

People Of Steel

The Support of a Town during the Homestead Strike

By Jason Partida

The sun rested under the cover of darkness as workers from a steel mill rose from their beds. On July 6, 1892 the steel workers from Homestead, Pennsylvania raced to reach the mill before their unwanted guests. The owner of the steel mill, Andrew Carnegie, away on vacation left the mill under the hands of Henry C. Frick, a man known for breaking unions. Frick refused to entertain any sort of negotiations with the union workers of the mill and in response the workers decided to strike. Frick hired the Pinkerton detectives to break up the strike and regain control of the mill. The arriving Pinkertons not only faced a mob of steel workers that night but also the weapons the workers managed to scrap together. Baring arms, the workers engaged the Pinkerton detectives on July 6, 1892. After the battle ended, state militia arrived to remove the strikers from the works. The strike continued outside the works and in the town for several weeks but ultimately the strike proved unsuccessful.¹

¹ I assembled the preceding narrative based on the following works. See Edward Slavishak, "Working-Class Muscle: Homestead and Bodily Disorder in the Gilded Age," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 3, no. 4 (2004): 330-368. Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

The climatic period of the Homestead Strike occurred in front of the steel mill and the Monongahela River amidst a violent battle between the striking workers and the invading Pinkertons. However, a more memorable component in the strike occurred amongst the workers and the town residents. The coming together of the town folk and steel workers signaled a town in support of the workers' decision to strike. Beyond the story of bloodshed that culminated with ten dead appears a prologue and epilogue immersed in a town centered on the steel mill.

A few months passed after the strike before the steel company prosecuted the workers responsible for the violent battle against the Pinkertons. In addition to the blacklisting of the leaders of the strike, the first arrest occurred in mid-July. The Burgess John McLuckie became the first, arrested on the charge of murder. Issued in the warrant for McLuckie's arrest, the names of Hugh O'Donnell, Sylvester Critchlow, Anthony Flaherty, Samuel Burkett, James Flannigan and Hugh Ross also appeared.² The police also apprehended strikers that were not on the initial warrant and charged McLuckie and Sylvester Critchlow with murder. Critchlow became the first person placed on trial. His trial provided an indication of things to come as the jury declared Critchlow not guilty. The juries also declared the other men involved in the strike in the ensuing trials not guilty. The results of the first trial and the following trials give a peculiar insight into the perceptions of the jury. Why did the jury deliver a not guilty verdict for the men that without a doubt participated in the riot? Why did their peers perceive them as victims while vilifying the actions of Carnegie and Frick?

² Arthur G. Burgoyne, *In Homestead: A Complete History of the Struggle of July 1892, between the Carnegie Steel Company, Limited, and the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers* (Pittsburgh, PA: Rawsthorne, 1893) 141.

The community created in Homestead pushed aside any rooted belief of immigrants during the second half of the 18th century. Historian Paul Krause, an expert on the event, offered the theme of the Homestead Strike through an interpretation of the Gilded Age. He defined the Gilded Age as a time geared towards private interests and the growth of the national economy, which grossly outweighed not only public interests but also the foundation of a supposedly republican representation. Specifically, the very government voted in by the people failed to support the majority and often favored big industry.³ Historian Edward Slavishak argues that the violent unfolding of the Homestead Strike resulted from the participation of the brutish Southern and Eastern European unskilled workers. Slavishak also asserted that the only support for the strikers stemmed from a need to assist the leaders who represented the old stock white American skilled worker.⁴ Here I argue that the town of Homestead did not ostracize the immigrant workers. Instead, through the influence of the unions present in town, the people of Homestead created a communal connection, and through its communal connection the town folk supported the strikers. This evoked communal connection permitted the strike leaders to avoid convictions of murder in the trials following the battle against the Pinkertons. Evidence in support of the strikers manifested from the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW), composed songs, newspaper articles written about the strike, and the not guilty verdict for the tried strikers. By examining the formation of the town of Homestead and the impact of a union in creating a community, this paper will show the role of the town and their strength as a community.

3 Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 6.

