Letters of introduction for Homestead history

PITTSBURGHER Jean Weaver sent the two letters that follow this introduction to John Herbst, executive director of the Historical Society, and he showed them to me. The first letter is about Weaver’s family on the Kovar side, and the other one came to her (and then on to John Herbst) from her cousin, Richard Kovar. He graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1951, moved to Washington, D.C. to work for the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Army, and is now vice president of a consulting firm.

Letters can be especially informative and provocative. When people don’t expect their words to be published, the writing is less self-conscious. Un-self-conscious writing is often more conversational, like people speaking. And if people wrote more like they talked, a lot would be better understood. After reading their words, I called Weaver and Kovar and they said it was fine to publish them.

Weaver had already asked that her cousin’s letter be put in the Historical Society’s Archives because of his personal recollections of the 1937 steel industry strike. Her letter and her cousin’s were edited slightly for publication here. I left the genealogy parts of both letters pretty much intact because it struck me that you usually see such historical detail only about rich, prominent families. Secondly, Grandfather Weaver, in his immigration from England, reversed the chain migration norm: he came as a child, looking to later bring his parents, whereas typically the male household head came first and hoped his family could follow. And lastly, I thought the whole thing just made the best sense this way.

Kovar’s letter vividly demonstrates some of the reasons that so many local families think the 1892 lockout and strike in Homestead is worth remembering in its centennial year. The letters serve, as well, to introduce the work of another native, Paul Krause, a leading authority on Homestead’s history. Due to the arrival of his work after the rest of the issue had headed to the press, this issue turned into a striking July Fourth “theme issue” right at the last moment. Within Krause’s essay is a list of Homestead-related events going on this Summer 1992.

Editor

Dear Mr. Herbst,

Here is a letter from my cousin Dick Kovar with a personal memory of the 1937 Steel Strike which might be interesting to HSWP.

Dick (Richard D.) Kovar grew up in Carrick on Claus Avenue. Bob was his older brother. Bob came safely through the war, WWII, and then stayed in the U.S. Air Corps and, shocking to us all, was killed in 1947 testing a jet plane. His mother, my Aunt Jennie, now in her 90s, lives in Nazareth, Pa. The Kovar family shared the house with Grandma and Granddad Weaver. Granddad Weaver came to America as a teenager to get work, with the ambition of bringing his parents to the USA and giving them a better life, my father told me.

You see, Dick and I are “double cousins.” His father was my mother’s brother and his mother was my father’s sister; we shared the same four grandparents — the Weavers, who came to Pittsburgh from England in the 1880s, and the other two from Czechoslovakia, with Dick’s father as a young child, by way of Canada around 1912. We all lived within blocks of one another, although our block was in Brentwood, so we did not go to the same schools. Nevertheless we all grew up in the same Presbyterian Church in Carrick, Concord Presbyterian Church. Another interesting family relationship is that when Granddad James Weaver immigrated as a boy, he stayed with a family, the Downings, who had come earlier from England and were known by his parents. In time, he and Esther, the young daughter in the Downing family, fell in love and married.

Granddad Weaver worked for Carnegie all his life and never made enough income to keep his family of seven always comfortable. But Granddad never blamed Carnegie management for his poverty. Nor did my dad. They were all opposed to unions and unionizing. Their instincts were all for loyalty to the company.

My dad left school after eighth grade to help support their family. And his brothers John and Walt left high school early for the same reason. John worked for the post office and Walt for the Post-Gazette. Aunt Jennie finished school and went on to teach in the Pittsburgh schools before she married. Uncle Tim did not finish high school either. He enlisted during WWI and after the war went into the mill. Now one generation later all of us have college degrees, which is an American success story in a way.

So there you are.

Jean Weaver

Dear Jean,

I was delighted to read the article that you sent from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892.

