INTRODUCTION

This book is about white working-class American men who opposed social democratic labor unions and politics in the century that culminated in the New Deal. It follows five generations of miners who, beginning in the 1850s, discovered and developed a rich swath of zinc and lead that straddled the boundaries between Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. By the 1920s, the Tri-State district led the nation in the production of these unheralded but essential metals. From the beginning, the miners pursued class interests that differed, to varying degrees, from those of the men who controlled the land, bought the ore, and smelted the metal. Yet for sixty years, from 1880 to 1940, national labor unions could not organize the Tri-State miners. This outcome mattered. The miners developed a powerful animus against the idea of class-based solidarity, particularly as practiced by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), a pioneer of radical unionism, and later by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Tri-State miners worked, willingly and repeatedly, as strikebreakers against the WFM in a series of clashes across the western United States between 1896 and 1910. Their actions helped to defeat and nearly destroy the WFM. These outcomes also mattered in Tri-State mining communities. Miners resisted government efforts, often backed by unions, to impose health and safety regulations despite the obvious dangers, the worst of which was silicosis, a fatal lung disease. Even during the Great Depression, when the federal government encouraged workers like them to organize for higher pay and greater security, Tri-State miners remained obstinate. The district’s majority crushed a promising drive by some of their peers to realize the full benefits of New Deal collective bargaining rights. Rarely, it seemed, had so many American workers fought so long to remain at the raw edge of industrial capitalism.

Tri-State miners baffled, frustrated, and enraged those who tried to get them to change. WFM leaders called them “a dangerous class” with a “deplorable lack of intelligence.” Twenty years later, an American Federation of Labor (AFL) organizer blamed the absence of unions in the district on “the stupid miner himself.” Reformers likewise struggled to make sense of them. A social worker concluded that a “feverish unsteadiness” warped their “so-
cial instincts and ideals.” Government health and safety investigators, meanwhile, found that the miners “seem indifferent, even fatalistic, and will take precautions only if compelled to do so.” These commentators concluded, as we might also conclude, that something was wrong with Tri-State miners and that it made them act against their own interests.1

The story of the Tri-State miners runs counter to what we know about American labor and working-class history in the decades between the Civil War and World War II. The new labor historians focused on the organizing story of how different kinds of workers banded together in common cause through unions and social movements to improve their working conditions, to articulate, defend, and exercise their rights, and to challenge employers, the state, and capitalism more generally. These stories were often about how workers and activists overcame obstacles and divisions to build solidarity through collective action. Their focus tended to be on the industrial unions that welcomed most workers, generally regardless of skill, race, nativity, or gender, such as the Knights of Labor, United Mine Workers of America (UMW), WFM, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the wider CIO. The impediments that American workers struggled with, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, were usually seen as coming from external sources, often through elite instruments of power.2

Of course, we know that fear and vulnerability hindered the labor movement in this period. We know, too, that many unions were limited by animosities attuned to racial, ethnic, gender, and religious differences that were often manipulated by employers.3 Yet we also know that many American workers overcame these encumbrances, even if only slowly and partially, to perceive common class interests and to form groups to defend them against economic and social exploitation, particularly in the New Deal era, when organized labor’s influence was strongest.4 Those expressions of class interest often included demands for safer, healthier workplaces and communities.5 Whether or not these histories explore union successes or failures, all take as their central subjects those workers who sought some form of collective organization as a means to blunt the experience of industrial capitalism and emphasize those who pursued political and economic changes ranging from reform to revolution. Even craft unions, once considered “a conservative social force” because of exclusive policies and an overriding focus on individual material gains, were shown to be allies, however inconsistent and flawed, in the broader working-class struggle for security.6 More than any other group, miners—in coal and metal—have served as the field’s lodestar because their unions, especially the UMW and the WFM, led the social democratic vanguard.7

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Our understanding of American workers has been guided by an assumption that they would join unions and welcome government regulation if only they had the knowledge and freedom to do so. Less conspicuous but nonetheless enduring is a related assumption that working-class democracy would prevail, sooner or later, over divisions of race, ethnicity, and gender. These assumptions rest on a scholarly faith in working-class mutualism. David Montgomery articulated that faith best when he argued that workers in industrial America developed “an ideology of mutualism” that taught them that their “only hope of securing what they wanted in life was through concerted action.” Despite differences of race, ethnicity, gender, skill, and politics, he argued, their “working-class bondings and struggles” informed “the shared presumption that individualism was appropriate only for the prosperous and wellborn.” Because workers were mutualists, Montgomery concluded, they rejected “the ideology of acquisitive individualism, which explained and justified a society regulated by market mechanisms and propelled the accumulation of capital.” “A whole generation of research and writing on working-class history,” he wrote elsewhere, rests on the finding that mutualism, as idea and practice, prevailed in the “workplace, community life, and local politics” of most working-class Americans. The concept is so powerful that even our understanding of working-class conservatism has been framed, in most cases, by studies of craft unions, such as those in the AFL, the nation’s largest and most enduring labor organization.8

