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Matt DeMoss

Pittsburg State University

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**A Missed Opportunity:
The Failure to Unionize Little Balkan Miners During the Strike of 1893**

Matt DeMoss

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The Failure to Unionize Little Balkan Miners During the Strike of 1893
by Matt DeMoss

“Among the Falstaff army of industries of this country, too poor to fight, too cowardly or virtuous to steal, the coal mining industry presents itself as one of the most bedraggled members of these ragged recruits,” stated mine operator attorney, D.W. Kuhn in 1911.¹ Although Kuhn sided with coal operators for business interests, his description of the industry was not flattering. By calling the coal mining industry a Falstaff army, Kuhn was comparing the industry to a celebrated Shakespearean character, “a very fat, sensual, and witty old knight; a swindler, drunkard, and good-tempered liar; and something of a coward.”² In Southeast Kansas during the 1890s, coal mine operators *were* “cowardly or virtuous” enough to steal from their employees. The wages paid to miners were so low that mining men and their families could not afford to pay their bills. Left with no other option, the miners declared a strike against the coal operators of the Little Balkans on May 19, 1893. With the support of the United Mine Workers of America, these miners fought to improve their wages. All summer their strike held with the support and aid given by the UMWA and other union brothers throughout the country. By late August, after months devoid of work or pay, the miners' demands were still not met and the UMWA's power and influence in Southeast Kansas was virtually nonexistent. The mine operators had defeated the strike with patience, intimidation, force, and by secretly shipping in a scab labor force. With winter fast approaching, the strike was officially called off August 23, 1893, and mining resumed in the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields with wages marginally better than before the Strike of 1893.

The Crawford-Cherokee coal fields, located in and around Pittsburg, Kansas, were known as

¹ William Graebner, “Great Expectations: The Search for Order in Bituminous Coal, 1890-1917,” *The Business History Review*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1974), 49.

² Dictionary.net, s.v. “Falstaff,” <http://www.dictionary.net/falstaff> (accessed November 15, 2009).

the Little Balkans because they were primarily populated with immigrant miners from the Balkan region of Southeast Europe. These Balkan immigrants, extremely poor and destitute, immigrated to America and then to Southeast Kansas in search of work. Once these men and their families arrived in the coal fields of Crawford and Cherokee Counties, this workforce was exploited in the extremely harsh and dangerous work environment of the coal mine. Many miners were killed or maimed weekly throughout the early 1890s. The *Pittsburg Headlight* and the *Pittsburg Messenger* both reported deaths or severe injuries at area mines in nearly every edition they printed during 1893. To say that the mining environment in the 1890s was unsafe is an understatement of epic proportions. Cave-ins, falling rock, explosions, noxious gases, exposed shafts that were hundreds of feet deep, and unsafe levels of dust were all part of the daily working conditions endured by a Little Balkan coal miner.

Life on the home front was not much better for miners, either. Similar to the famous Robber Barons of that time and period, coal mine operators took advantage of their employees at every opportunity. Operators would hastily construct dirt-floor homes or tents and make a camp for the placement of their labor force near the mines. Companies were now able to charge rent and recover some of their money paid for wages. Most camps were isolated from any other camp or town, so provisions needed by the miners were purchased from the company store, conveniently located within that camp. Often times the wages miners earned from their respective coal company were paid in script or by using a currency only accepted at that company's store, further limiting a miner's choices. This method of payment allowed companies to charge marked-up prices for the goods and necessities available at the store. This confinement of a miner's money allowed coal companies to not only retrieve nearly all the money they had paid in wages, but often times put miners in their debt. Coal operators were making money off of the coal they sold as well as the miners they employed.

The eldest son of a Frontenac, Kansas coal miner described mine operators by saying, "Mules were more valuable to those crooks! They had to be bought, and hiring more men was a helluva lot cheaper."³

Hard work in extreme environments for low pay prompted the organization of labor unions. A union brought all laborers of a specific industry together, creating a united force with central leadership. Unions were considerably stronger than mere individuals vying for improved conditions. In 1885, only 200,000 tons of coal were mined from the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields, but the mining industry around the Little Balkans was starting to flourish with the construction of lead and zinc smelters in Pittsburg, Kansas. These ores were being mined nearby in the Tri-District area of Southwest Missouri, extreme Southeast Kansas, and the Northeast corner of what would later become Oklahoma. This economic boom brought in the railroads and many other industries which also relied on coal for fuel. By 1890, 1,900,000 tons of coal were being produced in the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields annually.⁴ Higher production meant more workers, and so a mass migration of miners came to the Little Balkans. Early miners of the Little Balkans had wanted an organized union in the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields, but before the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers consolidated with the Knights of Labor to form the United Mine Workers of America in 1890, no union was strong enough to help those miners isolated far from the unionized coal fields of West Virginia and Kentucky.⁵ Joseph Skubitz noted in his 1934 Master's thesis, in the region west of the Mississippi River, M.L. Walters was named the first President of a new branch of the UMWA, in 1890. This area encompassing the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields was titled as District #14 and its headquarters was based in the mining community of Scammon, Kansas.

