

## CHAPTER 7

Las Animas County, Colorado | April 1914

---

After a good night's rest in the surprisingly well-appointed room, Keara Murphy planned to use her first full day in Colorado to survey the area of conflict. The coal mines stretched mostly in a straight-line running north from Trinidad to Walsenburg for approximately forty miles. According to her map, a road ran parallel to the railroad tracks. Most of the mines and miner camps representing the troubled locations ran along this route since the rail line was necessary for shipping the coal. For her purpose, she would need sturdy automobile transportation. Ideally with a driver familiar with the area.

As a working day traveling the region subjected to the cold weather, she dressed accordingly. Looking into the full-length mirror, she felt pleased with her ensemble. Pleased also with how she looked. The tight-fitting riding breeches defined the female form far better than full, ankle-length dresses. Women's fashion had changed little since the turn of the century. Murphy saw this as another expression of subjugating women by obscuring female sexuality.

Next came outfitting herself with the revolver. The riding breeches she purchased required a belt that provided the ability to secure the revolver holster at her lower back. Back in New York, she tested the suitability of concealing the revolver. The

## FIRE IN THE HOLE

bulky loose-fitting sweater covered it nicely. Took some getting used to sitting with the revolver poking into her lower back, but manageable. The holster attached to the belt held the butt end of the revolver at an angle affording easy extraction. Once in place she practiced withdrawing it several times. Should she come under threat, she must react soon enough to give her a couple of seconds. According to Alan Burke, she must never let a threat get too close.

Satisfied, she loaded the revolver then closed the cylinder into place. Inserting it into the holster, she did a turn in front of the mirror. It was not visible. Also secure from accidental discharge. As a double action revolver, the .38 special did not have a safety mechanism as did a semi-automatic. In an emergency, this prevented losing precious seconds fumbling to release a safety switch. Double action meant she could pull back the hammer and fire a round using minimum trigger pressure resistance as with a single action revolver, or simply pull the trigger exerting more force without first pulling back the hammer. Her father's instructions in the basics of handling firearms allowed her to feel confident should the need arise to use her weapon under actual circumstances. For accuracy, it is best to pull back the hammer and aim. To unleash multiple rounds quickly, just pull the trigger repeatedly.

In a sturdy shoulder bag, she carried her Kodak VPK camera with plenty of film and her notebook.

After having breakfast in the dining room, she inquired at the desk about arranging how best to secure transportation for today and likely for extended use during her stay.

"Where you headed, Miss Murphy?" the desk clerk asked.

"For today up to Walsenburg and back. I'm a writer for magazines. Here to see firsthand and report my observations on the troubles in the coalfields. Want to visit the mines and the striking miner camps. Interview people and take photographs."

"Mind you be very careful. This ain't exactly New York. There may be those that do not like someone taking pictures. Heard stories about some newspaper reporters given a rough time. You don't want to get in the middle of any shooting. Lot of that going on from both sides."

DOUGLAS CLARK

"Thank you for your concern. I'm aware of what's going on. Covered much the same sort of conflict in the West Virginia coal-fields a year ago. Can you recommend where I might hire a car and driver?"

The desk clerk nodded. "Perhaps the taxi service can spare one of their two taxis for the whole day. Might cost you but then again, their business is slow with everything that's going on. Want me to inquire?"

"Please do. I appreciate your help."

She sat in the lobby as the desk clerk spoke to someone at length on the telephone. When he hung up, he motioned for her. "I arranged for the use of a taxi all day. It'll cost ten dollars. They said the road up to Walsenburg was passible given the winter weather. The driver is the same young man that brought you from the train station. His name is Charlie. Spoke to his father. Told him you're a reporter from New York. Charlie will be here shortly. I'll have the kitchen prepare sandwiches and a couple of sodas for lunch later on. Where you're goin' might be hard to find a place to eat."

"Thank you. That's very thoughtful."

The young taxi driver entered the hotel twenty minutes later with a big grin on his face. A special event spending all day driving around a pretty New York City lady. Climbing into the aging taxi, he arranged the blanket to cover her lap and legs. It was a clear sunny day but only about twenty-five degrees. "Understand you're a reporter from New York. Plenty of stuff goin' on to write about."

"Seems so. Are things as bad as what I read in the newspapers?"

Charlie replied, "Well, I'd say it's real bad. My Pa says he's never seen so much shooting. People getting killed regularly. Mine guards shooting striking miners, miners ambushing guards. Which side you goin' to be talking to?"

"Both. I want to understand the facts. Hear what each side has to say." Reasonably true, but she clearly wanted to understand the plight of the miners how they justified resorting to killing those working for the mining companies.