4 Slavishak, "Working-Class Muscle".

Homestead during the Gilded Age

Built on the Monongahela River, the town of Homestead in Allegheny County, six miles from Pittsburgh in Western Pennsylvania, operated as a company town. Large industries created company towns for the purpose of producing materials and maintaining a workforce indebted to the company. The company owned almost all of the buildings and all of the businesses in the company towns, including houses, stores, and clinics. These towns, strategically located far away from other towns, forced residents into purchasing goods or needs from the company owned shops. In this way company towns practically owned and controlled all aspects of the lives of town folk. The company town of Homestead functioned as a town dependent on the production of steel. Historian Krause provides a vivid description of this environment:

With the railroad running through the town from east to west, the Monongahela River on one side and a precipitous hill on the other, Homestead and its steelworkers formed a self-enclosed community that could be strategically sealed off from unwelcoming visitors—overbearing owners or scab labor.”⁵ The strategic setting also forced the residence of Homestead, mainly the steel workers to work with the immigrants that toiled in the steel mill.

Union lodges rose in the quickly transforming town. Despite the emergence of the AAISW lodges and the Knights of Labor local assemblies, both unions worked together. The presence of unions in the town grew so important that “the AAISW’s meeting house

5 Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 210.

served as a center for sociability in the town; activities ranged from balls to funerals and included families of members in addition to the members themselves.”⁶ In this way Homestead became a town that accepted immigrants. Since Homestead existed before Carnegie changed the town into a company town, Homestead had a sense of a community already in place. This small sense of community in Homestead created through the willing participation of the immigrants working with the town folk and fortified by the emergence of two unions in the town formed a strong bond in Homestead.

The Importance of a Union

The AAISW represented above anything else security for the workers of the Homestead mill. Although, membership in the mill only reached 750 out of the 3,800 workers, the men of the mill relied on the presence of the union. Like any other business owner Carnegie wanted to run a union free works or a work place without a union. Nevertheless, the AAISW was a part of Homestead life. The union's presence in the town occurred before Carnegie purchased the mill. The union's presence also held parallelism with the town as the two built off each other during the period of growth the town experienced in the latter half of the 19th century. The meeting house of the AAISW allowed the members to hold events and served as the town's social gathering point. This meant the union's meeting house more specifically the union, was a central piece in town life. The union provided fair wages and job security along with the additional perks of the availability of the meeting house. The members of the union paid dues for the continual protection of the union. In this way the AAISW and its members lived off each other, each relying on the others fulfillment of their respective roles.

6 Ibid., 213.

What set the relationship of the AAISW and the residents of Homestead was the solidarity present between the members of the union and the non-union unskilled workers made up almost exclusively by Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Despite nativist rhetoric present among some of the old stock white workers, the workers pushed aside any resentment and operated as a cohesive unit. A unit filled with “the collective aspirations of these people conformed to a vision of labor republicanism that stretched . . . to distant roots in Europe.” The importance of maintaining a strong union and high wages pushed aside division in the town, while urging cooperation between co-workers of any heritage. The Eastern European immigrants also facilitated this welcomed discourse of unity in order to prevail. Immigrants faced the same struggles back home and, “like their American counterparts, they came from a tradition that had known and struggled against compulsory labor.”⁷ Unlike skilled labor unions and even within the AAISW, the AAISW of Homestead welcomed unskilled immigrant labor in part due to the presence of the other union the Knights.

The Knights supported all types of laborers, including unskilled laborers and immigrant workers. Although the nearby town of Pittsburgh eventually failed to house the two unions, Homestead was different. In Homestead the two unions worked together and avoided any interference that might occur between each other. An example of this was John “Yankee Jack” Thomas. “a popular local poet who worked in the blooming mill, belonged to both the Knights and the AAISW; indeed, he was a leader of Local Assembly 1785 and Munhall Lodge 24,” proving the uniqueness of Homestead. The cooperation of the two unions allowed the workers of

7 Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 211.

Homestead to organize effectively, creating powerful unions with the ability to hold influence over works in the town.