³ Albert Stefanoni, interview by author, Frontenac, KS, October 9, 2009.

⁴ Joseph Skubitz, "A History of the Development of Deep Mine Production in Crawford County and the Factors that have Influenced It," (master's thesis, Kansas State College of Pittsburg, 1934), 29.

⁵ Skubitz, 30.

In March of 1893, tensions in the mining industry of the Little Balkans started to build. On March 10, The *Pittsburg Messenger*, a weekly publication with a politically Democratic bias, reported that the Governor of Kansas had appointed T.B. McGregor to the position of State Mine Inspector and the subsequent “dissatisfaction among the miners in regard to the action of Governor Lewelling in appointing a state mine inspector.” Members of District #14 of the UMWA had previously interviewed Mr. McGregor in Pittsburg, Kansas and did not support his appointment. Area miners had hoped Governor Lewelling would allow local miners to be involved in the selection process and give their recommendation serious consideration in the selection. Although elected by his Populist Party politics, the Governor had ultimately gone against the labor force in his decision for State Mine Inspector, and had even met with State Senators and “agreed to turn a deaf ear to the organization of the UMWA.” The editor of the *Pittsburg Messenger* felt “Governor Lewelling, has in this instance, stabbed the men who gave such an overwhelming majority.”⁶

The UMWA started off the month of April very proactive. Unhappy about Governor Lewelling's new mine inspector and concerned about a severe drop in wages, the first formal meeting of the year for District #14 was held in Scammon, KS. The election for officials of district #14 was held at this initial meeting. Two days later, another meeting concerning the wages that had been paid since the first of the year was held. “Income of this district, since January 2, has been \$326 and the expenditures has been \$373, leaving an indebtedness of \$47 that confronts us.”⁷ The price paid per ton of coal had dropped from 62.5¢ per ton in the summer and 75¢ per ton in the winter to 47¢ in the summer and 53¢ in the winter as a result of the new Anti-Screening Law, passed by Kansas Legislators.⁸ This Anti-Screening law stated:

It is unlawful for any mine owner, lessee, or operator of coal mines in this state,

⁶ *Pittsburg Messenger*, March 10, 1893.

⁷ *Pittsburg Headlight*, April 10, 1893.

⁸ *United Mine Workers' Journal*, June 15, 1893.

employing miners at bushels or toms or any other quantities, to pass the output of coal by said miners over any screen or any other device which shall take part from the value thereof before same shall have been weighted and credited to the employees.⁹

The passing of this legislation proved that the lobbying division of the UMWA must have been effective when working with state governments. Another issue discussed was the firing of five men, working for the Kansas and Texas Coal Company, because they had asked to be paid weekly, as required by state law. The firing of these men from the Kansas and Texas Coal Company showed that District #14 of the UMWA still held little sway in the Little Balkans. Elsewhere in the nation, workers for the Santa Fe Railroad and Union Pacific Railroad went on strike in April.¹⁰

The UMWA was concerned by this unjust treatment received from area mine operators. The main opposition to the UMWA had come from the "Big Four" coal companies - the Western Coal Mining Company, the Central Coal and Coke Company, the Kansas and Texas Coal Company, and the Southwestern Coal and Improvement Company.¹¹ Although ignored, the miners were vigilant and motivated to improve their wages. The *Pittsburg Headlight* reported, "The UMWA are looking for and expecting trouble, as the coal supply now on board of coal cars is far in advance of demand, and them appearances indicate that operators had been preparing for a shut down if the emergency should come."¹² On May 12, 1893, miners from Frontenac, Kansas signed on with District #14 of the UMWA, whose membership had been primarily composed of miners from Northern Cherokee County.¹³ With most of the Crawford-Cherokee coal field now unionized, a meeting was set for

⁹ Skubitz, 30. Before the anti-screening law, miners were only paid for the coal that did not clear a screen with 1.5 inch openings, and operators were keeping all of the profits gained from the small pieces of coal that had passed through the screen.

¹⁰ *Pittsburg Headlight*, April 10, 1893; Ibid, April 18, 1893.

