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Suggested Citation:

Hutson, A.C., Jr. "The Coal Miners' Insurrections of 1891 in Anderson County, Tennessee." The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications 7 (1935): 103-121.

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THE COAL MINERS' INSURRECTIONS OF 1891 IN ANDERSON COUNTY, TENNESSEE*

BY A. C. HUTSON, JR.

The coal miners' insurrections of 1891-92 represented a militant struggle of the coal miners of East Tennessee against a pernicious system of mine operation aggravated by the use of the convict leasing system. The coal miner lived a life of continual insecurity, exposed as he was to exploitation and working for wages that were precarious not only in regard to amount, but also with respect to the regularity of their receipt. These conditions were made the more acute by the state government's leasing of the state's prisoners to coal mine operators. The convicts came into direct competition with the miners, forcing them to acquiesce in the demands of the mine owners and operators. The miners, incensed by the iniquitous system of coal mine operation and the unfair competition with the state convicts, began a series of riotous demonstrations, which necessitated the mobilization of the state militia four times and the establishment of a permanent military camp in East Tennessee in order to preserve law and order and to prevent the eviction of the state convicts from the mine stockades by the irate miners. The public conscience in Tennessee was awakened to the unfairness of the industrial system, and a popular disapprobation of the inhuman convict lease system was made manifest. The insurrections resulted in the abolition of the convict lease system and in the improvement of the system of coal mine operation.

Tennessee was not unique in the utilization of the convict lease system inasmuch as it had been adopted by a majority of the Southern states in the years immediately after the Civil War. That demoralizing conflict had stimulated crime, had swollen court dockets, and had filled prisons to overflowing. This, in turn, increased the financial worries of states, which were already impoverished, without financial resources, and on the verge either of bankruptcy or even of the repudiation of state debts. The leasing of a large number of convicts would permit the state not only to meet its penal expenses, but actually to net a fair profit. The result was that, without regard

* This paper was read at a meeting of the Society in Knoxville, April 6, 1934.

to moral or mortal consequences, the penitentiary whose report showed the largest cash balance came, therefore, to be considered the best penitentiary. If there were qualms of conscience awakened by the system at the beginning, they were silenced by the prospect of relief from taxation. Thus, what was "endured, first as an expediency, [was] finally embraced as a new economic discovery."¹

Under the above plan, the state leased to one or more private parties some or all of its convicts for a definite sum of money. The lessee contracted to pay for managing, protecting, guarding, feeding, and clothing the prisoners, as well as all other contingent expenses. The state had no control over the convicts so long as the lessee abided by the law and by his contract.²

Objection to the lease system came from those who deplored what they regarded as the uncivilized conditions characterizing the penal institutions under this type of management. They lamented the lack of reformation and moral change; the "very bad" influences; the appalling death rate; the atrocious housing and sanitary conditions; the fact that the convicts were overworked and were insufficiently fed and clothed; and that they replaced free laborers in the main industries of the state.³ In spite of these objections the convict lease system continued to be the prevailing plan of penal management in the Southern states because the lessees found the convicts cheap, efficient laborers, because state officials found that it made the prisons self-sustaining and, in addition, that it netted a large revenue, and because the citizenry were almost oblivious to penal affairs so long as these added nothing to the tax burden.

In 1865, for the same reasons that caused its adoption in other states, the convict lease system was permitted to begin its unhappy reign over the penal institutions of Tennessee.⁴ During the period 1865-1891, the system was heartily denounced by the mechanical

¹ Albert Roberts, "The Iniquity of Leasing Convict Labor," *The Engineering Magazine*, I (1891), 749.

² *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, United States*, 1886 (Washington, 1887), 381.

³ Rebecca A. Felton, "The Convict System of Georgia," *The Forum*, II (1887), 484-490; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, United States*, 1886, pp. 26-29, 300-303; G. A. Cable, *The Silent South with the Freedman's Case in Equity and the Convict Lease System* (New York, 1907); C. S. Potts, "The Convict Lease System of Texas," *The Annals of the American Association of Political and Social Science*, XXI (1903), 426.

⁴ *Journal of the Senate of the State of Tennessee*, 1865-66 (Nashville, 1866), 377, 406, 519, 545. Hereafter cited as *Senate Journal*. *Acts of the General Assembly of Tennessee*, 1865-66 (Nashville, 1866), chap. 34, pp. 48-52. Hereafter cited as *Acts*.

