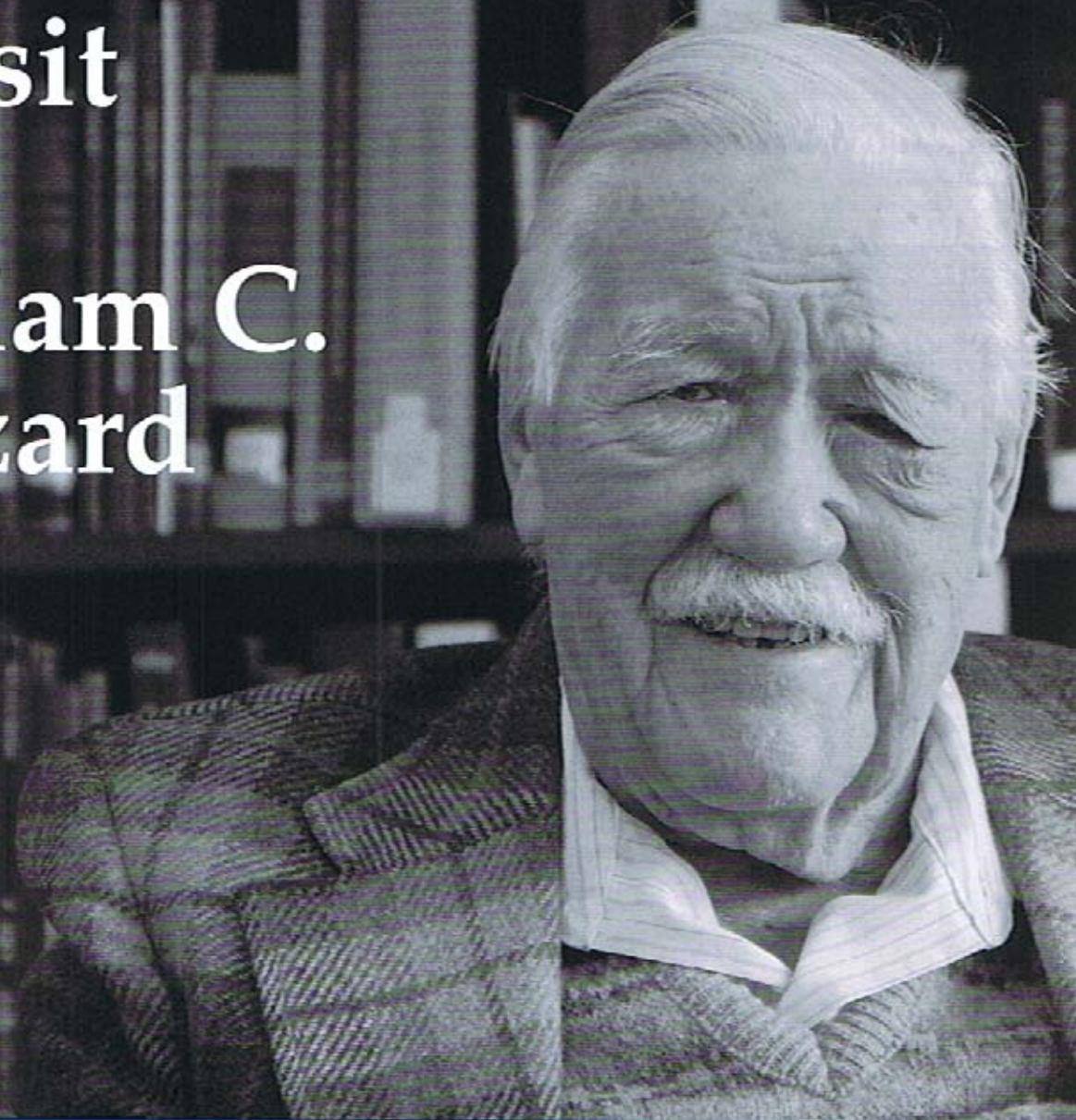


Son of the

A Visit with William C. Blizzard



Author, photographer, and activist William C. "Bill" Blizzard during a recent visit to the State Capitol Complex in Charleston. Photograph by Michael Keller.

Struggle

William C. Blizzard was born deep in the coal country around Cabin Creek in 1916 and has lived a life every bit as colorful as his family's legacy. A student of journalism and photography, a World War II veteran, and freelance writer, Blizzard has journeyed a long way from the coalfields of his youth. But the legacy of his birthright casts a long shadow.