¹¹ The Kansas and Texas Coal Company was often referred to as the K&T.

¹² *Pittsburg Headlight*, May 11, 1893.

¹³ Ibid, May 13, 1893.

miners and operators to get together and fix the prices. District #14 demanded 2.5¢ per bushel for the summer and 3¢ for the winter, which the operators vehemently denied. Once the operators had turned down the UMWA's offer, M.L. Walters declared to the miners that "those prices are to be paid from and after May 19, and you are hereby notified not to return to work even though you are offered the price demanded until authorized by a delegate convention representing all miners of those two counties, and if offered the prices notify the secretary of executive board at once and await action."¹⁴ The Strike of 1893 had officially begun.

The miners took action immediately by marching and picketing area mines. Parades were held throughout Crawford and Cherokee Counties. Three hundred miners from Litchfield, Kansas paraded down Broadway Street in Pittsburg, Kansas, led by a brass band and carrying a banner reading "No 47 & 53 For Us." Other orderly demonstrations were common. Although peaceful, these forms of protest were hard to miss by anyone in town, most of all, by the operators with empty mines and especially the smelter operators in Pittsburg, who only had a finite supply of coal. Strip mines of the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields were still open and producing coal, but for the smelters to get the heat needed for production, lump coal from the shaft mines was needed.¹⁵ The "situation is serious," the possibility that "smeltermen may become involved in the trouble," and miners in Missouri, Colorado, Arkansas, and the Indian Territory were libel to extend the strike in support of miners in District #14 were all newspaper reports that gave hope to a successful strike.¹⁶ All of the miners in the Cherokee District were "idle and preparations were being made to call out all of the miners in the state. The outlook for an early settlement between the coal miners and mine operators of this district look gloomy, and the most hopeful people directly and indirectly concerned in the

¹⁴ *Pittsburg Messenger*, May 19, 1893.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, June 2, 1893.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, May 26, 1893.

great strike have about abandoned all hope of a speedy adjustment.”¹⁷

Starting in June, 1893, the coal operators started running ads in area newspapers. These ads were not designed to sell coal to but gain public support from the non-mining citizens. They stated how important the coal industry was to the development and growth of Crawford and Cherokee Counties, especially Pittsburg. The ad noted that “Pittsburg will be one of the largest manufacturing cities west of the Mississippi River in 1900.”¹⁸ All of the ads were the same layout, and, every time they were run, the ads showed the arrogance and wishful thinking of the “Big Four.”

In June, the *Pittsburg Messenger* reported that the time for arbitration had passed, and it was becoming clearer all with every passing day that the Strike of 1893 was “rapidly approaching a crisis.”¹⁹ Another meeting between the miners and the operators was scheduled for Wednesday, June 7, 1893, at the Stillwell Hotel in Pittsburg, Kansas. Two miners were chosen as delegates from each mine to meet with all area operators, except for the K&T Coal Company, whose operators refused to attend. The number of representatives from each side was then reduced to five.²⁰ These men met again on May 13, and May 21, but no agreement could be reached. The operators “declared they could not pay the prices demanded,” yet the price of 57¢ and 70¢ was being paid to miners just over the border, in Missouri. The operators noted that they could quickly and easily find replacements, and the miners stated that they could get the strip miners to lay down their tools and join the strike.²¹ No compromise could be found or accepted by either side, so the meetings turned into a pointless bickering match.

Other Kansas coal miners, outside of the Little Balkans, went on strike by early June, but in Missouri and Colorado, the coal mines were running at full capacity in response to the strike. Those

¹⁷ *Pittsburg Messenger*, May 26, 1893.

¹⁸ Ibid, June 2, 1893 – July 28, 1893.

¹⁹ Ibid, June 2, 1893.

²⁰ Ibid, June 9, 1893.

²¹ Ibid, June 23, 1893; *United Mine Workers' Journal*, July 20, 1893.

mines were working every day, in an effort to fill the contracts held back in the Little Balkans. One miner was even told, by a reliable source, that 12 cars that had been filled at the Missouri mine he worked in were part of the Kansas contract.²² Getting the miners of Missouri and Colorado to also strike was now essential to the success of District #14's strike.