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industries, by a few prison officials, by investigatory legislative committees, and by a few governors of the state.⁵ The mechanical industries disliked the competition of the convicts in the making of wagons, furniture, and other goods which required skilled labor. Certain prison officials opposed the system because it gave too much power to the lessees and impaired penal discipline. Weak objections to the lease system of prison management were voiced by some of the state's chief executives. A typical pronouncement was that of Governor J. D. Porter in 1877: the present policy is "wrong, but the sentiment of the people [is] not against it."⁶ The strongest condemnation of the lease system, however, came from legislative committees that had investigated conditions connected with the leasing of the state's convicts. These conditions they labeled "cruel, inhuman, and barbarous." They stated that the branch prisons, in which most of the leased convicts were kept, were "hell holes of rage, cruelty, despair, and vice."⁷

Nevertheless, the lease system continued to hold sway over the prisons of Tennessee. This was owing to its support by a majority of the governors and prison officials, to the removal of a majority of the convicts from the mechanical industries to coal and iron mines, and to the income derived by the state from the system.⁸ Tennessee's convict labor from 1870 to 1890 netted a total profit of \$771,391.48. Strikingly enough, this sum lacked but approximately \$176,000 of repaying the state for the expenses of its penal institutions from their beginning in 1829.⁹ Thus it is easy to understand why most of the prison and state officials were desirous of the continuance of this revenue-producing system and there need be little wonder that the lease system was continued in spite of objections. State convicts were leased to various companies to be worked in coal and iron mines in competition with miners who were unorganized, who were not given to legislative lobbying, and who

⁵ *Senate Journal*, 1869-70, report of penitentiary directors, 165-170; *ibid.*, 1875, appendix, governor's message, 5; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Tennessee*, 1871, appendix, penitentiary inspector's report, 397. Hereafter cited as *House Journal*. *Knoxville Tribune*, Nov. 8, 1891, from the *Nashville American*.

⁶ *Senate Journal*, 1877, appendix, governor's message, 10.

⁷ *House Journal*, 1889, report of special committee to investigate public prisons, 306-309, 322-325.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1871, inspector's report on the penitentiary, 399, 402-403, 406; *ibid.*, 1873, report of the penitentiary committee, 138; *Senate Journal*, 1877, governor's message, 10.

⁹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, United States*, 1886, p. 267. See the reports of the treasurers and comptrollers of Tennessee for the period of 1871-1891, in the House and Senate Journals of those years.

did not succeed in directing public attention toward the evils of the system. Their resentment against such leasing was seemingly unheard and unnoticed by the state administration, but the latter's steady adherence to the system nourished what may be described as a malignant growth within the body of the state, a malignant growth that in 1891 finally burst, revealing the dark, repulsive conditions in which it had been rooted.

In addition to the factor of convict competition, there were certain industrial grievances, nursed by the miners against the coal mine owners and operators, which served as the immediate causes of the first insurrection of 1891. For one thing, the Tennessee Coal Mine Company, whose mine was located in Anderson county, near Briceville, had refused to allow A. H. Bradley to act as a check-weighman for the miners who had, according to the law, selected and paid for the services of Bradley as their check-weighman.¹⁰ It should be understood that the miners working back in the mine, without a representative at the tippie where the coal was weighed, had no assurance that the coal was correctly weighed or correctly credited to their accounts. Distrust of the mine owners had led to the demand for a check-weighman. The Tennessee Coal Mine officials had demanded Bradley's dismissal and had let it secretly be known that they would suspend mining operations if the miners did not quit themselves of his services. He was dismissed by a vote of fifty-one to fifty.¹¹

Another immediate cause of the initial insurrection was the company's policy of paying the miners for their labor in "scrip."¹² If a miner was sufficiently fortunate as to be located at a profitable place within the mine, he might extract coal at such a rate as would enable him to receive credit at the tippie for four tons per day, for which the company would pay him two dollars in scrip, redeemable at the company's store at par or elsewhere at a discount of 20%.¹³ At the company's store, however, prices were nearly 20% higher than at other stores. If the miner did not trade at the company store, he was warned that he would lose his job or be placed in a "hard-working" place in the mine, that is, unless he saw fit to change

¹⁰ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor and the Inspector of Mines to his Excellency Governor John B. Buchanan*, Extra Session, August 31, 1891 (Nashville, 1891), 6-7. Hereafter cited as *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 16.

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his trading habits. Although this was clearly in contradiction to the laws of Tennessee,¹⁴ the miner, working at near-starvation wages, could ill afford the expense of a suit against the coal company. And so officials of the company continued to scoff at the law by issuing scrip and by compelling the miners by threats to trade at the company stores.¹⁵

A third major grievance of the coal miners was the so-called "iron-clad" contract which they were obliged to sign before beginning work for the companies. Such a contract was that presented to the Tennessee Coal Company's miners in the spring of 1891, when they returned to work after a month's enforced idleness occasioned by repairs having been made in the mine. By signing this contract, the miners would relinquish their right to a check-weighman, would surrender to the company all coal on their cars in excess of 2,200 pounds, would agree to accept scrip, would promise not to stop work when they had a grievance, and would certify that they had "implicit confidence in the integrity" of the company. Most of the miners, having no confidence in the company and honestly doubting if it had any integrity, would not accept the contract. Thereupon the company threatened to mine its coal with state convicts.¹⁶ The miners, unmoved, refused to sign and on July 5, 1891, a carload of forty convicts was brought to the Tennessee Coal Mine at Briceville. These newcomers were immediately put to work tearing down the dwellings of the former miners and erecting a stockade for the main body of convicts, whose arrival was promised within two weeks.¹⁷