Armed with a map of striking miner tent colonies cut from the *Trinidad Chronicle-News*, she told Charlie, "I want to visit the

## FIRE IN THE HOLE

tent encampment outside of Forbes first then the one at Ludlow next. I understand Ludlow is the largest tent colony of striking miners."

"That's what I hear."

The road going north was passible, but modest snow accumulation still slowed the speed of the Model T. There was little vehicle traffic on the unpaved road given the circumstances. Although bundled in a heavy sheep skin hooded overcoat with a scarf about her neck, she welcomed the added warmth afforded by the blanket.

It took forty minutes to make the ten-mile drive to reach the Forbes striker colony. The tent encampment was set back not far from the road. A couple of dilapidated trucks were the only visible vehicles. Two long lines of white tents stretched for a couple of hundred yards. Smoke curled from stovepipes. A few people could be seen moving about. Murphy exited the Model T and extracted her camera.

She and her driver began walking among the tents. The first people she approached were a group of four women. They were standing around a large cast iron pot suspended over a fire of coal contained in a shallow pit. Bundled in heavy overcoats they were tending to some sort of communal food preparation with boiling water giving off a cloud of steam into the cold air. Stepping closer, Murphy introduced herself then asked, "Would you allow me to take your photographs?"

The four women looked at each other for a moment then nodded agreement.

"What are you cooking? Smells good."

One woman replied in a thick Italian accent, "Stew. Mostly potatoes and beans. One of our men shot a jackrabbit this morning so we have a little meat added for flavor."

Another woman said, "We live mostly on potatoes and beans. That's all we can afford. The Union gives us a little money each week for food, but it doesn't go far."

"How much?"

"Three dollars for a man, one dollar for a woman, fifty cents for each child. Not enough to buy meat. The menfolk do what they can to hunt game, but it's mostly jackrabbits. The occasional deer is a rare treat."

## DOUGLAS CLARK

"There's no town nearby. Where do you buy the food?"

A different woman with a Greek accent responded, "The Union contracts with those that are willing to bring food to us. Over there is such a wagon." Pointing, she added, "Not enough money to buy much food."

Walking through the tent colony, Murphy speculated out loud to Charlie, "Can't image living in tents in cold weather like this."

Charlie intently surveyed the scene as they walked. When he finally spoke, she could hear the emotion in his voice. "God-damn! How do they keep warm enough? Been living like this for months. Spring is still weeks away. First time I've seen this. Something awful!"

"Know how you feel, Charlie. Reading about it isn't the same as being out here seeing what it looks like up close. These are tough people. Desperate people. Coal mining is hellish work. Ever think what it's like spending your days underground in the dark doing the most dangerous kind of work?"

Charlie just shook his head and bit his lip.

After taking photographs, Murphy said, "Let's move on. I'd like to see one of the mines and the company's coal camp nearby where the miners lived before the mining companies evicted them. There's a string of them a few miles west of here." Showing Charlie the map published by the *Trinidad Chronicle-News*, "I want to try the CF&I-operated Berwind El Moro No. 2 mine not far from Ludlow."

Somewhat apprehensively he replied, "Okay. But that'll be mining company land. Goin' to be protected by armed guards. Those Baldwin-Felts fellas can be a mean bunch. Probably not willing to let reporters onto company land. Certainly don't want pictures taken."

"All the same, I'd like to see where all this fuss started and get some pictures if possible. You game, Charlie?"

"Alright, Miss Murphy. At least with a woman the guards might be less inclined to do anything violent."

"I just want to get photos so the readers can appreciate what the Colorado coalfields look like. What the mines look like from above ground. What the miners' housing looked like before eviction for comparison to now living in tents during winter in the

## FIRE IN THE HOLE

Rocky Mountains. Don't need to spend much time there. I want to spend most of the afternoon at the Ludlow strikers' encampment. After leaving the mine we can have lunch. I brought along some sandwiches and sodas from the hotel."

---

Charlie found the road leading to the Berwind Mine. It wound through some low hills for a couple of miles. They passed a sign reading *Property of Colorado Fuel & Iron*. As the road came over a slight rise, they could see the mine camp in the distance and a large two-story building Murphy assumed to be the mine offices. Traveling another few hundred yards, they came to a gate blocking the road. Next to the gate two men stood guard. One man stood behind the gate holding a rifle with the butt of the rifle stock resting on the gate. The second man stood in front of the gate with a holstered sidearm visible on his hip.

Holding up his hand, the guard approached the driver's side of the Model T taxi after Charlie stopped the taxi. "What's your business here?"

Murphy leaned over and said, "My name is Keara Murphy. I'm a journalist from New York. Was hoping to speak with the mine superintendent about the strike. Take some photographs if possible."

"You're trespassing. Didn't you see the sign?"

"Yes, I know this is CF&I property. That's why I came here. We're not trespassing."

"Get out of the car!" the guard demanded.