Until recently we have given little attention to the workers who did not join unions, even though they always outnumbered those who did. Roughly 20 percent of nonagricultural American workers belonged to unions in the early 1920s—the labor movement’s strongest years before the New Deal. The miners’ unions usually fared best but still struggled to organize a majority of workers in coal or metal. The WFM, at its height in 1910, claimed only 20 percent of metal miners. Unions gained more members after federal legislation in the 1930s made it easier to organize but never more than 35 percent of nonfarm workers, the 1950s pinnacle. At best, most scholars have treated those not in the labor movement as prospective unionists—needing only the right political leadership, union appeal, or social conditions to act on their true mutualist interests. Otherwise, we explain them in terms that privilege the determining power and strategies of elites, whether corporate bosses, right-wing politicians, or conservative cultural leaders. Negative prefixes define these workers as what they were not—nonunion, antiunion, unorganized—revealing a big blind spot that obscures what they thought and why, especially when those thoughts led to a persistent pattern of action, as with the Tri-State miners. Most of the few studies to take workers like these serio-
ously adopted short-term views, examining the events of a single year or decade, that yielded situational explanations about how momentary exceptions or contingencies produced counterpoints to the dominant labor movement narrative. Our assumptions about mutualism have left little room to interpret and understand those who opposed labor unions and social democratic politics over time, particularly in the decades before the New Deal, on their own terms, as historical actors with the same choices and choice-making ability as the unionized minority. When it comes to stories like these, we are little wiser than the contemporaries who reached for easy, dismissive explanations for why Tri-State miners acted as they did for so long.

*Poor Man's Fortune* reconstructs the century-long story of the Tri-State miners, treating its subjects as creative agents whose decisions and actions across generations reflected a logic of self-interest, both material and ideal, that they themselves crafted. It reveals a tradition of working-class conservatism, from the age of Jackson through the New Deal era, made by white men who identified their interests with the acquisitive market functions of capitalism and the social and political privileges of their race, nativity, and gender. As an ideal, that tradition offered poor white men a good chance to share the national prosperity through hard work and in turn uphold manly paternal responsibilities. In practice, amid many obstacles, it encouraged working-class white men, particularly the native born, to pursue narrowing economic opportunities through reckless physical action and often violent assertions of racial and nativist advantage. As much as larger structural forces influenced, and elites took advantage of, that tradition, multiple generations of Tri-State miners sustained and shaped it in dynamic ways with their own choices against often compelling alternatives offered by unions of all stripes, social reformers, and political allies of the labor movement. Far from ignorant pawns, they acted consciously and consistently for decades according to their own interests—as they understood them, past, present, and future. The great irony, indeed tragedy, is that their cumulative decisions yielded a future of early death, widespread poverty, and diminished freedom.

To a great extent, Tri-State miners authored their own fates. Across five generations, Tri-State miners saw their interests served best by capitalist markets and a culture of individual acquisitiveness that scholars have come to see as anathema to the working-class experience. For a long time, until around 1895, the social and political fraternities of white manliness gave them remarkable opportunities as owner-operators of small mining ventures. The next generation continued to expect the future to be like the past, even after 1900, when most men faced a system of permanent wage labor in
real and imagined competition with new European immigrant groups they considered nonwhite—and acted on their expectation in ways that closed them off to alternative visions of the future. The narrower the terms of advancement, the more these men asserted racial and gendered claims to the promises of capitalism. They embraced wage labor with the entrepreneurial zeal of an earlier era, first as mercenary strikebreakers, then as mine workers who insisted on personal wage incentives tied to market prices. These men transformed hard, dirty jobs into potentially lucrative opportunities that demanded reckless physical strength. In doing so, they created a more disruptive but still transactional working-class culture that abandoned older ideas of manly responsibility for a new logic of aggressive, heedless masculinity. As white American men, they expected their dangerous work in pursuit of individual gain to deliver special freedom from the new controls and restraints of corporate capitalism—whether by employers, the government, or other workers, especially those considered enemies of the competitive system. Such was the durable logic of white working-class conservatism that led most Tri-State miners to reject wider solidarities, attack organizations with the boldest ideas of collective security, and embrace the most restrictive forms of American nationalism.12