His father was the famed United Mine Workers leader Bill Blizzard, who rose to prominence during the West Virginia Mine Wars and became one of the key figures in the 1921 armed march on Logan and the subsequent Battle of Blair Mountain. [See "The Red Neck War of 1921: The Miners' March and the Battle of Blair Mountain," by Michael Meador; April-June 1981, also in The GOLDENSEAL Book of the West Virginia Mine Wars; see page 4.]

As a boy, William watched as his father and other union leaders, such as Frank Keeney and Fred Mooney, were tried for murder and treason in Charles Town. He sat next to his father when the jury found him not guilty and observed his father's continuing leadership role in the UMW, working alongside men such as Van A. Bittner and T.C. Townsend until he was appointed president of District 17.

While his father led the union, William carried labor's banner with his pen and camera, writing for such publications as Labor's Daily and The Nation. He has recently published a book titled When Miners March: A History of the West Virginia Coal Miners, in which he recounts the career of his father and the story of the Mine Wars in West Virginia. Still lively, energetic, and full of wit, William Blizzard met with me in October 2005, two months shy of his 89th birthday, to reminisce about his life, his father, and how the union cause has marched on through the past century. —Chuck Keeney

Interview by C. Belmont
"Chuck" Keeney



Chuck Keeney. Let's start by talking about your youth. You were born in Eskdale, [Kanawha County]. Did you grow up there?

William Blizzard. I didn't really grow up in Eskdale. My mother and father lived in one of them coal company houses for a time. When I was about five years old, my father was looking for a place to live

The Blizzard family in St. Albans in the early 1920's. Father Bill is at the right, mother Rae is at left, sister Margie is at center, and young Bill is at rear.



Bill as a high school sophomore in St. Albans, about 1932.

after his acquittal. He was looking around and found this old house with a tin roof and an outhouse around St. Albans. It was a small house, but a two-story one. From there I went to school in St. Albans. I went to high school in Boone County in a Presbyterian school for the first two years, and my last two I went to the high school in St. Albans. We didn't have much of anything at that small school except what you would call the basics: reading, writing, and arithmetic. So I was delighted when I transferred to St. Albans where they offered Latin and chemistry, which were classes that I really needed and really wanted.

CK. Where did you attend after high school?

WB. West Virginia University.

CK. Did you graduate from there?

WB. Yes, I did. Actually, I was really unhappy with the school. I felt out of place, because I was there with wealthy people who were connected with the coal industry on a management level, and, you know, I was kind of a lone sheep. I just didn't feel like I was treated very well. I didn't like it, and I almost quit. But I didn't have any real choice. My parents would've

wrung my neck if I quit. So I stayed and graduated with a B.A. degree [in English literature]. I also had minors in French and Spanish.

CK. So people treated you differently because of your father?

WB. Yes, well I thought so. At first I didn't know why it was, but as I look back, I realize that a reason for the way some people treated me [was] because of my father's role in labor. My parents realized it, though they didn't say anything to me. They initially sent me to high school away from St. Albans where there were kids whose parents were in railroad and coal management. They thought I might be mistreated, so they sent me to that Presbyterian school in Madison.

CK. Was your family Presbyterian?

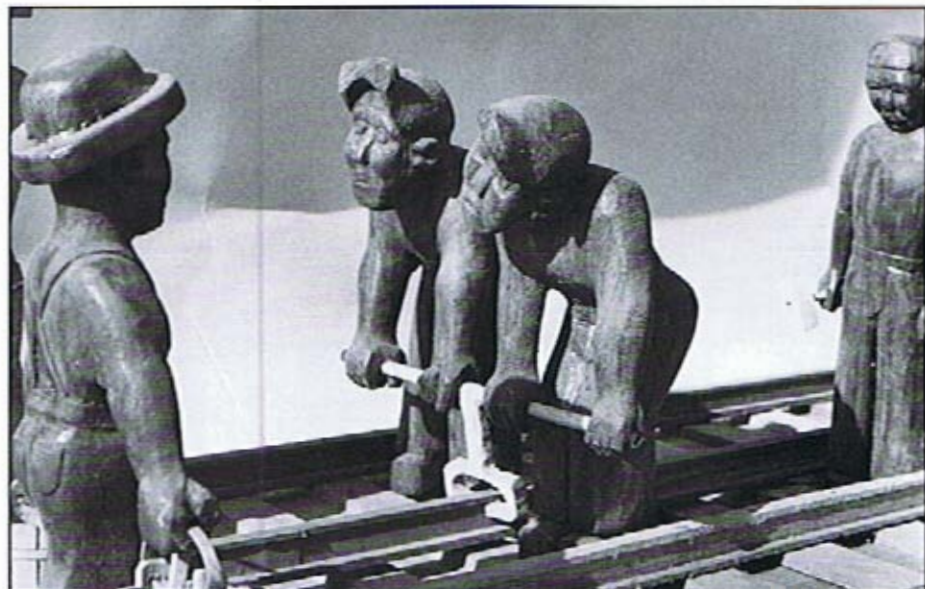
WB. No, no. My mother told me, "When you get there, you tell them that you're a Republican and a Baptist." My people, by the way, were Republicans. My father was. It seems like an anomaly, but that's the way he was, and he stuck with it the rest of his life, except during the FDR years.

