

Background information on *Matewan* (1987)

- 1. Introduction from the Director**
- 2. Terms, People, and Organizations You Need to Know**
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1. Director John Sayles on why he made the film:

In 1977 I wrote a novel called *Union Dues* that begins in West Virginia coal country and moves to Boston. Before I wrote it I did a lot of reading in labor history, especially about the coal fields, and that was when I came across the story of the Matewan Massacre. In a book about the Hatfield and McCoy feud in Mingo County, there was a mention of a distant cousin of the Hatfields named Sid, chief of police of the town of Matewan, who was involved in a bloody shoot-out in 1920, during the mine wars of the era. It got me interested, but accounts of the incident were few and highly prejudiced. The rhetoric of both of the company-controlled newspapers of the day and their counterparts on the political left was rich in lurid metaphor but short on eyewitness testimony. But a few characters stuck in my head – Sid Hatfield; the mayor, Cabell Testerman, who wouldn't be bought at a time when the coal companies routinely paid the salaries of public officials and expected their strikebreakers to be deputized and aided in busting the union; a man known only as Few Clothes, a giant black miner who joined the strikers and was rumored to have fought in the SpanishAmerican War. ... Aspects and details of other union showdowns in the area began to accumulate – the transportations of blacks from Alabama and European immigrants just off the boat to scab against the strikers; the life of the coal camp and the company store; the feudal system of mine guards and “Baldwin thugs” that enforced the near slavery the miners and their families lived in. All the elements and principles involved seemed basic to the idea of what America has become and what it should be. Individualism versus collectivism, the personal and political legacy of racism, the immigrant dream and the reality that greeted it, monopoly capitalism at its most extreme versus American populism at its most violent, plus a lawman with two guns strapped on walking to the center of town to face a bunch of armed enforcers – what more could you ask for in a story? And yet it was a story unknown to most Americans, untold on film but for a silent short financed by the UMW [United Mine Workers] in the aftermath of the massacre. The movie was called *Smilin' Sid* and the only known print was stolen by coal company agents and never seen again.

John Sayles, *Thinking in Pictures: the Making of the Movie Matewan*, Da Capo Press, 1987, p. 10.

2. Terms, People, and Organizations You Need to Know

- ***MATEWAN AND ITS PEOPLE:*** Small West Virginia town near the Kentucky border. Originally settled by white pioneers mainly of German and English descent, who became subsistence farmers isolated from the larger society. Displaced from their farms and homes by railroads, logging, and coal mining in the late 19th century. Most of their male descendants became miners.
- ***MATEWAN MASSACRE:*** May 19, 1920 shootout between Matewan sheriff Sid Hatfield and private detectives hired by the local coal mining company.
- ***MINE WARS:*** Violent, early 20th century clashes between miners and mining companies around unionization, including beatings, shootings, and mine sabotage.
- ***LABOR UNION:*** An organization of workers, usually organized by industry or job type, who collectively negotiate terms of employment with a company.
- ***UNITED MINE WORKERS:*** Miners' union formed in 1890.
- ***THE WOBBLIES:*** Industrial Workers of the World, a radical union active in the early 1900s, crushed by the government soon after World War I.
- ***UNION ORGANIZER, LABOR ORGANIZER:*** union employee sent around the country to help workers create new unions in specific companies or locations.
- ***STRIKE:*** Refusal to work by members of a union, or by workers trying to form a union. Depends upon the employer being unable to bring in replacement workers.
- ***SCAB:*** Nonunion worker hired during a strike to make the strike fail; someone who crosses a picket line.
- ***PICKET LINE:*** Line of striking workers protesting with signs (pickets) outside the place of business; more broadly, efforts by a striking union to prevent the company from hiring scabs.
- ***HATFIELDS AND McCOYS:*** Two families living along the West Virginia-Kentucky border, who became embroiled in a series of violent conflicts from the 1860s to 1891, causing several deaths and making national headlines.
- ***"BALDWIN THUGS," BALDWIN-FELTS AGENTS:*** Employees of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, formed in 1890 as a private investigation firm. The agency became known for hiring out its detectives to spy on workers, and to assist companies in breaking strikes and harassing employees.
- ***COMPANY TOWN:*** A situation in which a private company dominates the economy and the public affairs of a town, employing most of the people and controlling their housing, purchases of goods, and political officials.
- ***COMPANY STORE:*** Store controlled by the company; employees required to shop at the company store and forbidden to purchase goods elsewhere.

- ***COMPANY SCRIP:*** Private currency printed by the company, used to pay workers. Good only in company stores. Forces workers to shop at the company store, and allows the company to control the value of wages by raising or lowering prices at the store. High prices combined with low wages put workers in debt to the company, turning workers into indentured servants.
- ***TONNAGE RATE:*** The amount the company paid miners for each ton they brought out of the ground. The company could control wages by raising or lowering the tonnage rate.
- ***HOLLER:*** West Virginia vernacular for “hollow” – the area between two hills or mountains, where people lived. Basically, a small rural town or community.

3. Main Cast

Union Organizer

- **Joe Kenehan**, union organizer

Coal Miners

- **Danny Radnor**, Matewan native, teenaged miner and preacher
- **Bosephus “Sephus” Purcell**, Matewan native, miner
- **Hillard Elkins**, Matewan native, young adult miner
- **“Few Clothes” Johnson**, Black “scab” miner
- **Fausto**, Italian “scab” miner

City Officials

- **Sid Hatfield**, Matewan Chief of Police, veteran of World War I
- **Cabell Testerman**, Mayor of Matewan

Other Locals

- **Elma Radnor**, miner’s widow, Danny’s mother, runs small boarding house
- **Bridey Mae Tolliver**, miner’s widow
- **Everett “C.E.” Lively**, local restaurant owner, hosts the miner’s union meetings
- **Mr. Turley**, owner/manager of the Stone Mountain Coal Mine

Coal Company Agents

- **Hickey and Jenkins**, Baldwin-Felts detectives hired by Stone Mountain