Workers like these who remained outside the labor movement are the “dark matter” of American working-class history: We have witnessed the consequences of their actions but have not mapped their motivations. We have seen their effects in failed strikes, weak and divided unions, and the political vulnerability of the regulatory and welfare state. We have registered their impact in popular support for immigration restriction, racial segregation, and policies that favor capital and business. We have even detected their shadow in the New Deal era, a period otherwise portrayed as a “working-class interregnum” when American workers compelled the federal government to deliver unprecedented “collective economic rights” with social and political campaigns led by a surging union movement, at the forefront of which was the social democratic CIO. Yet even in the most optimistic retellings, scholars caution us that labor’s New Deal triumph was short and tenuous. The CIO was a “fragile juggernaut,” its power “truncated and brittle.” The labor movement’s gains depended on a federal labor regime that was slowed by conservatives in Congress, in business, and in organized labor itself, particularly the skilled workers in the AFL.13 These opponents, usually portrayed as elites, drew upon a lineage of conservative nationalism that combined the “ethos of ‘rugged individualism’ and the closely associated ideology of liberal capitalism,” white supremacy, male sexism, and “suspicion of foreigners.”14 Poor Man’s Fortune shows that these conservative
ideas were widespread among Tri-State miners in the 1930s and before—the result of their own decades-long grassroots practice of white working-class faith in capitalism. Their story reflected the experiences of other white working-class men in rural areas, towns, and small cities across the United States where it remained possible to imagine individual opportunities for economic advancement, whether these men ran farms, owned and operated small businesses, or contracted their labor by the piece or job. The Tri-State miners were an extreme case, perhaps, but not an exceptional one.

The first two generations of Tri-State miners sought individual economic opportunity as they pursued promises born during the Jacksonian market revolution. From the 1850s to the 1890s, the district, which would cut across five counties in three states—Jasper, Lawrence, and Newton in Missouri; Cherokee in Kansas; and Ottawa in Oklahoma—was known as a “poor man’s camp,” where individual prospectors with very little capital could secure speculative mining leaseholds on land they hoped would yield ore deposits and make them socially and economically independent. The possibility of becoming an owner-operator miner on the basis of one’s muscle power, mining skill, and diligence attracted thousands of ambitious men in the years surrounding the Civil War. White men, particularly the native born, had the freedom of movement and the access to legal and financial resources required to take up these opportunities. Their racial advantages were both psychological and material, as tangible as a mine shaft or a chunk of lead mineral. Many succeeded, a few got rich, and many more did not. Together they built prosperous communities that championed a democratic spirit of fairness and opportunity between risk-taking white men. That poor man’s culture explained achievement and made no excuse for failure. Proof of its efficacy abounded in this forty-year period, when hundreds of mining companies, most of them owner operated, discovered, mined, and sold lead mineral and zinc ore worth more than $36 million.

The entrepreneurial ambitions of Tri-State miners had deep roots in the broader region. The district’s stories of men who developed prospects into profitable small mining companies inspired thousands more newcomers from other mining districts and farms across the Midwest, Upper South, and Great Plains. They came because those stories were familiar and made sense; the Tri-State district was an organic part of a wider society and economy, not an outlier. Many, especially in the beginning, came from old lead-mining districts in the Mississippi River valley. They were first to develop the district’s deposits in a serious way and to insist on the poor man’s terms for doing so. More ambitious but poor white men came from the surrounding
Arkansas and Missouri Ozarks, rural places similarly shaped since the 1850s by lively commercial markets that favored small-scale producers. They had worked in lumbering, milling, tanning, or iron mining or were farmers who grew crops for sale and took seasonal work in these industries to make extra money. Others came from farms across the wider region, from Tennessee to Iowa. They all shared an economic experience and culture as white men who produced for the market with the goal of attaining independence for themselves and their immediate families. Their transition to the Tri-State mining district, where the barriers to entry were low for men like them, was smooth and logical.15

We know that many other rural white workers across the country navigated the market economy with a similar entrepreneurial outlook. In Appalachia, rural workers ran diversified household economies that combined farm production with wage work in mines and factories. Similarly, many rural workers in the Midwest combined farming with seasonal work in other industries, particularly shallow coal mining. By the 1930s and after, independent truck drivers would think and act according to a similar logic. Whether they were West Virginia farmers, Illinois coal miners, or truckers on the open road, we know that they often understood their interests as separate from the solidarity and collective action of the emerging labor movement. Company domination of local economies and communities ultimately pushed many of these workers toward class-based confrontation, particularly in the UMW. Tri-State miners, however, enjoyed opportunities for small producers longer than most in a district defined by competition between hundreds of separate companies, none of them in control.16

