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THE MAJOR STRIKE IN PITTSBURG KANSAS:
STRIKE OF 1899
ON THE MAJOR COAL MINING STRIKE OF 1899

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“Major Strike of 1899”

By: Chase Rietcheck

The year 1899 was an explosive time for mining in Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Illinois, but especially for Southeast Kansas. Many men came to Kansas seeking jobs in the mining industry. Although they knew that there were not great wages, it was still a way of supporting themselves as well as their families. As coal mining grew and prices went up, miners were starting to get a little frustrated with their wages. Some miners who still remembered the strike of 1893 decided to do something about their low wages by taking a stand against the coal companies. They were looking for better wages than what they were getting paid at the time, so in March of 1899 they went on strike. For what reason were these miners going on strike and what they were hoping to accomplish by striking? This was the biggest strike up to this date at the time in Southeast Kansas.¹

In 1899 the coal, lead, and zinc mines were a stressful place to be, with the poor wages, horrible work conditions, and life threatening accidents that came along with being a mine worker in Southeast Kansas. Miners were dying each day from either

¹ For more on mining, see: Fishback, Price V. and Lauszus, Dieter. “The Quality of Services in Company Towns: sanitation in Coal Towns During the 1920’s,” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (March, 1989); Graebner, William. “Great Expectations: The Study for order in Bituminous Coal.” *The Business History Review*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring 1974); Markowitz, Gerald and Rosner, David “The street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health and Labor in the Tri-State Region.” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Sep., 1990); Rickard, T.A. “History of American Mining.” *Mining Journal*, First Edition (1932); Schofield, Ann. ‘An “Army of Amazons:” The League of Protest in Kansas Mining Community, 1921-22.’ *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (winter 1985).

exploitation within the mines or a bad disease, which could have been tuberculosis, or silicosis which they had caught in the mines from breathing the black dust. In March of 1899, the miners of Southeast Kansas finally had endured enough and decided to go on strike in Crawford County. This was only one-fourth of the major strike of 1899. Three other states had mining industries, and miners there had also had enough of this bad treatment. These included Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Illinois. There were different reasons for striking, but they had decided to come together.

The miners had the idea that it would hurt the big mining industries more, and they would have better chances of getting what they wanted, if they would strike together. Oklahoma and Kansas miners combined because their lists of demands were similar, and Arkansas and Illinois miners organized together because their reasons for striking were also identical. In the beginning of the month of March, miners in Crawford County and other counties of Southeast Kansas came together and came up with a list of demands that they wanted before they would go back to work.² The major complaint had to deal with their wages. They were getting paid, but they also had other demands. For instance, they wanted a shorter work day and better work conditions.

The strike officially started on March 13, 1899, and it was a David and Goliath fight. The role of David was the mine workers of Crawford County, and it consisted of approximately 2,150 men of the area. It also included 500 to 600 men that had come from

² W.L.A. Johnson, *Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, Fourteenth Annual Report, Commissioner. Pg, 333

Missouri to work in the local mines.³ These men had joined the United Mine Workers of America, a national labor organization, whose headquarters were in Indianapolis and their jurisdiction extended all over America.⁴ This organization was developed to help mine workers get the best treatment possible in the mines. Organizations were divided into numbered districts that. Kansas and Missouri were put into district #14. Each district had a president. The president for district #14 was T. W. Wright. He was the person who made sure the voice of the miners was heard by the big mining companies.

Also in this David and Goliath fight, the part of Goliath was being played by the “Big Four Mining Companies.” These companies included Western Coal and Mining Company, Southwestern Coal and Improvement Company, Kansas and Texas Coal Company, and Central Coal and Coke Company. These companies controlled almost all of the coal mining in Southeast Kansas and Missouri and were the enemy of the miners in these regions. In March, the miners of district #14 came up with their first demand: a pay increase.⁵ Miners at this point in time were getting paid anywhere from \$1.75 to \$2.50 a day, depending on which mine that they were working in. Almost all the miners were looking for only a dollar to a dollar fifty increase, but when these demands reached the Big Four Companies they were turned down. So the miners decided to go on strike.

There were many reasons for this pay increase. The biggest was that the miners

³ *Ibid.*, Pg 327

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, Pg, 333

were not paid enough to buy adequate food for them and their families. The main basic products that got miners through the day were cornmeal, flour, pork, ham, coffee, and sugar, tea, and dried fruits.⁶ These products were available in mining community stores, which were owned and operated by the big coal companies within that community, so the little money that the miners did make was going back to the companies. The wives of miners and a few of other women also worked in these stores to help the family produce income. Money that was made by miners also went towards medicine to treat the sicknesses that the miners were developing in these mines. Medicine was in short supply and very expensive in these mining towns, and there were very few doctors in these communities.