In Homestead the town functioned around the steel works and the residents accepted the AAISW as the most important union in the town. Due to the vitality of the steel works, the cooperation between the steel workers proved essential in holding a strong union in Homestead. With the union dependent on the participation of the workers living harmoniously, Homestead formed into a town that unlike other steel towns worked for a common goal. This goal did not discard notions of nativism but contained them in pursuit of a town that operated as a union town unperturbed and undisturbed. Thus grounded in the objective of maintaining a strong union, the workers and their families urged each other to unite and support the strikers during the strike and once again in the following trials as a community.

A Community

The town already existed before the steel mill or the arrival of Carnegie but the growth of the town occurred because of those additions. Homestead housed white Americans with roots to Northern or Western Europe before the 1880s. Working immigrants too came from Northern or Western Europe until the 1880s when they began to arrive from Eastern and Southern Europe. The customs, diets, language, and religious beliefs grew with the new influx of immigrants and transformed the town. The creation of Homestead as a community for the sake of security also created an imagined community. This imagined community formed from the townspeople's perceptions of themselves as linked with the steel workers, acknowledged the striking steel workers' claims of representational ownership of the steel mill.

There can be many reasons why a community comes into creation from a group of people living in close proximity to each other. The author Benedict Anderson who created the term “imagined community” explained, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁸ Although Anderson refers to nationalism and his definition applies to states, a connection can be made in the case of Homestead. Homestead in a sense was an imagined community due to its formation. Since the residents of Homestead rallied around the rhetoric of the AAISW, they imagined themselves as a united community even though only a minority of the steel workers belonged to the union. Homestead imagined itself around goals similar to those that hold nations together: they protected the rights of their workers and fought against oppression from outsiders.

Herbert Gutman, an expert on the theory of community, described communities in a micro level focused on immigrants, as opposed to Anderson, who focused on state boundaries and the concept of nationalism. He wrote, “One strain of thought common to the rhetoric of nineteenth-century immigrant and native-born artisans is considered here. It helps explain their recurrent enthusiasm for land and currency reform, cooperatives, and trade unions.”⁹ The immigrants, fearing self-dependency filled with isolationism, openly tried to cooperate with their counterparts. Immigrants and native-born workers showed an eagerness to find a consolidating factor in which to protect themselves from the growing power of the few. These factors existed in Homestead, facilitating the

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, Revised and extended ed., 2nd ed. (1991). The Alpine Press Inc. 9.

9 Herbert G. Gutman, “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919,” *The American Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (June, 1973): 38.

shaping of a community where Americans readily accepted their immigrant counterparts in order to maintain a strong union.

Support of a Town

On June 28 1892, Frick began to lock out the workers from parts of the steel mill in hopes of forcing the workers to succumb to his terms of negotiating. In the next two days Frick locked out the workers from the rest of the steel mill. On June 30, after returning from the last day of negotiations before the union contract expired, the workers met and decided to strike; claiming Frick violated the union contract by locking the workers out. After the state militia recovered the steel from the strikers a few days after the riot, Frick easily replaced unskilled workers with scab labor by mid-August. The workers struggled to maintain a strong conviction of solidarity with no source of income to provide for their families. Frick planned on this drop in morale and expected to negotiate with each worker individually. What Frick did not calculate in his plan was the support of a town that believed in its workers, evident by the composition of songs filled with lyrics contemplating a perspective of victims and assailants, along with various newspaper publications.

Three songs produced about the Homestead Strike integrated support for the strikers into the cultural fabric of daily life. This support seeped out as “all over the country poets and lyricist commemorated [the Homestead Strike] in verse that was often more melodramatic than the events themselves.”¹⁰ The songs: “The Homestead Strike”, “Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men”, and “Song of a Strike” provided an

10 Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, 4.

explanation as to how much support the workers obtained. Branching out beyond an already engrossed community, the strike garnered support from a nation interested in how events might culminate. Each song depicted a unique instance of the strike.

