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## THE ALLE-KISKI COAL WARS, 1913-1919

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**I**N March 1916, the United Mine Workers of America began a campaign to organize the miners of the Allegheny and Kiskiminetas valleys. For UMWA organizers the Alle-Kiski<sup>1</sup> was Black Valley, a region known to be inhospitable to organized labor. The valley's antilabor tradition was first established during the ill-fated Apollo mill strike in 1893. The local lodge of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers refused to accept the wage scale offered by the Apollo Iron and Steel Company. Members also demanded the right to establish work rules within the plant and walked off their jobs when management refused to accept their demands. The timing of the strike was not fortuitous, for Henry Clay Frick had broken a major strike by the Amalgamated at Homestead a year before. George McMurtry, president of Apollo Steel, ordered the strikers to come to terms with the company in ten days or face the consequences. When the union failed to comply, McMurtry hired local farm boys to break the strike and led them through the picket lines himself. In ensuing decades the antilabor tradition in the Alle-Kiski became firmly entrenched as the valley supplied strikebreakers for

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1 The Allegheny-Kiskiminetas Valley is known locally as the Alle-Kiski.

industrial conflicts in Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia.<sup>2</sup> The UMWA campaign in the Alle-Kiski suggests that Black Valley's reputation was well deserved.

Situated north of Pittsburgh, the Alle-Kiski region emerged as an important coal and steel producing center during the three decades preceding World War I. The Pennsylvania Railroad, which ran the full length of the valley, had always been an important coal consumer. However, the establishment of steel mills in Saltsburg, Apollo, Vandergrift, Leechburg, Natrona, Brackenridge, and New Kensington sharply increased the demand for coal. By 1900 coal mines operated in or near all Alle-Kiski mill towns. Independent coal operators such as Lewis Hicks owned more than a dozen mines in Leechburg, Avonmore, Apollo, and Vandergrift. "Captive" mines such as Allegheny Coal and Coke, owned and operated by Allegheny Steel in Natrona, also flourished in the valley.

The availability of coal, undeveloped real estate, navigable rivers for barge traffic, and access to the Pennsylvania Railroad encouraged an industrial boom in the Alle-Kiski during the 1890s. Steelmaker George McMurtry created Vandergrift and moved his operation there in 1897. Within two decades that facility became American Sheet and Tin Plate Company, employing more than 5,000 workers in its thirty-two mills. In 1891 not a single heavy industry existed in New Kensington. By 1901 more than a dozen aluminum, glass, steel, and heavy machinery plants operated in the community.<sup>3</sup> The sudden concentration of industrial operations not only stimulated the growth of the local coal industry, but also brought about dramatic changes in the demography of the Alle-Kiski.

Prior to the industrial boom, the resident population of the Alle-Kiski was relatively homogeneous. Workers of English, Scots-Irish, and German ancestry left local farms for the mills and mines of the region. Industrialization, however, also attracted southern and eastern Europeans to the valley. Polish and Lithuanian workers displaced the native American founders of East Vandergrift during the first two decades of the twentieth century. School board meetings were sometimes conducted in Polish in that community. North Vandergrift became a Slovak hamlet. Large Italian communities were established in Vandergrift Heights and Arnold. Calabrians who did not work in the mills went into the mines. The UMWA local in Apollo con-

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Roy and Harvey Bruner, steelworkers, May 20, 1978; *First 75 Years: A History of Vandergrift* (Vandergrift, Pa., 1972).

<sup>3</sup> *New Kensington Dispatch*, Nov. 28, 1901.

ducted its meetings in Italian, and organizers were fluent in that language.<sup>4</sup>

The American-born population of the Alle-Kiski was clearly uneasy about the rush of alien workers to their valley. The *New Kensington Dispatch* felt compelled to warn its readership against "imported labor" scares generated by "newspaper sensation-chasers" in the Pittsburgh press. The utilization of foreign workmen as scabs reinforced the nativism of established resident workers and exacerbated tensions between them and the newcomers on the job. In 1902 a howling mob of 1,500 persons attempted to lynch three Italians in New Kensington. The three men were scabs in a local mine and were harassed by strikers. They responded by shooting two striking miners during a fight. Local authorities saved their lives by barricading the Italians in the local railroad station until a train was able to carry them to safety. Black workers, scab or otherwise, were no more welcome in the Alle-Kiski than were Europeans. Local citizens complained bitterly about 100 "bad negroes" employed at a federal government dam project near Barking, located on the Allegheny River below New Kensington. The encampment represented the single largest concentration of black workers in the valley and local authorities clearly wanted them to leave.<sup>5</sup> When the UMWA entered the Alle-Kiski it would find that race and ethnicity were barriers to unionization which were no less formidable than the opposition of the coal operators.