Upon the appearance of the prisoners, the miners saw their jobs, their means of livelihood, and even their homes, fading away. In fact, eviction had already come. Destitution and starvation were imminent. The citizens of the valley, of all classes and professions, were thoroughly aroused; few there were who did not condemn both the Tennessee Coal Mining Company and the state; few there were who did not openly sympathize with the evicted miners. These latter now determined to drive away from the place where they, themselves, had "formerly gained their bread," the recently arrived convicts.¹⁸ At a mass meeting, held on the evening of July 14, be-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10, 13, 17; *Knoxville Daily Tribune*, Aug. 5, 1891.

¹⁷ *Knoxville Journal*, July 18, 1891. Hereafter cited as *Journal*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1891.

fore the expected arrival of the main body of convicts the next day, the miners decided to take aggressive action "for uprooting," as they expressed it, "this blot and stain on the fair name of our great state." Just after midnight approximately three hundred armed miners advanced in a massed line upon the stockade at the Tennessee Coal Mine. They demanded the immediate release of the convicts, and the officers and guards, realizing the futility of resistance, surrendered the prisoners. The convicts were lined up, and the miners marched them along with the guards and officers to Coal Creek, where all of them, except the miners themselves, were entrained for Knoxville.¹⁹ There they awaited instructions from Governor John B. Buchanan.

Following their precipitate course of action, the miners informed the governor that they, "...five hundred of the citizens of Coal Creek and vicinity [had] come together to defend [their] families from starvation, [their] property from depreciation, and [their] people from contamination from the hands of the convict labor" which was depriving them of their livelihood. They requested the intervention of the governor in their behalf, so as to prevent bloodshed and additional loss of wages.²⁰ This request the governor received after he had arrived in Knoxville to attempt a personal settlement of the dispute.

There were other messages, too, that had informed Governor Buchanan of the outbreak. E. B. Wade, superintendent of prisons, had advised the governor that an armed mob had released the convicts, that the local sheriff was unable to handle the situation, and that two or more military companies were needed to quell the revolt. Buchanan had replied that it would be necessary for the sheriff to request aid of the state authority, for without such a request he possessed no legal right to dispatch the military. Wade, annoyed at the delay, had informed the governor that the situation demanded "prompt and decisive action," inasmuch as "nearly all the citizens of Anderson County around [the] mines are in sympathy with the mob."²¹ Thus urged, the governor had then wired Sheriff Rufus Rutherford of Anderson county to ask for the military if he needed assistance. The sheriff had replied that he was unable to enforce

¹⁹ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, p. 19; *Journal*, July 16, 1891.

²⁰ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 19-21; *Journal*, July 17, 1891.

²¹ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 19-21; *Journal*, July 16, 1891.

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the law, whereupon Buchanan had ordered three companies of the state militia to meet him in Knoxville on July 16.²²

It will be recalled that it was in Knoxville that the governor received the miners' request for intervention. Forthwith he acted. On the morning of the sixteenth, the governor with his party, and three companies of militia left Knoxville by rail for Coal Creek, the convicts being taken with them in an attached car. Meeting the gubernatorial party at Clinton, Sheriff Rutherford was ordered to deputize the militia. This done, the train proceeded to Coal Creek, the passenger train junction for Briceville, where it was met by a large crowd but with little demonstration.²³

In the afternoon Governor Buchanan addressed the miners and citizens of the community at a place called the Thistle Switch. In this address the governor claimed that he had nothing to do with the making of the laws of the state, but he did declare that he was charged with the enforcement of laws and that he intended to enforce them in this instance. He condemned the miners for having broken the law, even though the law be admitted as unjust. Wrongs were rectified in courts and not by force of arms, continued the chief executive. His advice was that the miners desist from their insurrectionist activities and instead to resort to the courts for a redress of their grievances.²⁴

In a well reasoned reply, Eugene Merrill, the leader of the miners, pointed out that even though the governor was correct in his statements, he had failed to take into consideration the fact that the miners had been shamefully mistreated by the coal mine officials, who for their part had broken the law with impunity. Merrill cited the failure of the operators to allow a check-weighman or to pay in lawful money, their intimidation of the miners, and their presentation of an iron-clad contract which, if executed, the speaker claimed would result in a "modified form of slavery."²⁵ The labor chieftain then asked the governor if he would send the militia as quickly as he had done in the present instance in order to force the operators to grant the miners their rights according to the law. To this, Buchanan made no reply.