CK. You served in World War II. Tell me about your service during the war.

WB. Well, I had already graduated from college, and I didn't want to leave my new wife. So I just waited around till I was drafted, and I just took what they offered me. I told them I would like to get into some photography, if there was an opening. It happened that there was, and so I went to a photography school in Denver, Colorado. It wasn't very much longer after that we were sent overseas to serve in an intelligence area. It was an information-gathering thing, using P-38 planes, in those days the fastest planes the U.S. had. They took guns out of them and put cameras in instead. The pilots would fly along, and they would take photos of enemy territory. Most of my work was in the film processing.

CK. Didn't you attend Columbia University after the war?

WB. Yeah, after the war, I moved to New York City with my wife. I was paid by the government on the GI Bill to go to school, and I wanted to anyway. Columbia University was within walking distance of where I lived. They had listed there in their



Trained in the military as a photographer, Bill spent much of his career with a camera in his hand. This photograph by Bill appeared on the cover of *GOLDENSEAL*, July-September 1975 — our second issue. It shows the woodcarving of Raleigh County artist Charlie J. Permella.

The elder Bill Blizzard, a minor from Cabin Creek, was 28 and president of Sub-district 2 when he led union miners from Marmet toward Logan in 1921. Although fired from the union by John L. Lewis, Blizzard later served as District 17 president, beginning in the 1930's until his retirement in 1955, three years before his death.

catalog a whole series of professional writing courses. I studied magazine writing, newspaper writing, and so forth.

CK. After which you became a freelance writer and worked some for *The Charleston Gazette*. Is that correct?

WB. Yes, well, that is true.

CK. How long did you work for the *Gazette*?

WB. Let's see, 12 years. 1959 is, I believe, when I started. The reason they hired me was because I had multiple skills: I was a photographer, and I was a writer. I drove all over West Virginia and interviewed various people, writing about locals, and so forth. Anything about West Virginia that I thought would be interesting to West Virginians.

CK. How did you incorporate your military experience in photography with your journalism?

WB. It wasn't really a difficult task. I worked for magazines a great deal,



and newspapers. When they wanted to save money, they had me do two jobs instead of one. A lot of magazines want separate people for each task, but many of the times, they let me do both. I've taken pictures

everywhere, the southwestern deserts, even Europe. Sometimes taking pictures can be pretty dangerous. When I covered the Widen strike, it was a pretty volatile atmosphere. (Laughs) You were taking serious risks to go into the strike zone and take good pictures. Luckily, I never got shot at. But it can be a risk. [See "Strike Duty: A State Trooper Recalls Trouble in the Coalfields," by C.C. Stewart; Winter 1995.]

I also did some work for *GOLDENSEAL*. One of the articles, a labor one, actually, the *GOLDENSEAL* editor had contacted a man who had done a great deal of wood carving in the area around the New River. I was hired to take pictures of the carvings he had done. [See "Working on the Railroad: The Historical Wood Carvings of Charlie J. Permelia," by William C. Blizzard; July-September 1975.]

CK. Where did you work after the *Gazette*?

WB. I worked for a labor paper. It was called *Labor's Daily*. It was established in Charleston, on the west side. It was intended to be a national periodical for the whole labor movement. I worked there two-and-a-half or three years.

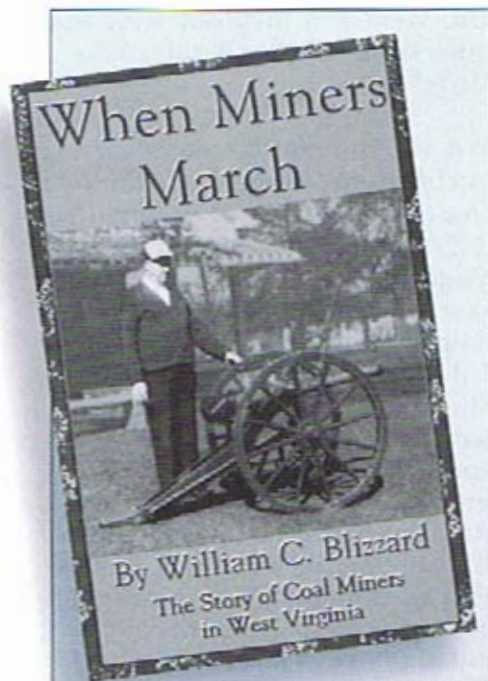
CK. Were you involved with any other labor activism besides *Labor's Daily*?

