

Mark Raupp

Undergraduate Research

December 7, 2018

Final Report – Illinois Coalfield War

The Coalfield's Project was designed to highlight the story of the "Battle of Virden" that occurred on October 12, 1898 in the town of Virden, Illinois. The story centers around the labor movement in Illinois in the late nineteenth century and serves as an analogy to the issues surrounding workers, labor rights, the Gilded Age, and the abuse of employers. Events also are illustrative of the role of government and the general acceptance of the use of force to disrupt and end labor actions. In addition, an element of racism is also present as the Chicago-Virden Coal Company (the company) attempted to incite violence by recruiting and transporting African-American workers from the south to act as strikebreakers. These strikebreakers were victimized by the company by the fact that they were hired under false pretenses and promised a higher than normal wage for working in the mine.

In the case of Virden, the situation started as 6-month long strike and ended when the company and the miner workers reached a deal for a rate of .40 per ton in 1898. The company had no intention of paying this new rate and conspired with other mines in the region to lower wages. Events came to head when the company built a stockade, essentially a fort, around the mine and started to plan to import out-of-state Black labor. In order to guard the property and keep the striking miners out, the company also hired armed guards in the form of the Thiel Detective Agency of St. Louis, Missouri. When the company tried to land unload a train load of strikebreakers in October of 1898 a shootout occurred between the company and the miners.

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Thirteen people were killed that day, eight miners and five guards, scores of others were wounded.

The intent of this project, and the part I was involved with, was designed to create several pieces of media including a self-guided walking tour smartphone application. The ultimate goal being to educate and inform the general public about this little-known piece of important Illinois history. Due to technical issues, the tour application will be completed by December 9th 2018.

This project was quite an undertaking for me. There was quite a bit of information to get up to speed on. I think I managed well and Dr. Feurer was a terrific mentor, and I learned an incredible amount. Another problem was the contradictory and missing information the historical record provided. Per Dr. Feurer's suggestion I made a site visit to Virden to acquaint myself with the locale and to get a sense of the locations and where they are or were located. This provided a great perspective, but sadly many of the original sites are gone. I interviewed several locals and discovered that many life-long residents were unaware of this historical event. Complicating matters, the town erected a bas-relief on the town green to commemorate the event, however it is sorely scant on details or context. However, I was able to dig up some details to supplement the body of work that Dr. Feurer had exhaustively compiled.

This project is the most exciting and interesting research project I have undertaken in my college experience. It would not be hyperbolic to say that it has had a major impact on the type of history I wish to focus on. Dr. Feurer has inspired me to continue learning about the strange

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and important historical impact the United States Labor movement has had on the country. The project also had the unintentional benefit of being the source for my HIST-395, Historical Methods, project and something that I want to elaborate further on for my capstone project in HIST-495. As I continue on in my quest to become a teacher, the story of Virden and the labor movement in Illinois will be a critical part of the lessons I plan to teach my future students. For me, having the privilege of working on a historical project like this is one of the best experiences I have had at NIU and reaffirms my decision to have come to our institution.