In September 1913, the UMWA attempted to organize coal miners in the Harwick district, site of the infamous mine disaster of 1904 in which 180 miners died.<sup>6</sup> Harwick was located at the southern extreme of the Alle-Kiski, and the importance of a union victory there was clear to both coal operators and the UMWA. The Harwick strike was a prelude to a maximum union organizing effort in the Alle-Kiski. A UMWA success at Harwick was not merely a matter of establishing the first union foothold in Black Valley. Many Harwick district mines straddled the Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad, which hauled coal, coke, and ore to the mills of United States Steel. A union success at Harwick could only have been construed by unorganized miners as a victory against an industrial titan. Deter-

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4 Interview with Poleslan Stemplinski, steelworker, Dec. 15, 1978. Robert Szymczak, "East Vandergrift — Across the Atlantic to Morning Sun: An Informal History of East Vandergrift," in *First 75 Years: A History of Vandergrift*; interview with Giuseppe Steri, coal miner, May 18, 1978 (hereafter cited as Steri interview).

5 *New Kensington Dispatch*, Sept. 16, 1893, June 19, 1902, Sept. 1, 1899.

6 *New Kensington Dispatch*, Jan. 28, 1904.

mined to avert such a victory, coal operators brought in thugs and strikebreakers. The miners retaliated with picket lines and sabotage. After three years of protracted violence and deprivation at Harwick, the union reported that only one of the original striking miners remained in the battle.<sup>7</sup>

A union contract ended the Harwick conflict in September 1916. The favorable Harwick settlement was timely, for UMWA morale and unity were at a low ebb. In March 1916, the union had plunged into the heart of the Alle-Kiski, even though it had not yet signed a contract with the Harwick operators. Although weakened by the three-year war of attrition at Harwick, the UMWA gambled, vowing to organize all miners in the valley. Local coal operators not involved in the Harwick struggle had watched the conflict with interest and were prepared for the union when it opened its campaign against their mines. However, the furious counterattack mounted by the coal barons was not solely responsible for the union's problems. Internal dissension and a failure of leadership posed threats to UMWA workers which were no less serious.

The history of the UMWA is marked by factionalism, localism, regionalism, clashing personalities, and conflicts born of individual ambition. District Five, which encompassed Pittsburgh and most of southwestern Pennsylvania, reflected the national experience of the union. The UMWA had come in force to District Five at the turn of the century. A bitter internal power struggle developed in 1906 when Francis Feehan defeated incumbent Patrick Dolan for the district presidency. Feehan was committed to an aggressive organizing campaign in his district and he began a drive to win nonunion miners in the Greensburg area of Westmoreland County, directly east of Pittsburgh. The UMWA national president, Thomas Lewis, criticized the timing of the strike. Dolan loyalists also opposed it, and their locals did all they could to disrupt the organizing drive. The guerrilla warfare continued long after Feehan's vice-president, Van Bittner, assumed the district presidency in 1912.<sup>8</sup>

Bittner was no less committed to organizing nonunion miners in his district than Feehan had been. Although his locals were in a chronic state of revolt, he expanded the UMWA campaign into Harwick in 1913, and to the New Kensington, Apollo, Vandergrift,

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<sup>7</sup> Report by Van Bittner, president, District Five, United Mine Workers, *United Mine Workers Journal*, Sept. 21, 1916.

<sup>8</sup> John Brophy, *A Miner's Life: An Autobiography* (Madison, Wisc., 1964), 132-36; Pat Fagan Oral History Transcript, Pennsylvania Historical Collection and Labor Archives, Pennsylvania State University.

and Saltsburg areas in 1916. The Dolan forces continued to cripple the campaign and were aided in their efforts by Al Hamilton, publisher of *Coal Trade Bulletin*. Hamilton, a reputed friend of Dolan, fed inside union information supplied by Dolan's spies to the coal operators when it suited his purposes. Although the precise nature of his loyalties is not clear, this "shady entrepreneurial character" sowed the seeds of dissension wherever he went. Van Bittner, a fighter, met the challenge. This tough and aggressive UMWA advocate pressed the Harwick strike for three years in defiance of the machinations of union defectors, fixers, and coal operators. However, his personality and leadership qualities were not assets in a situation which required tact as well as courage. Bittner appeared unable to solve problems which demanded conciliation and compromise. In July 1916, Harwick district coal operators finally came to the bargaining table. Bittner was unable to obtain an agreement on a uniform wage scale from his locals.<sup>9</sup>

The controversy precipitated a major upheaval in District Five. A wage scale committee headed by John L. Lewis, union statistician, editor of the *United Mine Workers Journal*, and future president of the UMWA, was sent in by union headquarters to settle the dispute. A uniform scale was adopted. Van Bittner resigned and took a staff job with the union national office. Philip Murray was appointed president of District Five.<sup>10</sup> From that point on District Five assumed a demeanor not unlike that exhibited by neighboring District Two. That district, which included Cambria and Clearfield counties, had forty thousand miners dispersed among its 170 locals. Under the consistent and firm leadership of its district president, John Brophy, internecine strife had been virtually eliminated. With Philip Murray, a man of "easy and conciliatory manner," internal peace would at last come to District Five. Murray was a man inclined "to steer his way carefully through a mess" rather than "push things to a showdown."<sup>11</sup>

The leadership crisis and district reorganization had weakened but not broken the organizing campaign in the Alle-Kiski. Although Philip Murray had replaced Bittner's hard-line approach with one that was more conciliatory, he was no less committed to the struggle than his predecessor had been. Under his leadership controversies con-

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<sup>9</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York, 1977), 31-36; Brophy, *Miner's Life*, 133; report by Philip Murray, president, District Five, United Mine Workers, *United Mine Workers Journal*, Mar. 26, 1917, July 20, Aug. 24, 1916.