The first song focused on gaining support for the strikers, especially among other steel workers. Lyrics such as “Now, boys, we are out on strike, you can help us if you like” and “Let us unite with heart and hand and spread the news through this broad land” looked for support within the steel mill. The song stressed the importance of enduring the struggle by uniting and included the key to winning the strike. The song encouraged strikers to “fight with might and main and travel hand in hand,” which reinforced the notion of community. In order for the strike to be successful the workers needed support from the town and cooperation within. Through this song the strikers created a blueprint for the importance of consolidating the town as a united community.¹¹

The second and third songs offer a similarly harsh critique of Frick, Carnegie, and the federal government. The third song, “Father was Killed by the Pinkerton Men” depicted feelings that expressed a discontent towards Carnegie and vilified his actions. The lyrics, “The freedom of the city in Scotland far way” questioned the reason why Carnegie chose to continue on his vacation while his workers “are cattle and may die,” as the song suggests. These lyrics vilified the owners and made victims of the strikers. The song also revealed dissatisfaction towards the government for failing to protect the workers: “But here in Free America with protection in full sway, his workmen get the freedom of the grave.” These lyrics reveal the grim reality of how powerless the working

11 “The Homestead Strike”: *The Homestead Strike Songster* (New York: n.d.). Reprinted in Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 243.

class was against big industries, especially without any protection from the government.¹² The fourth song, “Song of Strike” continued the discontent expressed in the third song. This song represented the disillusionment with the owners of the steel mill and the taking advantage of hard working men. The lyrics, “And why our labor unions they must not be recognized, whilst the actions of a syndicate must not be criticized,” indicated a bitter taste left in the mouths of the public as they questioned the actions of the firm. More so, this song personified Carnegie and Frick as slave drivers: “You must all renounce your union and forswear your liberty and we will give you a chance to live and die in slavery.”¹³ The sentiments portrayed in this song not only criticized Carnegie but the Gilded Age as a time of protecting industries and stifling workers. This feeling of nakedness against industry only pushed the town of Homestead to solidify the communal tie placed by the union and enhanced by the steel workers.

These songs went beyond artistic talent; they symbolized a perception of the steel workers and in a sense justified the strikers’ actions against the Pinkerton detectives and the steel mill. With interpretations already placed between the victims and the offenders, an image formed around who upheld justice in the town. Morale for the strikers grew overwhelmingly because of the support granted by the town. The songs also provided a mentality of a town that in the future housed the court trials of the men arrested for initiating the strike.

12 “Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men”: Sigmund Spaeth, *Weep Some More, My Lady* (Garden City, N.Y.: 1927), 235-236. Reprinted in Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 243.

13 George Swetnam, “Song of a Strike,” (1892). Reprinted in Linda Schneider, “the Citizen Striker: Workers’ ideology in the Homestead Strike of 1892,” *Labor History* 23 (Winter 1982): 60.

The emotions of the town continued to run high in support of the strikers. Three months after the riot, the prosecution included the charge of treason against the leaders of the strike. On October 2, 1892, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* publicized the plans of the prosecution to include the charge of treason against the strike leaders in addition to already placed charges of riot, assault, manslaughter, and murder.¹⁴ In the newspaper article the writer includes the public's reaction to this new accusation and charge.

The public believed this new charge on top of the already present charges signaled the persecution of the strikers. A charge of treason meant that the strikers conspired against the country. They believed the charge of treason was excessive and did not support the charge. The article continued as follows, “even now, after the charge is formally made, the public will not accept that view [of treason], except upon clear evidence.”¹⁵ Despite the claim of accepting the charge in light of new evidence, the public had already created an interpretation of the event, one that privileged and justified the actions taken by the strikers. Justified because the public knew these men, they worked alongside these men, they celebrated together in times of festivities, and some even shared the pain of loss. The residents understood what drove the strikers to riot, and they also understood the importance of the union. In fact, many of the residents participated along with the strikers in pushing out the Pinkertons from the town. The imagined community of Homestead that belonged to the town and not the company allowed the residents of the town to support the strikers in their moments of fighting. Now the town prepared to support the strikers’ moment on trial.

14 “The Charge of Treason”, *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, October 2, 1892.

15 “The Charge of Treason”.