WB. Not specifically labor activism, but I did some articles for *The Nation*. One of them was on the Widen strike and the whole labor situation in West Virginia. One was a biographical sketch of the editor of *Labor's Daily*. Ralph White was the editor's name. I don't know whether he is still alive or not. He was real happy to have me, partly because of my skills and partly because my father was president of the UMW District 17. And the paper, of course, wanted the support of the major unions. He called himself "Scoop" after he became a newspaper guy. Scoop was put in charge of *Labor's Daily* by the International Typographical Union. It was a big job.

This union was divided into two factions. One faction financially supported the paper, while the other faction opposed. The faction that opposed was all in a fuss because of the Red Scare that McCarthy got started up in Wheeling. This faction, because they feared the paper was a little too far left of the ledger, so to speak, wanted to dissolve the paper. I wasn't ashamed of being a part of the paper, and I'm not afraid to mention that some of the people I was associated with were affiliated with socialists, although I wasn't directly involved with their politics. I refused to disassociate myself with people because of their political views, as long as they were pro-labor. From the way I understand it, *Labor's Daily* was eventually dissolved as a result of the Red Scare. We were on the FBI's bad side. (Laughs)

CK. You have recently published a book on the labor movement, specifically the UMW in West Virginia and the Mine Wars, called *When Miners March*. When did you write the book, and what made you decide to write it?

WB. Well, I had thought about it for a while when I was taking my vari-



When Miners March: The Story of Coal Miners in West Virginia began as a series of newspaper columns written by Bill C. Blizzard in the 1950's. It was published in book form in 2004. The cover photograph shows Bill in his yard at Winfield with a field cannon, said to have been used against the miners during the Battle of Blair Mountain. To purchase *When Miners March*, send \$24, including tax and shipping, to Appalachian Community Services, 229 Bitrice Road, Gay, WV 25244. An audiobook version, dramatized by Ross Ballard II of Martinsburg, is being prepared by Mountainwhispers.com.

ous writing courses at Columbia. I bumped into another student there who was writing something on the Mine Wars for a master's degree, or something, and I thought maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea for me to start thinking seriously about writing something on it. I wrote it while I was working for *Labor's Daily*, and they published it in the newspaper as a serial. I was good friends with the editor of the paper, and he wanted badly for his paper to be supported by the UMW, so we thought it would be a good idea to publish what I had written.

CK. How did your work finally make it into book form?

WB. It became a book many years

later. It was originally written around 1952. I wanted to get it published as a book, but I was busy with other jobs as a freelance writer and it kind of dropped out of my plan. I did get an agent at one time, but she and I didn't get along too well. She did say there were some publishers interested, but the work was a bit too controversial, something that not everybody's going to be agreeable about, you know. My book is very much biased in favor of the coal miners. Well, I don't really think of it as being biased (laughs), but anyways, I thought it important that the coal miners' story be told.

So, many years later, I moved down to where I am now in Winfield, and, one day, somebody tapped on my door. There was this guy standing outside, and he had something under his arm. He told me he was looking for Bill Blizzard, and I said, "Well, you found him." (Laughs) He explained to me that he had gotten a copy of my manuscript and had been using it in teaching some labor history classes out in the Midwest, and he had tracked me down. He asked me if I would like to get it published, and I thought, why not? His name is Wesley Harris.

CK. What do you want people to take from your book?

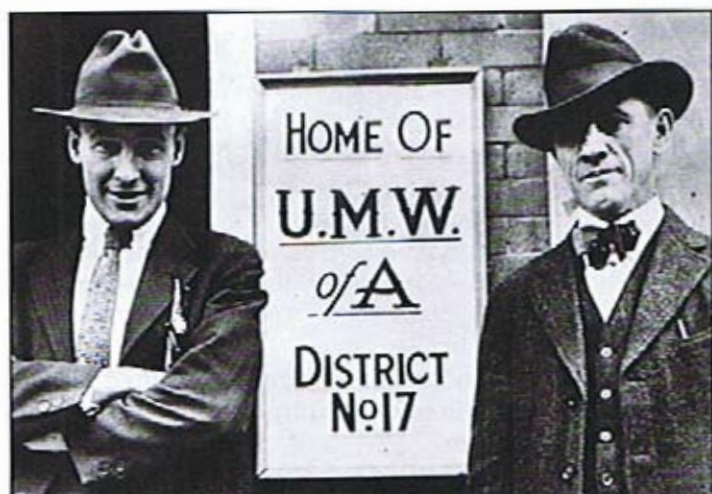
WB. I wanted to show how people lived and give in great detail the things that the newspapers had ignored, not being very sympathetic to the miners. I wanted to cover the years leading up to Blair Mountain and show what deeds had been done to the miners and how such things had forced them into violent action, to where they felt they had

no alternative. Whether they were correct or not in their actions, I'm not going to say. I know my father thought they were correct.