By now, the Pittsburg smelters had begun to shut down and unskilled miners were on the “verge of destitution.” Journeymen miners were not yet suffering, but they were beginning to feel the effects of no work or pay for two months. The UMWA began to run newspaper ads, nationally, to solicit money and aid for the “victims of the recent lock-outs in the Kansas coal mines.”²³ Miners and operators kept meeting and working towards an agreeable price. By July 14, the year-round price of 54¢ was nearly agreed upon, but the UMWA kept pressuring for the 57¢ and 70¢ price paid in Missouri. All hope was not lost, because union miners in Missouri and Arkansas had made a verbal commitment to lay down their tools and join the strike, beginning on August 1.²⁴

The K&T Coal Company was the first company to start playing dirty. By mid July, the miners who worked at their Litchfield mines were issued eviction notices. The Crawford County Sheriff's Department delivered the notices, stating that the miners had 30 days to vacate the premises.²⁵ These miners would eventually move into tents near the K&T Coal Company's Litchfield work site.²⁶ Then, at noon on Thursday, July 17, 1893, two men and one boy were wounded by gunshots fired by G.C. Clements, Clements' son, and Dick Reed at the Clements' Strip Pit near Weir City, Kansas.²⁷ That day over 100 women had marched on the Clements' Strip Pit in an effort to persuade the employees there to join the strike, prompting Clements' violent reaction. Similar to the “Army of the Amazons”

²² *Pittsburg Messenger*, June 15, 1893.

²³ *Ibid*, June 23, 1893.

²⁴ *Ibid*, July 14, 1893.

²⁵ *Ibid*, June 14, 1893.

²⁶ *United Mine Workers' Journal*, July 20, 1893.

²⁷ *Pittsburg Messenger*, July 21, 1893.

march of 1921, these women went out to picket area mines and help their family's efforts in the strike. As women and men fled in fear, word of Clements' actions quickly spread across District #14, and Weir City was immediately crowded with angry strikers. Violence seemed eminent, but “cooler heads” prevailed and heeded the voice of reason delivered by the *United Mine Workers Journal*, in the month prior. This weekly publication of the UMWA had stated,

The miners of the Sunflower State need fear no overwhelming by Pinkerton thugs or militia dudes, if they maintain the very commendable mode of procedure they have adopted and carried out so far in the strike. But on the other hand, we hope that any provocation practiced by the other side will be immediately sat down upon by the authorities.²⁸

The *United Mine Workers' Journal's* pleas for equal treatment by authorities went unanswered when no arrests were made after the Clements Strip Pit incident.

The final insult issued by the mine operators upon the miners of the Little Balkans began in late July. The mine operators were said “to be getting very uneasy” and had begun hiring armed guards to stand watch around new stockades being constructed near the mines in Weir City, Scammon, and Litchfield.²⁹ On Monday, July 24, 1893, over 1,000 black miners from Alabama arrived in the Little Balkans. Two hundred men were delivered by railroad to the K&T's stockade in Litchfield, and over 800 men were delivered to stockades in Weir City and Scammon. Guarded by sheriff's deputies, these new arrivals to the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields started work the very next day.³⁰ Although surrounded by armed deputies, not for their safety but to keep them from conversing with the striking miners, some men were able to escape the stockade and speak with the miners.

These Black miners had no intentions of causing problems for the local miners, so the union miners

²⁸ *United Mine Workers' Journal*, June 1, 1893.

²⁹ *Pittsburg Messenger*, July 21, 1893.

³⁰ *Ibid*, July 28, 1893.

paraded their newfound friends around Pittsburg to drink and converse about issues concerning the strike. Stating that they were “deceived” as to the reason for being moved to the Little Balkans, the black miners were unaware that they had been sent in as scab labor. As a result of this malicious move, the *United Mine Workers' Journal* labeled the mine operators of Southeast Kansas as “cowards.” The operators even admitted to the fact that the “Negroes have been brought to Kansas under false pretenses,” further proving their boorishly arrogant and deceitful tactics used to skirt the effects of the strike.³¹

When the miners of Missouri did not strike on August 1, as promised, the vigilance of miners in the Little Balkans began to weaken.³² Smaller independent coal companies, without the means or desire to ship in scab labor, were working “to reach an agreement with the union.” By mid August, miners in Missouri did go out on strike in support of the miners in Kansas, but this effort was too little, too late. Around the same time, Mr. Charles Devlin of the Mt. Carmel Coal Company had been working on a compromise that he felt many of the now desperate miners would accept.³³ This plan agreed that “whereby the miners were paid 50¢ and 65¢ per ton of mine run with the privilege of accepting 5¢ per 100 pounds of screened coal that averaged over 50% coal.”³⁴ This agreement was to be effective until May 1, 1895. Although not officially approved by the union, the “Devlin Plan” was being widely accepted by miners throughout the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields.

