

ERIE'S RAILROAD WAR:
A Case Study of Purposive Violence
for a Community's Economic Advancement

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VIOLENCE for a specific purpose has always been a central part of the politics, society, and culture of urban America. Although excessive displays of violence are obvious in the history of the United States, there exists an elaborate system of alibis, rationalizations, and historical amnesia that fosters the mistaken idea of a nation dedicated to "peaceful change." Often, Americans resort to violence when legitimate grievance procedures have been exhausted, and the Erie Railroad War is a good example of this tendency toward purposive violence.¹

Actually, the Erie Railroad War was a specific example of a larger historical problem in the nation's economic development. As Americans began constructing their railroad system, they experimented with varying track widths. This resulted in a number of different track widths which added to the cost of rail shipment and delayed the development of a unified network. Sometimes, railroads deliberately chose a different gauge to prevent diversion of traffic over other lines. In Pennsylvania and Ohio, the so-called "war of gauges" was most pronounced, since each state had railroads representing seven different track widths in the 1850s.² These "wars of gauges" often resulted in some form of violence, and the Erie war was perhaps the most hard fought and yet humorous example of the resolution of the gauge problem.

Erie's Railroad War cut across class lines, since the underlying purpose of the rioting was for furthering the commercial development of Erie in the Great Lakes region. Hence, it was for economic reasons that the people of the city of Erie and the neighboring township of

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1 Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence* (New York, 1971), v-vii; Thomas Rose, ed., *Violence in America* (New York, 1969), xix.

2 George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution* (New York, 1966), 82.

Harborcreek, in December 1853, ripped up the tracks of the Erie and North East Railroad at city crossings and wherever it crossed the public highway. This purposive violence had the support of most Erie-ites.

By December of 1853, the Erie and North East had completed its link with the chain of railroads from New York to Cleveland. This new track eliminated the break, or difference, in railroad gauges between the two east-west lines that connected at Erie.³ The advantages in this uninterrupted route were obvious to the railroad men. But Erie-ites saw this new route as another way for Midwestern trade to bypass Erie and contribute to the growth of Buffalo and the state of New York. Only this time the scheme's result was what was to become the New York Central Railroad rather than the Erie Canal. Since the railroads refused to extend their tracks to Erie's harbor and ran them more than a mile from the lake front, the danger of being bypassed commercially seemed real enough to the citizens of Erie.⁴

Because the New York and Erie Railroad and the New York Central had to cross Pennsylvania to establish their connections with Ohio, Erie-ites enlisted the state government in their struggle for economic survival. In response to Erie's plea, Governor William Bigler stated that "Pennsylvania holds the key . . . between East and West, and . . . it is the right and duty of the State to turn her natural advantages to the promotion of the views and welfare of her own people."⁵ Although the commonwealth frowned upon Erie's violent methods, it approved of Erie's objectives and supported its cause in the state legislature and the state courts.

In the early 1850s, there was a multiplicity of gauges in the nation's railroad network. On the New York and Ohio sides of northwestern Pennsylvania, the Buffalo and State Line Railroad and the Cleveland, Painesville, and Ashtabula Railroad used a four-feet-ten-inch gauge. Thus, the Erie and North East Railroad was situated with eighteen miles of six-foot track between two railroads of four-feet-ten-inch gauge. If the directors of the Erie and North East Railroad could be persuaded to use the four-feet-ten-inch gauge, traffic could

3 "Charter of Erie and North East Railroad," Spencer family archives in possession of J. T. Spencer of Erie.

4 See John Miller, *A Twentieth Century History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1909), 1: 267-93.

5 George E. Reed, ed., 4th ser., *Pennsylvania Archives* (Harrisburg, 1902), 7: 651.

move uninterrupted from Cleveland to Buffalo and effectively bypass Erie completely.⁶

To prevent this from happening, state senator John H. Walker, an Erie and North East director, helped to pass the Pennsylvania Gauge Law on March 11, 1852, which froze the size of the existing railroad gauges within Pennsylvania. With this legal maneuver, Erie relaxed and felt less threatened. But the New York and Ohio interests went to work on the 1853 session of the Pennsylvania legislature. After they allegedly spent \$50,000 in bribes, the Gauge Law was repealed on April 11, 1853.⁷ Erie-ites now knew that large economic corporations could bend the law to suit their purposes.

