steal peoples land. Kenny wrote that the men in Ireland who engaged in violence against English landlords dressed up in the women’s fashion of the time. The propensity to dress in women’s clothing did not cross the Atlantic when the Irish entered the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, according to historians.

The Molly Maguires were a secretive organization. In West Virginia, union organizers also were forced to operate underground for fear they would be jailed or murdered by the mine

guards, and yet, as their organizing efforts grew stronger, the miners proudly adopted the name “rednecks,” which referred to the red bandanas that West Virginia miners wore around their necks.

### **Molly Maguires Labeled ‘Thugs’**

Similar to how the national press portrayed the coal miners of West Virginia as backcountry hillbillies prone to violence, the Molly Maguires’ crimes were explained in terms of natural Irish propensity toward savagery. The New York Times, as part of its campaign to vilify the Mollys, compared the group to “thugs,” or thuggee, a religious organization active in northern India that reportedly robbed and murdered in the service of Kali, the goddess of destruction.

In West Virginia, socialist newspapers were important supporters of union organizing efforts. In Pennsylvania, the primary supporters of the Mollys — and in some cases, the only supporters — also were socialist newspapers. The New York Labor Standard, edited by the Irish-born Joseph P. McDonnell, and the Irish World were among the few publications that condemned the hangings of the Molly Maguires.

By the 1970s, a movement was growing in Schuylkill County, Pa., where the Mollys had been active, to officially recognize the Molly Maguires as advocates for the working class. In 1978, Pennsylvania Gov. Milton Shapp issued a statement honoring the Molly Maguires and “paying tribute to these martyred men of labor.” The following year, Shapp signed a posthumous pardon for John Kehoe, who was hanged on Dec. 18, 1878, in Pottsville, Pa., for his alleged role with the Molly Maguires.

A greater appreciation of the Molly Maguires continued to grow in northeastern Pennsylvania. In 2010, a Molly Maguire Historical Park was built in the middle of Mahanoy City, a small town in Schuylkill County where Molly Maguires were active in the local coal mines. The park includes a statue, made by renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis, of a Molly about to be hanged after being found guilty.

Part of the funding for the Molly Maguire historical park was provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. The park’s developers also used funding from the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 awarded through the Department of Housing and Urban Department. Sean Connery serves as chairman of the park’s advisory board and historian Kevin Kenny serves as one of its board members.

In the village of Eckley, Pa., where the movie The Molly Maguires was filmed, visitors can purchase t-shirts honoring the Mollys. The wooden coal breaker in Eckley, featured extensively in the film, was built as a prop and still stands today. The company store, where

Connery and Harris' characters share a pivotal scene in the film, was also built as a prop for the movie and still stands today.

Momentum is gaining in West Virginia to honor the state's coal miners. The battle to get Blair Mountain on the National Register of Historic Places is still making its way through the courts and continues to face strong opposition from coal companies. Blair Mountain, located in Logan County, W.Va., was the site of the largest labor uprising in U.S. history and the largest organized armed uprising since the U.S. Civil War. The battle pitted coal miners against coal company-friendly local police. Toward the end of the battle, federal troops arrived to quell the uprising.

In May, a group of volunteers opened the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum in Matewan in Mingo County, W.Va. The museum contains artifacts and historical records of the local communities affected by the West Virginia mine wars of the early 20th century.

### **When Boom Times Go Bust**

Pennsylvania and West Virginia differed in how they ultimately honored their coal miners. But the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania and the southern coal fields of West Virginia also have much in common. Both have experienced significant economic downturns over the past several decades. The coal companies and local politicians failed to preserve the enormous wealth generated by the workers. If the industries and the workers had worked cooperatively with a long-term view instead tying every investment to short-term profits, the wealth created by coal production would have made lives much easier for the miners and their future generations.

But the history of natural resource extraction has shown that local communities suffer the most while the extraction is occurring and do not enjoy any long-term benefits when the boom times goes bust. The mine owners, whether based locally or headquartered in New York or overseas, viewed the valuable rock mined by the workers as their property, not as a resource whose value should be shared equally.

The environmental damage caused by the coal industry is easier to see in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania. Many of the mountains are scarred by 150 years of mining. The areas where the topography is flat still look like the moonscapes portrayed in The Molly Maguires movie. In a telling scene in the movie, the characters played by Richard Harris and Samantha Eggar go on a picnic just above a coal tailings pond. Ironically, Eggar's character finds the small amount of greenery in the trees adjacent to the tailings dump as a refreshing escape from the darkness of the company town, which is gray and dusty 24 hours a day. Today, if you travel to the Eckley, where the movie was shot, these same environmental wastelands exist just beyond

the outside of the old company town.

The environmental devastation caused by 150 years of coal mining is more hidden in the beautiful mountains of West Virginia, even though hundreds of mountaintops have been removed and thousands of streams have been contaminated by the coal companies' valley fill. West Virginia was dominated by a single industry that did extensive environmental damage. But Pennsylvania's land has been devastated by a multitude of industries that have left it looking far worse for the wear.

From a labor perspective, Pennsylvania has a diversified industrial heritage that gave rise to strong union activity beyond the coal patches. But the tide appears to be turning in West Virginia as historians, filmmakers and local activists refuse to let their state's strong union history be buried forever.

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