In several additional speeches there seems to have been reflected the aroused feeling of the citizenry of the community. A Farmers'

²² *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 19-21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-22; *Journal*, July 18, 1891.

²⁵ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 21-22.

Alliance man, of that very party which, not many months before, had nominated and elected Governor Buchanan, stated: "Our fathers years ago took guns and fought for liberty, and shall we, their sons, at the sanctions of Mr. Morrow, be made to acquiesce to what we think a rightful duty?" Another speaker, after welcoming the head of the state to the community, declared that "We could have done...without your bringing along dudes and boys. We wouldn't hurt them infants."²⁶

Upon the adjournment of the meeting, Governor Buchanan and his party were escorted to the home of Captain Chumbley, near the stockade of the Knoxville Iron Mine, where they spent the night. After a miners' meeting that evening, which the governor did not attend, some of the more radical miners fired some guns in the direction of the stockade, and for a few minutes there was fear of another outbreak. The governor himself shouldered a gun and prepared to participate in the defense, but the miners passed on and the scare was over. In fact, most of the miners had banded together to see that trouble did not occur during the night. Despite this assurance the governor did not rest well, and early the next morning, left for Nashville, owing to a "press of business" of which he was doubtless glad, because he had indeed been greatly fatigued by the toils and trials of the preceding two days and nights. With regard to the Briceville situation, Buchanan stated that he had done all that was in his power, intimating that he would have done more if the constitution had given him the authority. He again asserted his intention to enforce the law with respect to the convicts, but he made no declaration of any intention to relieve the miners' grievances.²⁷

If the governor found it convenient to take his departure, he ordered the militia to remain at Briceville so as to preserve law and order. Although the troops did build a small barricade, there was not much that they could do to prevent another outbreak. They lacked sufficient provisions and proper sleeping facilities. Besides, most of them had no desire to make a determined stand against the miners. Many of the disgruntled militiamen requested leaves of absence, but naturally they were refused. At one time it looked as if the Chattanooga detachment would go home, but its members were shamed out of desertion. For their part, the miners sympathiz-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22. Mr. Morrow served as an agent of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company, lessee of the state's prisoners.

²⁷ *Journal*, July 18, 1891.

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ed with the militia and some slipped food into the camp for them. Others entertained the soldiers in their homes and developed cordial relations. For these reasons, it is doubtful if the militia would have interfered had the miners again tried to release the convicts.²⁸

While the soldiers were constructing a barricade, guarding the convicts, subsisting on a menu unfit for human beings, and denouncing the governor because of their plight, Commissioner of Labor G. W. Ford and his assistant were mingling with the miners, striving to bring matters to a satisfactory settlement. Nevertheless, in spite of their friendly, even confidential, relations with the miners, they were unable to sway the latter from their determination of "no compromise—the convicts must go." Thus the miners were just as determined to expel the convicts as the governor was that the convicts should remain. Moreover, the consensus of opinion in the community, including that of other citizens as well as the miners, was that "if convict labor is allowed to get a good hold on the valley, its freedom and prosperity will be ruined."²⁹

The first insurrection gave rise to an enormous amount of newspaper controversy as to where the guilt for the conditions existing in the coal mining industry should properly be placed. The Tennessee Coal Mine Company officially declared that the miners were "unfair, unmanly and dishonorable;" that it was the display of such characteristics on the part of the miners which had necessitated the leasing of the convicts; that the company had no apology to make for its actions; and that it was definitely committed to the present arrangements as long as the governor would support them.³⁰ To these and to other accusations the miners replied by admitting that they were "rough and hard," that they did have "black sheep in their number," but that on the other hand they did consider the rights of others and expected the same in return.³¹

The first insurrection revealed to Tennessee officialdom a group of individuals with characteristics, aspirations and philosophy of life that were novel in the extreme. It took a storm to blow away the dark clouds of ignorance and to bring into official view a previously unnoticed type of laborer, who had borne silently the injustices which had been pressed upon him. This laborer—specifically, the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, July 20, 1891.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, July 18, 1891; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, p. 24. The miners did agree to remain quiet over the week-end.

³⁰ *Journal*, July 21, 1891.

³¹ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1891.

miner—whose honest, common-sense philosophy asserted that 'right' was 'right' and 'wrong' was 'wrong,' wherever they were found, stoically believed that nothing should prevent the eradication of the 'wrong' and the maintenance of the 'right.' Although these miners were uneducated, they possessed, as one editor stated, an ability to see into the very "marrow of things."³² In their simple, rough, rugged way they expressed the ideals of the pioneer. They were sympathetic, understanding, faithful and generous in their relations with their fellowmen. A miner would not hesitate, even in the face of obstacles, to go to the aid of an unfortunate neighbor. If, on the other hand, a person were guilty of misconduct, the miners would use physical force, if necessary, to compel that individual to desist from his course and to make amends for his misdeeds. The philosophy of the miner did not tolerate unfair practices, such as the oppression of the weak, who could not retaliate. The miners' nature rebelled against the use of nefarious, undermining, secretive methods in order to gain wealth or power. They would, however, break with impunity existing laws and customs to gain what they considered their "rights and privileges." They would kill to maintain honor, destroy property to avenge an insult, and break the law to protect their families. These miners, underdogs of society, saw in the convict lease system, not profit and revenue to the state, but a vicious practice that would take away their means of support and leave them and their families in destitution. From their point of view they were fighting against a real situation, not against a finely spun theory.

