

Films about The Battle of Blair Mountain, Matewan, Bill Blizzard, and William C. Blizzard

by Steve Fesenmaier, July 29, 2009

As we approach the 100th anniversary of The Battle of Blair Mountain, August 25-September 2, 1921, the events of that dangerous summer are coming back in to focus. Thanks to William C. Blizzard, the son of the leader of The Battle, Bill Blizzard, we have a much more accurate description of the Coal Wars as reported in his book, "When Miners March." Luckily for all of us, Wess Harris published the book in 2005, and has done a great job selling more than 5,000 copies around the state and region. He is presently working on a second edition that will come out sometime this fall. We are all very lucky to have listened to the "audio movie" that Harris' collaborator, Ross Ballard II, has created, complete with special effects and music that add depth to the living version he created for MountainWhispers.com, West Virginia's award-winning audio book company.

Below are descriptions of two films directed by Charleston filmmaker Kelley Thompson, "Remembering William C. Blizzard" and "The Widen Project," that include footage he shot of Mr. Blizzard before he died in late December 2008. There is also a description of a film, "The Real Hillbilly," a two-hour History Channel documentary that includes a chapter on The Matewan Massacre and The Battle of Blair Mountain. Mr. Blizzard was able to see this excellent presentation on national television before he passed.

Of special importance is Gordon Simmons' interview in 2006 for his program, "West Virginia Authors" where Mr. Blizzard talks about his father and his original research at the public library in downtown Charleston.

Listed at the bottom are descriptions of three other films that explore the importance of The Battle of Blair Mountain. Listed first is Bill Richardson's landmark "Mine Wars," (2004) that is still the best film made to date about the Southern West Virginia coal mine wars. The Kanawha Valley premiere of this film in August 2004 led to the still-going "West Virginia Film Series" that I program for The South Charleston Museum, showing in The La Belle Theater. "In The Company's Hands" (1987) is a "lost" WV masterpiece, being shown on WVPBS in November 1987 and then disappearing. This film is a perfect companion to "Mine Wars" because it includes interviews with people who actually lived during some of the events shown in "Mine Wars" including descendents of the coal mine owners. "Even the Heavens Weep" (1983) is the first film to explore the reality of The Battle of Blair Mountain and is still worth watching. Mike Connors' narration is very well done. WVPBS did a great job on the subject. (I sent a copy to Wess Harris so that he and William C. could see this archival creation.)

I have also included a description of John Sayles' "Matewan" (1987), the best known film not only about the Mine Wars, but one of the greatest labor history films ever made. On almost a daily basis, I receive Google News alerts showing me that people around the world are still very interested in the film and the event that started the explosion that became The Battle of Blair Mountain. This fall, glassworkers in Ireland will be flying Sayles and his colleague Maggie Renzie to introduce "Matewan" as part of their labor celebration.

I should also include Jason Brown's coming film on the meaning and making of "Matewan," called "Them That Work." I have seen a 25 minute rough version of the film. I think that it will be an exciting film for people who love West Virginia labor history.

Unfortunately, many people including West Virginians are not aware of "Matewan" and the other films and books relating to the Mine Wars. I often have to tell them to visit a video seller and check out the film.

WHEN MINERS MARCH

2006 7 discs Mountain Whispers.com

William C. Blizzard, the son of Bill Blizzard, the "general" of the Battle of Blair Mountain, with the assistance of Wess Harris, compiled his many accounts of the West Virginia Mine Wars in his book, "When Miners March." He had written most of the book for various labor publications anonymously in the 1950s. In 2005 Ross Ballard took the book and turned it into a monumental "audio movie," complete with sound effects and original music. Songs on the special CD are by T. Paige Dalporto, Elaine Purkey, Hazel Dickens, Mike Morningstar, John Lilly and the Irish duo of Enda Cullen and Ian Smith. Access: <http://www.mountainwhispers.com/MWGiftShop.htm>.

REMEMBERING WILLIAM C. BLIZZARD

2009 30 mins. Killer Productions

William C. Blizzard (Dec. 22, 1916 - Dec. 29, 2008) was one of three children of Bill Blizzard, the leader of the "Red Neck Army" at The Battle of Blair Mountain 1921. His grandparents were also long-time labor activists. His mother, "Ma Blizzard," was well known for her support of miners during the Cabin Creek-Paint Creek Mine War of 1912-13. He is the author of the 2004 book, "When Miners March." He spent his life working as a journalist, photographer and labor activist. In spring 2008 Charleston filmmaker Kelley Thompson interviewed him for over an hour for his film, "The Widen Project," using a small portion in that film. When Blizzard died in December 2008, he decided to use the footage to make a film about a man who spent almost a century fighting for West Virginia's

miners. The film opens with him singing one of his favorite songs, "On Moonlight Day." Fellow Charleston Gazette workers James Haught and Paul Nyden talk about his many years working at the Gazette. Gordon Simmons, a labor historian, talks about the meaning of Blizzard's life and work. Wess Harris, publisher of "When Miners March," talks about his "discovery" of Blizzard and his friendship with him. Narrated by Ross Ballard II, creator of the audio book version of "When Miners March." Bob Webb provided the music for the film. *Access: Kelley Thompson, killer64@suddenlink.net, 304-344-1990 (home)*

