



Letter To The Editor: Annual Anniversary Of Union Miners Event Is Oct. 12

by James Goltz
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Letter To The Editor:

I want you to know about a gun battle that took place on October 12, 1898, in Virden, Illinois. This year is the 125th anniversary of that event. On October 8, in Union Miners Cemetery, located at 5585 Mt Olive Rd, Mt Olive, IL, a commemoration of the battle will be held at noon.

A recap: The coal mines in IL and the region had refused to bargain fairly with their UMWA-represented workers. One of the miners' demands was an 8-hour workday. The mines all settled except for the Chicago/Virden mine, so the strike became a lockout. The mine recruited unsuspecting miners from Alabama. Their advertisement said they wanted black coal miners. Virden was not prejudiced, but companies trying to sow division among workers is a tactic that continues into modern times. It is a tactic the UMWA has faced many times. A self-appointed UMWA organizer, "General" Alexander Bradley, had a contingent of miners at Virden when the train arrived carrying the replacement workers. Nobody said who fired the first shot, but when it was over, eight miners were dead. General Bradley said, "Don't send men, send doctors," in a telegram back to Mt. Olive.

Three miners from Mt. Olive were buried in a cemetery. Many of the residents were outraged at the manner of their deaths and called them criminals. It is unknown at this time who ordered the disinterment of their bodies, but they were taken from their graves and left alongside the road. The UMWA bought an acre of land for a miner's cemetery. It became known as Union Miner's Cemetery and, to this day, is the only known union-owned cemetery in the USA. The three miners were reburied there.

Because of what happened in Virden, General Bradley became the most successful UMWA organizer in the history of their union in Illinois, and perhaps nationwide, by signing up 20-40,000 new members. He died a sickly man suffering from Black Lung and other ailments from his work in the mines beginning at nine years old. The Mt. Olive community cared for him until his death in 1918.

The mine signed the contract after the National Guard showed up to keep peace in Virden. Illinois Governor Tanner stood with the miners. The Irish firebrand Mother Jones knew about this gun battle and sent a request to the IL Macoupin County Board. It said, in part, that when she died, she wanted her remains to be brought to Union Miner's Cemetery to be buried "with those brave boys." In 1930, her remains were brought to Mt. Olive, where it was greeted by 50,000 kindred spirits. She got her wish and was buried with her boys.

A group of Progressive Mine Workers of America, led by Mt. Olive resident Joe Ozanic, began a fundraising drive to erect a memorial in her honor while also honoring the miners. The memorial was dedicated in 1937, and another crowd, estimated at 40,000 plus, came for the dedication.

Here is a link to an almost 30-minute Podcast about it: <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1856440/9221375>

You are also encouraged to share this story with anyone you believe may be interested.

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