

Historical marker to John L. Lewis dedicated in Panama

In 1906, in the tiny village of Panama (population 343 in 2010), located on the border of Bond and Montgomery counties, the Chicago based Shoal Creek Coal Company sunk one of the most mechanized mines in the state of Illinois, and put the word out looking for miners to move there. In those first years, the town attracted emigrants, mostly Italians, to work the mine, but soon others populations arrived, included a Welsh family from Lucas County, Iowa, named Lewis.



John L. Lewis came to Panama in 1909, with neither a high school diploma nor a plan for his life, but circumstances soon unfolded in his favor. He began working in Panama #1 mine, but that November the Cherry Mine Disaster, which killed more than 260 miners, focused the nation's attention on mine safety, and Lewis, who had worked in the theater, knew how to fire up an audience, especially when the cause was labor. His rise in the UMWA local chapter led to his apprenticeship with Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), where he became an organizer and trouble-shooter for the union. Lewis climbed that labor union ladder, becoming vice president of the national UMWA and its president in 1920, a position he held until his retirement in 1960. Lewis was one of the most powerful labor leaders in America for nearly half a century (he died in 1968). On November Friday, November 5, 2021, the Village of Panama invited Illinois' to celebrated Lewis legacy with the unveiling of a new ISHS historical marker.



ISHS representatives Dan Monroe, president; Elaine Evans, website development; Mary Lou Johnsrud, office manager; and Chuck Stanley, chair of the ISHS Historical Markers committee, at the John L. Lewis marker dedication in Panama.

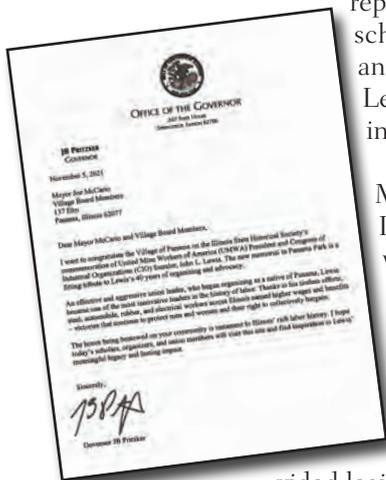
The dedication was attended by village officials, state representatives, labor leaders, school children, union historians, and the curious, who found Lewis's story astonishing and inspiring.

The event was organized by Mike Matejka, president of the Illinois Labor History Society, who enlisted the help of the Union Labor Life Insurance Company (ULLICO), which underwrote the Illinois State Historical Society (ISHS) marker. Deborah Hancock, Panama Village Clerk, provided logistical support from the community, which included a buffet lunch, a printed program, local speakers, and students to help unveil the marker on a

beautiful sunny day in John L. Lewis Park. Guest speakers included Tim Drea, President of the Illinois AFL-CIO and past Legislative and Political Director of Local 881 of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), and the son of a coal miner (and himself a former miner); John Angleton, retired Director of Illinois Mines and Minerals; Edward M. Smith, CEO ULLICO Inc., State Representative Marcus Evans Jr., 33rd District and Chair of the Illinois Labor and Commerce Committee; State Senator Doris Turner, 48th District; and village mayor Joe McCario.

Unveiling the John L. Lewis marker were 8th grade Hillsboro students Taylor VanOstran, Madison VanOstran, Olivia William, and Maryn Tarver, who earned the afternoon off school to celebrate their community's coal-mining history. Performing labor songs and leading the audience in "Solidarity Forever" was Wildflower Conspiracy, a duo from nearby Macoupin County. William Furry, executive director of the ISHS, served as master of ceremonies for the unveiling.

Panama's "Union Miner" Cemetery, located just south of town, is a beautiful resting place for many coal miners, several of whom were buried in a common grave at the front of the cemetery after a tragic mine gas explosion in 1916 that took the lives of more than 11 individuals. The inscription at the miners memorial in Panama is from John L. Lewis:



"The public does not understand, and I think never will, that spiritual fealty that exists between men who go down into the dangers of the mine and work together, that fealty of understanding and brotherhood that exists in our calling to a more pronounced degree than in any other industry. The public does not know that a man in a coal mine is not afraid of anything"



Group photo after the unveiling of the new historical marker in Panama.

Photos by William Furry

except God. That he is not afraid of injunctions or politicians, or threats, or denunciations, or verbal castigation, or slander, that he does not fear death."

The text of the new historical marker follows:

John L. Lewis—United Mine Workers of America
 United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) president and Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) founder John L. Lewis (1880-1968) came to Panama, Illinois, from Iowa with his family in 1908 to work in the mines. Within one year he was president of UMWA Local 1475. In 1909, Illinois UMWA District 12 hired him to lobby Springfield after the 1909 Cherry Mine Disaster, which killed 259. In 1911 the American Federation of Labor (AFL) hired him as an organizer. In 1919 he began the UMWA acting president, an office he was elected to in 1920 and held until 1960. The UMWA was the nation's largest union and Lewis ruthlessly held power. Frustrated Illinois miners rebelled against Lewis in 1932 and organized the Progressive Mine Workers of America (PMWA),

which led to bloody battles between insurgents and UMWS loyalists. In 1935 Lewis launched the Congress of Industrial Workers (CIO), challenging the AFL craft unions with industrial unionism, bringing millions of workers into the union movement. Lewis negotiated better wages, safety, health, welfare, and retirement programs from miners. Nationally renowned from the 1930s-1950s, famous for his bushy eyebrows, stentorian voice, and Shakespearean rhetoric, Lewis was both feared and cultivated by politicians. His support was critical to President Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 re-election, though he did not support Roosevelt in 1940. Lewis kept a Springfield home and is buried in that city's Oak Ridge Cemetery.

Sponsored by Union Labor Life Insurance Company, Village of Panama, United Mine Workers of America, Laborers International Union of North America-Midwest Region, Illinois Labor History Society, and the Illinois State Historical Society.
 November 5, 2021. 



Edward M. Smith, CEO of ULLICO Inc., addresses the crowd at the marker dedication.



State Senator Doris Turner, District 48, spoke about John L. Lewis's impact on coal miners and other industrial workers in Illinois.