Going on strike is a difficult decision to make because, if your family had no income or very little income, which was the case for most of the families in Crawford County, then life was very hard on a daily basis. Sometimes the strike would backfire on miners, and they would have to cave in to the unsatisfactory wages of the coal company, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to survive. There were miners that would not cave and would resort to different ways to survive.⁷

For instance many families would cultivate their own garden as an alternative food source.⁸ Also many of the miners would hunt for food or raise animals and butcher

⁶ Editorial, *Pittsburg Headlight*, June 12, 1899.

⁷ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1899.

⁸ W.L.A Johnson, *Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, Fourteenth Annual

them for food, and in many cases if the men were working in the mines, the wives of these men would do the hunting. As you would expect, because of economic circumstances, there was an enormous number of robberies and theft, as both men and women would steal from others' gardens and livestock.⁹

Though wages were never great in Crawford County, price of food and other necessities increased which made earnings seem small. Some of the statistics of 1899, average annual earnings of Crawford County was \$856.58 per year.¹⁰ The average cost of living in the town of Pittsburg, Kansas, was \$806.96, this left only an average saving of a person living in Pittsburg, Kansas, of, \$58.62.¹¹ This was not enough to make a good lifestyle let alone an easy life for the average person in the Southeast Kansas. The population in Pittsburg, Kansas, in 1900 was 10,112 and in Crawford County it was 58,809, this included men, women, and children.¹² The total average income for Crawford County in 1900 was \$50,340,504. So even though income was there it wasn't that high and the miners knew this and knew that they could be doing better than this.

Strikes in Crawford Country usually followed by violence, as men were so

Report, Commissioner. Pg, 337

⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg, 339

¹⁰ W.L.A. Johnson, *Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, Fourteenth Annual Report, Commissioner. Pg, 333

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Edward T. McNally, *Pittsburg Almanac 1876-1976*, Pittsburg Kansas: Edward T. McNally 1986.

determined to get what they wanted that they would use violence to try to get mines closed down. They would use dynamite and other types of vandalism to close down the mines and hurt the big companies. They did not only use violence against the mines themselves; they would also use violence against other miners. In the *Pittsburg Headlight*, a local newspaper, it was reported on June 6, 1899 that “miners went to George Bell’s home who was a local mine worker that did not go on strike, and totally destroyed his garden.” This was an attempt to persuade him to go on strike. The paper also reported that¹³ “Mr. Bell had not missed a day of work since he had started in the #6 mine shaft.”¹⁴

Threats were not uncommon within the Crawford County area, and many times guards would have to be brought in to resolve of the situation before it got out of hand.¹⁵ The *Pittsburg Headlight* also reported, late Wednesday evening of June 10, 1899, “loud threats were heard that strikers were going to come and kill several miners in Camp No. 5 and were going to burn mine shaft No. 6, local guards came and cooled down the situation.” A few times guards arrived too late and mines would go out of commission. The problem with this is that the men who were still working in these mines would have no job and if they were not working they might as well go on strike with the rest of the miners. While men that lost their jobs due to these forms of violence would move to find

¹³ Editorial, *Pittsburg Headlight*, June 12, 1899.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, June 10, 1899.

new work, in many cases they would not have enough money to move and would be stuck with no job or any form of income. So, there was a better way to pass the time then to sit around and do nothing. Which was usually to go on strike.

Daily newspapers kept the public informed of the strike situation. They also kept the big companies informed. There were three main newspapers that reported on the strike situation: *Pittsburg Headlight*, the *Pittsburg Kansan*, and the *Weir City Journal*. Almost every day these papers would send out “Strike Situation” reports, even if the situation was unchanged. For instance, the *Pittsburg Headlight* reported on June 8, 1899 “that the strike situation stays about the same, with a small increase in the number of men going to work at the K and T mines in Weir City.”¹⁶ The papers also kept the public informed of what the U.M.W.A and the president of the district was doing to help the miners get their request heard and changed. *The Pittsburg Kansan* reported on June 8th, 1899, “that W.T. Wright president of district No. 14 left for a miners convention in Kansas City.”¹⁷

Another way to keep the public informed was the annual reports that were made each year to document what went on that year in the coal mines, how the strike was being worked out, and how it might be resolved. The “Fourteenth Annual Report” kept many informed. For instance, the President of District 14th, Mr. T. W. Wright reported on May 11th, 1899:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, June 8, 1899

¹⁷ *Ibid*

My Dear Sir: Our conference adjourned yesterday forenoon, being unable to effect a settlement. It is, I expect, a well-understood maxim, that all corporate interests have a common interest and common understanding. A settlement with the Central Coal and Coke Company may or may not have meant a settlement with all the corporate interest involved. But the practice of these large mining companies is sending representatives to a conference shorn of power and authority to act, save on the lines laid down by men hundreds of miles away and who personally never come in contact with their employees, places of fatal barrier in the way of adjusting and settling differences between employer and employed that always arise from time to time. Such a barrier existed in this instance, with the result that no agreement was reached.¹⁸

This was a way for the miners to see how their needs were being met and whether any change was going to happen.

