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REFERENCE SERIES

THE COEUR D'ALENE MINE LABOR PROBLEM, 1892-1899

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Prior to 1892, organized labor in the Coeur d'Alene mines had successfully resisted wage cuts. But declining prices of lead and silver and rising freight rates induced the mine owners to shut down their mines, January 16, 1892. By acting together, they forced the railroads to rescind the rate increase after two months of closure. Then they decided they could reopen if the miners would accept lower wages to match the declining metal prices. When the miners refused, the mine owners arranged to import enough non-union workers, May 14, to allow partial resumption of production. Almost two months later, during the national commotion over the fight between the Pinkertons and the steel workers near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on July 6, the Coeur d'Alene miners found out that the secretary of their union was a Pinkerton agent employed by the mine owners. The agent managed to escape, but during the excitement the Gem mill was blown up, and the non-union crew of an adjacent mine was captured. The unions occupied the other mills around the area, and soon Burke Canyon was entirely cleared of non-union men. On July 12, the mine owners had to agree to discharge all their non-union workers. That same day, President Harrison agreed to send in federal troops, and martial law continued in effect until November 18, 1892. During that time many of the union miners were arrested and held in the bull pen; the only convictions obtained against them, though, were in federal court on charges that were dismissed on appeal. With the support of federal troops, the mine owners managed to bring their non-union workers back, and to reopen their properties. Some of the union leaders, while imprisoned by mistake on federal charges in Boise, concluded that the local mining unions over the west would have to federate into a regional union; the result was the formation of the Western Federation of Miners the next year in a convention at Butte, Montana.

Although the panic of 1893 proved to be particularly hard on lead silver mining, the Coeur d'Alene unions gradually regained control over all the mines in the region, except for the largest--the Bunker Hill and Sullivan at Wardner. Another dynamiting incident, reminiscent of the blow-up in 1892, led to another siege of martial law. A large force of men took over a train, loaded it with explosives, and demolished the Bunker Hill and Sullivan concentrator, April 29, 1899. After that, the state,

backed by the United States Army, refused to allow any of the union men to work in the entire area. Several hundred again were confined in a new, enlarged bull pen, and the incident provoked a bitter national discussion of the battle between the Coeur d'Alene miners and the mine owners. In spite of all this trouble, though, the Coeur d'Alene mines developed into the major lead silver area of the United States, making Idaho the leading silver state. One of the mines by itself (and not the largest, either) produced more silver than did the entire Comstock lode of Nevada, and total production (mostly, lead, silver, and zinc) exceeded two billion dollars in value.