<sup>10</sup> *United Mine Workers Journal*, Aug. 24, 1916.

<sup>11</sup> Brophy, *Miner's Life*, 135-36.

cerning internal union problems simmered but rarely reached the boiling point. Murray succeeded in subordinating hierarchical questions to the needs of the recruiting campaign. On March 31, 1916, an estimated 1,500 miners struck Alle-Kiski mines, demanding recognition of the UMWA, an eight-hour day, a check-weighman at the tippie, and better wages. By late summer estimates placed the strikers' numbers at eight thousand.<sup>12</sup>

The coal operators struck back with spies, armed guards, and thugs, some of whom were deputized.<sup>13</sup> Scabs were imported into the valley. The strike soon assumed the proportions of a small but earnest guerrilla war. Company thugs attacked and shot union miners; union miners attacked company guards, scabs, and property. Miners were the targets of violence on or off company property, because company men understood that local authorities and state constabulary would rarely intervene. Emboldened company men assaulted individual miners on public streets, and even attacked a brass band composed largely of miners marching along a public road near West Apollo. Local union officials, organizers, and "foreigners" were particularly subject to arrest or harassment. However, on at least one occasion, an Allegheny County sheriff deprived a coal operator of his deputyship because he and his men were involved in too many shootings.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, that kind of impartial law enforcement was not applied throughout the Alle-Kiski, and violence continued to escalate.

Armed confrontations were particularly prevalent at mines operated by Lewis Hicks. Alle-Kiski miners, like those who worked for Hicks, generally earned sixty-three cents per day less than their unionized brethren in the Pittsburgh district, even though their work day was two hours longer. It was these "slave-like conditions" and the strikebreaking techniques used which generated violence. Hicks operated fourteen mines in the valley and enjoyed access to economic resources which were not available to smaller operators. (His father, Alfred Hicks, a Welsh immigrant, helped to found Allegheny Steel and held important interests in local banks.) Lewis Hicks understood that his mining operations had been selected as a special target by the UMWA. He responded by hiring the largest private army of armed

<sup>12</sup> *Evening Telegram*, Mar. 31, 1916; *United Mine Workers Journal*, June 29, 1916.

<sup>13</sup> It was common practice in the Alle-Kiski for deputy sheriffs to be hired and paid by private citizens or companies.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Sam Mendicino, retired coal miner, Dec. 27, 1977; interview with John Grill, retired coal miner, Jan. 20, 1978 (hereafter cited as Grill interview); Steri interview; *Evening Telegram*, Mar. 30, 1917; *Apollo News Record*, Sept. 8, 1916; *United Mine Workers Journal*, Oct. 19, 1916.

men in the valley and by importing trainloads of scabs. In Saltsburg, Avonmore, Apollo, and Leechburg, Hicks's hirelings beat, shot, and intimidated miners and their families,<sup>15</sup> virtually unrestrained by local authorities. Smaller operators imitated Hicks on a smaller scale. Union organizers were forced to employ their skills against Alle-Kiski coal operators who were virtually unanimous in their commitment to an armed suppression of the strike.<sup>16</sup>

Foremost among UMWA organizers in the Alle-Kiski was Fannie Sellins. An activist in the tradition of Mother Jones,<sup>17</sup> Sellins had participated in coal strikes in Follansbee, Buffalo, and Yorkville, West Virginia. Prior to that time, she had been a garment worker and a union organizer in that industry. When and why she took residence in New Kensington is not known. According to one source she moved there after being pardoned by President Woodrow Wilson from a jail sentence she had received for union activities in Fairmont, West Virginia. However that may be, Mrs. Sellins, a grandmother and widow, joined the campaign in Alle-Kiski sometime during January 1917.<sup>18</sup>

Mrs. Sellins directed her initial efforts at the mining operations of Earl Iseman, located at Creighton on the west bank of the Allegheny River, opposite New Kensington. Iseman used gunmen so liberally that his commission as deputy sheriff had been revoked by the Allegheny County sheriff several months before. Following a scuffle with Iseman and his men, Sellins charged him with assault but lost the case. A month later deputy Joseph Murray arrested Sellins in Creighton because she called him "scab."<sup>19</sup> The use of scab labor was an established tradition in the Alle-Kiski, and Sellins and her

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15 *United Mine Workers Journal*, Sept. 21, 1916, Feb. 15, 1917; *Evening Telegram*, Mar. 9, 1916; *Apollo News Record*, Sept. 8, 1916, Dec. 8, 1916; *Apollo Sentinel*, Apr. 21, 1916; interview with Frank Buccardo, retired coal miner, June 6, 1978; Steri interview.