CK. Let's talk for a moment about your personal recollections from the Mine Wars. After the armed march on Logan and the Battle of Blair Mountain, your father, along with many others, was tried for treason and murder. Although you were very young, do you remember anything from the treason trials?

WB. The only thing I remember very vividly was sitting beside my father in the courtroom when the jury came in that acquitted him. My father watched very intensely and nervously. As they came in, my father sprang up from beside me almost straight up in the air and landed on the table in front of us. And there he was, squatting on the table as the jury filed in, and I wondered what in the world was he doing that for. (Laughs) I remember that very well. Of course, after he was acquitted, there was a big hullabaloo, but I didn't pay much attention to all of that, being only about five at the time. But I never will forget how my father acted when that jury came in.

CK. The Mine Wars were filled with a number of colorful leaders and characters from both sides, some of whom you knew. I'd like to run a few



Labor leaders Fred Mooney (left) and Frank Keeny. Photographer and date unknown, courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives.



Bill Blizzard addresses the audience at a recent gathering in Charleston, while a portrait of his father looks on, seemingly with approval. Photograph by Steve Fesenmaier.

names by you and get your impressions of these individuals.

WB. Okay.

CK. Frank Keeney. [One of the leaders of the Paint Creek/Cabin Creek Strike (1912-13) and UMW District 17 president during the armed march on Logan, Keeney later formed his own union, the West Virginia Mine Workers, and is author Chuck Keeney's great-grandfather.]

WB. Yeah, Frank. I didn't really know him well early on, but I knew him much better in later years, after he had been kicked out of the UMW by John Lewis and they wouldn't let him back in. He tried to form his own union, but it was later broken up — probably none too gently — by UMW organizers. He was a very decent guy who got a raw deal out of the whole situation. I bumped into him accidentally in Charleston when I was older, and he was parking cars in downtown Charleston. Who could believe that Frank Keeney would end up as a parking lot attendant? But there he was. Later on, I got to know him and found that he was a

strong supporter of my father before and after Blair Mountain. Frank and I became great friends.

CK. Van Bittner. [Bittner was a union organizer and was closely connected with John L. Lewis. Bittner worked with the UMW in Alabama, Illinois, and West Virginia, where he briefly served as District 17 president in the 1930's. Bittner became a strong political voice in the state during the 1940's.]

WB. I knew Van Bittner better than any of the rest of them, because he worked with my father and was in our home a lot at the time. He came from a coal mining background. My only impression [of] Mr. Bittner — I thought he was an extremely bright, capable man, and at the same time, I thought he was the most vain man I had ever met in my life. (Laughs) Simply because the way he spoke about himself and how he spoke about books and his opinions. He was vain. My father knew about it, too, but wanted to keep his job, and Van was president of District 17 at the time. My father was working for him at the time, before he became president.

CK. T.C. Townsend. [A Charleston lawyer and former coal miner, T.C. Townsend defended Blizzard, Keeney, Mooney, and other miners during the treason trials. Townsend ran for governor in 1932 on the Republican ticket, with the support of Van Bittner and Blizzard, but lost to Democrat Herman Guy Kump.]

WB. (Laughs) Old Tom! He was my father's attorney during the treason trials. He also helped my father get some jobs before the armed march, and that was tough to do because my father wasn't al-

ways the most welcome guy in the workplace, if you know what I mean, because of his past, and all. My father supported [Townsend] when he ran for governor in 1932.

CK. What would you like for people to remember about your father?

WB. That he was a very, very strong advocate of organized labor, that he was a coal miner and had been subjected to the same treatment as other miners of his day.

CK. Well, thank you so much for sharing some of your memories with me today.

WB. You're quite welcome. My father would probably bang me on the head if he heard all that I just said, but he's not around to hear anything about it, so I guess it's okay. ✨

C. BELMONT "CHUCK" KEENEY of Alum Creek is the great-grandson of union leader Frank Keeney. A writer and historian, Chuck served as a researcher for *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*. Chuck is a doctoral student and teaching assistant in history at West Virginia University. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.