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REFERENCE SERIES

COEUR d'ALENE MINING WARS

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Silver mining in the Wood River and Coeur d'Alene regions had fallen into a severe decline by 1892. Many of the Wood River mines had to go out of business altogether. And in an effort to conserve lead silver ore reserves until the general economic situation turned more favorable, mining in the Coeur d'Alene mountains was shut down pending improvement. When the mine owners' association managed to get some rail rate and smelting concessions, the companies offered to reopen if the miners would accept lower pay. Otherwise, the companies figured they would be better off financially to leave their ore undisturbed in the ground.

A bitter labor dispute grew out of company efforts to try to operate Coeur d'Alene lead silver mines in face of union opposition to a lower wage scale. Efforts to bring in organized, outside workers, protected by company armies, provoked considerable trouble. (Idaho's state constitution had a provision, growing out of the national railway strikes of 1886, against admission of private armies to the state. But no serious effort was made to enforce the law on this matter.) When the miners discovered that their union secretary also served the companies as a Pinkerton agent, the whole conflict literally exploded. On June 11, 1892, in an open war, a force of miners dynamited an abandoned mill at Gem. At this point, the mine owners prevailed (without any difficulty) upon Governor N. B. Willey (a mine superintendent from Warrens) to proclaim martial law. After the dynamiting, inspired in part by the Homestake steel mill war the week before near Pittsburgh, no more disorder disturbed the mining region. But the companies concluded that they would not have much success trying to operate non-union mines without military protection. Their own armies appeared insufficient. With martial law, a large number of union miners were confined in a large outdoor prison, known as a bullpen. The county jail could not begin to accommodate a significant portion of the Coeur d'Alene miners, so the Coeur d'Alene bullpen was invented in this emergency.

Unhappy over the Gem dynamiting, the mine owners also wanted to bring criminal charges against the miners. In a district in which most of the inhabitants were miners, or else sympathized with the miners, they had little prospect for success in the courts. They managed, though, to get some of the union leaders

arrested for violating an injunction provided them by the United States district judge. For a number of months, Ed Boyce and some of the other union officials were confined in the Ada County jail pending a hearing and appeal. While there, they decided, on advice of their attorney, James H. Hawley, that the various mine unions in the west ought to form a federation to present a united front and to support each other during times of crisis. (Much of the financial support of the Coeur d'Alene unions came from the unions in Butte, which provided most of Hawley's legal fees during the court case; Hawley simply was suggesting that his clients get together into an effective organization to protect their interests.) A federation of the Coeur d'Alene unions already had been established, and early

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Except for the Major lead-silver producer of the region--the Bunker Hill and Sullivan--the Western Federation of Miners succeeded in unionizing the Coeur d'Alene district by 1899. But the Bunker Hill and Sullivan resisted any arrangement for dealing with a miners' union. Acting quietly, the union secretly began to penetrate the Bunker Hill and Sullivan anyway. Finally, on April 24, 1899, the miners requested that the company adopt the prevailing union wage rate--a higher level than the other mines.

Unable to resist entirely, the Bunker Hill and Sullivan manager acceded to the wage demands. But he refused to recognize the union. Anticipating resumption of the mining war of 1892, the Bunker Hill and Sullivan prepared a defense with a small private army. Conditions, though, had changed considerably since 1892. Shoshone County had a sheriff ready to restrict the company forces. Still under control of Populist officials who opposed fusion with any other party, Shoshone County remained a hostile region for any company trying to hold back the miners' union.

With nothing to fear from their own county officers, the miners showed that they really meant business. Of all the battles the Western Federation got into, their fight with the Bunker Hill and Sullivan proved to be their most important. On April 29, about a thousand miners came down the canyon from Burke and Mullan to Wallace and Kellogg. They arrived on a train loaded with enough dynamite [3,000 pounds] to demolish the Bunker Hill and Sullivan concentrator. A labor union newspaper in Wallace reported that:

At no time did the demonstration assume the appearance of a disorganized mob. All the details were managed with the discipline and precision of a perfectly trained military organization.

Routing the company forces with no difficulty--and with only two casualties, one on each side--the miners did a superlatively

effective job of dynamiting one of the largest concentrators anywhere. The superintendent and his sixty armed guards fled before an entirely superior force, and the triumphant miners slowly returned home after a five minute victory celebration. They figured that their long war with the Bunker Hill and Sullivan had come to an end.

Although the governor in 1899 had no experience as a mine superintendent (as had been the case in 1892), he decided to ask for intervention of United States troops. The army was needed not to preserve order, but to capture the offending miners and to test the power of the Western Federation in court. Another bullpen, after the 1892 model, had to be constructed to house several hundred suspects. Governor Frank Steunenberg promised "to punish and totally eradicate from this community a class of criminals who for years have been committing murders and other crimes in open violation of law."

Martial law was continued through the rest of his term, and no miner was allowed to work in any mine in the district without a state permit. Permits were denied to anyone who could not prove that he had not participated in the Bunker Hill and Sullivan dynamiting. No member of the Western Federation of Miners Union could obtain a permit without withdrawing his membership, and when the mines reopened, the Western Federation had no miners at work.

In order to bring anyone to trial for participating in the dynamiting, Governor Steunenberg, on July 10, replaced the Populist county commissioners and sheriff with new appointees. Two Boise attorneys, James H. Hawley and William E. Borah, undertook the prosecution of the financial secretary of the Burke union for conspiracy in the incident. Hawley, who originally had served as attorney for the miners in 1892, and who had suggested organization of the federation of miners in the first place, had not anticipated anything like such dramatic results from the federation; he felt that the organization had been legitimate originally, but had been transformed into a criminal conspiracy.

Governor Steunenberg concurred. Prosecution of more than a handful of miners held in the bullpen was out of the question: even if the county had been able to afford the trials, very few jurymen could be found to hear the cases. The state expressed satisfaction upon obtaining one conviction on July 28, and the remainder of the miners who actually were scheduled for trial all managed to escape on August 28. Ten more miners were convicted of delaying the mails (a federal charge relating to the United States Postal Service statutes), on November 6, 1889, and wound up in San Quentin for two years. Martial law in Shoshone County lasted two years, but the Western Federation of Mines had lost out long before that.

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