On Trial

On November 18, 1892, Sylvester Critchlow became the first striker put on trial. Summoned to the Allegheny County Criminal Court, Critchlow faced charges for the murder of T.J. Connors. Connors worked for the Pinkerton detectives and participated in protecting the Homestead mill from the striking workers on the day of the riot. He died on July 6 during the riot between the steel strikers and the Pinkertons after being shot. Judge Kennedy presided over the case. District Attorney Burleigh ran the prosecution. D.A. Burleigh also received assistance from Thomas M. Marshall, William J. Brennan, William Reardon, and John F. Cox. The last member Cox was from Homestead.¹⁶

On the day of the trial, the people of Homestead assembled in the court room in support of Critchlow, demonstrating their collective belief in his innocence. The people of Homestead arrived hoping to witness an innocent man receive a favorable outcome. The judge decided to empty out the court room of all attendees. With the exception of the reporters, only people needed for the case stayed. Members of the bar, witnesses, and jurors made up the rest of the people allowed in the court room.

Because the case dealt with the murder of Connors, the district attorney asked the jurors to forget about the question of rioting and treason and disavow any connection to Homestead in hopes of separating Critchlow as a striker and portraying him as a murder. On the defense, Marshall advocated for Critchlow and empowered the jury with his opening statement:

16 Key members involved in the case found in the following sources. Burgoyne, *In Homestead*, 241-260. "Critchlow Acquitted," *New York Times*, November 23, 1892. "Summing up the Case," *The Pittsburgh Press*, November 23, 1892. "Striker Held for Murder," *New York Times*, July 29, 1892. "The Case of Sylvester Critchlow," *New York Times*, November 19, 1892.

The position you occupy to-day is not new to some of your number, but I do not think you will ever again occupy a position of such public importance. Your power is greater than the president of the United States. He can only spare life under certain conditions. You can take it away without question. . . . Of course, the court's instruction is entitled to deep consideration, but after all you are the judges of both law and facts.¹⁷

In his statement Marshall provided an outlet in which the jurors could voice their opinion in a matter that represented the struggle of Homestead. The actions taken on July 6 faced an open interpretation. The people from the county had two choices: they could either acknowledge the struggle and plight of the workers who chose to strike against oppression, or they could decide the actions taken by the strikers went too far and resulted in savagery. The outcome of the first trial not only represented a charge of murder but it also created a rubric in which to judge the other steel workers who struck and now waited for their turn on trial.

The trial continued for a few days as both sides brought in numerous witnesses in order to prove Critchlow's location during the riot. The defense argued that even if he was present at the Carnegie Company grounds there was nothing to convict him of, as the defense also questioned the nature of the riot. One witness, Mrs. Coyle claimed she saw Critchlow a mile away from the mill and headed towards his home. When further questioned about the validity of her testimony she exclaimed, "There's no lie about it . . . but you're trying to make me tell a lie, and I wouldn't do it for all the money Carnegie

17 "Summing up the Case,"

has.” Her testimony alone represented the sentiments of the residents of Homestead. The town folk felt Frick overstepped his authority in calling the Pinkerton detectives, because if he really wanted to protect his property, the Pinkertons did not have to enter the mill in the dead of night like criminals. The defense questioned the actions taken by Frick the day of July 6 and the validity of the witnesses presented by the prosecution. The defense based their argument on the denied presence of Critchlow and accused Frick as the only one responsible for the events of July 6. Judge Kennedy addressed the jury before deliberation, in an attempt to disengage any feelings toward the event and only deliberate on the facts. He stated, “If there is evidence that the rioters had determined to take life in order to carry out their object and purpose, all are guilty in the first degree.”¹⁸ The jury went into deliberation at 3:25 p.m. At 6 p.m. the jury reached a not guilty.

