



[The Mine Wars](#) | Article

Jean Battlo

Jean Battlo is a playwright and local historian who grew up in southern West Virginia. She is the youngest daughter of Fortunato Battaglia, an immigrant from Calabria, Italy, who worked as a coal miner for decades. Ms. Battlo was interviewed on-camera for the 2016 documentary The Mine Wars.



Jean Battlo. Credit: WGBH

Immigration

The war was coming, and there was fighting in Italy. My dad and his brother, for one thing, they didn't want to fight in the war. All Europe was a mess, and I think the bottom line is why most people move on to the next frontier -- the excitement, something new.

My father first came here in 1911 with his brother Antonio. His name was Fortunato Battaglia, but they somehow got Tom Battlo out of that, because that was a lot of name. And they spent the first few years in New York and New Jersey, and then the way Dad told it, is there were coal company agents all over, and they were forever trying to bring people down to the coal mines during that period. The coal mines were at the real bang of their boom; it was just starting

out. And [the coal company agents] would walk up, for instance, to an Italian and and say, “Lavoro e casa,” in other words, “We can give you a job and a home.” And, they had nothing to lose, you know. They weren’t real sure what they were coming to. They had heard about the coal mines but they didn’t know anything about West Virginia. They came down to the area and began working in the mines, which [my father] loved ’til his dying day.

Falling in love with a photograph

[My dad] was staying with an Italian family called Loggina, translated in English to “Larkins.” And while he was there Mrs. Larkin had a photograph of her niece [Concetta Maria Roschella] in Italy. And fortunately my dad liked that picture very much, and began to write to her, and the understanding was very common during that time. Their story could have been every miner in this microcosm of melting pot here in the coalfields -- he would pay her way over and she would stay with her aunt and they would get acquainted. If she was unhappy, he would pay her way back. And so she came and fortunately for all of us... she liked him and they planned to marry. I think it was only about three months after she had gotten [to West Virginia].

Raising a family in the coalfields

[My parents’] life could not have been harder. Work, everything at those first years was by hand. She washed on a washboard, in a tub, and [worried how to have] enough food until she was able to start gardening, and as the children came, how to take care of them during the Depression. It was a very, very difficult time. The homes were inadequate. It was a roof over their head, but barely. And so there was a lot of difficulty. [But] my dad was the type of man that when he was not finding enough work, and when the Depression was getting started and mines would shut down for a few days, he worked four mines at one time, and he would shift from one to the other. Many of the people at that time, and certainly my mother and dad, did not see that as oppressive.

My dad saw his job as working very hard, getting a good living, being able to plan for a future so that most of his grandchildren are professionals and trying to provide for that future. And he saw the mines as a means to do that. And he was a physical guy. He liked hard work very much, so he enjoyed the work. I think that’s bound in a work ethic that people used to have that, “I’ve got a good life. I

love this woman. I love these kids.” I think he thought of himself as blessed. He was an extremely happy man and he saw the mine as providing that, and that part is true. But they were committed to [education]. My mother told him, “We can do without food. We can do without this, that, and the other, but these kids will finish school.”

Strikes, and fighting for economic equality

These kind of fights were going on everywhere, but again, you have to remember how much the coal operators’ associations controlled -- including newspapers -- and so again it was an easy write-off to call this just mountain men fighting it out. And that’s what apparently happened instead of seeing this as part of the continuation of the American Revolution. There was an attempt at equality everywhere, but we had not even begun the battle for economic equality. And that’s what unions were, whether they were in the hills of... Matewan, West Virginia or the streets of Paris, France, or in Moscow. It was the same fight. It was the same aspiration. And it was the same, I would even call it, need for that period of the democracy to become complete and begin to look at how much economic equality can we work toward.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/minewars-interview-battlo/>

The day for people to just give us things is over. We have to stand up for ourselves. We have to help ourselves. Where we have to start as a people is to take pride in us - start with helping us.





Ellis Ray Williams

Ellis Ray Williams is a long time resident of McDowell County in West Virginia. His father moved to the area and took a job as a coal miner so that his family, including Ellis Ray, could attend the schools for African Americans, which were much better than those in the Deep South. Mr. Williams was class president and valedictorian when he graduated from Gary District High School in 1940. In addition to his firsthand experience in the mines, he is also a WWII veteran and was an educator in McDowell County for many years. Mr. Williams was interviewed on-camera for the 2016 documentary The Mine Wars.



Ellis Ray Williams. Credit: WGBH

Segregation

When I was growing up, the first job I had was on the outside of the mine, sweeping the streets. I was out there sweeping the street on Church Street and... a little girl, a white girl, came out and started talking with me. And when she started talking that broom started moving. That street got swept so fast because I moved away from there because I didn't wanna get in trouble because of... race or anything like that. And of course I later learned about the girl and her name and everything because she worked in the summertime in the company store, and she was asking me why did I move so fast and didn't talk with her? And I explained to her why I didn't talk with her. One of the evils of racism, segregation, and all of that.

Danger

My father and I were working in this place where the coal had been worked out. And the coal was just falling, and you didn't have to shoot it, or pick it, or anything. Just had to shovel it into the car. And... we had-- it was just about quitting time, too, and we had loaded up a... I think it was seven cars and this

was the eighth car. And... it was supposed to be my car that we were loading on. And we had it just about loaded and this big bump came, and my father said, "We'd better get out of here," and he told me to run. And I ran out, and he started right behind me and he thought about that car of coal there and he turned and ran back in there to release the brake on this car to save that car of coal. And when he turned, he knocked the brake off the car, and it was on a slant and the car started drifting out. And my father was running down the track ahead of the car, and a piece of slate fell out of the top and sort of hit him in the back of the head, and knocked him to the side and forward, otherwise that car would have run over him. And it scared me to death because I really thought I'd lost a father, but when he got up he had one little bruise. It knocked his mining cap off and everything, and he just thanked God and that was it, but it scared me to death. I was ready to give up mining at that moment. Yeah.

Understanding

Now with, togetherness you get more power. Those people who work in the coal mines, the only way they could make some of those owners understand was to strike. So they would strike... stop the flow of money coming in to the big man. And when they would strike, the owners' bills would be still coming in. So, the owner would have to do something to get those people back to work. I could understand that. I could understand it when I was working in the coal mine with them. And that's one of the best lesson that you can ever learn in this world is get down there with some of those people who were scuffling in the coal mine to work with them.

Last day

I might've mentioned about a boss that I had in the coal mine, and he was supposed to have gotten a pump to bring into the mine to pump water out of a place. And then the water was about up to your knees, and he didn't bring the pump in the mine. I made the statements, "I don't know why in the world I came in here to work in the first place." And he cursed and told me, he said, "I know why. You're just like I am. You can't do any 'curse word' better." And I said, "Well, I don't know whether I can do better or not, but I'll tell you what. I'm going to try to do better. I won't be back tomorrow." And that was my last day working.