Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX, I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Chuck Keeney would tell you he comes from a long line of coal mining rednecks and he's heard all the stereotypes.

Chuck Keeney: If you're from West Virginia and you travel all outside the state, as I often do, people still say things like, "Oh, you have all your teeth." Or, "Oh, you have shoes. Do you date your cousin?"

Lizzie Peabody: Chuck Keeney is a West Virginia historian but he says, redneck history is the history of labor unions everywhere. That's because it traces back to the red bandanas, worn by workers who risked their lives for better working conditions.

Chuck Keeney: I always say that the red bandana is a scarlet thread throughout West Virginian history. And you go all the way back to 1877, actually in the railroad strike, the first nationwide strike in American history, which started in West Virginia. You had railroad workers that began wearing red bandanas around their necks. And so, they were called rednecks.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh wow.

Chuck Keeney: Yeah. They'd-

Lizzie Peabody: It's come to mean something totally different now.

Chuck Keeney: That's exactly right. It means something totally different. And the reason that it means something totally different now is because the miners didn't control the narrative. The coal industry controlled the narrative.

Lizzie Peabody: Keeney says there's always been a power struggle between union workers and the state's largest industry, coal mining. When coal miners put on red bandanas to protest low pay, got angry that their working conditions were unsafe and yelled at bosses who ignored their demands. Coal companies said, it was just the uncivilized nature of the drunken hill folk that made up their work force.

Chuck Keeney: And therefore, the term redneck becomes to be associated with someone that is backward, uncivilized, et cetera, et cetera. So, you create the stereotype in order to say, these people are being violent because this is a part of their nature. It's not because of the industrial system that is keeping them in chains. And Blair Mountain is a dagger in the heart of that stereotypical character of my home.

Lizzie Peabody: Blair Mountain is the site of America's largest labor uprising ever. It took place in West Virginia 100 years ago, this August but for a long time, the story laid buried deep beneath the mountains of time.
Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we're mining this nugget of history. When black, white and recent immigrant coal miners, all rednecks, banded together to demand better working conditions and a living wage and were met with machine guns. This is the battle of Blair Mountain.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The battle of Blair Mountain is about power. The kind that keeps your light bulb on in your kitchen and the kind that exists between a worker and a boss. And in 1920, the men who owned coal companies had all the power.

Tony Perry: These companies are able to wield greater and greater political and economic force on municipal levels, on county levels, on state levels and on federal levels.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Smithsonian curator Tony Perry, from the National Museum of American History. In the early 20th century, America was industrializing fast. There were a lot fewer people plowing the fields and a lot more melting steel, laying train tracks and canning food.

Tony Perry: You have industrialization really ramping up in America and where industrialization in many ways is being fueled by coal, literally and figuratively.

Lizzie Peabody: Steel, railroads, food production, all that stopped. If coal wasn't being pulled out of the mountains in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. So, coal companies needed people to swing pickaxes and load train cars. Lots of people, nearly 2% of the American population worked in coal mines at the time. That's nearly seven million Americans today, more than the entire population of most states.

Lizzie Peabody: West Virginia coal companies got real good at recruiting workers from across America, dangling the promise of good pay and a middle-class lifestyle. They specifically targeted black Americans who were migrating away from oppressive laws and farming systems dominating the south.

Catherine Moore: Compared to being a sharecropper or a small farmer in Virginia, a black miner’s earning potential was actually quite high in West Virginia.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Catherine Moore, she's a writer and founding member of the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum.

Catherine Moore: They were pretty much assured of getting a job, they could make the same wages as whites, which was untrue in nearly every other occupation in the United States at that time.

Lizzie Peabody: The coal companies also promised workers a little place to call home, company housing, which was a pretty sweet deal for European immigrants who'd just landed in the US with no place to go. This is Chuck Keeney again.

Chuck Keeney: Literally they were had recruiters at Ellis Island. They said, "Do you want a job? We can give you a job and we can give you a house." And of course, immigrants thought, well, wow, a job-

Lizzie Peabody: This really is the land of opportunity.
Chuck Keeney: Right, now this is great. And they stick them on a train. And then they find themselves in Logan County, West Virginia.

