

Angus McDonald, '33as, brilliant government student who was elected to Phi Beta Kappa this spring, visited the celebrated Kentucky mine war area last summer. Some of his impressions and conclusions regarding this black chapter in modern United States history follow

The Kentucky mine war

A SOONER'S ADVENTURES AND CONCLUSIONS

BY ANGUS MCDONALD, '33



ON the night of July 3 last summer I arrived in Pineville, Kentucky. I had gone into the Kentucky coal regions because my curiosity had been aroused by the treatment received by other students who had gone there and had either been beaten up or escorted to the state line or both. I therefore did not advertise myself as a college student who was investigating the mine war in Harlan and Bell counties.

After spending the night of July 4 in Pineville I went the next day to Harlan where the trial of Chester Poore, one of the miners indicted for the killing of a deputy sherriff at Evarts in May, 1931, was in progress. My presence in the courtroom excited no evident interest. While in Harlan I met several of the witnesses in sympathy with the miners. I also made friends with some of the miners and had the good fortune to be so well received by one of them that he agreed that I should be introduced when necessary as his "cousin." This explained my stay in the vicinity and helped avoid suspicion. After the trial of Chester Poore closed at Harlan I went to Evarts, the scene of much of the Kentucky trouble.

My friends in Harlan had told me to whom to go in Evarts to get reliable information. All told the same story of abuse and mistreatment. I took several statements, visited at the homes of some of the miners, collected company statements showing the starvation wages paid and returned to Harlan. There I was warned that "the law" was following me. Two men (who, I was told, were deputy sheriffs) followed me to the postoffice where I mailed all the material which I had collected, including notes,

affidavits, etc. The men stood at the door apparently undecided what to do. I simulated unconcern, pulled out a cigarette and said, "Got a match, buddy?" ("Buddy" is the impersonal form of address most used in the Kentucky mountains.) This apparently allayed their suspicions and I strolled leisurely down the street. I did not look back but could feel their eyes on me until I turned the corner. Not wishing to test my constitutional rights I hurried back to Pineville.

One of the lawyers whom I had met when I was there before was kind enough to give me the use of his office. There I took miner's affidavits which threw some light on the past and present conditions in southeastern Kentucky. I secured a number of sworn statements in regard to the sale of Red Cross flour which was appropriated by the last Congress for relief of the unemployed. One of the methods used to intimidate miners who insist on talking is anonymous threatening letters sent through the mail. I secured one of these letters which was written in red ink. The old man who gave me the letter said, "Them gun thugs can't skeer me."

I wasn't so sure they couldn't skeer me so I left for home without having been beaten up and with the privilege of finding the state line for myself.

The smouldering hatred between the operators and miners in southeastern Kentucky burst into open flame almost two years ago. The Kentucky mountains, long noted for their feuds, have produced a feud which is attracting the attention of the entire country and involves the population of Harlan and Bell

counties. On one side are ranged the operators, their hired gunmen, loyal employes, most of the officials and business men dependent upon the coal companies; on the other a few thousand ragged and starving miners. Here is found, perhaps, a sharper separation of classes than anywhere else in America. On one side are the richest of the rich; on the other the poorest of the poor. The Harlan and Bell county miners, fighting for the right to organize, are opposed by forces ranging from small local operators to the most powerful financial interests in the world. Among the most powerful are the United States Coal and Coke Company of the United States Steel Corporation at Lynch, the Wisconsin Steel Company mine of the International Harvester Company at Bentham, Henry Ford's Fordson Coal Company at Wallin's Creek, Insull's mine at Black Mountain and Mellon's Piney Coal Company and the big Kayu mine at Coxton. The outcome of the struggle has never for a moment been in doubt. Organized wealth has had only to exert its power to retain its supremacy.