WIDEN FILM PROJECT

2008 55 mins. Killer Productions

Charleston filmmaker Kelley Thompson was hired in 2006 by the Central Appalachia Empowerment Zone to interview Clay Countians, filming their memories. He found that many recalled life in Widen, the famous company town built by J.G. Bradley who was a national and state coal mining leader. He also learned about the 1952 U.M.W.A. strike at Widen. He interviewed William C. Blizzard, son of the union leader Bill Blizzard, Gordon Simmons, president of the WV Labor History Assn. and others about the strike. (Julia Baker wrote "Up Molasses Mountain" based on her father's memories of the time.) The film covers other areas including the Buffalo Creek & Gauley Railroad, and sports history with legendary coach Bobby Stover. The world premiere of the film took place at The South Charleston Museum May 10 @ 7 PM co-sponsored by SCM and the WV Labor History Association. *Access – Kelley Thompson, killer64@suddenlink.net, 304-344-1990 (home)*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZD4qx1P4As&feature=related>

HILLBILLY – THE REAL STORY

2007 120 mins. Moore Huntley Productions

The original title of this film was "Appalachia – America's First Frontier." The staff at The History Channel renamed it. It premiered on Sunday, September 2, 2007 at 8 PM on The History Channel. Wess Harris, publisher of William C. Blizzard's landmark book, "When Miners March," and Ross Ballard III, who produced the audio book version of the book, provided research for this film. William C. Blizzard is interviewed about the role his father played in the Battle of Blair Mountain and Ballard explains some of its meaning. It discusses the largest civil insurrection since the Civil War -- the Battle for Blair Mountain in the violent West Virginia coalfields in 1921, when a self-proclaimed Redneck Army of 10,000 coal miners fought for their right to organize. *Access: The History Channel store. <http://shop.history.com/detail.php?a=115530>*

WEST VIRGINIA AUTHOR – WILLIAM C. BLIZZARD AND WESS HARRIS

2005 30 min. WVLC Library Television Network

Host Gordon Simmons interviews William C. Blizzard, the author of "When Miners March," and the son of West Virginia labor leader Bill Blizzard. Also interviewed is the publisher of the book, Wess Harris, a board member of the West Virginia Labor History Association. Mr. Blizzard, who died in January 2009, had recently turned 92. During the interview, he talks about his life, particularly about writing the columns for Labor Daily that were combined to make the book. Wess Harris talks about his "rescue" of Mr. Blizzard, finding him living in a trailer house in Winfield, Putnam County several years ago. Mr. Blizzard briefly remembers his grandparents who were some of the first labor activists in the southern coal fields, starting in Fayette County, eventually moving to the Cabin Creek area of Kanawha County. This interview is historic given Mr. Blizzard's extensive firsthand knowledge of the coal wars that involved three generations of Blizzards. Access: WVLC Library Television Network homepage - <http://librarycommission.lib.wv.us/html/videoserver/ltn/wvauthor.html>

The program can be watched using WV public library computers as a streaming video. Copies can also be obtained on DVD by contacting Mark Lanham, WVLC Television Services, marcus@wvlc.lib.wv.us

MINE WARS – THE COAL MINERS WAR FOR FREEDOM

2004 57 mins. Bill Richardson Productions

Williamson, Mingo County, West Virginia filmmaker Bill Richardson directed this film about the Southern coal mine wars of the 1920s. Key events such as The Battle of Blair Mountain and the Matewan Massacre are analyzed and the influence these events had on national attitudes toward coal mining and labor unions is presented. The West Virginia Film Series sponsored by The South Charleston Museum began with the world premiere of this film in August 2004. Access: Bill Richardson, WVU Extension Office, Mingo County Courthouse, Room 3, Williamson, WV 25661, (304) 235-0370, e-mail - Bill.Richardson@mail.wvu.edu.