Many miners were now beginning to return to work if the terms offered by the operators were that of the “Devlin Plan.” The headline of the *Pittsburg Messenger* on August 25, 1893 was “The Strike Ended”. By this report, the strike had lasted from May 20, to August 22. Over 200 miners had agreed to the terms of the “Devlin Plan” with the operators of the Santa Fe Coal Company in

³¹ *United Mine Workers' Journal*, July 27, 1893.

³² *Pittsburg Messenger*, August 11, 1893.

³³ *United Mine Workers' Journal*, August 24, 1893.

³⁴ *Pittsburg Messenger*, September 1, 1893; Skubitz, 31; *United Mine Workers' Journal*, August 31, 1893.

Frontenac by August 22, 1893. District #14 President of the UMWA, M.L. Walters, was still not satisfied with the terms.³⁵ None of the “Big Four” coal companies had accepted the terms of the “Devlin Plan” and still refused to acknowledge the union.³⁶ Some “Big Four” coal companies, especially the Western Coal and Mining Company in Yale, Kansas, had invested so much importing the black miners from Alabama that they did not rehire any miners involved with the Strike of 1893.³⁷ These were actions that Walters and the UMWA were not willing to accept. On the first day back to work, August 22, 1893, only 35 miners showed up at the Santa Fe's No. 2 mine in Frontenac, and nearly 400 union men opposed to ending the strike had to be contained by sheriff's deputies. The next day, over 300 miners showed up for work at the No. 2 mine.³⁸ This drastic increase in miner turnout signaled the real end to the Strike of 1893 and a lack of confidence in the union's power to get better terms. President Walters later agreed to the “partially satisfactory” terms, and The *United Mine Workers' Journal* reported that the strike was over on August 23, 1893.³⁹

Now that the UMWA had been beaten back and rendered useless by not only the “Big Four” coal companies but also the independent coal companies, the gates were left wide open for operators to return to their usual, crooked business practices. With the approach of winter, money had to be made for supplies, food had to be put on tables, and every effort had to be taken to get families moved from tents and back into the shelter of wooden houses. Now having all of the cards in their hands, many operators reneged on the agreed terms of the “Devlin Plan.” Some operators began claiming that overhead expenses had risen and lowered the wages paid to miners by 5¢ or more per ton. Although the miners had effectively given up on the union, the union had not given up on them. On September 7, 1893, the *United Mine Workers' Journal* ran a letter sent by the District #14

³⁵ *Pittsburg Messenger*, August 25, 1893.

³⁶ Skubitz, 31.

³⁷ *Pittsburg Messenger*, September 1, 1893.

³⁸ *Ibid*, August 25, 1893.

³⁹ Skubitz, 31; *United Mine Workers' Journal*, August 31, 1893.

Secretary, J.M. Lacy, calling for miners to come back out on strike over an “uncalled for reduction” in mine wages.⁴⁰ President Walters then made a last-ditch effort for help by calling upon all of the country’s trade unions for support.⁴¹ Neither Lacy nor Walters got what their wish, because the strike was over and the miners of the Little Balkans were now working out of necessity. The downfall of the union, in the Little Balkans, had severe lasting effects. After the Strike of 1893's failure, mine operators “held complete sway in the Crawford-Cherokee coal fields for the next five years. During the period, the production of coal gradually increased, while the condition of the miners grew worse.”⁴²

D.W. Kuhn noted that conditions in the American coal trade were “widely regarded – by mine operators, miners and their unions, engineers, scientists, and government officials – as wasteful, inefficient, excessively competitive, and insufficiently profitable.”⁴³ Before the 1890s, labor unions representing coal miners were not too unlike the coal industry itself. “Inefficient and excessively competitive” were adjectives that described the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers and the Knights of Labor, but once they combined to form the UMWA, more bargaining strength was held. District #14 of the UMWA definitely had the determination, but the lacked strength and aggressive nature needed to prevail during the Strike of 1893. The actions taken by the miners throughout the strike were peaceful and appropriate, but they lacked the fighting spirit needed to gain the respect of the “Big Four” coal companies and, on a lesser level, the rest of the smaller, independent Southeast Kansas coal companies. Evictions, shootings, armed guard intimidation, scab labor, refusal to recognize the UMWA, and the hard-nosed negotiating of mine operators were all examples of the tight-fisted tactics used by greedy mine operators and owners in the Little Balkans.

⁴⁰ *United Mine Workers' Journal*, September 7, 1893.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, September 14, 1893.

⁴² Skubitz, 31.

⁴³ Graebner, p 49.

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This is another source that reiterated information, but in a broader region. This book is similar to Tolson's *An Account of Afro-Americans in Weir, Kansas*.