It is a struggle by the miners for their so-called "natural rights" and by the operators for the right to exploit the workers. On the one hand is a concept of master and slave morality; on the other the philosophy of the under dog. One side is as selfish and intolerant as the other. Each justifies any means to gain his end. A striking miner looks on the rich operators as cutthroats worthy of death. When one of the latter is killed there is universal rejoicing in the dilapidated shacks along the Cumberland river. The operators look upon the miners as ignorant, shiftless and

lazy; easily influenced by Communist agitators, having no regard for property and life. Their fight to maintain their superiority involves more than avarice and a desire to preserve their property rights. Property rights to them have come to stand for all that is good in modern civilization. They seek to preserve the status quo at any cost. Many of the operators are running their mines at a loss when no doubt a compromise would enable them to make money. The question involved is more than a matter of dollars and cents. It is the struggle against and for the right to unionize the fields. The issue is very simple. It is democracy against paternalism. The same spirit which animates the miners was manifested by the colonists in this country between 1776-1789. It is the age-old struggle between the have-nots and the haves. As is usual in such cases, each side is losing heavily when both could gain for the moment by compromising. Literally hundreds of mine guards have been maintained by the operators to protect their property from the striking miners. They have spent far more by stubbornly refusing to recognize the union than they would have paid out in wage increases. Like the miners, the operators are fighting for abstract as well as real rights. They are masters and they wish to remain so. The immediate cause of the labor war was wages. But wages, I think, have been incidental to the whole struggle. Many of the miners would work for less if their union was recognized. Many of them could get relief from the Red Cross and other charitable organizations would they renounce the union.

The men who have been beaten up, whose houses have been searched, and whose wives have been insulted could have obtained relief from the tyranny of the stomach at the price of their intellectual freedom. Many of the men could have had jobs today (and some have) if they would become "scabs." Not only could they have jobs but they could obtain food to keep them in relative comfort. The miners are not striking primarily for a higher standard of living; they have never known a much higher standard of living than a European peasant. One look at the rows of rickety shacks that adorn the hollows is enough to prove this. They are striking for the right to organize; for the abstract rights of free speech and free assembly. They are rebelling against taxation without representation. Of course they have a vague idea that they own the mines and should derive the benefits from them. But they wouldn't know what to do with the property the communistic brethren tell them they own if they had possession of it. They do not want economic democracy or even economic comfort. The average miner has no over-

whelming desire for a radio or a bathtub; for well-furnished and commodious houses he cares little. During the war the miners squandered their wages on whiskey; they do not wish economic security. No ambition to become billionaires is found among the masses in Harlan and Bell counties.

What the average Kentucky miner wants is the right to strike, the right to select his own doctor, the right to a fair trial, the right to hire a check weightman, have a gun, make his whiskey and above all, the right to make a speech on the corner. For the Kentucky miner is naturally a speechmaker. He has a habit of jumping up on every occasion, waving his arms and shouting in a loud and raucous voice about his fancied and real wrongs. The thing that he has most resented throughout the struggle is the fact that he has been deprived of his right to talk. The popular idea of the mountaineer is that he is extremely reticent and taciturn. I did not find him so; he is an extremely loquacious and communicative individual. He is hospitable and generous and not unintelligent. Although often illiterate he is a keen judge of human nature. If you accept him as an equal and don't put on airs he will be a loyal friend. But once wronged he is an implacable enemy. To the educated social worker or a member of the ruling class who looks upon him as a degraded unenlightened person he is coldly contemptuous. The miner's attitude toward the college man is friendly. I did not find that veiled hostility toward educated people so manifest in many so-called backward communities. Every door was open to me while in Harlan and Bell. I was invited to eat, "to stay all night," in miserable huts where ragged and obviously half-starved, but usually clean, children played listlessly.

On the other hand, I think the character of coal barons and those people who sympathize with them have been somewhat maligned. The loyal coal company employee, the officials and those who make up the upper crust have been described as coldly mercenary and viciously cruel. With a few exceptions, nothing could be more untrue. They are kindly and sympathetic and as a rule charitable and generous. But they are opposed to any change in things as they are. They believe not in democracy but in paternalism. They want to do what is best for the miners but they want to be the ones to decide. They are the Lord's anointed; the chosen people of a God-given system which they believe in body and soul. They represent more than a spirit of avarice and gain. They believe in aristocracy. I was told in Pineville that people fall into two classes, the rulers and the ruled. An individual is incapable of deciding what is good for

