

The Coal Creek War

Introduction:

The Coal Creek War represents one of many conflicts involving labor, management, and state or national government. In this lesson, students will examine primary source documents to determine how each group responded to the events at Coal Creek.

Guiding Questions:

What were the main issues involved in the Coal Creek War?

How did labor, management and state government respond to the events at Coal Creek in 1891-1892?

Learning Objectives:

The learner will analyze primary sources to determine what factors influenced the response of labor, management and state government to the events at Coal Creek.

The learner will demonstrate knowledge by participating in a debate concerning which side won the Coal Creek War.

Curriculum Standards:

History

US.15 Analyze the rise of the labor movement, including its leaders, major tactics, and the response of management and the government: (C, E, H, P, TN) · Samuel Gompers · Eugene Debs · Haymarket Affair · Pullman Strike · Coal Creek Labor Saga · Collective bargaining · Blacklisting · Open vs. closed shops

Materials Needed:

Internet Access to View videos:

[Marty Stuart Performs "Dark as a Dungeon"](#)

[SIXTEEN TONS - Tennessee Ernie Ford w/ Lyrics](#)

[Patty Loveless - "You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive" - Live](#)

Key Vocabulary and Background Reading

Resolution Reading

Primary Source: Governor Buchanan's Speech

Primary Source: The Miners' Side

Primary Source: The Tennessee Coal Mine Company Responds

Graphic Organizer

Background:

Informational Text: [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.](#)

Hutson, A.C., Jr. ["The Overthrow of the Convict Lease System" The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications 8 \(1936\): 82-103.](#)

[Coal Creek Watershed Foundation website](#)

Lesson Activities:

Activity 1- Problems in the Coal Mines

Individual Activity/ Group Discussion

Have students watch each of the videos listed in the materials section. As they watch, students should list the drawbacks or problems associated with working in a coal mine. Next, have students share and discuss the problems they identify. It may be helpful to create a master list of problems as students share. Possible answers include: dangerous working conditions, unpleasant working conditions (dark and cold), company stores and or script, long hours, and low wages. Ask the students to identify which problems were specific to coal mining and which were general issues that affected many industries in the late 1800's and early 1900's

Note: Many students have access internet access on cellphones or other personal electronic devices so this activity could be assigned for homework.

Activity 2 –Background Reading

Whole Class Activity



Give each student a copy of the Background Reading.

This can be assigned as individual or round robin reading. Review each of the key vocabulary terms and events described in the background reading.

Activity 3- Primary Source Analysis

Small Group Activity

Divide students into small groups to examine the primary source documents. Provide one copy of each primary source document and the graphic organizer for each student. Students should work together to read each document and complete the graphic organizer. Note: Two of the primary sources are lengthy. Depending on the length of the class period you may need to have students continue this activity on the following day.

Activity 4- Resolution Reading

Whole Class Activity

Give each student a copy of the Resolution Reading.

This can be assigned as individual or round robin reading. Review and discuss the document as necessary.

Assessment: Class Debate

Have each student write a short essay explaining which side he or she believes “won” the Coal Creek War. Then divide the students into two groups. Ideally, you will have students with differing opinions on each team. The diversity of opinions will help students in formulating their arguments.

Extending the Lesson:

Ask students to imagine that they are writing an editorial that will appear in the local newspaper just before the vote on June 8, 1861. The editorial should cite evidence from the lesson to support its position for or against secession. For information on how to write an editorial, see [Tips for Editorial Writing](#) from the University Interscholastic League, Texas



Background Reading

While coal was mined in Tennessee before the Civil War, the expansion of railroads following the war allowed the coal mining industry to rapidly expand. The promise of coal mining drew immigrants like David Richards and Thomas Zecchini to Coal Creek in the late 1800's. Because coal veins were often located in remote, sparsely populated areas, many mining companies found it necessary to provide housing for the miners. Rent for these poorly built company houses was deducted from a miner's wages. Companies also built stores at which the miner could purchase food, clothes and other necessities. Miners often complained about the high prices at these company stores. The company stores allowed miners to charge purchases and then deducted these charges from the miners pay. Many companies paid their miners in scrip to ensure that they could only shop at the company store. Scrip is a substitute form of money issued by a company or organization. Some miners found that by the time their rent and store charges were deducted from their pay each month there was no money left to buy supplies for the coming month. The miner was forced to charge more purchases and the cycle continued.

Like other Gilded Age industrial workers, miners faced harsh working conditions and low pay. Miners often resorted to collective action in the form of strikes or work stoppages to force miner owners to raise pay or improve working conditions. Miners were also concerned about potential cheating on the part of the company. Each miner loaded his coal car deep in the mine. Miners sometimes sought the right to hire their own check weighman to ensure they were credited with the correct amount of coal each day. The check weighman's job was to ensure that each coal car was accurately weighed and credited to the correct miner. Miners in Coal Creek often planned strikes during the winter months when demand for coal was high so that the companies had little choice but to meet their demands. This system worked because the mine owners could not easily replace the striking miners. However, the convict lease system offered mine owners an alternative workforce and therefore threatened the livelihood of miners.