The Homestead Strike was one of the landmark events in the American labor movement, and I have read widely varying interpretations of it. I think I first read about it in a book called Right Here in Pittsburgh, a collection of historical pieces written decades ago by a Pittsburgh Press columnist. A book I read in high school, possibly a textbook, treated the incident as an anarchist
riot and took the side of Carnegie and Frick, though most histories since make much of the restraint (compared to lots of other strikes then and since) shown by the workers.

The main outcome of the strike’s failure, as best as I can tell, was the infamous 12-hour work day, which meant that if the man on the next shift at the mill didn’t show up for work, you had to work a 36-hour day — and at no extra pay.

As the Post-Gazette noted, the aims of the Homestead strike, including eight-hour shifts, were not achieved until 1937, when USSteel recognized the Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC). What the paper didn’t note was that it was a company-wide strike in that year, which many feared would be more violent than the 1892 one, that forced USSteel to yield.

I’d like to read a good account of that 1937 strike sometime because I have two vivid memories associated with it, though I was only 8 years old. I woke up early one morning to hear Mom crying in the hall outside her bedroom, a very unusual event. Dad had just left for work, and she explained that she was afraid “the strikers” would hurt him. As a foreman he was required and entitled to cross the picket lines each day, but other men (strike-breakers, probably) had been beaten up at the main gate the day before and their cars had been turned over and burned. Later, possibly that same day, I remember Dad coming home tired and shaken. He said the strikers had in fact rocked his car but that someone in the crowd had called out, “That’s Tim Kovar, he’s OK,” and they had let him pass. But then mounted state troopers rode into the crowd swinging their billy clubs, and a number of men were badly hurt.

Dad, who by 1937 had worked himself up from a laborer to become a self-taught machinist and then a foreman at the Edgar Thomson Works in Braddock, was a “company man.” But USSteel patronized and, some would say, exploited Dad and his fellow foremen, classifying them as management to keep them out of the union, passing around certificates and badges and extra responsibilities as status symbols, but holding down their pay to, eventually, less than lots of unionized workers.

Dad’s earnings and job satisfaction peaked during World War II, when he was put in charge of an old billet mill, which he had to reopen and staff with crews of brawny women, whose fathers and husbands had gone off to war. When the war ended, Dad was responsible for closing down the no-longer-needed billet mill; he sent the women workers home to their returning men. Then the company told him that since another man had taken over his former foreman’s position while he ran the billet mill, there was no management job to go back to. The year his oldest son returned from the war, Dad was back in the “yard” of the finishing mill where he had formerly been the foreman, and at a lower wage than before the war. Eventually he got his pre-war job back, and early in the 1950s the company had a portrait photograph taken of him for publication in the USSteel company magazine as an example of an immigrant who had risen to management rank.

At the end, however, management scammed Dad and others into a phony pension deal that enabled the company, by retiring the men a few years early, to reneg on a huge chunk of their promised retirement pay. Then they replaced the up-from-the-ranks veterans with newly graduated engineers.

Although I remember Dad’s disappointment at his early retirement, it wasn’t he but my older brother Bob who told me how the company had pulled a sort of bait-and-switch deal on Dad. Bob, who worked at the mill for a year, heard the story from Dad’s friends, and later a fraternity brother of mine who was staff assistant to Dad’s superintendent confirmed some of the details.

Though he might complain about individual bosses, Dad always spoke well of the company in my hearing. Curiously (to me, anyway), the unions were casually disparaged in our household, which included my mother’s parents, in whose house we lived. Granddad Weaver was a retired steelworker who as a teenager had immigrated from England and had somehow managed to raise a large family and buy a house on a non-union steelworker’s wages and a pittance of a pension (the children’s wages helped). It was his view — and probably my parents’ — that union-organized strikes did more harm than good by putting men out of work and by promoting violence and injury.

My brothers and I naturally absorbed these attitudes, and there were no union families in our neighborhood to contradict them. It wasn’t until I worked in the mill myself one summer, and heard the horror stories the old-timers told of the pre-1937 days, that my perspective changed and I came to appreciate what the workers and their unions had suffered and achieved. And later on, my brother’s account of the shabby treatment Dad had received further altered my attitude toward the company.

