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Some of the guns used in the Battle of Blair Mountain are on display in the Mine Wars Museum in the old Matewan National Bank building.

# HISTORY LEAPS BACK TO LIFE

## Matewan's Mine Wars Museum reopens in new locale

By Rick Steelhammer  
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**M**ATEWAN — A move to a new location and the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic have made reopening the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum a struggle, but nothing worth having comes easy in this strife-steeped coal town.

On Friday, the museum reopened in its new home, the Matewan National Bank building, just across Mate Street from its former home in what once was the Chambers Hardware and Furniture Store.

The one-time hardware store was a fitting site for the museum when it was established there in 2015. Its brick walls are still pocked with bullet holes from a key mine wars battle — the 1920 Battle of Matewan, a gunfight between coal company detectives



Mackenzie New, director of the Mine Wars Museum, talks about its reopening in the old Matewan National Bank.

and townspeople led by Matewan Police Chief Sid Hatfield.

But the bank building provides the museum a sturdy structure with ample room in which to grow, with added exhibit space, a gift shop, a gallery for rotating art exhibits, a site for a new archives,

office space for staff, a large conference room and rental space for businesses.

"We've more than doubled the space we had," Mackenzie New, director of the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, said Thursday as she and other museum staffers

took a break from last-minute preparations on the eve of reopening.

"When we first walked in here a year ago, there was nothing here," Wilma Steele, a member of

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# MUSEUM

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the museum's board of directors, said. "But now we have a living, breathing museum."

"We're really looking forward to reopening," New said. "I've been counting. It's been 310 days since we packed up and moved everything across the street."

A May 16 reopening, scheduled to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Matewan, had initially been planned for the museum, featuring a number of crowd-drawing events, including a recreation of the 1920 gunfight that left 10 men dead. But the prospect of crowds following the arrival of COVID-19 did not mix, and the opening date had to be pushed back.

"We'll just have our Battle of Matewan program next year, along with our observance of the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain," New said.

"Next year, our anniversary program will be memorable," Steele said.

From now through the end of October, the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum will be open on Fridays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day. Face masks and social distancing are mandatory, and no more than 10 people at a time will be admitted into the exhibit area.

"I really look forward to school groups coming in again," New said. "There is no mention of the Mine Wars in West Virginia history texts. In fact, when President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration was having writers produce travel guides for the states, Gov. Homer Holt insisted that all references to Blair Mountain, Mother Jones or anything else related to the mine wars be taken out."

As a result, generations of



The "Life in the Coal Camps" display at the Mine Wars Museum is in the museum's new location in the old Matewan National Bank. This photo is of miners in Gary and was taken by Lewis Hine in 1908.

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young West Virginians have grown up never knowing of the history that took place near their homes. Lesson plans and other resources dealing with the Mine Wars are available to teachers via the museum's website.

"One of the things I most frequently hear from visitors to Matewan is, 'What were the Mine Wars?'" New said. "When they find out, most of them want to know more."

College groups from Pennsylvania to Minnesota, plus Ball State University in Indiana, Berea College in Kentucky and Virginia Tech have toured the museum in recent years.

New exhibits on display following the museum's re-

opening include one on the role women played during the Mine Wars. Here, visitors can learn not only how women kept their families fed in union tent cities after being evicted from coal company houses, but how they used common tools to tear up tracks used by coal trains.

Another new item on display is a barred cell door from the Jefferson County Jail in Charles Town, used to hold some of the 22 United Mine Workers of America members awaiting trial on charges of treason against the state of West Virginia in 1922, following the Battle of Blair Mountain.

An abundance of other

Blair Mountain artifacts can be seen by museum visitors, starting with a replica of a homemade bomb similar to real bombs dropped, with little effect, on miners from three biplanes chartered by coal operators.

Also displayed are photos of some of the 14 U.S. Army Air Service bombers under the command of Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell ordered to stage in Charleston and be ready, if needed, to target striking miners. The bombers ended up being used only for surveillance purposes.

Handguns, rifles and other weaponry found on the battlefield by historian, metal detectorist and former museum board president Kenny King

make up a large part of the exhibit.

Exhibits at the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum cover coalfield battles stemming from 1912-13 attempts to unionize mines along Paint and Cabin creeks, in Kanawha and Fayette counties, through the 1920 Battle of Matewan, also known as the Matewan Massacre.

They move on to recount the ambush revenge killing of Matewan Massacre figures Sid Hatfield and Ed Chambers in Welch in August 1921, which, a week later, triggered a Miners March from Charleston to Blair Mountain on the Boone-Logan county line. There, the miners engaged more than 5,000 sheriff's dep-

uties, coal company detectives and other union foes dug in on a ridgeline studded with fortified machine gun emplacements.

Exhibits also cover the miners' decision to surrender their arms to the force of 4,000 U.S. Army troops dispatched to the scene of the battle, deemed to be the largest U.S. civil insurrection since the Civil War, and the treason trials of Miners March leaders in Charles Town in 1922.

The museum began to take shape in 2011 and 2012, when Steele and King placed battlefield artifacts King had found at Blair Mountain on display in a building in the nearby Logan County community of Blair, mainly for those taking part in a commemorative Miners March to see.

"Lou Martin, a history professor from Chatham University in Pennsylvania, said that exhibit was too good to take down and forget about," Steele said.

Shaun Slifer, an exhibit technician, artist and sculptor from Pittsburgh who had been invited by a friend to get involved in the project, designed

the exhibits in the original Mine Wars museum, starting in 2014, and has done the same on a larger scale in the new location.

"There was a great team of people involved in the project, but they needed someone to figure out what visitors should see when they walked into the room," he recalled.

Slifer has made numerous trips from Pittsburgh to Matewan this year to design exhibits for the new building, and he has stayed in town for the past three weeks to make sure the museum is ready for its reopening.

After spending months thinking about what the museum should look like, he said, "it's nice to finally see people walking around in it."

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