

The Lattimer Massacre: Who Owns History? – An Introduction

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Formed in 1890, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) could not ignore the strategic importance of the anthracite fields of Pennsylvania. A compact area of 462 square miles produced almost all of the hard coal, a vitally important domestic fuel, in the United States. The mines employed over 100,000 men and boys. They, as all industrial workers in the era, suffered from exploitation. Although many lived in company-owned towns or patches, a large number of “free towns” provided public space for organizational meetings.

At first the UMWA's foray into the hard coal districts seemed promising. In June 1892, a union local was formed in Shamokin. Two years later, the UMWA established District One as an intermediate level of governance for its anthracite local unions. Internal bickering among the district's leadership and organizational problems combined with adverse economic conditions to erode the growth of the union.

Although compact, the anthracite area was divided into three succinct and competitive economic regions: the Schuylkill, the Lehigh, and the Wyoming. The UMWA organized only the Schuylkill region and past experience had shown that a union that did not include all three regions died quickly. Within the Schuylkill region, the union was not successful in recruiting “new” immigrants from eastern Europe who were fast becoming the major component of the industry's labor force. John Fahy, President of District One, attempted to attract the new immigrants by using foreign language speakers at rallies, but the effort was not very successful; by 1896 District One suffered an eighty per cent drop in membership.¹

1. Perry K. Blatz. *Democratic Miners: Work and Labor Relations in the Anthracite Coal Industry, 1875-1925* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 51.

Lacking sufficient strength to influence working conditions through job action, Fahy turned his attention to advancing labor's legislative agenda. His lobbying efforts, however, reflected an anti-immigrant basis. He secured an amendment of the Miners' Certificate Law of 1889 to require a candidate to answer at least twelve questions in English.² Previously, immigrants could answer all questions through an interpreter. Obviously, the revision promised to postpone, if not prevent, large numbers of immigrants from gaining access to the industry's highest paying position. Fahy also supported the passage of the Campbell Act that taxed anthracite mine operators three cents a day for each adult immigrant employee on their payrolls.³ Most mine operators shifted the odium for such blatant anti-immigrant legislation from the union onto themselves by deducting the tax from their workers' wages. It was a strategic blunder, which greatly influenced the strike of 1897.

The strike of 1897 had its origins in a highly applauded feat of engineering, the Jeddo Tunnel. The eastern middle anthracite basin is a series of parallel troughs of coal beds separated by ridges situated on the plateau-like summit of Broad Mountain. Hazleton, its principal city, is also near the geographic center of the field.

In December 1885 the Black Creek overflowed its banks, broke through a diverting dam and poured into Harleigh Number 2 mine on the north side of Hazleton. It took a week to divert the swollen creek. During that period two billion gallons of water poured into the breach flooding the mines at Harleigh and Ebervale to 150 vertical feet.⁴

The enormity of the flood precluded economical pumping forcing the abandonment of the mines. Millions of tons of un-recovered coal, however, were a prize that would not be ignored forever. In 1891 John Markle, superintendent of the nearby Jeddo mine, conceived a plan to use the area's topography to lower his own pumping expenses and reclaim the abandoned mines.

To the north lay the Butler Valley whose floor was 800 feet below the summit of Broad Mountain. Markle concluded that a tunnel driven from the valley floor to a point below the coal measures would drain the mines. Excavation of the 15,000-foot tunnel, measuring 7 by 9 feet, was completed in little more than four years. Later the tunnel was extended

2. To become an anthracite miner the candidate had to document at least two years service as a miner's laborer in the anthracite mines and successively answer a number questions posed by a committee of certified miners.

3. The courts later declared the act unconstitutional.

4. Pennsylvania Mine Inspector Reports, 1885, 121-122.

to drain the mines at Lattimer, Milnesville, Hollywood, Drifton, and the rest of the area north of Hazleton.⁵ The gravity drainage system gave these mines a great economic advantage over their southern neighbors.