The strike of 1899 really hit its high points in the months of April, May, and the beginning of June. In the middle of March when the strike first started, there were 2,150 strikers, which was the highest number of them to this point. Near the end of June just as the strike was nearing its end, the total number of strikers was near the 3,500 range. This number of miners is not totally accurate because there were no real official records that recorded every miner that went on strike; also, some miners would drop out a few at a time and they were not always accounted for. Most records only noted the men that joined the U.M.W.A., but these records did not include men who did not join but who still went on strike.

At the beginning of the strike, men just wanted a pay raise and to cut back on the hours, but as the strike went on they were finding more and more components that they

¹⁸ W.L.A. Johnson, *Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, Fourteenth Annual Report, Commissioner. Pg. 336-337

wanted to add to their list of demands. On May 23, 1899, the strikers sent a list of demands to the district president T. W. Wright, they went as follows.

The price per ton during the six summer months be 58 cents per ton and the 6 winter months be 64 cents per ton. And they demanded that dead work be recognized as follows: 1) entries 12ft and over are paid by a rate of one dollar per yard. 2) entries less than 12 ft wide paid at a rate of one dollar and fifty cents per yard. 3) all cross cuts be paid one dollar and fifty cents per yard. 4) bushing eighty cents per yard or according to thickness. 5) horse bucks one dollar per foot. 6) stowing ten cents per car or fifty cents per yard or to be taken away by the company. Other demands included price of powder be one dollar and seventy-five cents per keg, a semimonthly pay-day, along with only eight hours of work a day, as opposed to compulsory-doctor system.¹⁹

These were all the demands at the beginning of May of 1899, and more would be added as the strike goes on. The strike remained strong through the months of April and May, but at the end of May it started to grow as the miners and strikes became more and more desperate. It reached a strong point in June.

Between June 8/10, 1899, W.T. Wright president of the U.M.W.A district No. 14 left for a miners convention in K.C. where he met with the big coal companies to go over terms and demands.²⁰ A few minor things were worked out. but nothing on the major scale of the strike was worked out, therefore the strike continued. On June 10, 1899, strikers camped out around mining shafts No. 6 and No. 11 to motivate still-working miners to join the strike. Later that night, the miners went back to shaft No. 6 and set it on fire and were threatening any miner that would not join them with death.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Pg, 336

²⁰ Editorial, *Pittsburg Headlight*, June 8, 1899.

This date was also the day that Mr. George Bell's home was attacked. On June 12, 1899, things were starting to look up as the Rich Hill strike came to an end. The conditions to resolve the strike were as follows: a uniform scale of 50 and 55 cents year round, a nine hour work day, and a semi-monthly pay day. Also there was to be no discrimination to be shown by the company against the portion of their employees who engaged in the strike, but little change was to be expected in the strike until after the 15th of June. Men were going to Frontenac and Midway to go back to work in the mines. The commissary under the management of Fred Stanton" and E. Bevins gave the men of Rich Hill food to eat. This sort of good will was an act of good faith towards the men that were under management towards the mine workers. The Pittsburg miners were still on strike, and on June 15th, 1899, Negro miners were being imported to take the place of some of the strikers. When they brought black miners in, they had to be protected by the United States Marshall. Exactly twenty of United States Marshals were brought in to keep the order.

This was the case in many of the Southeast Kansas mines, where black men were brought in to work the mines till the strike was over. Wanted posters were being hung all over the town to try and get men to come work the mines. They read:

Wanted! Colored coal-miners for Weir City Kansas., district, the paradise for colored people. Ninety-seven cents per ton September 1 to March 1; 87 1/2 cents per ton March 1 to September 1, for screened coal over seven-eighths-inch opening. Special train will leave Birmingham the 13th Transportation advanced. Get ready and go to the land of the promise.²¹

²¹ W.L.A. Johnson, *Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, Fourteenth Annual Report, Commissioner. Pg, 339

The first importation in response to the above notices was 175 African Americans, who were brought by the Western Coal and Mining Company over the Missouri Pacific railway.²² They were unloaded on June the 14th at Fleming camp, and there was no evidence of violence or disturbances at that time. This was the case in many of the mines in Southeast Kansas, where they would bring in help. Most of the time it was black workers who were willing to take the money that was offered. There were occasions where mining companies would raise the pay just a little to attract new miners, usually of black, who would see this as an improvement in their income

Bringing in new miners, and especially black miners, would backfire on occasion. Even though African-Americans had no previous knowledge of the strike before they were brought to Southeast Kansas, they were still quite willing to join the striking miners when given assurance of support and protection. Though they were offered support and protection, many of the black miners had no problem working for the wages that were offered by the coal companies. Even after the strike of 1899 was over, there were still wanted posters advertising for black miners and any other miners. This would help the big four to make sure that their mines would stay up and running if there was to be another strike.