The methods employed by the miners, although unlawful, were no more unethical than the methods used by capitalists against labor. While the capitalists did not adopt an open and aggressive manner to attain their objectives, they did not scruple to employ more underhanded methods, such as lobbying or bribery. The mine operators, due to their position and power, were able to coerce the miners to work where they desired, to trade at the company stores, to accept scrip, to deny themselves a check-weighman, and to submit to similar humiliations and oppressions. They scoffed at the laws regarding the check-weighman and the issuance of scrip, for they knew that the miners were financially unable to institute legal proceedings against the coal company. The operators maintained that the frequent strikes of the miners forced them to engage convicts to work in the mines, while the miners in turn recalled the failure

³² *Ibid.*, July 18, 1891.

hy asserted that 'right' ever they were found, the eradication of the Although these miners or stated, an ability to n their simple, rough, e pioneer. They were erous in their relations hesitate, even in the unfortunate neighbor. If, misconduct, the miners mpel that individual to for his misdeeds. The r practices, such as the e. 'The miners' nature ing, secretive methods would, however, break gain what they consid- ould kill to maintain and break the law to ogs of society, saw in ue to the state, but a means of support and From their point of n, not against a finely

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of the company to give them a check-weighman, and denounced the operators' efforts to force them to work in competition with convict labor.

The first insurrection, viewed from any angle, was indecisive. Governor Buchanan with three companies of state militia had replaced the convicts in the stockade at the Tennessee Coal Mine, but he had not appeased the wrath of the miners, who demanded that their grievances be redressed.³³ The governor had pleaded for law enforcement, but he had not promised redress of grievances. Thus, not only was the affair not definitely settled; it had become, in reality, more precarious than ever. The quiet-appearing volcano was on the verge of another and a more violent eruption. The exterior tranquillity of the miners failed to reveal their inflexible determination to expel the convicts. Each successive day this determination grew stronger. In compliance with their agreement with Commissioner of Labor Ford, the miners remained peaceful over Sunday, July 19, 1891. That day was uneventful but, as the future was to prove, it was only the calm that precedes the storm.³⁴

By six o'clock on Monday morning, miners from all the territory around Anderson county, even from across the Kentucky state line, were beginning to pour into the mining camps at Briceville and Coal Creek on foot, on mules, and on trains. They armed themselves with long barrellled shot-guns, Winchester rifles, and Colt pistols. A line was formed and the march to the Tennessee Coal Mine was started about 7:30 A. M. Scouts, posted on the high mountain ridges which encircled the mine, sighted the oncoming miners and relayed the warning to the stockade, where hasty preparations were made to defend the convicts. Shortly before arriving at their destination, the miners moved into the mountain ranges, hiding behind trees and rocks as they advanced. Those who were without guns remained in the background, arming themselves as best they could with stones and branches.³⁵

As the miners' force came within firing distance, a committee of their leaders went up to the stockade to confer with Colonel Granville Sevier, who was in charge of the militia. The committeemen demanded the release of the convicts and their transportation out of the valley. Colonel Sevier, hesitating, made moves as if to take the

³³ *Ibid.*, July 18, 20, 1891.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1891.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1891; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 29-32.

committee captive. At once Eugene Merrill waved a handkerchief as a signal to the miners, who sprang from the hillsides two thousand strong. Realizing that they were far too numerous for his force of one hundred militiamen, Sevier decided to withdraw to Knoxville as the miners requested. The latter promised to molest neither the stockade nor any company property, and, in addition, to aid in guarding the convicts. Thus the entire assemblage of forty convicts, six guards, one hundred soldiers, and approximately two thousand miners began the march of five miles to Coal Creek. Commissioner of Labor Ford and Adjutant General H. H. Norman, on their way to the stockade, joined the procession near Briceville. Miners' wives handed out sandwiches and coffee to the visiting miners as they passed along. One woman, fifty-five years old, had walked five miles, carrying a basket of food to distribute to the miners.³⁶ While awaiting transportation at Coal Creek, several of the soldiers went home with the miners and ate at their tables. The miners voted the soldiers "excellent fellows." A militiaman called out, "What's the matter with the miners?", to which the troops replied, "They are all right."³⁷ About 1:30 P. M. the entire group of convicts, guards, and militia was loaded on a train and sent to Knoxville.