Small producers registered their claims on capitalism at the ballot box in the late nineteenth century. Despite punishing depressions in the 1870s and 1890s and increased corporate consolidation of power, white men, particularly the native born, continued to rally to the Republican Party’s free labor ideology that heralded economic opportunity through hard work in a competitive marketplace and asserted the closeness of worker and employer interests. Those engaged in domestic manufacturing and resource extraction especially valued Republican pledges to protect American labor from foreign competition with tariffs and, in time, immigration restriction. At the same time, many Democrats also believed that white workers could claim a share of capitalist prosperity, that the divide between them and the rich was not total. Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan said as much in his 1896 Cross of Gold speech, an occasion said to mark the arrival of a popular challenge to industrial capitalism. Responding to charges that his campaign would damage American business, Bryan declared that his critics were “too
limited” in their “definition of a business man.” “The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer,” he claimed. “The miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth … are as much business men as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world.” Tri-State miners, along with many other workers, considered themselves among Bryan’s “broader class of business men.”

Even those most attuned to the threats corporate consolidation posed to small producers—after all, that was Bryan’s point—imagined restorative remedies that reaffirmed democratic access to market prosperity. The main popular insurgencies that culminated in Bryan’s 1896 candidacy—organizations such as the Grange, the Greenback-Labor Party, and ultimately, the People’s Party—all revolved around foundational commitments to antimonopoly reform and inflationary monetary policies designed to give poor men fair economic opportunity. Significant constituencies in the era’s labor movement, including within the Knights of Labor and the AFL, shared this vision and goal.

By the 1890s, Tri-State miners saw themselves as entrepreneurs who combined hard labor with business acumen and thus shared little common interest with the growing ranks of wage laborers, many of whom took a more critical stance against capitalism. That did not make them passive. Like many others, Tri-State miners were vigilant against monopolies, particularly land and smelting companies that bought interests in the district in the 1870s and after. That vigilance led some to resist the concentration of power. A minority joined with area farmers to support the Greenback-Labor and People’s Parties but only on the basis of antimonopoly proposals that honored their market-oriented aims. They were also familiar with the Knights of Labor. The Knights were active in the Kansas coalfields beginning in the late 1870s and tried to organize the Tri-State district for a decade without lasting success. Tri-State miners could not square their economic ambitions with the Knights’ vision of collective security and solidarity, especially after the mid-1880s when the Knights adopted a more combative stance with a series of prominent strikes. The AFL, generally more conservative and accommodating of capitalism, might have fared better, but the federation had no presence in metal mining until 1899 when it challenged the WFM, which emerged, along with the UMW, from the early 1890s dissolution of the Knights. By then, the vast majority of poor man’s camp miners were non-union, not antiunion, although some were growing wary of union tactics and aims as the upheaval against capitalism intensified with violent clashes across the country. Like many other workers who aspired to ownership, they
rejected strikes because such direct action assumed a fundamental divi-
sion between workers and owners when they saw none for men like them. 
They also ignored or resisted the mine safety laws that the Knights helped to 
pass because the cost of compliance threatened their small-scale operations, 
whether present or future. The legacies of the poor man’s camp—mental as 
well as material—encouraged Tri-State miners even in the economic crisis of 
the 1890s when opportunities for becoming an owner-operator slowly gave 
way to a permanent regime of wage labor.

Tri-State miners understood the loss of self-determination at work as a 
threat to their ideal of white manliness, which had valorized responsibility, 
perseverance, and autonomy. After the depression of the 1890s, outside in-
vestors intensified district mining practices that foreclosed future owner-
operator possibilities for small-scale miners. Like other white men facing 
subordination in this era, Tri-State miners embraced rough masculinity, 
a way of understanding manhood that “emphasized toughness, physical 
strength, aggressiveness, and risk taking.”19 Informed by a long-standing 
emphasis on independence and freedom of action, they began acting force-
fully for their own benefit, with little care for the detriment to others—first 
as strikebreakers against the WFM, which launched a wave of strikes against 
wealthy mining corporations across the West in the 1890s. With skillful 
negotiation, these men exploited their nonunion, native white status to take 
jobs, often at high wages, from mainly foreign-born union miners. At first, 
most did it temporarily, eager to return home to invest their earnings. While 
these divisions benefited mining companies foremost, the option of strike-
breaking became an important means for many men to weather bad eco-
nomic conditions and see new entrepreneurial possibilities in wage labor.