Lizzie Peabody: Coal mining was a pretty decent paying job but it was also extremely dangerous. You were thousands of feet underground in a dark cramped tunnel. Deadly gases could seep through the rocks, suffocating you or they could explode. And water could rip through the mine at any second or a runaway cart loaded with coal could crush you or rip your arm off or the ceiling might collapse.

Peter Liebhold: So, it's incredibly dangerous work.

Lizzie Peabody: Peter Liebhold is a Curator Emeritus at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Peter Liebhold: We actually have a prosthesis, an artificial leg that was made by a miner and used after that miner lost a leg in an accident.

Lizzie Peabody: During World War I, an American soldier had a higher likelihood of survival than a West Virginia coal miner. That is nuts. Miners put up with the risk to keep a roof over their family's heads. But in 1920, they started to see their paychecks getting a little bit leaner.

Peter Liebhold: There's a recession going on, it's tough times. And even more importantly, the miners see that they're sliding down. They see a time that things might be worse for their children, not better for their children and that if they don't say it out right, they certainly know it and feel it.

Lizzie Peabody: Americans across the country were struggling to pay bills. And it was getting harder by the day. A lot of people blamed immigrants or other minority groups for their struggles.

Chuck Keeney: So, you have a lot of racial hostility going on, a lot of xenophobia going on, enormous labor unrest. And you had an enormous wealth gap between the rich and the poor. In fact, in 2021, we're looking at the largest wealth gap between the rich and poor since 1921. It's not altogether a completely different world than what we see today.

Lizzie Peabody: So, we don't have to work that hard to imagine what this moment was like.

Chuck Keeney: Right, right. You don't have to.

Lizzie Peabody: With the economy slowing down, there was also less demand for coal. So, coal companies were constantly one-upping each other to stay competitive. One company would pay workers less to cut costs. Then they all paid less than a company would cut costs in another place like safety inspections. And then they would all cut safety inspections and so on and so forth in a race to the bottom.

Tony Perry: This becomes one of the major sticking points that accounts for a lot of the tensions and the emerging conflicts because the effort to keep labor costs down, you also then have in these company towns, poor housing, poor healthcare facilities, poor sanitation, access to water.

Lizzie Peabody: To call these company towns is being a little generous with the word town. Mines were usually tucked away, deep in the mountains. And besides the mine, there really wasn't much else there.
No roads, the only way in or out was on the train. So, the coal company provided housing, schools, a hospital of sorts, maybe a store because there weren't any. So, as Peter Liebhold says, a coal company didn't just control every aspect of a miner's life. It controlled their families, too.

Peter Liebhold: The mine operators are providing all of those things in order to attract the miners so they can have a good quality of life. The downside of course, is if the mine operators are providing everything. Then they can take everything away.

Lizzie Peabody: So, if you're fired, you lose your job but also your home, basically everything. The miners really only had one tool to fight back and that was their numbers. There were tens of thousands of them and they could literally bring the entire country to a screeching halt if they banded together and stopped working, otherwise known as a labor union strike.

Lizzie Peabody: The United Mine Workers of America was close to having this amount of power. It was the largest union of coal miners in the country and it was a real thorn in the sides of the coal companies. By 1920, it had unionized nearly every single coal mine in the country, except a handful of mines in Southern West Virginia. Okay, but who cares, right? It's just a few mines. Well, those few mines produced just enough coal to keep the country going. If the union called a strike.

Catherine Moore: If the UMWA called nationwide strike and Southern West Virginia miners in these four or five counties stayed at work, they could break the strike.

Lizzie Peabody: Unionizing these mines was literally a life or death mission for the United Mine Workers of America. If they could unionize these last few mines, they would have leverage to negotiate for safer working conditions and better pay. But the coal companies knew this would cut into their profits, maybe even bankrupt them, so they had a zero-tolerance policy for unions.

Chuck Keeney: With the mine guards. They had basically this private police state.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yeah. The mine guards. This is how coal companies controlled everything in these coal mining towns, with their own private police force and the so-called mine guard saw it is their duty to keep union organizers out of Southern West Virginia.