A prophesy of the outbreak had been sent to Knoxville early in the morning of the twentieth by J. A. Dunn, reporter for the *Knoxville Journal*. Throughout the day Knoxville had been the scene of intense speculation and wild rumors as to occurrences at Coal Creek and Briceville. When news arrived of the capitulation of the militia and of the movement on Knoxville, large crowds assembled at the railway station. About 4:00 P. M. the train, consisting of an engine, a passenger coach, and several open coal cars, arrived in Knoxville. The convicts, wearing stripes, as one person described them, "More prominent than those on the pants of a later day dude," were unloaded from the dilapidated coach and marched up town to a place of safe keeping. The militia, hardly distinguishable from the black dust of the coal cars, also marched uptown to find food and a resting place.³⁸

At Briceville more stirring events were taking place. Scarcely had the miners sent the convicts and militia from the Tennessee mine to Knoxville, than plans were made to do the same with convicts at the Knoxville Iron Company's mine, although convicts

³⁶ *Journal*, July 21, 1891.

³⁷ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 29-32.

³⁸ *Journal*, July 21, 1891.

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had been employed there since 1875. About 2:00 P. M. a meeting of the miners was held in an orchard just opposite the Knoxville Iron mine. Despite the protests of the commissioner of labor and of the adjutant general, the miners proceeded to line up and to march on the stockade. Not surprised by their appearance, the warden of the branch prison was willing and ready to give over the convicts. The latter were lined up, and the miners placed twenty-five of their own number in front and on each side to prevent escapes, while the main body fell in behind the procession. At Coal Creek, the convicts were loaded on a train and sent to Knoxville to join their fellow prisoners.³⁹

Thus the miners had been temporarily successful in a revolt which had been accomplished without bloodshed, without "the slightest outward excitement, animosity, or ill-feeling or intoxication, but with the resolute determination of East Tennesseans armed to fight for a just cause."⁴⁰ Following the second convict ejection, the miners withdrew to a private place for another meeting, at which they bound themselves by an oath not to molest either state or company property and to conduct themselves as quiet, respectable citizens. The meeting quietly adjourned and the miners returned to their homes, happy in their deeds, but firmly facing the future. During the night a group of the miners guarded the stockade and property at both of the coal mines to prevent any destruction either by radical miners or by company officials seeking to place the blame on the miners.⁴¹ An onlooker at Coal Creek had said with a grim smile, "They are determined to wipe out the convict system in East Tennessee at any cost." Even though their actions may have appeared radical, the men had "conducted themselves in the most orderly and quiet manner and deserved credit for their conservatism and their lack of rashness."⁴²

Governor Buchanan, informed of the second insurrection, immediately ordered fourteen companies of the state militia under General Sam T. Carnes to rendezvous at Knoxville, equipped with three days' rations, ammunition, guns, tents, and blankets. This increased to six hundred the number of soldiers mobilized to suppress the revolting miners. These militiamen were quartered, upon their ar-

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

rival, on the University of Tennessee grounds until the governor should arrive from Nashville.⁴³

Meanwhile, the miners at Coal Creek were making further preparation for the arrival of Governor Buchanan. They appointed a committee of five, who were to go to Knoxville and to request influential citizens to accompany them to see Governor Buchanan in the interest of the miners. Buchanan was loudly rebuked for having sent the militia to East Tennessee a second time, for it was felt by the miners that the "militia was not needed to preserve peace, but to see that convict laborers worked in the Tennessee Coal Mining Company's Mines."⁴⁴

The governor arrived in Knoxville on Wednesday morning, July 22, and immediately granted an interview to the committees awaiting him. At this meeting, the miners requested, first, that the *status quo* be restored, that is, that the convicts be returned temporarily to the mines and that all offenses committed by the miners be pardoned; second, that the lease contract then be annulled and the convicts removed; third, that the governor convene the General Assembly and recommend the repeal of the convict lease law; and fourth, that upon the repeal of the lease law all the convicts in East Tennessee mines be removed to the state prison. The miners promised to protect state and company property until the foregoing could be effected. They concluded their petition in these words:

It is not necessary for us to refer to the gravity of the situation. Sufficient is it that it is so. We are neither of the school of the commune nor nihilist. We struggle for the right to earn bread by honest labor, and in principle are opposed to the system of labor which may be invoked to our degradation. For us and our families we invite the sympathy of a common humanity.⁴⁵

When the lessees were called in and consulted regarding the proposition, neither would agree to remove the convicts from the Tennessee Coal Mine or to annul the contract between the state and them. Buchanan then told the miners that there was nothing for

⁴³ *Ibid.*, July 22, 1891. These companies were the Memphis Chickasaw Guards, Rosier Zouaves, Maurelain Cadets, Buff City Guards, Hiberian Rifles, Nashville Washington Artillery, Nashville light infantry, Buchanan Rifles, Perkins Rifles from Franklin, Springfield Rifles, Murfreesboro Rifles, Shelbyville Rifles, Tullahoma light infantry, and Winchester Rifles.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, July 21, 22, 23, 1891.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, July 23, 1891; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 33-36.