Murphy nodded to Charlie and they both stepped out of the vehicle.

Grabbing Charlie by the arm, the guard checked him for any firearms. "You're both under arrest for trespassing. Get back in the car. I'm taking you to the mine office under custody."

Frightened, Charlie pulled his arm free from the guard who suddenly slapped him hard across the cheek. "Listen you fuckin' kid, you'll do as I say or get a lot worse than that."

Murphy could see this getting out of hand. She suspected these were arrogant Baldwin-Felts thugs that she observed in West Virginia. Not about to allow them to take her and Charlie

DOUGLAS CLARK

anywhere. The audacious assumption they had legal authority to make arrests incensed her.

Reaching inside her overcoat she extracted her revolver from under her sweater. Stepping close to the guard, she pointed the weapon in his face.

"We're not going anywhere with you, asshole!"

The surprised guard behind the gate raised his rifle pointing it at her.

Seeing the movement, she stepped to one side placing the guard in front of her between the line of sight of his colleague with the rifle. "Tell your partner to put down his rifle."

The guard glared at her saying nothing.

"Listen carefully. We're going to drive back the way we came. You're coming with us. Don't want your partner getting any ideas about using that rifle."

Defiantly, the guard shook his head. Murphy stepped closer to him suddenly punching him in the nose as hard as she could using her gloved left hand. "I'm not kidding!"

As the guard held his bleeding nose, Murphy grabbed hold of the arm of his coat pulling him toward the taxi. "Charlie, get in the car. This guy will sit in the front, and I'll hold my gun on him from the backseat." To the guard trying to stem his bleeding nose with a handkerchief, she said, "Now get moving." To the guard behind the fence, she shouted, "Put down the rifle. You shoot, your partner dies. We'll drop him off up the road after we're out of firing range."

After making it back to the main road, Murphy told Charlie to stop the car. To the mine guard seated in the passenger seat she said, "Are you with Baldwin-Felts?" The man made no response causing Murphy to push the barrel of her revolver into his neck. "Well?"

He spit out, "Yes. I'm with Baldwin-Felts."

"Thought so. Now get out. Enjoy your walk back."

Standing in the road holding his nose with the front of his coat now soaked in blood, he said, "You'll pay for this. I know your name, bitch."

Charlie put the car in gear and drove off. From the backseat Murphy said, "Are you okay?"

## FIRE IN THE HOLE

Shaken, he answered, "Yes. Don't want to go through that again though. You carry a gun?"

Murphy chuckled. "Not usually. You see I was in West Virginia a year ago during that coalminers' strike. Newspaper accounts portrayed an even more dangerous environment here in Colorado. Someone I trust recommended I protect myself."

Charlie nodded. "Glad you took that advice. Those Baldwin-Felts fellas are a nasty bunch. Their headquarters are in Trinidad. Two of them murdered a union organizer last summer right on the street. The sheriff never arrested them that I ever heard."

"Listen, Charlie, I know this was an unsettling experience. Would you rather just return to Trinidad?"

"I'm alright, Miss Murphy. Where do you want to go now?"

"Tell you what, let's go the tent colony at Ludlow since we're so close. We'll eat our lunch when we get there. Afterwards, I just want to do a walk about and take more photographs. Then we head back to Trinidad and call it a day."

Charlie smiled, relieved by the prospect of getting back to familiar surroundings. "Sounds good."

Murphy doubted that Charlie would volunteer for another such outing into the coalfields.

Only a few miles away, the Ludlow miners' tent colony looked the same as the one at Forbes although much larger. This encampment housed 1,200 miners and their families. Perhaps as many as 2,000 people total. In deference to Ludlow's importance as the principal union stronghold, another tent enclave sat on the opposite side of the railroad tracks only a quarter mile away. The khaki-colored tents housed a company of Colorado National Guard troops according to a military unit flag waving from a pole. Strategically placed to present a visible deterrent to armed striking miners.

Murphy took another series of photographs before entering the large tent marked with a painted wooden sign on a post reading *United Mine Workers of America District 15*. Inside there were several women and one man seated at tables arranged close to a potbelly stove providing some warmth. After a brief conversation with Louis Tikas the main UMW organizer at Ludlow, Murphy learned that District President John Lawson made his office in Trinidad.



## DOUGLAS CLARK

That made her immediate plans easier. Not much more to gain by visiting more tent colonies. The Berwind experience ruled out trying to photograph former company owned mining communities, much less getting photographs of the mines themselves. In Trinidad, she had access to UMW district leaders, Adjutant General Chase of the Colorado National Guard, and as the county seat, the Sheriff of Las Animas County. To attempt an audience with CF&I meant traveling to Pueblo. To interview Governor Elias Ammons required journeying further north to Denver. Pueblo was only 90 miles north and Denver another 100 miles along the same rail route. A heated rail carriage preferable to the unheated interior of an old Model T Ford on poor roads.