Tri-State strikebreakers devastated the WFM, setting it on a radical 
course that would roll the labor movement for decades. They helped break 
nearly every major WFM strike: at Leadville, Colorado, in 1896; at Coeur 
d’Alene, Idaho, in 1899; at Cripple Creek, Colorado, in 1903; and at Lead and 
Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1910. Tri-State strikebreakers sparked simmer-
ing tensions that led the WFM to challenge the AFL by forming the Western 
Labor Union, a direct forerunner to the anticapitalist IWW, in 1898. While 
subsequent strike defeats pushed moderate WFM leaders to seek peace with 
the AFL in 1910, attempts by radicals to regain control would torment and 
divide the union to the point of collapse by the end of World War I. Tri-State 
miners haunted the WFM: in the minds of radicals, as mortal foes to be 
crushed; in the minds of moderates, as a potent force that should be union-
ized with whatever accommodation might be required. Both the WFM and
the AFL launched repeated, unsuccessful efforts to organize them, first in competition with one another from 1899 to 1910 and then in concert until the 1930s when the New Deal presented the best chance yet.

Over a fifteen-year cascade of conflict, Tri-State miners learned to regard the WFM, especially its members born in eastern and southern Europe, as a threat to their economic opportunities and social advantages as white American men. Strikebreaking against foreign union miners—in an increasingly racist and xenophobic national culture, often defended by military force—drew from patriotism the confidence to disregard the concerns of immigrants and the nonwhite, no matter the cruelty. This feeling sharpened as WFM leaders denounced strikebreaking as an immoral act that deviated from the expectations of traditional manliness. Like other white men in this age of Jim Crow and imperial aggression, Tri-State miners asserted their claim of racial authority through violence against perceived enemies. They attacked African Americans, fought unionized immigrants in strike zones, and forcibly ejected foreign-born miners from the Tri-State. They saw their fears realized in WFM and IWW radicalism; fighting these groups became a main way of proving one's worth as a white man, akin to soldiering. Tri-State miners not only deepened their opposition to radical unions but began to understand themselves in a new way—as free, patriotic workers whose respect for capitalism earned them special privileges, a view that alienated many from the labor movement and social democratic politics more broadly.20

Tri-State miners doubled down on the performance of rough masculinity to keep alive the risk-and-reward ethic of the poor man's camp, albeit on narrower, tougher terms. While small-scale prospecting and mine leasing ended after 1900, men found that their physical labor was in high demand in the district's still hypercompetitive, undercapitalized operations. Mining companies relied especially on unskilled shovelers, workers who loaded ore into cans for hoisting, and began paying them a piece rate to boost productivity. Shovelers embraced piecework, which was plentiful as American industrial and military expansion consumed ever-greater amounts of zinc and lead from the Spanish-American War to World War I. Shovelers made themselves indispensable by treating their bodies as capital. Between 1900 and 1930, men wielding standard-size shovels that held twenty-one pounds a scoop moved more than 600 billion pounds of ore in the Tri-State—the equivalent of more than 820 Empire State Buildings. They made money and gained status. Now the largest occupational group in the mines, shovelers were heralded for embodying the rugged white masculinity that elite nationalists like President Theodore Roosevelt championed. They soon domi-
nated the district’s working-class culture and defined what it meant to be a strong white man. Their example emphasized youth, reckless power, and short-term incentives; it belittled ideas of safety, sustainability, and public aid. Shovelers took risks with their bodies, endured pain and suffering, and showed no weakness—all requisites for a good payday under the logic of the piece rate. As they came to see it, to give in to the threat of injury or death not only reduced pay but revealed masculine failure, a signal of physical and mental inadequacies that risked association with the foreign-born and nonwhite people ruled inferior in the era’s racist politics. This performance of white working-class masculinity further distanced Tri-State miners from union workers who sought to make work safer and uphold older ideas of manly responsibility. It also created a problem for how they advocated for themselves: they were committed to doing work that broke their bodies but prejudiced the weak and damaged.21

As risk-taking wageworkers, Tri-State miners also strained against their employers as they demanded a share of the district’s expanding profits. They still expected capitalism to work for white men like them. After 1905, the miners, not mining companies, insisted on tying wages to production incentives, including bonuses and a sliding scale that tracked the market price of metal. They defended this raw claim on prosperity with physical defiance that reflected both their social privileges and the harsh realities of their labor. When companies tried to cut wages or replace them with machines or cheaper foreign workers, these men disrupted operations without fully rebelling. They turned again to temporary migration as strikebreakers, switched employers without notice, sued over injuries, forcibly excluded foreign workers, and after the Panic of 1907, withheld their labor in small, isolated wildcat strikes. Their tactics were often successful; mining companies, divided and usually small, could not control them. Some miners even flirted with the idea of union organization, at first on an independent basis and then in bids to align with the AFL, which was increasingly regarded as a trustworthy ally of white, native-born workingmen. And yet most Tri-State miners could not accommodate union demands for safety and security. They remained committed to an ethic of individual physical risk for market-based incentives—an ethic given new life by American entry into World War I and the rise of a new boomtown in Oklahoma.