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him to do but to enforce the law, even if it resulted in bloodshed. He did inform the miners, however, that before coming to Knoxville he had determined to call an extra session of the legislature, before which he planned to present the miners' plea along with other pressing questions. He stated that he could not, of course, guarantee the action of the legislature, but he assured the committee that he was determined to restore law and order in Anderson county. When the governor completed his remarks, the committee realized that it had not been able to accomplish what had been desired and that it could not go further without additional instructions from the assembly at Briceville. The conference adjourned until the next evening. Fears were expressed as to what might occur when the committee returned to Briceville without having accomplished its aims; it was proposed, therefore, that a number of influential Knoxvilleians accompany the committee in an endeavor to persuade the miners to await peaceably the action of the General Assembly.⁴⁶

Since the miners' committee could not return to Briceville before Thursday morning, it attended a large mass meeting of Knoxville laborers on Wednesday evening. In addressing the meeting Chancellor Henry R. Gibson compared the convict labor system with "a sword held over the heads of our laboring people." He held that the miners had the right to "compete with free, not slave labor." Continuing, Gibson observed that for a long time the "miners have been calling upon the Governor, but he heard them not, for he had corporation cotton in his ears." He asserted that "In all likelihood the world has never seen so much forbearance as these miners have exercised under so great a provocation. Throughout they have conducted themselves like gentlemen and Christians. They are not fighting law or society, No, but they are fighting for their rights of manhood. The state of Tennessee is far more honored by these miners than by those who would turn the Gatling guns upon them." In conclusion the chancellor called upon the people to accept the governor's proposition to allow the legislature to settle the question, in order that there should be no bloodshed.⁴⁷

The miners' committee, Knoxville citizens, and press representatives left early Thursday morning, July 23, for Briceville, where the governor's answer to their demands would be presented to the miners. They were met by a large crowd, quiet and determined in manner,

⁴⁶ *Journal*, July 23, 1891; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, pp. 33-36.

⁴⁷ *Journal*, July 23, 1891.

which accompanied them to the Thistle Switch, where the meeting was called to order by Mr. M. Ingraham, chairman of the miners' committee. Committee members called upon the miners to be "men of sobriety, thoughtfulness and men of reason," and to hear the proposition of the governor as it would be explained by Mr. J. C. J. Williams of Knoxville. Despite this admonition, the miners were opposed to any arrangement that did not provide for the removal of the convicts. Expressions of "Lets us fight it out" were heard as Williams arose to speak. The situation was indeed delicate and one liable to produce trouble, yet Williams was able to break down the hostile attitude of the miners by his tactful manner in presenting the governor's proposition. Such is reflected in the speaker's introductory remarks:

I hardly know which way to turn, I see such a sea of faces before me, on either side of me and behind me. I want to say that I occupy a position toward you like that of the Queen of Sheba toward King Solomon. When she saw all the splendor and greatness before her she threw up both hands and said she had heard a great deal about it, but the half had not been told. . . . I see before me honest assembled labor that ought to wear a crown. You have only to be conservative and a great victory is within your grasp. . . .⁴⁸

Then he stated that that "pernicious thing, the convict lease system," is "unanimously [*sic*] lost" for the "sovereign people say it must go." Quoting the byword of Andrew Jackson, Williams declaimed: "By the eternal, this system must go out of existence. You want the hydra-headed monster stamped out by the legislature." In reply to this, cries of the miners echoed, "We will, if it won't." Continuing his address, the speaker argued that "you want the other counties on your side, [as] it is best to have the law repealed." The governor had promised to call an extra session of the legislature to discuss the question, but Williams warned that this would take time and urged that the miners should be patient. He advised the acceptance of the proposition as that was the way to "get rid of this infamous statute and get rid of the zebras."

The Williams address broke down the recalcitrance of the miners and they appointed a committee to prepare another set of resolutions. While these were in process of preparation, members of the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1891; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, p. 36.

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miners' committee told the assembled host that by accepting the governor's plan the arrest and punishment of the leaders and members of the miners' band would be avoided; that the convicts would be returned to the mines if it took the federal army to do it; and that it would be well to wait three months for the action of the state legislature. By this time the resolutions committee had returned, and its report the miners accepted. These resolutions were that the *status quo* should be restored; that the militia should be ordered home from Knoxville; that the governor should call an extra session of the legislature; and that an armistice should be declared for sixty days.⁴⁹

The miners' proposal was rejected by the governor in an interview, held Thursday evening, on the ground that the clause providing for the armistice of sixty days was in the nature of a compromise which would lower the dignity of the state. After considerable discussion the meeting ended without any agreement having been reached.⁵⁰