himself unless he has proved his worth in the country of rugged individualism. The people of Pineville are as kindly as the residents of any other average American community. At the hotel where I stayed the proprietor was caring for several families. No one that I know of was turned away hungry. But he believed that to give the miners the right to organize would be putting a dangerous weapon into the hands of ignorant men. Bell County Attorney Smith was sincere when he said, "We have our institutions and we mean to protect them."* The officials do not admit the right of free criticism. It is regrettable, they say, that students who have come into the region to investigate conditions have been beaten, but it was necessary. They believe that the miners must be denied their freedom for the present. They recognize the right of the miners to a living wage, but wages cannot be paid where the business does not justify it. They are right when they say that this is one of the fundamentals of the whole American system; it is good American doctrine that where two rights conflict, the lesser one must be extinguished. There is no greater right than property because all rights depend upon it. Take property rights away and personal rights would disappear. Property in itself is not necessarily more important but the ideal of the sanctity of property is fundamental to our system, therefore it must be preserved. Such is the argument propounded by the guardians of the public weal.

The struggle then, it is seen, grows out of two schools of thought; one Hamiltonian, the other Jeffersonian; the one emphasizes property rights, the other human rights.

I have suggested two characters: the miner who is jealous of his personal liberty and the coal baron whose attitude is that of a feudal overlord. There is a third type, that of the gunman and killer, whose character is more distinct and may be described with more accuracy. He is primarily a selfish and cold-blooded killer who is paid by the coal companies to safeguard their interests. Under the Kentucky law the sheriff may deputize employees of the coal companies. These men are of the most vicious type. When the local scum has been exhausted, the jails and prisons are ransacked to find the most desperate killers.† They are frequently brought in from other states. The operators are not particular what

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**Literary Digest*, April 16, 1932.

†Arnold Johnson, "The Lawlessness of the Law in Kentucky," in *Harlan Miners Speak*, report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields, prepared by members of the national committee for the defense of political prisoners, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1932, p. 61. Also *The Kentucky Miners Struggle*, American Civil Liberties Union, New York, 1932, p. 7.

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THE KENTUCKY MINE WAR

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type of men work for them. They want the union stamped out and are not scrupulous in their methods as long as their end is accomplished. It would be impossible for them to hire respectable and honorable men to starve miners and their families by blowing up soup kitchens and destroying food. Undoubtedly many of the bullies in their pay commit outrages for which the operators are not directly responsible. But men have always been careless of the rights of their natural enemies no matter how civilized they may have become. It is to the interest of the operators that the strike be broken; so any crime committed that contributes to this end is winked at or is only casually investigated. The furtherance of a crime which makes a man's job more secure or on which his job depends is usually condoned or approved by him. A man is always interested in justice for himself but seldom for his natural enemy. Self interest clouds the vision and impairs the judgment of the operators and their friends. This characteristic of human nature is what makes it possible for the Harlan county cutthroats and ordinarily law abiding exponents of the sacredness of property to work hand in hand.

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THE NEW YORKER OF OKLAHOMA

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persuaded Rosner to let him snap pictures, which were released exclusively by one large newspaper syndicate at the climax of the case.

Travel? Very much, admits Mr Heflin. Like Conrad, he went to sea and to see the world very early in life (without his parents' permission). His many trips to Honolulu as a young sailor almost entitle him to wear the leis. He discovered, much to his chagrin, on signing on a vessel once that its destination was Alaska. Since then his caution in buying travel passage has been remarkable.

Mr Heflin, who is a Phi Delta Theta, is assisted by Wayland Boles, '31 journalism, associate editor, and George W. Knox, jr., Wisconsin and Oklahoma (1926), business manager. George H. Willis, jr., ex'26, has contributed many of the notable pictures and drawings in *The Bandwagon*.

The editor of *The Bandwagon* makes his home in Oklahoma City, is married (Eugenia Gable Heflin), and has one son, Martin Ganier Heflin.

In addition to his solid work in the editorial chair of *The Bandwagon*, Mr Heflin also finds time to review current books over radio station KOMA each week. His training in New York and elsewhere for this work has given him particular fitness in it, and his listening public may safely be said to run into the thousands.

by

Joseph A. Brandt

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