By the summer of 1853, Erie-ites were also losing control of their railroad. Since the Erie and North East had paid its contractors with a large part of its bond issue and the contractors had sold them to the New York and Ohio interests, two-thirds control was now in the hands of the enemy. Under threat of losing their positions, the directors and officers of the Erie and North East signed a contract with the Buffalo and State Line Railroad to make the changeover to a four-foot-ten-inch gauge on November 17, 1853.⁸ With this action, another nonviolent means of stopping the railroads was eliminated.

Meanwhile on July 19, 1853, the city councils of Erie (each ward in Erie had its own council, and they met in combined session for the entire city) had adopted an ordinance to prohibit a change of gauge, and they further ordered the high constable to remove any new four-foot-ten-inch tracks from the city streets.⁹ On November 14, 1853, the Erie and North East directors had presented a compromise to the city councils. In return for the gauge change, the directors said that:

1. an engine house and repair shop would be built in Erie.
2. the proposed Erie and Pittsburgh Railroad would be built.
3. help would be given in the construction of a link between Erie and the New York and Erie Railroad by way of Jamestown, New York.

Although this seemed like a fair proposal, many similar promises by the railroads had been broken, so the councils bowed to the pressure of public opinion and resolved to enforce the July 19, 1853, ordinance.¹⁰

6 Laura G. Sanford, *The History of Erie County, Pennsylvania* (Erie, 1894), 349-52.

7 1853 *Pennsylvania Legislature* (Harrisburg, 1853), 366.

8 Sanford, 120.

9 *Erie Observer*, July 23, 1853.

10 *Erie Gazette*, Nov. 17, 1853.

Fear and distrust of the railroad now became the primary motivating factors in the minds of most Erie-ites.

As the tension mounted, the mayor of Erie issued a proclamation "calling on the citizens of Erie . . . to hold themselves in readiness . . . to assist in maintaining the ordinances and peace of the city," after November 21, 1853. To legitimize their violent threats, three eminent Erie lawyers issued a lengthy legal opinion ruling that the city could remove tracks and bridges from the streets. In addition, the city cancelled the railroad's franchise, since the railroad had violated its charter by not laying track to the harbor. Consequently, the railroad track was declared a public nuisance.¹¹ Later, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court would uphold this opinion.¹²



REMOVAL OF THE STATE ST. BRIDGE • ERIE, PA.
DECEMBER 7, 1853

(Courtesy of Security-Peoples Trust Company of Erie, Pennsylvania)

On December 7, 1853, the Erie and North East Railroad began to change its track, and Erie started to gather its forces against the railroad. Mayor Alfred King, leading the high constable, city dignitaries, 150 special police officers, and an excited crowd, rode a sway-backed horse up State Street to a wooden trestle which spanned Mill Creek. Municipal authorities and citizens of Erie tore down the bridges over State and French streets and ripped up track. Although some railroad men tried to interfere, most of them left town after being pelted with stones and rotten eggs. On the following day, the citizens and road commissioners of Harborcreek tore up a mile and a half of track and burned a railroad bridge where it coincided with the public highway.¹³ Thus, after every legal channel of protest was exhausted, violence appeared to be the only solution for the citizens of Erie.

11 Ibid., Nov. 24, Dec. 1, 1853.

12 *Commonwealth v. The Erie and North East Railroad Company, Pennsylvania State Reports*, 27: 339-79.

13 *Erie Gazette*, Dec. 15, 1853.

After these incidents, the railroad quickly replaced the track in Harborcreek, but it was removed again and the bridge was destroyed once more. On December 17, 1853, the railroad obtained an injunction from the United States Circuit Court in Pittsburgh to stop persons from "interfering with the change of . . . gauge." Although the United States marshal served the injunction and the railroad thought it was safe, the people of Erie and Harborcreek continued to rip up tracks as fast as they were relaid.¹⁴

On December 27, 1853, the most serious conflict between the citizens of Erie and Harborcreek and the railroad took place. The people of Harborcreek were busily ripping up track, when a train from Buffalo rolled up carrying some three-hundred men. The men were led by a conductor named Coughlin and a Superintendent Dennis of the Buffalo and State Line Railroad. As Coughlin and Dennis drew near the "Rippers," a fight broke out, and the farmers surrounded the two men and threatened them. Coughlin pulled out his pistol and tried to fire it, but it misfired twice. On the third attempt, the gun went off, and the ball hit a "Ripper" named George Nelson in the head. The impact knocked him cold but did not kill him, since the bullet grazed the skull. Nevertheless, the "Rippers" thought he had been killed.