16 One notable exception was Henry Kinloch of New Kensington, who signed a union contract for Valley Camp Mine, June 15, 1917.

17 Mary Harris ("Mother") Jones was an itinerant labor activist in the United States for more than fifty years. Known as the "Miner's Angel," she participated in labor conflicts in West Virginia, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. In 1905, she helped found the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical labor organization. Consult Dale Fetherling, *Mother Jones, The Miner's Angel: A Portrait* (Carbondale, Ill., 1974).

18 UMWA records for this period apparently do not exist, and it is therefore not possible to document Mrs. Sellins's precise arrival in the Alle-Kiski. In the *United Mine Workers Journal*, Mar. 1916, an article entitled "U.M.W.A. Women" includes but a scant three paragraphs on Mrs. Sellins. See also *United Mine Workers Journal*, Sept. 15, 1919; *Evening Telegram*, Mar. 3, 1917; *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 27, 1919.

19 *United Mine Workers Journal*, Oct. 19, 1916; *Evening Telegram*, Oct. 23, 1916, Jan. 31, 1917, Mar. 3, 1917.

colleagues had no choice but to defeat that tactic if they were to be successful. Strikebreakers of diverse ethnic backgrounds including English, Germans, Italians, Greeks, and blacks had been brought into the valley. But nothing incited Alle-Kiski coal miners to a frenzy as did the presence of black strikebreakers. For many Alle-Kiski workers, the mere fact that a man was black was presumptive of being a scab.

On February 24, 1917, union organizers received word that a special trainload of black strikebreakers was approaching Pittsburgh. The black workers had been recruited in Alabama and lured north by the promise of high wages. They apparently had not been informed that they were bound for scab duty in the coal mines of Lewis Hicks. Union organizers rushed to Pittsburgh hoping to talk the blacks off the train but were prevented from approaching the coaches by guards. As the train moved north from Pittsburgh following the Allegheny River, it was forced to stop at a block signal near Tarentum. There, Fannie Sellins and other organizers ran alongside the cars and induced about one hundred to leave the train. Many blacks scrambled out the coach windows, for the doors remained locked. With a pledge of train fare, food, and shelter, the entire contingent paraded across the Tarentum bridge to New Kensington where temporary lodgings were provided at the Polish Falcon Hall.<sup>20</sup> With that small success in hand, Sellins continued her assault on the coal barons and their accomplices. She accused the Allegheny County sheriff of hiring thugs as deputies for the purpose of attacking miners and urged all miners to vote against him. She then shared a rally platform with district president Philip Murray at New Kensington's Garibaldi Hall and helped lead a parade across the river to Creighton and back.<sup>21</sup>

And suddenly the strike ended. Upon United States entry in World War I on April 6, 1917, Alle-Kiski coal operators fell in behind the flag. The Hicks interests even came to an agreement with the UMWA, which included a 50 percent increase in pay for miners. Ironically, war brought more than a year of labor peace to the Alle-Kiski. War also brought administered prosperity to the nation's coal-fields. Strikes were forbidden. All labor disputes were subject to arbitration by the War Labor Board or Federal Fuel Administration. In an unprecedented move, the United States government became a

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<sup>20</sup> *Apollo Sentinel*, Mar. 2, 1917; *Evening Telegram*, Feb. 24, 1917; *United Mine Workers Journal*, Mar. 15, 1917.

<sup>21</sup> *Evening Telegram*, Apr. 2, 1917; *United Mine Workers Journal*, Apr. 12, 1917.

third party to a basic national wage agreement signed by bituminous coal operators and the UMWA in October 1917. Under that agreement Alle-Kiski miners temporarily surrendered their goals of free collective bargaining and the right to strike<sup>22</sup> but escaped the rigors of unemployment and wage cuts so traditionally a part of life in the coalfields. However, the agreement did not protect the miners from the consequences of inflation.

The 1917 agreement bound the UMWA not to renegotiate its terms before the war officially ended or April 1, 1920, whichever came first. Although the armistice was signed in November 1918, the United States Senate did not ratify the Treaty of Versailles, and the war did not end officially until July 1921. Adjustments of miners' wages had never kept pace with accelerating wartime inflation, and UMWA rank and file had begun to clamor for a new wage scale long before the shooting ceased in Europe. Uncertainty concerning the peace treaty did little to sustain UMWA confidence in the 1917 agreement. Many coal operators had signed the 1917 accord under duress and never recognized the UMWA as the legal bargaining agent for the miners. Operators of that mind chafed under government controls and longed for a return to unregulated, nonunion conditions. By early spring 1919, there were abundant signs that labor relations in the Alle-Kiski were returning to prewar conditions. Coal operators abrogated the 1917 agreement. Alle-Kiski miners attempted to use the modest achievements of 1917 as a foundation for future negotiations with the operators. They demanded an adjustment of their wage scale and an affirmation of union recognition which they knew had not been won in 1917.