Despite a pattern of resistance to government regulation, Tri-State miners expected the nation to reward their rugged, patriotic fidelity to capitalism. For them, American nationalism delivered crucial racial and nativist advantages that promised ongoing access to market prosperity for white men who no longer enjoyed full economic independence. Their expectation was based
on evidence. The federal government had helped create the conditions that gave rise to the poor man’s camp by forcing Native Americans off the land, supporting railroad construction, erecting tariff barriers that protected domestic metal markets from foreign competition, allowing rampant discrimination against African Americans and others considered nonwhite, restricting immigration, and suppressing radical, anticapitalist unions and groups, such as the IWW. Above all, the federal government encouraged nationalist economic expectations with military excursions and wars against demonized enemies that also created rising demand for zinc and lead, no more so than during World War I. Tri-State miners benefited directly from the political economy of belligerence and came to see their interests entwined with the white nationalist ideas and policies that fueled lucrative American militarism.

By the late 1920s, however, they were no longer sure that the government was on their side. Federal agencies encouraged a new, more rational regime of managerial capitalism, aiming to empower corporations to bring order and efficiency to the larger economy. In the Tri-State, that meant helping mining companies address their risky workplaces. Federal modernizers like Thomas Parran, who would become U.S. surgeon general a decade later, were horrified by the physical toll of life in the district, counted in rates of infectious disease, particularly syphilis and tuberculosis, as well as the injuries, fatalities, and incidence of silicosis among miners. Mining companies were worried about the rising cost of workmen’s compensation insurance, now a legal requirement, as the mining economy slowed after 1927. The government and the companies joined forces, together with leading insurance companies, to impose health and safety reforms and, most critical, prevent the most damaged miners from working. Led by the U.S. Bureau of Mines and the Public Health Service, this paternalistic strategy scrutinized the bodies and behaviors of men in ways that threatened what it meant to be a Tri-State miner as a worker and a white man. As the downturn became a depression, companies pursued this strategy of control with ruthless energy.22

While opposed to reforms that seemed to restrict their livelihoods, Tri-State miners looked to the New Deal—especially with its nationalist allusions to wartime precedent—to restore the economic and social standing of men like them. They wanted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to revive the nation’s economy and roll back the health and safety regime so that they could share in prosperity once again. But the New Deal presented a dilemma: in order to regain what they had lost, Tri-State miners would have to deal with the labor unions they had long opposed. In the national wave of organizing that followed the passage of the National Industrial Recovery
Act in 1933, a substantial minority of district miners joined the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine Mill), the WFM's successor and at the time an AFL affiliate. When companies refused to bargain, Mine Mill launched a strike in 1935 that closed the whole district. The clash exposed a stark divide between past and future: on one side were men who remained committed to the deep-seated verities of race, masculine risk, and the market, and on the other was a new, smaller group that embraced the possibilities of social democratic unionism as Mine Mill left the AFL for the new CIO.

The conservative tradition prevailed. The majority of the Tri-State miners turned against their allies in Mine Mill by joining a company union that broke the strike, encouraging and empowering employers keen to further exploit divisions of race, gender, and nationalism. While the federal National Labor Relations Board ultimately sided with Mine Mill by outlawing the company union, it could not change the minds of the district’s miners. If the New Deal was a “decades-long experiment in the economic enfranchisement of the American working class,” men like the majority of Tri-State miners viewed its benefits in conservative terms, as privileges that should flow once again to white Americans, especially men, who kept their faith in capitalism.23

What made Tri-State miners conservative was a sustained desire to return to an earlier, greater era when ordinary white men could attain some material benefit and personal autonomy from their mental and physical skills in competition with other white men. Their conservatism was primarily economic and social with deep roots in the Jacksonian market revolution. It championed hard work, democratic markets, the prerogatives of manliness, and the privileges of white people in the United States. Some might call it individualism; without qualification, however, that term erases the ways hierarchies of race, gender, and nativity structure individual opportunities. While Tri-State miners were self-interested, they claimed those interests as white men at the expense of others with increasing vehemence; the power to exclude became integral to the claim.24 Over time, Tri-State miners, and other Americans, synthesized these commitments into a belligerent white nationalism. They judged new circumstances against these old certainties, viewing any attempt to challenge or limit their prerogatives—whether through safety regulations or radical labor unions—as a threat.

Tri-State miners knew exactly what they were doing and why. They thought and acted within a political structure and culture that generally encouraged their ideas about economics, race, gender, and the nation. Powerful groups certainly tried to exploit their racism and nativism for their own

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ends—mining companies, strikebreaker recruiters, and labor organizers alike. But Tri-State miners were not simply duped by elite propaganda; they made these views their own over time through dynamic practice. They neither were victims of businesses and politicians nor fooled into acting against their own interests. They did what they did for a reason. Tri-State miners vexed employers and commanded a grudging respect.