Chuck Keeney: If you went into West Virginia and you took a train, if you got off on a coal camp, there's going to be mine guards, armed, waiting for you. And they're going to want to know why you're there, who you are, how long you're staying. And if the answer isn't satisfactory they're going to put a butt of a rifle in your stomach and throw you back on the train.

Lizzie Peabody: Besides brute force, coal companies exploded racial divisions as part of their arsenal against the union. It's one of the reasons they were so eager to hire black and immigrant workers. They thought different ethnic groups could never get along.

Chuck Keeney: However, it didn't work.

Lizzie Peabody: It backfired?
Chuck Keeney: It backfired, yes. The union was able to successfully organize African-Americans. They were able to successfully organize the immigrants and get the native whites on board. And so they all banded together.

Lizzie Peabody: When the coal companies saw mine workers banding together in spite of race, they got even tougher. They fired anyone they even suspected of joining a union and the mine guard evicted the worker’s family while he was still underground in the mine.

Jean Battlo: Literally, literally stories are told of them actually going in on one woman who was cooking at the stove and literally pulled her out and threw her and her, well the pot. She was cooking in and into the yard.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Jean Battlo, a West Virginia historian who grew up in the state’s Southern coalfields. She says that in May of 1920, a ruthless band of mine guards threw some mining families out of their homes and into the streets. And when news of the evictions got to the local police chief, Sid Hatfield, it was the final straw.

Jean Battlo: And Sid Hatfield, he was just between you and me, he was a real scoundrel. If he had a really, really good solid point to him, it was his sense of justice, "Hey, you can't do that to these people."

Lizzie Peabody: So, Sid Hatfield, some miners and the mayor rushed to confront the men.

Jean Battlo: Sid and his group said they were armed to the teeth. With machine guns they came in, in cars between meaning business. So, Sid and his deputies met them on the street, now the story is of course, that he just pulled out his gun and shot. One man jumped in the barrel and hid in there for the entire shootout. But as to who shot first, the truth of the matter is, who knows.

Lizzie Peabody: By the end of the day, seven mine guards lay dead in the street. Two miners and the mayor were also killed.

Lizzie Peabody: Sid Hatfield was made a hero of the union mine worker cause. He had stood up to the oppressive mine guard system. But Hatfield had begun a battle the coal companies were determined to finish.

Lizzie Peabody: The two opposing forces would meet a little over a year later on Blair Mountain.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: After Sid's shoot out with the mine guard, chaos broke out across the coalfields of Southern West Virginia. Miners went on strike and coal companies responded with mass evictions. Thousands of mining families were forced from their homes into tents. They formed these huge tent colonies and as summer turned into winter and rain turned to snow conditions got worse and worse. This is Chuck Keeney again.

Chuck Keeney: Thousands of them are living in tents in Mingo County throughout 1920 and 1921. Living in tents, kids are getting sick, they're malnourished. So, you have people living in these really desperate conditions.
Lizzie Peabody: Striking coal miners clashed with mine guards in deadly guerrilla warfare across the state's hills and hollers. The governor created a new branch of law enforcement just to squash the violence.

Chuck Keeney: West Virginia created its state police force specifically to put down this strike. That's why we have a state police in West Virginia.

Lizzie Peabody: Even though the gun fighting took place mostly among men, women played a part as well. They'd tear up train tracks or convince the men hired to replace the striking miners to turn around and leave town.

Catherine Moore: They would confront these train cars of strike breakers and use all their powers of persuasion, that they would shame the strike breakers in some cases. And they would sometimes come to blows. I mean, there are multiple stories about women who would get into fist fights with these strike breakers.

Lizzie Peabody: Catherine Moore says it was also common for women to smuggle guns to the miners.

Catherine Moore: This woman named Willie Fish, that's pregnant at the time. And she had these big baggy maternity clothes, which were perfect for hiding guns and ammunition. And so she would load up her skirts and her pockets with bullets and guns. And she would walk through the woods and somebody would be hiding in a bush and she'd give the signal, they'd come out, she'd give him a gun. She'd move on. And in this way, she was able to, out of the sight of the mine guards who are monitoring their activities this whole time.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Almost a year after the strike began, mining families were reaching a breaking point. So Chuck Keeney's great grandfather, Frank Keeney hatched a plan. He said, "If they couldn't unionize the mines in Southern West Virginia, they should just shut them down."