Under the convict lease system, state governments leased convicted criminals to companies as a cheap labor force. The convict lease system was in place in several Northern states prior to the Civil War. However, after the Civil War the convict lease system was adopted throughout the South for two main reasons. First, the economies of the Southern States were devastated by four years of war. State governments could not afford to build or maintain prisons or provided food, clothing or shelter for prisoners. The convict lease system not only drastically



reduced the costs associated with prisons; it also provided states with a much needed source of income.

A second reason for the popularity of the convict lease system in the South was that it allowed the states to exploit a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment. The amendment abolished slavery but allowed “involuntary servitude” as a punishment for a crime. After the end of Reconstruction and withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877, control of state government in the South returned to Democrats. Many of the state government officials were openly hostile to African- Americans and sought to strip them of their rights through legislation such as literacy tests and poll taxes. African Americans were convicted by all white juries and sentenced to long prions terms by white judges. African Americans made up the majority of leased prisoners in the Southern states.

Tennessee began leasing prisoners in 1866. In 1891, the Tennessee Coal Mine in Anderson County decided to replace striking miners with convicts. This decision led to the series of events known as the Coal Creek War.

Works Cited:

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.

Adrian, Christine. “The Convict-Lease System, 1866-1928 (Three Lessons).” *Middle Level Learning* 44 (May/June 2012): 5-16.



Resolution Reading

By the time that Governor Buchanan spoke the crowd of miners on July 17, 1891, the first action of the Coal Creek War had taken place. On July 14, the miners released the convicts from the stockade at the Tennessee Coal Company and sent them and their guards on a train to Knoxville. It was this action by the miners that brought the governor and the state militia to Briceville in Anderson County. The convicts were returned to the Tennessee Coal Company. On July 20, approximately 2,000 miners returned to the Tennessee Coal Company and demanded the militia surrender. The militia, guards and convicts were loaded on a train and sent to Knoxville. The miners then marched to the Knoxville Iron Company which had used convict labor since 1875. The convicts there are also sent by train to Knoxville.

Governor Buchanan refused to give in on the issue of convict labor in the mines, but did promise to call a special session of the legislature to address the question of convict labor. The miners reluctantly agreed to allow the convicts to return to the mines until the legislature could meet to resolve the situation permanently. However, when the General Assembly met in August, 1891 they not only failed to end the convict lease system but voted more money for the state militia so that it could be used to control the miners. In September 1891, the miners tried a new tactic. A prisoner from the Tennessee Coal Company mine was convinced to apply for a writ of habeas corpus on the basis that the coal mine was an illegal prison. The lower court ruled in the prisoner's favor, but the state supreme court reversed the ruling. In the face of these failures, the leaders of the miners' committee resigned which allowed more radical men to come to power.

On October 31, the miners marched to the Tennessee Coal Mine, released the 163 prisoners and set fire to the stockade. Next, they released 120 prisoners at the Knoxville Iron Mine. On November 2, the miners released 200 prisoners at the Cumberland Mine in Oliver Springs. While the governor tried to plan an appropriate response, the miners went back to work and the Tennessee Mine Company promised not use convict labor in the future. Eventually, Governor Buchanan sent the militia and 200 convicts back to the Knoxville Iron Mine. On August 15, 1892 the miners demanded the release of prisoners at the Oliver Springs stockade. The militia refused and some shots were exchanged. The miners sought reinforcements and the militia eventually surrendered to the miners. The convicts were sent to Knoxville by train. The governor promised the miners that he would resolve the situation, but many miners did not believe him. About 1,000 miners participated in a number of attacks against the militia in Fort Anderson. All the attacks failed. Governor Buchanan sent General Carnes and 500 militiamen to stop the revolt. Most of the miners had fled by the time Carnes arrived in Coal



Creek. Carnes arrested hundreds of people in Coal Creek including D.B. Monroe who was prosecuted as the leader of the mob. The Coal Creek War was over.

D.B. Moore was eventually sentenced to 7 years in prison for his participation in the Coal Creek War. One other man was sentenced to a year in prison. The rest of the over 300 men indicted were released with fines, short jail sentences or no punishment at all. Governor Buchanan's chances at a second term were destroyed. He ran as an independent and was soundly defeated. The events at Coal Creek and reports on the horrific conditions the prisoners endured turned the public against the convict lease system. In 1893, the legislature voted to build a new state prison at Brushy Mountain. The last contract expired in January of 1896 and the convict lease system ended in Tennessee.

Based on what you learned, who do you think "won" the Coal Creek War? Was it the miners, the company or state government? Be prepared to support your opinion with evidence from the readings and the sources.

Works Cited:

Hutson, A.C., Jr. "The Overthrow of the Convict Lease System" The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications 8 (1936): 82-103.