Nineteen-nineteen was the year of the Red Scare, replete with charges of radicalism, Bolshevism, and sedition. UMWA miners in the Alle-Kiski were not immune to those charges, even though their union had begun an antiradical campaign prior to American participation in World War I. The Industrial Workers of the World and its "one big union" idea was a particular target of the UMWA. Samuel Gompers had assigned John L. Lewis to aid UMWA President John White in ridding the UMWA of its militant and radical elements. Lewis and Gompers were both politically conservative, and each believed labor "visionaries," "doctrinaires," and "insurgents" to be threats to both the established order as well as their own place and power. Lewis ordered his union to purge itself of its anarchistic,

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<sup>22</sup> In 1917, the right to strike and bargain collectively were not established legal principles.

pro-Soviet elements. In that spirit he tried to persuade John Brophy to expedite the expulsion of socialists from the Pennsylvania Labor Council. Lewis also supported immigration restriction and declared that Americanization programs would strengthen rank-and-file solidarity. Lewis and local red baiters had little to fear from the IWW in the Alle-Kiski. In 1913, an IWW agent appeared in New Kensington, where he attempted without success to induce local glassworkers to strike. One hundred "foreign" employees in Alcoa's polishing department did follow him out on strike for more than a week. However, the strike collapsed when its inspiration was jailed, fined, and invited to leave town. Scattered IWW members distributed literature to local miners, apparently without result.<sup>23</sup> Nor is there evidence that Fannie Sellins or other UMWA organizers in the valley had been infected by the virus of radicalism.

By early summer 1919, Fannie Sellins had returned to duty on the picket lines. Labor relations in the Alle-Kiski assumed their traditionally violent character. Tensions were no doubt exacerbated by the activities of union organizers at local steel mills. A national committee for organizing the nation's steelworkers had established a regional headquarters in Pittsburgh. Union organizers, experienced UMWA veterans among them, fanned out across the valley and enjoyed particular success recruiting foreign-born steelworkers. That "alien" presence, which appeared to dominate the valley's labor movement, fed the fires of nativism, prejudice, and xenophobia.

In 1919, raging inflation, Red Scare hysteria, and a public yearning for domestic tranquility were all potential weapons which might have been used against disruptive unionists. Alle-Kiski coal operators apparently ignored those issues and relied instead upon raw coercion to defeat the UMWA. The coal operators, especially Lewis Hicks, raised a private army of armed men and imported black strikebreakers much as they had before the war. A few Alle-Kiski operators signed union contracts,<sup>24</sup> but Hicks continued to set the tone for labor relations in the valley. Black scabs were apparently his trump card, but it proved to be a card overplayed by Hicks and his associates.

Few blacks lived in the Alle-Kiski. Racial hostility made living and working in the valley extremely difficult for blacks. Some mills,

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<sup>23</sup> Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 31, 52; Brophy, *Miner's Life*, 132-33; *New Kensington Dispatch*, Mar. 27, 1913, Apr. 3, 1913; *United Mine Workers Journal*, Jan. 1, 1919, Feb. 15, 1919, Apr. 1, 1919, Sept. 1, 1919; Steri interview; interview with John Schrecengost, coal miner, Mar. 1, 1978.

<sup>24</sup> *United Mine Workers Journal*, June 23, July 6, 1919. McFetridge Brothers and Johnetta Coal and Brick signed union contracts in 1919.

including American Sheet and Tin Plate in Vandergrift, employed blacks in menial jobs, while others such as Apollo Steel refused to hire them at all. Black miners in Saltsburg and Leechburg found work, but they were not welcome in the Russelton district. Crosses burned and white-robed figures marched in the night as the Ku Klux Klan appeared throughout the valley during the postwar years.<sup>25</sup> In an atmosphere of xenophobic hysteria and racism few people cared to discuss rationally the reasons for the appearance of black scabs in the valley. The union was never able to mobilize public opinion against their use. Fannie Sellins and other UMWA organizers searched for and found a weakness in the strikebreaking tactics of the operators — many blacks had been hired under false pretenses. They rioted in Avonmore and Leechburg after being informed that they had been recruited for scab duty in Hicks's mines.<sup>26</sup> In Creighton blacks not only deserted the operators but defected to the UMWA.