The victory of the defense and the acquittal of Critchlow demonstrated the strength of the town and their support for the strikers. The support of the town transcended Homestead as support for Critchlow’s acquittal spilled from the town and into the county. Critchlow stayed in jail on additional charges. But the town knew that any conviction of a Homestead man proved unlikely in the coming trials. Indeed, they were correct as no man involved in the Homestead riot received any conviction for murder. This victory represented the support of a town for their steel workers, even in the face of the justice system. Throughout the trial, residents of Homestead presented an alibi for Critchlow. Those who testified against him for the most part were either part of the Pinkerton detectives or brought in by the Carnegie Company as reporters the day before the riot. Even though by some accounts Critchlow did participate in the battle and there

18 “Critchlow Acquitted,”

was credible testimony that positioned him at scene of the murder, the jury declared him not guilty. Contrary to the evidence presented in the courtroom the justice system protected someone involved in illegal activities. Did the jurors intend to set free a man who participated in a riot that resulted in deaths go unpunished by the law?

The answer is questionable but the intention of the jurors who collectively represented a town is not. The riot, in the minds of the public, resulted from the callousness of a man named Frick. In their opinion Frick's decision to lock out the men from the mill and hire replacement workers crossed the line. The men only sought a job with security, a security provided by the presence of a union. If the men decided to strike, they had the right to do so. After all, they only defended their worker's rights of fairness in the workplace. The public blamed Frick, Carnegie, and large industries as the assailants, while the strikers fulfilled the role of victims burdened by the inability to provide for their families. The support the workers received from the community grew stronger. In order to protect the union, the community provided the workers with a sense of security in which to justify their actions. The evidence laid bare for all to see as a jury of his peers decided that Critchlow was indeed an innocent man.

After the Trials

In its culmination, the story of Homestead from the perspective of the strikers and the town that supported them was ultimately a tale of defeat. After the trials, the prolonged strike garnered no success and the striking men limited on resources to scrape by ended the strike. In this failure the AAISW weakened tremendously, and the strongest union in steel works turned into a memory of short-term success. With their names black listed, the leaders of the strike headed in different directions. The workers with no other options

renegotiated individually and went back to work in the steel mill with decreased wages. Frick and Carnegie prevailed in running a non-union works and continued to run the mill on their terms. The town adapted to the changes of a non-union works and Carnegie donated a library named after the town. With steel unions giving way in the country, the steel companies pushed for working conditions that focused on greater production. The growth in production and advances in technology ushered changes in U.S. cities as skyscrapers emerged throughout the metropolitan sectors of the country. The ebb and flow of unions and industries continue today over the rights of the workers to provide a living for themselves and their families much like the steel workers of Homestead.

Conclusion

Even if the strikers failed to keep their union in the mill and in the process paid a heavy price for their actions, the struggle undertaken represented a new relationship between workers and employers. The effort put forth by the town and the strikers cannot be tagged as a complete failure. The created communal connection born in the town of Homestead supported the strikers in a show of solidarity. Through the lessons taught by the AAISW, the town bypassed notions of nativist rhetoric and accepted their Eastern European counterparts in the town for the sake of a consolidated union. The public's efforts of continued support were evident in newspaper articles published throughout the months of the strike. The public produced songs describing the plight of the workers and the maltreatment by Frick towards the strikers. In the moment of highest stakes, the town gathered in unison in support of the strikers who now faced the judicial system. As a community, Homestead's support for the strikers stretched beyond the boundary of the town and affected the county. The jurors immersed in the story of Homestead handed

down an acquittal for Critchew a participant of the riot. The events at Homestead left behind a crumbling union, but also added a chapter in the struggle between workers and corporations.

The events in Homestead do not parallel modern strikes but the issues remain constant. Workers continue to protest working rights and expect fair treatment at the work place. Large industries continue to take advantage of labor and exploit workers. The issue of immigration and its effect on jobs continue to persist. The actions of the Homestead Strike should not be emulated; however the support of a town provides an exemplary note in dealing with unfair treatment. Without the use of violence, a united front can prove more effective in ousting the abuses of large industries. Different methods like boycotts, largely unthinkable in the 18th century, easily substitute the use of force as the spread of news is instantaneous. The Homestead Strike showed the resulting danger of workers pushed too far by corporate abuses and leave a lingering possibility of what may happen if abuses in the work place continue today.

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