Chuck Keeney: And he was all fire and dynamite. He asked for and shared no quarter.

Lizzie Peabody: Frank Keeney was a native West Virginian who'd started working in the mines when he was just 10. And on May 12th, he set his plan to shut the mines down in motion. The miners blew up a power plant, cut telephone lines and shot mine guards, West Virginia's governor responded by declaring martial law. Civil liberties were suspended and a military rule swept over the area.

Chuck Keeney: So, state police were brought in. They attacked the tent colonies on June the 12th, slashed all the tents, poured gasoline into their water supplies and they confiscated all the food. And then they began, they rounded up all the miners they could find and put them in prison without habeas corpus of course because it's martial law.

Lizzie Peabody: While the men were in jail, state police began intercepting food shipments to their families in the tent colonies essentially starving them out. And while all this was going on, a trial kicked off for the police chief who'd stood up for the mine workers, Sid Hatfield. On August 1st, 1921, as Sid climbed the steps to the courthouse. Three men shouted from the crowd.
Jean Battlo: And they hollered at him, "Where's your guns?" And he said, "I left it back at the hotel because I didn't want any trouble here." And he throws his jacket back to show he didn't have a holster on. And then they started shooting.

Lizzie Peabody: Mine guard agents murdered Sid Hatfield and his deputy on the courthouse steps. Jean Battlo says it was revenge for the shootout a year earlier.

Jean Battlo: Really, I've always called it an assassination, always.

Lizzie Peabody: The mine guard had sent the miners a message. They control the coal fields. And this is what happened if you challenged them. When news of the assassination reached the miners, they grabbed their guns.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: A week later, 5,000 miners surrounded the West Virginia state Capitol in Charleston.

Catherine Moore: And they set out a list of proposals or demands to the governor of West Virginia at the time basically saying, this is what we need in order to maintain peace here. And it was really a list of the same things they had been asking for, for decades. The governor rejected every single one of the demands and said basically, "I cannot force the coal companies to accept the union."

Chuck Keeney: And that's when my great grandfather walks out to the crowd of miners and says, "The only way you can get your rights is with a high-powered rifle." He then told the miners to go home and await the call to march.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The call came a couple of weeks later on August 20th, hundreds of miners gathered in Marmet, West Virginia. Within a day or so, the number had grown to thousands. The plan was to march to the Southern coal fields and free the miners being held in jail, bring food to their families being starved in 10 colonies and once and for all rid Southern West Virginia of the brutal mine guard system.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: More than 5,000 miners began the 80-mile march south, picking up hundreds by the day, red bandanas tied around all their necks. An anonymous miner was quoted calling the group a darn solid mass of different colors and tribes blended together, woven, bound, interlocked, tongued and grooved and glued together in one body.

Chuck Keeney: It was an extraordinarily diverse group that was marching. What was more terrifying for the powers that be in 1921, than to see a lot of immigrants and black people marching with guns. You want to talk about something that challenged the power structure, not just the economic power structure but the racial power structure within the United States at that time, they could not allow this movement to be successful.
Lizzie Peabody: Now, this was the height of the Jim Crow era. Black and white people weren't even allowed to drink from the same water fountain in many states. And here comes this diverse group of red bandana wearing rednecks, all marching together.

Chuck Keeney: They desegregated all the places where they went. They would stop at restaurants and they would force the restaurant owners to serve everybody together. The blacks, the whites and the immigrants. Now this is 1921. We're talking about 40 years before the Civil Rights Act.

Lizzie Peabody: There was only one road that would lead the miners to their destination. And it went directly over Blair Mountain. This is where a local sheriff on the side of the coal companies was lying in wait with a private army of 3000 men.

Chuck Keeney: And so, they set up these defensive entrenchments all along these ridge lines in order to prevent the miner's army from marching through Domingo. They're up on top of this very steep, steep slopes, heavily wooded areas with entrenchments and machine guns.