Fannie Sellins was both audacious and persuasive. After the war, she went back to work in the Creighton district and convinced black strikebreakers there to join the union. In July 1919, she and several dozen of those men appeared on the union picket lines at the mines of Allegheny Coal and Coke Company, near Brackenridge. Allegheny Coal and Coke was owned by Allegheny Steel, which had been founded by Alfred Hicks. Members of the Hicks family managed the mill, and the appearance of black pickets at its nearby mines must have been a rude shock. Company complaints concerning the black pickets were quickly rebutted by the UMWA. Union organizers reminded the local press that it was hardly appropriate for the Hicks interests to make race an issue in the strike, since Lewis Hicks had been the chief importer of black laborers into the Alle-Kiski.<sup>27</sup>

Fannie Sellins's tactics at Allegheny Coal and Coke were a modest success. Company miners walked out, and black strikebreakers refused to cross the picket lines. According to union sources, the company then imported "a bunch of lousy scabby Greeks," and advertised for "free born American" miners to replace those who had been misled by "outside agitators."<sup>28</sup> The Allegheny Coal and Coke strike became a stalemate which reflected conditions at most mines in the valley. Sellins divided her time between service on the picket lines

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Oscar Morrison and Jim Kerr, retired steelworkers, Dec. 1, 1977; Grill interview.

<sup>26</sup> *United Mine Workers Journal*, July 6, 1919; *Amalgamated Journal*, Nov. 15, 20, 1919.

<sup>27</sup> *Valley Daily News*, July 21, 28, 1919.

<sup>28</sup> *Amalgamated Journal*, Aug. 7, 1919, Sept. 4, 1919.

at the mines and organizing the steelworkers of Allegheny Steel and West Penn Steel. The UMWA had assigned a team of its best recruiters to the task force organizing steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania. The UMWA leadership hoped that the unionization of the mills might expedite unionization of the mines. Sellins shared recruiting duties with Polish-speaking organizers at union rallies in Natrona in mid-August.<sup>29</sup> Union recruiting efforts aimed at unskilled, foreign-born steelworkers were particularly successful in Natrona and Brackenridge, but Sellins would not live to participate in strikes in those towns in September.

On August 26, 1919, Fannie Sellins and Joseph Strzelecki, a miner, were shot and killed in West Natrona. Situated on the bluffs above the Allegheny River, West Natrona was known locally as Duck Town. Its Polish and Slovak residents kept large flocks of waterfowl in the tradition of village life, but they worked at the nearby Allegheny and West Penn steel companies. As in East Vandergrift, those men who were not steelworkers worked in the mines. Fannie Sellins had been on picket duty for several months at the Allegheny Coal and Coke Company mine. The mine portal entered the bluff immediately below West Natrona, and was adjacent to Allegheny Steel which owned the mine.

It is not possible to prove or to refute William Z. Foster's charge that the Sellins affair was managed from beginning to end by the "Steel Trust."<sup>30</sup> Nor is it probable that the actual sequence of events which occurred on August 26 will ever be made entirely clear. Newspaper, eyewitness, and official accounts are often contradictory, but available evidence suggests that the Sellins killing was not simply the result of spontaneous violence.

According to local newspapers, Fannie Sellins was killed while on picket duty. As the afternoon shift left the mine at five o'clock with an escort of company deputies, the guards and pickets exchanged angry words. In the ensuing *melée* shotguns and buckshot were employed against the strikers. Guards claimed that Mrs. Sellins was shot while leading a riot. They maintained they had acted in self-defense and that they resorted to the use of deadly force only after being pelted with rocks and sticks. Miners protested that there had been no such provocation. Some claimed that Sellins was clubbed and shot after giving aid to the fallen Joseph Strzelecki. Most believed

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<sup>29</sup> *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 15, 23, 1919.

<sup>30</sup> William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons* (New York, 1920), 146-49.

that her death was the result of a premeditated attack.<sup>31</sup>

Eyewitness accounts dispute both newspaper reports and the official version of the Sellins episode. Stanley Rafalko was running an errand for his father when the Sellins incident occurred. According to Rafalko, there were no picket lines or shouting mobs in his neighborhood on that hot August afternoon. Several local steelworkers, towels tied around their necks, made their way down the hill to the mill below. Night turn was about to begin. As Rafalko approached the local grocery, he noticed a maroon touring car parked not far away. Its top was down, and Rafalko had no difficulty seeing steelworker Joseph Czarnowski and another steelworker seated in the car engaged in conversation with three uniformed officers. Rafalko entered the store, and when he emerged a few minutes later a wild *melée* had erupted.

The officers used blackjacks on anyone who came within reach, and then began to fire their handguns at any available target. Joseph Czarnowski was wounded in the arm, but escaped with his life by scrambling down the hill toward Allegheny Steel. The gunfire apparently attracted the attention of Fannie Sellins, who arrived at the scene in the company of neighborhood women and children. Sellins appeared to know the officers and attempted to remonstrate with them, citing the obvious danger to innocent bystanders. The officers were not moved. A black hunchback emerged from a nearby mining company shack carrying an armful of rifles. Those weapons were quickly brought into play with deadly effect as another local resident was shot. Again Sellins approached the officers and protested, but they cursed and struck her savagely with a rifle butt. She scrambled to her feet and attempted to flee the scene through a gate leading to property owned by Konstanty Rafalko, Stanley Rafalko's grandfather. As she ran the three officers shot her at pointblank range. Sellins fell, mortally wounded, her false teeth lying in a pool of blood.<sup>32</sup>

Following her death the violence ended as quickly as it had begun. Nine persons had been shot, two fatally. The officers picked up the

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31 *United Mine Workers Journal*, Sept. 15, 1919; *Amalgamated Journal*, Sept. 4, 1919; *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 27, 28, 29, 1919; *New Kensington Daily Dispatch*, Aug. 29, 1919; Foster, *Great Steel Strike*, 146-49. One deputy was treated for bruises after the incident.