During that night and the next day, Friday, intense feeling prevailed in Knoxville and throughout the state when it was discovered that no agreement had been made. In a number of the larger cities mass meetings were held, at which resolutions were adopted denouncing the convict lease system and declaring that it must be entirely abolished. While doubt and uncertainty spread throughout the state, the miners' committee held a meeting in Knoxville, at which the commissioner of labor, G. W. Ford, presented another set of resolutions for its consideration. This proposition was considerably less severe in tone than its predecessor and it greatly reduced the number of stringent demands. It provided for the restoration of the *status quo*; for the miners' protection of the convicts and guards on their return to the mines; for the immediate return of the militiamen to their homes; and for the miners' reposing confidence in the governor and General Assembly to give them the "necessary relief from the repression that now hangs over us."⁵¹ These resolutions, after considerable discussion, were adopted by the miners' committee; and on Friday afternoon they were accepted by the governor.

Although this settlement was much less satisfactory to the miners than their original petition, they had, nevertheless, made some gains.

⁴⁹ *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor, 1891, p. 36.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36; *Journal*, July 25, 1891.

The miners had been compelled to give up their demands for the immediate removal of the convicts from the Tennessee Coal Mine, for a definite statement on the part of the governor of opposition to the lease system, and for an armistice of sixty days until the action of the legislature. Yet in their fight against the lease system they had obtained a direct promise of an extra session of the legislature to consider the question and, what was of equally great significance, the almost unanimous support of the press and of public opinion throughout the state.

In accepting these resolutions the governor congratulated the miners "upon their manliness in thus submitting the case, and upon their determination to abide by the laws and enable him to preserve the peace." Later, he told reporters that "the terms of the agreement finally adopted by the miners' committee is just what I wanted and suits me exactly. It is exactly what I told them I wanted. . . . We have reached a satisfactory conclusion of a most ugly problem. I shall call an extra session of the legislature as I agreed to do."⁵²

The compromise settlement was just as obnoxious to the miners as it was pleasing to the governor. A member of the miners' committee in speaking of the agreement expressed the sentiments of the group by declaring:

No, it is not satisfactory to any of us, it is not to me, but it is, under the circumstances, the best thing we could do, that is what my people wanted us to do, that is, do the best we could under the circumstances. We believe we have acted right in what we have done and believe that if it had not been for the movement we made on the convicts, the good we have reached in the way of stirring up public interest and sympathy and having the Governor agree to call an extra session of the legislature to repeal the law, would never have been accomplished. If the Governor will stick to his side of the agreement, we will to ours. But if at the end of a certain time he has done nothing, then you may expect to hear from us again. . . .⁵³

Now that the "war" was over, the soldier laddies could go back "to the girls they left behind." The entire force had departed from Anderson county and East Tennessee by Sunday morning,

⁵² *Journal*, July 25, 1891.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, July 25, 1891.

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*,
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July 26. Camp life had been very monotonous, enlivened only by drills, competitive reviews, watermelon rind fights, arrests for absences without leave, and "ham and bread" with plenty of water. The conduct of the enlisted men occasioned the following remark by one of the officers: "The trouble is the boys do not yet thoroughly understand that this is not all play."⁵⁴

The one hundred and fifty convicts were returned to their stockades at Briceville and Coal Creek on Saturday morning, July 25. Governor Buchanan and his party, a group of "on-lookers," and some reporters, including two special "war" correspondents, accompanied the convicts back to the scene of the outbreak. The train was met by about one hundred men and only one of these had a gun, a situation rather disappointing to the "war" reporters. At the Tennessee stockade they found those miners who had patiently protected the property from damage during the crisis. When Buchanan took his leave of the late insurrectionists, one reporter described the scene as follows: "With implicit confidence in each other the Governor and these men shook hands on the matter and everyone now awaits to see what he will do."⁵⁵

Thus Governor Buchanan was able to secure a "peace with honor." He was able to "vindicate" the law without the shedding of blood. The miners with their crude and rough tactics had drawn a surprising amount of attention and had won a number of concessions, despite the fact that their opponents were masters in the art of diplomacy. They had broken one good law in order to strike a death blow at a bad one. Probably never in the history of labor agitation in Tennessee had a mass of men been so aggrieved, so anxious for their rights and privileges, and yet had remained so nearly within the "pale of the law." The miners had aroused, as is seldom done in such instances, the feelings and sympathy of the people of the state in behalf of their cause. They, as well as the citizenry in general, now realized that it behooved them to "await patiently the solution of the vexed question by lawful and regular methods."^{56*}

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, July 23, 25, 1891.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, July 26, 1891; *Special Report of the Commissioner of Labor*, 1891, p. 40.

⁵⁶ *Journal*, July 23, 1891.

* The second, and concluding, installment of this study will appear in Number Eight of the East Tennessee Historical Society's *Publications*.