Dad never again referred to his experience with the strikers but provided a curious footnote to it some years later when I happened to admire some parading state troopers and their horses. “Pennsylvania Cossacks!” he snarled suddenly, though he never explained his outburst. I suppose it had something to do with what he saw during the strike. Then, in the 1950s, I came across a man who had been a plant superintendent in 1937. When I told him about my father’s experience crossing the picket line in Braddock, this man regaled me with the plans he had laid for putting down the 1937 strike at his own plant. He had the local state police commander in his pocket, and they were going to use tear gas and shotguns to drive the strikers away from the mill gates. He said he was disgusted when USSteel’s Pittsburgh management settled the strike before he could “break” the local SWOC organizers.

After all of these years since the 1892 and 1937 strikes, I have clearly come down on the side of the
workers and the unions, but my dad and granddad never did. Despite their low wages and their gutted pensions, they were loyal and grateful to the company for the chance to better themselves in America. Neither of them finished high school, but by the time I was born they were wearing suits and ties to the mill and between them they managed to own and hold onto a home throughout the Depression, and nobody in my generation had to quit school to go to work.

Today most of our children have finished college and are well-launched. I feel like we are the fortunate survivors and beneficiaries of that painful process begun in 1892 by Granddad’s generation and consummated in 1937 by Dad’s. We owe a great debt to those who did not survive or benefit from the struggle themselves.

Much love,
Dick

RETHINKING THE HOMESTEAD LOCKOUT ON THE FOURTH OF JULY
by Paul Krause

ONE hundred years ago, in the summer of 1892, Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick initiated the most infamous labor dispute of industrializing America. After a decade-long struggle to unseat the trade unions that had effectively shared in the management of the Homestead Steel Works, Carnegie and Frick decided, as the latter put it, to finally “operate the plant ourselves.” The Homestead Lockout began on 29 June, when Frick shut down the giant steelworks and announced, on Carnegie’s orders, that the company would no longer employ any worker who carried a union card. In so doing, they challenged 3,800 steelworkers and their families. The workers responded by sealing off the mill — and the entire town — to prevent scab labor from resuming operations. Frick quickly moved to dispatch 300 agents from the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to dislodge the workers. When the Pinkertons arrived by river barge in the early morning of 6 July, they were greeted by thousands of armed townspeople, prepared to die in defense of their rights.1

In the violent day-long confrontation that followed, three Pinkertons and seven workers were killed; other steelworkers were seriously wounded in the attack. The death of the workers and the wounding of their colleagues touched all of the town’s principal ethnic and occupational groups and underscored the extent to which this working community reflected an exceptional model of American unity. Indeed, the casualties constituted no less than a cross section of the town’s population: Welshman John Morris and Irishman Thomas Weldon were highly skilled steelworkers; Silas Wain was an English mill hand; Henry Striegel, a German teamster; Peter Fares and Joseph Sotak, immigrant laborers from Slovakia; and Civil War veteran George Rutter, a “native-born” American.2

Five days after the “battle of the barges,” on 11 July, Homestead’s remarkable solidarity began to crumble when, at the request of Frick, Gov. Robert E. Pattison mobilized the entire Pennsylvania State Militia of 8,500 men to retake the mill and the town. By the end of the summer, state authorities, acting in cooperation with the Carnegie Steel Company, had brought more than 100 indictments against the leading steelworkers on charges of riot, conspiracy, murder, and treason. Only a few of the steelworkers were ever tried, and none was convicted, but the combined authority of the state and one of the largest manufacturing establishments in the

Paul Krause is an assistant professor of history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. A specialist on nineteenth-century labor history, Krause earned his Ph.D. from Duke University. His book, The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel, is being published by the University of Pittsburgh Press this summer to coincide with the centennial of the Homestead Lockout.