32 Interview with Stanley Czarnowski and Stanley Rafalko, Sept. 29, 1979 (hereafter cited as Czarnowski and Rafalko interview). Stanley Rafalko was seven years old at the time he witnessed Fannie Sellins's death. His recollections of the incident are extraordinarily clear. Information regarding the role and observations of Joseph Czarnowski were supplied by his son, Stanley Czarnowski.

body of Fannie Sellins by the head and heels and stacked it with that of Joseph Strzelecki on the floor of the touring car. Joseph Czarnowski was present when the bodies were dropped unceremoniously on the floor of the Allegheny Steel infirmary. Czarnowski's wound had been discovered by deputies on patrol, and he had been taken to that facility in order to be given medical attention. According to Czarnowski the chief deputy rejoiced that the "whore" had finally received the treatment she deserved. His only regret was that one of the men shot by his officers was a company spy.<sup>33</sup>

Ensuing official investigations by the Allegheny County coroner and sheriff did little to establish the facts in the Sellins case. In fact, the cursory character of those inquiries give credence to the charges made by miners that local authorities were covering up the deeds of the coal operators. Local miners insisted that deputy Joseph Murray had threatened Sellins and the Creighton justice of the peace, who had shown leniency toward miners in his court. Sellins and Murray had been involved in altercations in Creighton in 1917, and he had allegedly sworn to "get her." Orders for Murray's arrest were issued, apparently by the justice of the peace. Sheriff William Haddock ordered the justice to cease authorizing arrests and appeared to retaliate by ordering the arrest of James Oates, a union organizer, for "conspiracy."<sup>34</sup>

The political byplay was followed by a shoddy investigation and inquest conducted by the coroner. His investigators apparently ignored Murray's possible connection to the Sellins incident and rejected a county detective's recommendations that murder warrants be issued against specific company deputies. Investigators seemed content to interview miners and deputies. According to the investigators, the pickets, many of whom spoke broken English, did not have their stories straight. The explanations of the deputies contained no contradictions or conflicts, and investigators accepted their testimony without question. Reports to the coroner concluded that the pickets were solely responsible for both the violence and the bloodshed.<sup>35</sup>

Those reports and medical evidence were presented to a coroner's jury which was convened in Pittsburgh a month after the shooting. The jury found that Fannie Sellins's death was caused by a gunshot wound in the left temple which was inflicted during a riot. The

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<sup>33</sup> Czarnowski and Rafalko interview.

<sup>34</sup> Allegheny County Coroner's Records, Vol. 133: 629, Sept. 29, 1919; *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 27, 1919; Czarnowski and Rafalko interview.

<sup>35</sup> Allegheny County Coroner's Records, Vol. 133: 629, Sept. 29, 1919.

shooting was done in self-defense and was therefore justifiable. The mine guards had simply done their duty. The jurors were "certain that there was a riot" and that "there were no innocent bystanders." "Everyone in the crowd was guilty of rioting."<sup>36</sup>

The antilabor bias of the jury was made clear in posthearing statements to the press. The jury deplored and condemned "the foreign agitators who instilled anarchy and Bolshevik doctrines into the minds of the un-American and uneducated aliens of the district."<sup>37</sup> Even as those sentiments were being made public, several miners who had attended the inquest were arrested for inciting to riot. If Fannie Sellins and Joseph Strzelecki had fallen victim to Black Valley's legacy of industrial violence, justice had succumbed to Red Scare hysteria.

The Sellins case never evoked public indignation or moral outrage in the Alle-Kiski. Editorial comment in the local press was only slightly less subdued than the union response to the killings. Fannie Sellins received a martyr's funeral. Local miners marched in protest. But her death received scant coverage in the *Amalgamated Journal* and *United Mine Workers Journal*. Philip Murray dashed off angry telegrams to the president and governor demanding an investigation, but that short flurry of protests by union officials was followed by little else. The UMWA leadership may well have been preoccupied with preparations for the impending national coal strike which would be called on November 1.

