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PASS THE WORD 
A PROJECT OF THE KENTUCKY ORAL HISTORY COMMISSION

CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: BLOODY HARLAN



*A union member shows his bullet wound after a skirmish with Harlan County sheriffs.
Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

HARLAN COUNTY — Coal miners engaged in skirmishes, strikes and boycotts to unionize the mines after mine operators slashed salaries by 10 percent to deal with the changing economic conditions of the Great Depression. Over the course of a decade, miners and local, state and federal authorities used violence, weapons and intimidation to aid their causes. Law enforcement helped mine operators and owners break up strikes and protect the temporary miners (known as scab workers) who worked during the strikes. Because

the coal companies ran many towns, workers who sympathized with the union or went on strike were forced out of their company-owned housing. Only three of Harlan County's incorporated towns were not owned by the coal mines. Evart, an independent town, sympathized with the striking miners and provided them with shelter and food.

In 1935, the federal government passed the Wagner Act, which protected the rights of private sector workers to unionize, enter into collective bargaining agreements and strike. Because of the act's success, Harlan County mines were unionized through the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) by the end of decade, protecting miners and helping coal remain a viable industry in Eastern Kentucky. The UMWA also banned discrimination based on race, religion, or national origin, helping to instill integrated unionism in Harlan County.

The Kentucky Oral History Commission (KOHC), administered by the Kentucky Historical Society, is dedicated to supporting documentation of Kentucky's rich history, along with the issues confronting its people. Pass the Word (passtheword.khs.gov) is an online database from the KOHC that facilitates discovery of more than 30,000 oral history interviews from Kentuckians in all 120 counties, located in more than 100 repositories across Kentucky.

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