Lizzie Peabody: There was about 15,000 miners against an army of 3000. The miners had the numbers but the mine guard had machine guns and they'd place them along the highest points of Blair Mountain, forcing miners to charge them or retreat.

Chuck Keeney: And I've been upset at where one of these defensive entrenchments where, where they had these foxholes built, when they had these machine gun in placements and you look down these steep ridge lines and it's so mind boggling to think how difficult, if you were at the bottom of this hill and you're charging up this hill against machine guns, how angry you would have to be and determined you would have to be in order to do that.

Lizzie Peabody: Thousands of miners fanned out into the woods, they scaled the rocky mountain side as bullets rained down on them. They attacked, retreated and charged again but they never let up. They were determined to reach the starving coal families stranded on the other side of Blair Mountain.

Chuck Keeney: We know in some places that the fighting was close quarters. Other times machine guns kept squadrons of miners pinned down. We know that the miners nearly made a breakthrough at Crooked Creek Gap when a machine gun malfunctioned and they were able to make a rush but then the coal companies were able to regroup and fight them back.

Lizzie Peabody: On the fifth day of battle, September 4th, federal troops finally arrived to stop the violence miners laid down their weapons, saying their beef was with the coal companies not the US government.

Lizzie Peabody: In the months to follow nearly a thousand miners were indicted for murder, conspiracy and treason.

Catherine Moore: If you think about the charge of treason, that's a pretty shameful charge. And so, I think there was partly there was a sense of the miners who were involved had been anti-American. And so, people were shamed for participating in these conflicts.
Lizzie Peabody: That's why we don't know much about the actual events of the battle today. Miners were afraid to tell their side of the story out of shame or fear of being jailed. And so, the story of what truly happened began to fade away or be intentionally forgotten.

Catherine Moore: West Virginia studies textbooks were written from a pro industrialist perspective. And that's just a fact. If you look at the biographies of the men who were writing the textbooks from the twenties onwards, they had direct ties to the industry. And so, they painted a very pro-industry perspective in the histories that they wrote.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: More than a half century later, the story of the battle of Blair Mountain finally began to emerge. Nobody knows exactly how many people died in the fighting but it's believed as many as a hundred miners and 30 mine guard were killed. It was a major setback for the American labor movement and the United Mine Workers. But they carried forward a set of ideals that have since become woven into the American fabric.

Chuck Keeney: Those guys that stormed Blair Mountain, they were fighting for the things that we enjoy, like a minimum wage, the abolition of child labor, weekends, paid vacation, pensions, health care, all of these other things that we hold for granted.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Smithsonian's Tony Perry says, even though the battle happened a hundred years ago, its lessons are just as relevant today.

Tony Perry: Because we're living in a moment now where language around uprisings, revolt, insurrection, protest, what have you, where this language is being deployed and weaponized in different ways. One of the things that I take away from Blair Mountain is really a question. And that question is, what determines, what allows us to assess whether an uprising, a revolt is just or not?

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: To learn more about the battle of Blair Mountain and see some of the mining gear we have in the Smithsonian collections, including a miner's prosthetic leg, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor. You can also read Chuck Keeney's book, “The Road to Blair Mountain: Saving a Mine Wars Battlefield from King Coal” or visit the Mine Wars Museum in West Virginia.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks to Tony Perry, Catherine Moore, Chuck Keeney, Jean Battlo, Peter Liebhold and Valeska Hilbig. This is our final full episode for the season but don't despair. We've got a new season
coming out this fall and you may see a little bonus feature in your feed just before the Olympics too. So, keep an eye out for that.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In the meantime, don't forget to tell us you love us in Apple Podcasts. Our podcast team is James Morrison, Stephanie De Leon Tzic, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Paint us a picture here of the US in 1920. I mean, I think 1920s and I think the roaring twenties, so-

Chuck Keeney: Well, you have to find a lot of flappers in Mingo County and Logan County in 1920. I don't don't think Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway were roaming around in Charleston at this time.

Lizzie Peabody: Fair, fair point.