In the months following the inquest, the Sellins case assumed a grotesque character as antilabor spokesmen used her death to denounce the steelworkers union. Sheriff Haddock had spared no effort to break the steel strike in Allegheny County. Employing a policy of arbitrary arrests and numerous suspensions of civil liberties, the sheriff had imposed his own special brand of law and order on the Pittsburgh district. The Sellins case presented a unique opportunity further to discredit the strike. Forty-three days after the Sellins funeral, the sheriff wrote to a Senate labor committee and complained that Mrs. Sellins's body had been exhumed and mutilated by radicals. Their ghoulish acts were designed to smear local authorities and furnish propaganda for local "anarchists and revolutionaries." According to the sheriff unrest and disorder existed in the region because of the "presence in the community of dishonest, revolutionary Bolshevik agitators whose sole purpose [was] to prey [upon] the unintelligent

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 27, 1919.

foreigner and goad him into deeds which the American worker [would] not tolerate." <sup>38</sup>

John Fitzpatrick, chairman of the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers, believed that Fannie Sellins had been killed in order to instill the "fear of God" in the strikers.<sup>39</sup> If those responsible for her death were so motivated, their strategy proved to be of little merit. The steelworkers of Natrona, Brackenridge, and other Alle-Kiski mill towns left their jobs in droves when the strike call came in September. Nor were local miners intimidated by her death. Virtually all coal mines in the valley were shut down during the nationwide strike called in November.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that Fannie Sellins was not a victim of a murder conspiracy. She might have been a tragic victim of yet another outburst of industrial violence so common in Black Valley. But even if that were so, local coal operators and steelmakers had good reason not to mourn her passing.

The 1919 coal wars, climaxed by the Fannie Sellins incident, struck at the heart of coal and steel operations by attacking both managerial prerogatives and the source of profits. Market conditions and to an even greater degree the ability of management to manipulate labor costs determined profit margins in the coal and steel industries. Western Pennsylvania was a region in which the supply of semi-skilled and unskilled labor commonly exceeded its demand. The organizing efforts of Fannie Sellins threatened management's easy access to cheap labor. She did not share craft unionists' disdain for black and European workers, and her success in appealing to them was unprecedented in the valley.<sup>41</sup> She also ignored traditional craft union concepts of inviolable jurisdictions when she attempted to organize both coal miners and steelworkers. Fannie Sellins was among

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<sup>38</sup> *Valley Daily News*, Oct. 17, 1919. Sheriff Haddock claimed that a hole had been bored in the back of Mrs. Sellins's skull. Such an entry wound might have supported the charge that she was shot from behind. Mrs. Sellins was buried in New Kensington, Westmoreland County, which was not in Haddock's jurisdiction. Surveys of local historical sources have not yielded evidence which corroborates the sheriff's allegations.

<sup>39</sup> *Valley Daily News*, Sept. 25, 1919.

<sup>40</sup> Available evidence suggests that the Sellins affair did little to influence the conduct of either the steel strike or the coal strike in the Alle-Kiski. The coal strike did not appear to alter the course of the steel strike in the region, and the apparent failure of the steel strike did not inhibit the aggressive leadership of the UMWA in November.

<sup>41</sup> The American Federation of Labor was the largest labor union in the United States. It was an organization composed largely of skilled crafts which practiced racial segregation and exhibited little sympathy for the problems of unskilled industrial labor.

the first industrial unionists to appear in the Alle-Kiski. In 1919, however, industrial unionism was an idea whose time had not yet come. Nearly two decades passed before Philip Murray and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, financed and staffed largely by the UMWA, reentered Black Valley to unionize its industrial workers.

## EDITORIAL POLICY

The *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* reflects the primary objects of the Society, namely, "to increase and diffuse knowledge of the history of Western Pennsylvania." Western Pennsylvania is defined broadly as "the headwaters of the Ohio River system and items, events, etc., related thereto." Manuscripts dealing with subject matter outside this category will be considered only if they contain material of special importance and historical value.

The use of primary source material, new interpretation, new discoveries, and unique subject matter are all taken into consideration when the editorial board considers possible publication. Originality of treatment, general interest of the article, and the style in which it is written are additional criteria for acceptance. A special section of the magazine is reserved for those manuscripts falling into the more specialized category of personal reminiscences or family history.

Those interested in submitting manuscripts should refer to *A Manual of Style* (1969 edition), published by the University of Chicago, for matters of editorial style. Recent back issues of the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* should be consulted for the preferred form in footnoting and quantity of footnotes (brevity is strongly recommended). Illustrative material pertinent to the subject matter of the manuscript is welcomed.

Two copies of the article should be submitted together with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The author should retain a copy. The manuscript must be typewritten (pica type preferred), double spaced, with footnotes at the end, and should not exceed thirty pages in length. Please allow at least eight weeks for review of each manuscript.

Persons interested in reviewing books for the *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* are invited to write the editor requesting addition to the list of reviewers. A vita sheet indicating field of specialization, dissertation topic, and academic affiliation should be submitted. Graduate students and recent Ph.D.s are especially encouraged to contribute. Reviews must not exceed 650 words, or approximately three pages, double space, pica type. Unsolicited book reviews will not be accepted.

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