In 1897, one the largest miners on Hazleton's south side, the Lehigh-Wilkes-Barre Coal Company, appointed Gomer Jones Superintendent of its Honeybrook Division with instructions to cut costs. Jones restored old working rules and fired a number of men.⁶ Part of his retrenchment program called for a centralized stable at the Company's Audenreid stripping operations.

Immigrant mule drivers at Stripping Number 5 noted that they spent an additional two hours a day traveling between the new stables and their workplace. On Saturday, August 14, the mule drivers refused to work until they received compensation for their additional time. Jones viewed the strike as a disciplinary problem and, brandishing an ax handle, threatened to beat the pickets if they did not return to work. The angry men attacked him. Jones was able to hit a striker with his club before he escaped. News of the episode spread quickly and on Monday 2,000 immigrant men and boys refused to work until the company discharged Jones.

The Lehigh-Wilkes-Barre Coal Company responded to the strike in the usual fashion. It fired foremen and clerks who sympathized with the strikers. Heavily armed Coal and Iron Police patrolled the area. The company also offered to discuss the issue after the men returned to work. But the men stood firm. The strike ended on August 23 with the company revoking the stable order and promising to investigate Jones' actions within ten days after the men returned to work.⁷

Restoration of work at Audenreid, however, proved to be only a temporary truce. The Campbell Act went into effect on August 21 and five days later immigrant mine workers at Coleraine struck for a wage increase that would cover the new tax. They marched to other mine patches in the area asking the men to join their protest. Meanwhile the Audenreid men accused the Lehigh-Wilkes-Barre Coal Company of failing to investigate Gomer Jones and walked off their jobs.⁸

5. James B. McNair, *With Rod and Transit: The Engineering Career of Thomas McNair, 1824-1901* (Los Angeles: Private Publisher, 1951), 149-159.

6. *The Daily Standard* (Hazleton). Other superintendents found fault with Jones; enforcing of "old time rules." W. R. Storrs to Samuel Sloan, August 28, 1897, Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Papers, Lackawanna Historical Society.

7. *The Daily Standard*, August 23, 1897, 1.

8. *The Daily Standard*, August 26, 1897 1; August 30, 1897, 1.

Under immigrant, not UMWA, leadership the strikers formulated a set of demands: a 15 per cent wage increase; the right to pay and select their own physician; the end to the company store system; and the same pay as "Americans." Armed with a program, the immigrants continued marching from colliery to colliery forcing the men to leave work. They soon succeeded in closing down most of the mines on the south side of Hazleton.⁹

On September 6, the operators called for the protection of the law. Three counties, Luzerne, Carbon, and Schuylkill, converged on Hazleton's south side and the three sheriffs responded. Schuylkill County Sheriff Alexander Scott took a posse to the area. Finding the strikers peaceful, he returned to Pottsville (the county seat) stating that the fifty-mile trip was a waste of the taxpayers' money.¹⁰ Sheriff James Martin of Luzerne County did not agree with Scott. Nor did Martin worry about the taxpayer. Mine operators provided the 150-man posse with weapons and paid their wages.¹¹ On September 10 Sheriff Martin's posse clashed with strikers near Lattimer.

Initially workers at A. Pardee and Company's mine in Lattimer, which lay on Hazleton's north side, remained at work. But when the immigrant workers at Pardee's Harwood colliery (located on the south side of Hazleton) joined the strike the men at Lattimer requested help in closing down their mine. In response the southside men set out for Lattimer unarmed and behind two American flags on September 10.¹²

More miners joined the parade as it moved north. At the Hazleton city limits the strikers were refused permission to march through the town. Without protest they took a circular route around the town only to meet Sheriff Martin who tried to turn them back. But the men refused, arguing that they had a right to walk on a public highway. During this confrontation members of the posse wrestled one of the American flags from its immigrant bearer breaking his arm in the process. After a time the strikers were finally permitted to proceed.

As the strikers continued marching Sheriff Martin and his deputies took a trolley to Lattimer where they established a picket line across the public highway. When the marchers arrived the sheriff ordered them to disband. Suddenly the posse opened fire. Unarmed and completely in

9. *The Daily Standard*, August 30, 1897, 1; September 7, 1897, 1.