The big four companies met with the President W.T. Wright on June 21, 1899 to try to negotiate the terms of the strike. Terms that were sent with Mr. Wright were as

²² *Ibid.*

follows:

Price per ton during the six summer months be 58 cents per ton and the 6 winter months be 64 cents per ton. Dead work be recognized as follows: 1) entries 12ft and over are paid by a rate of one dollar per yard. 2) entries less than 12 ft wide paid at a rate of one dollar and fifty cents per yard. 3) all cross cuts be paid one dollar and fifty cents per yard. 4) bushing eighty cents per yard or according to thickness. 5) horse bucks one dollar per foot. 6) stowing ten cents per car or fifty cents per yard or to be taken away by the company.²³ Other demands were that price of powder be one dollar and seventy-five cents per keg. A semimonthly pay-day, along with only eight hours of work a day, and no more compulsory-doctor system, drivers and cagers be paid two dollars per day, trappers be paid one dollar per day, any man in a larger mine should only have one job, shot-fires not less than two dollars and fifty cents per shift. Finally, check weight men must have a check number in order to receive their pay, same as a miner; also, a check off system was implemented.²⁴

On June 21, 1899, companies of Mount Carmel Coal Company, Pittsburg and Midway Coal Mining Company, The Weir Coal Company, J.C. Graham Coal Company, Bennett and Crowe, Arnott and Company, Player and Ryder, Robson Bros. Company, and Miller Coal Company signed a contract to approve these terms. This was the fairest and most equitable agreement that had ever been made in the history of the mining industry of Southeast Kansas. Miners were especially pleased with the eight hour work day and the mine-run basis because this put them on equal footing with the miners of the east. Within this contract there was a "Arbitration Clause," which practically forestalled any possibility of strikes in the mines of the operators signing the contract, because it

²³ Editorial, *Pittsburg Headlight*, June 21, 1899.

²⁴ W.L.A. Johnson, *Kansas Bureau of Labor and Industrial Statistics*, Fourteenth Annual Report, Commissioner. Pg, 333Pg, 336-337

assured a safe and simple method for the amicable adjustment of whatever difficulties could have arisen in the future. It stated that if there were, "any problems with the way that miners were being treated, they would not strike and they would bring their problems forth to the companies to be worked out in a peaceful manner."²⁵

These demands and terms were to be set in motion but not right away, as the big four companies tried to delay this pay increase along with the shorter work hours as long as possible. On June 30th, 1899, the date when these new terms were to come into effect, it was stated and signed by the big four companies that the new terms would be effective as soon as September 30th, 1899.²⁶ As good as all the new terms sounded, many of the strikers were thinking about going back on strike to put the terms and conditions in effect as soon as possible. The big four companies were lucky that this was only a few of the workers; in fact, many of the workers were very pleased with the new conditions. Their families were still suffering from hunger, they were tired of being out of work, and because of this they ended the strike. There were still a few mines in Southeast Kansas on strike, but as for most of the Pittsburg area they were over for the time being overall men were satisfied.

The strike of 1899 was the biggest strike since the 1893 strike in Pittsburg, Kansas. It was also known as one of the most successful strikes of the late 1800's and the early 1900's because of the biggest increase of wages ever reported in this time frame. It

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Pg, 338

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Pg, 339

was also successful in the fact that there were no deaths that were reported due to the strike, there were a few injuries due to the protest at the mines and a few violent outbursts on the side of the strikers. The strike of 1899 changed the way miners were treated from that point on.

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This text was used see what life was like for the coal miners inside the mines.

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This text provided a look at what the protest were-like in the 1890's, how people reacted to these protest, also what the people outside the protest actions were.

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This text was looked at to see what kind of sickness were in the area along with what it took to treat these sicknesses.

Fishback, Price V. and Lauszus, Dieter. "The Quality of Services in Company Towns: Sanitation in Coal Towns During the 1920s." *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Mar., 1989).

This text was used to see what the sanitation was like in the coal mining communities and what the owners of this town did to help them.