IN THE COMPANY'S HANDS

1987 58 M. 1987 WSWP-TV

Jack Kelly directed, wrote and produced this comprehensive documentary about the Southern WV coal mine wars. It is narrated by Kelly and local actor Michael Martin who also acts in some of the recreations. Using archival footage, photographs, and historic songs, Kelly recreates the world of coal mining in the area. He interviews the descendants of people on both sides – the children of coal mine owners and the children of coal miners. Some of the people interviewed include black coal miner Sug Hawkins, Cecil Roberts (not UMWA president), and William Becker. The nephew of Tom Felts of the Baldwin-Felts Agency and a son of an owner are also interviewed. The film goes back to the first days of coal mining in WV, which started in 1871 in the New River area near Beckley. By 1896, 26 million tons of coal from the Pocahontas Field was being shipped all over the country to power the developing industrial age. 14 millionaires lived in Brawell. Around 1900 many miners from Europe were brought to the coal fields, segregated in their own sections of the company towns. 80 % of all coal in WV was mined in company towns. The coal mine owners felt they had a divine right to do whatever was necessary to build their companies in “the wilderness.” Most of the film focuses on the struggle between miners and the oppressive reality of life in company towns where all behavior was closely controlled by the miner owners. Key events such as The Matewan Massacre and The Battle of Blair Mountain are analyzed. Dr. Fred Barkey, a well-known WV labor historian, and industry historian Dr. C. Stuart McGhee provided the historical information. Executive producer Donn Rogosin, station manager of WSWP-TV. *Access: Steve Fesenmaier on DVD, also WV State Archives*

YouTube - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2wnXT8T7Ao>

EVEN THE HEAVENS WEEP

1985 55 mins. WV PBS-TV

The story of the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921, the largest armed labor conflict in American history. TV star Mike Connors narrates this classic story about the long and bloody history of coal in Appalachia. *Access: WVPBS TV. Debbie Oleksa West Virginia Public Broadcasting, Morgantown, 1- 888-596-9729.*

MATEWAN

1987 130 M. IFC Films

John Sayles, one of the leading independent directors in the world, came to WV in 1983 to film one of the most famous confrontations between laborer and owners in the town of Matewan, Mingo County, WV, 1920. It took him four years to finally finish the film, directing “Brother from another Planet” during that time period. Coal miners, struggling to form a union, are up against company operators and Baldwin-Felts agents. Black and Italian miners, brought in by the company to break the strike, are caught between the two forces. Union activist and ex-Wobbly Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper), sent to help organize the union, determines to bring the local, black, and Italian groups together. Drawn from an actual incident; the characters of Sheriff Sid Hatfield (David Strathairn), Mayor Cabell Testerman (Josh Mostel), C. E. Lively (Bob Gunton), and Few Clothes Johnson were based on real people. James Earl Jones plays Few Clothes Johnson, a black coal miner who joins the union to stop massive abuses. The execution of Sheriff Hatfield on the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse steps by Baldwin-Felts agents led to the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest armed labor conflict in American history. Music by WV native Hazel Dickens. Nominated for an Oscar by Haskell Wexler for best cinematography. Filmed in Thurmond and the New River Gorge, WV. *Access: Amazon, etc.*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn5W6xDBNKc>

THEM THAT WORK – HOW MATEWAN INSPIRED A STATE

2009? ? mins. Pewter Productions

Jason Brown, a West Virginia filmmaker now living and teaching in Louisiana, decided to make a documentary about the making and importance of John Sayles’ 1987 labor epic, “Matewan.” He interviewed Sayles and some of the stars of the film including Chris Cooper, a recent Oscar winner, and David Strathairn, nominated for his role in “Good Night and Good Luck” as Edward R. Morrow. He also visited the annual reenactment held every May in the actual town of Matewan, and talked to many people whose lives were influenced by the film. *Website – Them That Work Productions, <http://www.vandalia-productions.com/index.html>.*

AN EVENING WITH..JOHN SAYLES

1986 25 M. WVPBS

WVPBS producer/director Jack Kelley, who latter directed “In the Company’s Hands,” interviewed John Sayles about the making of his epic labor film, “Matewan.” Sayles talks about his career as an independent filmmaker, working in Hollywood and outside. He discusses how he discovered the “unknown history” of the WV Mine Wars. He thanks Carolyn Ketchum for helping him find Thurmond to shoot “Matewan.” (He wrote a book on making “Matewan” called “Thinking in Pictures” which includes the screenplay and how he made his landmark film. He also talks about working with Bruce Springsteen, NOT revealing that Springsteen was a chief funder of the film. This interview was part of Beckley Public Television’s series, created by manager Donn Rogosin, “An Evening With....” Interviewing various WV celebrities for several years. Access: *WV State Archives, Steve Fesenmaier*

TWO PBS SERIES THAT DISCUSS THE BATTLE OF BLAIR MOUNTAIN – WEST VIRGINIA – A FILM HISTORY and THE APPALACHIANS

Battle of Blair Mountain, Bill Blizzard websites -

[HTTP://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/BATTLE_OF_BLAIR_MOUNTAIN](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Blair_Mountain)

[HTTP://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/BILL_BLIZZARD](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Blizzard)

[HTTP://BLIZZARD.ZMM.COM/BILL/INDEX.HTM](http://blizzard.zmm.com/bill/index.htm)