The crowd became angry and chased the two railroad men back to the train in spite of efforts by laborers and trackmen to stop them. Fearing for his life, Coughlin hopped a locomotive and fled to safety in New York State. Meanwhile, the crowd grew more incensed and demanded that Dennis, who had remained, be handed over to them. Dennis said that he had not shot the man and refused to surrender himself to anyone but a lawman. Consequently, the crowd rushed the train and several men forced their way onto it. In the meantime, a railroad official went forward to the locomotive and started it for the New York line with two or three extra passengers from Harborcreek.¹⁵

As the train left, the mayor of Erie, the sheriff, all of the Erie military companies, and half the people of Erie arrived on the scene. Flaring tempers and wild speeches ensued until the sheriff took possession of the track and prohibited any further work on it. The sheriff said the matter should be settled in the courts, but he appointed

¹⁴ *Pittsburgh Legal Journal*, Dec. 17, 24, 1853.

¹⁵ *Erie Gazette*, Dec. 29, 1853.

Morrow B. Lowry, a leader of the "Ripper" party, to enforce the peace.¹⁶

Since the train had carried off, or "Shanghaied," two or three Harborecreek men, the party opposing the "Rippers" was called "Shanghaiis." Of course these two groups were bitterly hostile to each other. The overwhelming majority of Erie-ites were "Rippers," except those that were directors, stockholders, and employees of the railroads. The list of the "Ripper" party included almost every prominent political, business, and religious leader in Erie. Mayor Alfred King was the nominal leader, but Morrow B. Lowry, director of the Sunbury and Erie Railroad, was the real head, since he wanted his railroad to build the line to Erie's harbor. Lowry would later become a state senator. Other prominent "Rippers" were the Reverend G. B. Lyon of the First Presbyterian Church; Gideon J. Ball, former state treasurer and Erie's state representative; and James Thompson, a former United States congressman and soon to become the chief justice of Pennsylvania.¹⁷

The "Shanghai" leaders were related to the railroad in some way. The most important was John A. Tracy, president of the Erie and North East Railroad. The most despised was John H. Walker, railroad director, Whig party head of Erie County, and former president of the state senate. Since Walker had helped to pass the Gauge Law of 1852 and then sided with the railroad, he was regarded as a traitor.¹⁸

After a federal injunction protecting the Erie and North East was issued, the city of Erie began to remove the tracks of the Franklin Canal Company, a subsidiary of the Cleveland, Painesville, and Ashtabula, from the city streets to insure the break in gauges. But the Cleveland, Painesville, and Ashtabula secured an injunction from the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to "stay waste" until the legality of the railroads' actions could be decided. At this point, the railroads offered another compromise.¹⁹ The railroads offered to release the ringleaders of the "Rippers" that had been jailed in Pittsburgh, if the city would permit the relaying of the tracks until the dispute could be adjudicated. However, the Erie city councils flatly refused this offer.²⁰

Subsequently, Mayor Alfred King and Morrow B. Lowry were

16 Ibid., Jan. 12, 1854.

17 Ibid., Sept. 1, 1853; Miller, 1: 279, 292, 803-4. See also A. K. McClure, *Old Time Notes of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1905), 1: 228-32.

18 Miller 1: 278.

19 *Pittsburgh Legal Journal*, Dec. 31, 1853.

20 *New York Tribune*, Jan. 10, 1854.

arrested for contempt of court on January 11, 1854. They were charged with hindering the United States marshal in arresting "Rippers." King and Lowry left Erie for a Pittsburgh jail the next day after a mass demonstration in their favor.²¹ On January 13, the United States marshal was arrested by Erie authorities for false imprisonment. He was bailed out quickly, but the incident created a national uproar.

On January 17, 1854, the nation was startled by a story that a group of Erie women had torn up the bridges over State and French streets. In actuality, the women who destroyed the bridges were men in disguise.²²

By early 1854, the Erie Railroad War was a national issue. In a cabinet meeting, President Franklin Pierce was asked by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to send in federal troops to defend the mail route. However, Pierce took a more cautious approach, and he followed the advice of his postmaster general, Jesse Campbell of Pennsylvania, who did not denounce Erie's actions. President Pierce stated that he wanted to make sure that all judicial processes were exhausted before he sent in the troops.²³

The issue was also discussed in Congress, but the track-ripping was subsiding as the Pennsylvania legislature took measures to insure the "break" at Erie. By late January 1854, Lowry, Mayor King, and four Harborcreek "Rippers" were freed, and after appearing before mass meetings in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, they returned to Erie in triumph.²⁴