Their story was in the mainline white American tradition, a product of its self-styled sunlit heartland, where promises of family independence, economic opportunity, and cultural cohesion seemed to bear real fruit. The Tri-State district and its surrounding counties were prosperous. Residents credited that prosperity to the dominance of native-born whites like them; they violently expelled many African Americans and foreigners to make it so. Some called the region a “white man’s heaven.” By 1910, Jasper County, the district’s heart, not only led Missouri in mining output but was first among its 114 counties in cattle production, twenty-first in total crop value, and sixth in value-added manufacturing. It was surrounded by counties with similar agricultural profiles. The state’s fifth-largest county by population, Jasper boasted a literacy rate of 96.6 percent and youth school attendance rate of 87.9 percent, both more than three points above the state average. Joplin, the largest city, was modern; a streetcar and light-rail network provided transportation between its neighborhoods and to district towns in all three states. Four railroads provided passenger and freight connections in every direction. In addition to high-end hotels and theaters, the district also offered popular leisure activities through cinemas, amusement parks, and sporting events, including professional baseball games. While the people who lived and worked in the Tri-State inhabited a world different from the places labor historians usually study, whether big cities, single-industry areas, or plantation zones, their experience would have been very familiar to many, if not most, contemporary white Americans.25

Some readers might expect religion to explain the miners’ conservatism. But the evidence does not show that religion, organized or not, had a causal influence. Like other miners elsewhere, they were decidedly not pious. Those who went to church could choose from a dozen or more different denominations in the Tri-State, most of them Protestant. Miners encountered little in the churches that challenged their social and economic views, and they did not air their objections to labor unions or their political allies in religious language.26 Theirs is certainly a story about belief, however—about white working-class men believing, both as thought and expectant action, in capitalism, the nation, whiteness, and their own physical power.27

Tri-State conservatism was surely political but did not produce a neat pat-
tern of partisan politics. Democrats and Republicans alike were well organized and ran strong in the district, often neck and neck, even in precincts where miners predominated. Miners also had ready access to political ideas beyond the mainstream parties. The Grange, Greenback-Labor Party, Union Labor Party, People’s Party, and Socialist Party all canvassed the district. The Socialist Party’s main newspaper, the *Appeal to Reason*, was published in nearby Girard, Kansas. At the same time, the nation’s leading anti-Catholic, nativist newspaper, the *Menace*, was published in Aurora, Missouri, a mining town on the district’s eastern edge. While a few miners were won over by the radicalism of the *Appeal to Reason*, many more were drawn to the reactionary views of the *Menace*. Tri-State miners seemed more likely to favor Republicans before the depression of the 1890s, when they could reasonably aspire to be owner-operators. As a general trend, they turned toward favoring Democrats afterward, once they faced permanent wage labor. But it was only a trend. In the 1920s, many miners gave their support to Republicans promising protective tariffs and immigration restriction in three successive elections. Third parties drew some support, usually when the economy was bad. For example, the Greenback-Labor Party and Union Labor Party each got around 15 percent of the vote in the 1880s, a period of crisis in the lead industry. Socialist Eugene Debs won a plurality in two precincts in 1912, a rare moment when union organizers seemed to make headway, but more miners voted for William H. Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, or Woodrow Wilson, who won a plurality in the district as a whole. Overall, Tri-State miners tended to choose candidates who promised government measures that would preserve or restore their prerogatives as white men.

The better we understand workers like these, the better we will understand the durable power of a politics that in the present defies explanation. The small-business owner, the specter of burdensome government regulation, the injustices of welfare, and the allure of “right to work” count among the enduring tropes of right-wing populism. Those who claim these ideas often act to deny chances or choices to other workers, particularly along racial, nativist, and gendered lines. Scholars of working-class conservatism since the 1950s have interpreted this as “backlash,” a term that suggests a negative reaction produced in response to change. The story of the Tri-State miners reveals a longer lineage.28

Some Tri-State miners did heed the appeals of union organizers and progressive reformers. For decades, labor unions doggedly tried to win them over. To their immense credit, these activists did not give up. Unions that persisted against Tri-State strikebreakers in spite of defeat may have had little choice but to fight on. But they also believed that a politics of solidarity,
collective action, and economic and physical security would ultimately prevail. Even the most social democratic unions, the WFM and Mine Mill, won converts in the district. But these remained minority voices, neither able to convince the majority nor stay mobilized for long. Most miners only came close to joining the labor movement when doing so entailed no risk of associating with foreigners, African Americans, or political radicals. Even then, the lure of economic self-interest, particularly in times of prosperity, beggared and eroded union pledges of collective advancement. Some miners did support health and safety regulations in the mines. Most did not.