10. *The Hazleton Weekly Sentinel*, September 9, 1897, 1; *Pottsville Republican*, September 8, 1898, 1; September 11, 1897, 1.

11. *The Hazleton Weekly Sentinel*, September 9, 1897, 5. *The Daily Standard*, October 21, 1897, 1.

12. *New York Daily Tribune*, September 12, 1897, 1 and 3.

the open; the men had no chance; when the smoke cleared more than fifty striking immigrants lay dead or wounded on the ground.¹³ The *Hazleton Daily Standard* described the episode as “butchery” and denounced the deputies as “licensed life takers.”¹⁴ But after a five-week trial Sheriff Martin and his deputies were acquitted of any wrongdoing. The verdict outraged many people who felt that justice had been denied.

After a period of initial outrage, the Lattimer Massacre faded from public memory until the United Labor Council of Lower Luzerne and Carbon Counties erected a monument to commemorate its seventy-fifth anniversary.¹⁵ As might be expected, the council interpreted the massacre as a labor event. Its brochure, published later, describes the monument as, “a monument to labor’s martyrs”.

The significance of being associated with “labor’s martyrs” can be best illustrated by the politics of the dedication. It was the time when the Miners for Democracy challenged the UMW’s establishment for control of the union. Both parties demanded and received representation on the podium. Cesar Chavez, United Farmers Workers Director, helped dedicate the monument. In 1972, however, the Farm Workers and the Teamsters were locked in a jurisdictional dispute. On the day of the dedication, September 10, 1972, the numerous flags or banners of both unions fluttered along the approach to the monument.¹⁶

While union partisans strove to identify with this “labor” event, organized ethnic groups felt overlooked. They were not formerly represented on the planning committee, but some individual members who were not aligned with organized labor advanced the ethnic position. A strong point of disagreement was the wording of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission’s roadside marker describing the event. Labor argued that the generic term “immigrant” be placed before the word “miners” on the plaque. The ethnic position was that each national group be specifically named and “miners” become the secondary term. In 1972 Labor won this debate over “who owned Lattimer?”

13. *Ibid.* Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, September 11, 1897, 1. *Pottsville Republican*, September 13, 1897, 1.

14. September 11, 1897, 1.

15. Edward Pinkowski published a short book, *The Lattimer Massacre* (Philadelphia: Sunshine Press, 1950), and Victor R. Greene discussed the event in an article, “A Study of Slavs, Strikes, and Unions: The Anthracite Strike of 1897” in *Pennsylvania History* (1964) as well as in his monograph, *The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1968). But these works enjoyed only a limited audience in the Hazleton area.

16. The author was a member of the monument planning committee.

Over the next twenty-four years the United Labor Council kept the memory of the massacre alive by sponsoring a Roman Catholic Mass, conducted, when weather permitted, outdoors at the site of the monument, on or near September 10 of each year. But the annual commemorative Mass also reopened the debate over whether Lattimer was a labor or an ethnic event.

Representatives from both the labor council and the ethnic groups sat on the planning committee for the centennial commemoration of the massacre which also included members of such organizations as the Pennsylvania Labor History Society, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Eckley Miners Village Museum Associates and the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society.

The spirit of cooperation, however, could not completely lay the question of ownership to rest. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission agreed to a second roadside marker on the event. The marker would be placed at Harwood, near the spot where the striking marchers set out for Lattimer. As before, the discussion focused on the text to be placed on the plaque. It was finally agreed that the words "Polish, Slovak, and Lithuanian," would replace the generic term "immigrant," on the second marker. The Harwood marker also included the names of the ethnic church cemeteries in which the bodies of the slain marchers were interned. For some the unveiling of the Harwood marker on the first day of the centennial ceremonies was a betrayal of labor.

The second day of the commemoration was devoted to an academic conference, which was partially funded by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. The conference considered the significance of the massacre from the ethnic and labor perspectives. Informed by the local debate, the conference also turned its attention to the "question of who owns history/" Some of the papers read at that conference are presented in this issue of *Pennsylvania History*.