New legal developments gave Erie-ites hope. By action of the Pennsylvania legislature in 1854, the charters of both the Erie and North East Railroad and the Franklin Canal Company, a subsidiary of the Cleveland, Painesville, and Ashtabula, were repealed, and the railroads were ordered to extend the line to Erie's harbor.²⁵ A year dragged on and the controversy became a legal imbroglio in the Pennsylvania courts. When the Erie and North East balked at moving its terminal into the city of Erie, the public rose up against the railroad again on January 8, 1855. This was one day after the courts had ordered the Erie and North East to relocate its Erie terminal within the city limits. Upon failing to relocate the terminal, a group of Erie citizens burned bridges and ripped up tracks of the Erie and North East,

21 *Pittsburgh Legal Journal*, Jan. 21, 1854; *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 1854.

22 *Erie Gazette*, Jan. 19, 1854.

23 *New York Tribune*, Jan. 24, 1854; Miller, 1: 291.

24 *Erie Gazette*, Feb. 2, 1854.

25 *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1854; *Erie Observer*, Apr. 7, 1855.

and Harborcreek quickly followed suit. The sheriff tried to raise a posse but to no avail. The sheriff appealed to the mayor, but he was too busy, since he had guests for dinner.²⁶

But this time the city of Erie seemed less resolute in its fight with the railroad. Leading "Rippers" apologized for the actions of the mob. However, no one was punished for this outbreak. The tracks were quickly replaced and were not disturbed again.

The effects of this issue had divided the town. Merchants favoring the railroads were boycotted. "Ripper" children attacked "Shanghai" children. The Presbyterian church was split in Erie, and the "Shanghais" formed Park Presbyterian Church to get away from the "Rippers." In respectable circles, fist fights and brawls over the issue were common.²⁷

Gradually, a legal solution emerged. The railroad was permitted to build tracks with no "break," if they would construct a line to Erie's harbor and relocate a highway in Harborcreek Township. Finally, the Cleveland to Erie Railroad subscribed \$500,000 to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad for the connection to Erie harbor.²⁸

Erie's Railroad War did not prevent the change of gauge, since the standard gauge of four-feet-eight-and-one-half-inches was coming into use. But the railroads were forced to build a line to the harbor. The New York Central did not reap the benefits of this line, since it granted the privilege of building the harbor line to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad, which later became a part of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Basically, the Erie war of gauges was a clash of economic and political interests. The local and state political units fought the economic power of the railroads through the law, until they felt the railroads were circumventing the law. After legal recourse was frustrated, violence resulted. But it was a type of violence that unified most of the community against a large economic power that threatened to strangle Erie commercially. Probably, the incident anticipated the agitation of the Granger movement and antimonopoly feelings that developed after the Civil War. The discussion over federal intervention to keep the mails moving foreshadowed the action of President Cleveland in the Pullman Strike several decades later. Similarly, the state's revocation of the charters of the Franklin Canal Company and the Erie and North

26 *Erie Observer*, Jan. 13, 1855.

27 Miller, 1: 292.

28 *Erie Gazette*, July 24, 1856.

East Railroad and their subsequent seizure anticipated later actions by the government to curb violence and enforce its policies.

When the purposive violence finally subsided, Erie forgot or repressed its actions. Leading "Rippers" refused to discuss the matter in later years. Gradually, the idea developed that the Erie Railroad War was an unlawful attempt to stop progress. The idea of fighting for commercial survival did not seem to salve the collective guilt of the community. So, the Erie Railroad War was relegated to a mythical past, where it was hoped that it would soon be forgotten. Not unlike other communities experiencing violence unrelated to class conflict, it was thought, in retrospect, to be an unfortunate aberration in an otherwise law-abiding community. In this case, purposive violence for the sake of economic development had the support of all groups within the community, but almost as quickly as Erie won a suitable compromise, the corporate enemy, the railroad, became a symbol of progress again. When the economic needs were satisfied, the purposive violence subsided and was forgotten.²⁹

29 I am indebted to Director Donald Kent, Bureau of Archives, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, for his earlier article on this subject which appeared in *Pennsylvania History* 15, no. 4 (Oct. 1948) : 253-75. I also wish to thank Professor Stuart Campbell, archivist, Mercyhurst College Archives, and his assistant, David Horvath, for their assistance in this project.