The defeat of progressive unions and health and safety regimes testified, time and again, to the difficulty of convincing native-born white men to subordinate their desire for personal opportunity and independence, real or imagined, to the public good. Most would not abandon the advantages of race and the dominant mode of aggressive masculinity, even in the 1930s when they enjoyed few prospects in a political economy of physical suffering and low pay. Those who did were genuine revolutionaries in context. They were also rare. The struggle of reformers to change the Tri-State miners revealed a broader truth, that it was always difficult to convince Americans, particularly those who benefited most from racial and gender inequality, to embrace a new vision of the future. That should make any progressive successes in the Tri-State, rare as they were, seem all the more remarkable and important.

More commonly, the Tri-State miners emboldened the most conservative elements within organized labor—both in the leadership and at the grass roots. Their attachments to capitalism, pugnacious masculinity, and white nationalism encouraged many white union members to conclude that more democratic options were not viable and to opt instead for defensive choices. This process, driven by the actions of workers outside of organized labor, moved the center of gravity in the labor movement to the right, where it was already rewarded by capital and state. In the radical WFM, for example, native-born members followed strikebreakers back to work. In the AFL, national leaders hoped to organize Tri-State miners into a conservative metal-mining union to thwart radical groups in the WFM and ultimately in the CIO. Even moderate leaders of the WFM and Mine Mill appeased the racism and nativism of Tri-State miners in the hopes of building stronger unions. By the late 1930s, the AFL stood in robust defense of capitalism and white Americanism, revealing how ideas that had motivated generations of Tri-State miners were now reflected in the central assumptions and positions of the nation’s largest federation of workers. By the 1950s, the same was also true of large parts of the CIO, as “new” European immigrants and
their children learned the dark power of white American masculinity. That says less about the Tri-State miners than it does about the enduring influence of their conservative ideals in the minds of other white working-class men then and since.29

Sylvan Bruner, a local lawyer and former miner, never imagined that a metal miner’s union would hold its annual convention in Joplin, Missouri, the center of the Tri-State district, as Mine Mill did in August 1941. In the preceding year, the union, with the help of the National Labor Relations Board, had made progress among the district’s workers. Mine Mill held its convention in the Tri-State as a show of collective determination to finally organize them. “We are very glad to have all of you here,” Bruner told the gathered delegates. They might have hoped for a sunnier welcome than what came next. “I think I can say that the miners in the Tri-State District have paid a most tragic price for their lack of organization,” he explained, and “that their families have paid a tragic price.” Few people wanted to see the union’s latest attempt succeed more than Bruner, who had witnessed all the union failures since 1907. “I think I can say, without fear of contradiction,” Bruner repeated, “that every worker in the Tri-State District has paid a tragic price through the lack of organization and through open shop conditions in what is known as the Tri-State District.” But he was not yet satisfied that his statement conveyed the role those workers had played in that history, so he said it again, clearer. “What I mean to say is that the hard rock miners in the Tri-State District have paid with their lives and broken bodies for 30 years because they have not realized that they should organize.”30

Tri-State communities indeed bore a terrible cost for the decisions of generations of miners. Their story is full of economic failures, life-shattering injuries, and premature deaths from sudden accidents and from the slow, bloody suffocation of silicosis. Women shared that cost as wives, mothers, and sisters. We know that some of them challenged the outlook of the district’s men, disagreed and pleaded with them, called for a different life. We also know that many women went along, often with enthusiasm. They sought their own fortunes in the Tri-State and often profited from their labor in the mining camps. Many who married miners shared the ambitions of their husbands and sent their sons into the mines. Whatever their perspectives, the voices of women in the Tri-State mining communities are rare in the documentary record. What follows amplifies those voices as much as possible.

In local memory, collected and shared mainly by the daughters of these people, the story of the Tri-State district was told with defiant pride, despite the costs, after mining stopped in the 1950s. Their tellings empha-
sized the hard work of poor men in discovering and developing the mines. These were tales of ingenuity and achievement amid hardship. They talked about making something from nothing: profitable mining camps, thriving towns, and a city, Joplin, whose streets still bear the names of the most successful miners. They invoked the district’s contributions to the nation, supplying vital metals for two world wars. They insisted on positive legacies, despite devastating environmental consequences that have plagued many Tri-State communities and destroyed some. The district’s history of opposition to unions, government regulation, and the promise of social democratic change went unspoken.

When people spoke of the miners, they talked about the poor men seeking fortune: the prospector, the owner-operator made good, the shoveler, even the district’s favorite son of a miner, Mickey Mantle. Today, the mining memorials at Joplin, Webb City, and Baxter Springs each reflect that image with a statue of a miner, always alone.