Arriving back in Trinidad, Charlie said, "Let me show you something. Get your camera ready. Something interesting but I can only stop for a few seconds. It's the local headquarters for Baldwin-Felts."

Instead of driving to the hotel, Charlie drove a short distance east out Elm Street. An automotive service garage with several service bays stood next to a two-story building. The door of one service bay was open with a long-wheelbase vehicle parked outside. Unusual looking given that it was surrounded by what appeared to be steel plating.

As he slowed, Charlie said, "See that thing toward the back end? That's a machine gun. I'll stop for just a couple of seconds so you can get some camera shots."

Murphy took several photos before Charlie drove on. "Strikers call it the *Death Special*. An armored car. Miners say Baldwin-Felts uses it to harass strikers by shooting up tent encampments. Rumor has it that it was constructed at CF&I's steel mill in Pueblo."



Following the confrontation at the gated entrance to the Berwind Mine, the guard struck by Keara Murphy entered the office building. Walking the distance in the cold had reduced the profuse bleeding that now darkened his overcoat and shirtfront.

Baldwin-Felts regional supervisor Leland Atwood happened to be at the mine that day following his own surveillance of the

## FIRE IN THE HOLE

Ludlow striker's tent colony. He was the first to see the injured man. "What the hell happened to you!"

Seething with anger, the man said, "Stopped a man and a woman at the gate. We tried to take them into custody when the woman pulled a gun on Belcher and me. The fuckin' bitch then hit me with the barrel of her gun."

"The woman hit you with the barrel of her gun?" Atwood looked at the man's nose. It was skewed to one side. Obviously broken. No laceration though. To a clerk seated at a desk, he said, "Fetch me a wet towel."

Once the clerk returned from the toilet with a dripping towel, Atwood took it and wiped the injured man's face clear of blood. "She did this with her gun? What kind of gun?"

"A short-barreled revolver."

"Really. Your nose is broken but there are no marks." Atwood suspected the woman hit him with her fist not her gun. "Hold still. I'm going to straighten out your nose. Going to hurt like hell."

Atwood put the towel over the man's nose and jerked it back into place. The man cried out in pain and his nose began bleeding again.

"Hold this in place until the bleed stops. Did you get their names?"

"The woman's name is Keara Murphy. Said she was a reporter from New York."

"The man?"

"A young fella. The car was a Model T taxi with markings of the *Trinidad Taxi Company*."

"Very well. Once the bleeding stops, get your ass back out to the gate and finished your shift. What's your name?"

"Clyde Maddox, Sir."

—

Baldwin-Felts made their regional headquarters in Trinidad for operations in the coalfields of Las Animas and Huerfano Counties. The following day Leland Atwood began his investigation into Keara Murphy. He knew her name from magazine articles published in *McClure's*, *Colliers*, and attribution in arti-

## DOUGLAS CLARK

cles appearing in the pro-union *New York Times* newspaper. Atwood served as regional supervisor in West Virginia during the coalfield strike in Kanawha County. When that strike was settled earlier this year, Baldwin-Felts chief Thomas Felts reassigned him to Colorado.

While Thomas Felts employed his two brothers Albert and Lee in senior positions, it was Leland Atwood that he relied on for organizational management in field operations. Atwood was a natural leader. Smart and ruthless, his inclination to use violence for achieving objectives fit well for the activities of Baldwin-Felts. He was good with a revolver and quick to use it, having killed several men. Baldwin-Felts provided him a well-paid career with prestige by characterizing his duties as a law enforcement professional.

Having come from humble rural beginnings in Virginia as the son of a tobacco farmer, Atwood however held disdain for coal miners. He viewed the mountain people of West Virginia and the foreign immigrant majority working in the Colorado coalfields as backward and inclined toward violence. Good for nothing better than digging coal. Alignment as security for the mining corporations gave Atwood a sense of superiority. Given wide-ranging latitude, he relished his power commanding a body of well-armed mercenaries.

Fearing by striking miners and union organizers, any opposition to the authority of Baldwin-Felts was met with a harsh response. Murphy's derogatory portrayal of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency during the 1912-1913 Paint Creek & Cabin Creek strike in West Virginia angered Atwood professionally. Murphy even praised the exploits of that foul-mouthed grandmother Mother Jones returning to Colorado to incite the miners to revolt as she did previously in Colorado during the 1903-1904 Cripple Creek strike. Fortunately, Jones was being held in custody in Trinidad's San Rafael Hospital under orders from General Chase exercising his authority under martial law. Perhaps Atwood might also find a way to remove Murphy from producing further pro-union publicity and negatively portraying Baldwin-Felts in national publications.

## **FIRE IN THE HOLE**