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Phyllis Smith "Coal Miners of the Northern Coal Field of Colorado"

Lecture, 9/23/84

Sunday Salon: Carnegie Branch Library for Local History

Dr. Mann(?) said some very nice things about me. I regard myself as a student of history, however, rather than an expert.

Sixty years ago, in the 1920s, the coal industry was the largest employer of men and, regrettably, young boys, in the County. Despite this fact of being the largest employer of people, coal miners, themselves, were not celebrated in this area by two groups. The coal operators did not celebrate them. In fact, they pretty well ignored their requests for greater safety standards in the mines and for other things that I will get into a little bit later.

I'm sorry to say that the residents of Boulder County also did not celebrate the coal miners. After all, coal miners were dirty. They spoke in foreign languages. They had unusual customs that were not fitting in with the young university community. In fact, there are some who say there was an ordinance in the 1920s that said, "Thou shall not carry a lunchbucket on Boulder streets". Now, I think this is somewhat apocryphal, but it is true that the attitude toward coal miners in this area was not a healthy one.

I spoke to a woman just a short time ago, I would call her a dowager, who said that in the 1920s, many residents of Boulder regarded the coal miners, the farmers, as those who provided their services, and she said it is really quite true, we did not regard them - well, as I go through my material, I will state that I think that antipathy from the coal mining community to Boulder still exists to this day.

First of all, some facts and figures about where the coal field is. It's called the Northern Coal Field as distinguished from the Southern Coal Field which is a lot larger. The coal, itself, was a soft, dull brown material formed probably a hundred million years ago when the Boulder Valley was an inland sea and a marsh. The debris from this marsh formed the coal and they say that 14 feet of debris forming would form one foot of coal. The coal field began in the eastern part of Boulder County and extended to Weld. In Weld, they're flat, but as you approach the foothills, the coal fields upthrust because as the inland sea disappeared with the thrust of the Flatirons you can see here, the coal fields, themselves, tilted in this direction. Some of the beds are two to three hundred feet deep. They're deeper at the northern end of the field than they are at the southern. One of the aspects of this particular kind of lignite coal is that it had a combustible nature so it could not be stored. Now, that of course affected the labor relations of this area because if it could not be stored, the miners could not work in the summer. So that led to even further unstable relations between the coal operator and the miner, himself.

The first people to come this way probably stood in those upended coal seams and looked, of course, not down at their feet; they were looking at the mountains for gold and silver. A few of them, however, looked down at their feet and saw that, indeed, the coal seams were extruding out in the open. Some of the early pioneers used that coal for fuel in their homes. Naturally, the word spread back east and to Europe that there was coal here. The first settlers, then, in that region were Cornish, the Welsh and the Irish, the German. They came as experienced coal miners. They were also experienced in labor relations, and, as such, were regarded as trouble-makers by their employers. They did not put up with very much. In fact, the first strike occurred near Erie at the Briggs Mine in 1871. The operators wanted the miners to screen the coal before the coal was weighed, before they could get their wages. This, amongst coal miners, was called dead work. If they had to screen the coal, there would be less wages. The miner did not care for that. The strike ended with the miners, well there was a small riot in Erie. The miners were arrested, put in jail, and the strike failed.

About the same time, the Denver Pacific, which had a railroad from Denver to Cheyenne, put a spur line into the coal area. Naturally, they wanted the coal. They were not too interested in Boulder City as a community. Boulder, at that time, was still numbering 350 souls. But they wanted the coal. So as these spur lines came into the Northern Coal Field, the coal, instead of becoming a very small type business, developed into big business. Eastern interests began to buy up the coal field. Some of the railroads, some of the other larger interests, and thereby, presented another problem to the coal miner - that is of absentee ownership. It's awfully hard to deal with an owner of a coal field if he doesn't live close by.

Even so, the unions kept developing. First, they were kind of local unions within one mine, two mines, perhaps all those miners in Erie or Superior, Marshall, but they didn't have much clout, as you could see. In 1878, Erie, which seemed to be the leader of all these union movements, had the first Knights of Labor organization. There had been strikes all along up to the turn of the century. Some of them a little successful. Sometimes, they got promised that they would have an eight hour day, but it was never actually put into force. Miners usually went to work before dawn broke and came home from work after dark. At least, they were in a little bit better shape than their mules. Mules often lived their whole lives, except for their infancy and retirement, under ground.

The miners wanted to be paid for their dead work which would include the erecting of timbers underground to protect themselves from cave-ins. Operators didn't want to pay them for that work; they just wanted to pay for the coal, itself. This was one of the largest bones of contention and it was simply not addressed during those early years.

They also wanted a check weighment - someone that they knew and trusted who would weigh the ore and, thereby, assume their wages would be about \$1.50, sometimes \$2.00 a day. But the operator said, "No, we will weigh the coal". Well, the miners didn't like the operator's check weighment.

As coal began to be big business, wages were no longer issued in money. They issued script and the miners did not like script because they could only use it at a company store and they did not have the freedom to be able to buy food and whatever they needed wherever they wanted. Also, sometimes if they lived in company housing, they did not pay rent, it was merely docked from their wages.

By this time, and I'm talking now of just before the turn of the century, new groups of immigrants came to this area. First the Italians, then the Croations, Belgians, French, lots of the Eastern Europeans of every complexions, Greeks. They were encouraged to immigrate here by the coal operators because of the fact that they could not speak English and so, therefore, they couldn't readily communicate with one another to learn what the conditions were. Also, they were not as experienced at coal mining as the first groups. They learned quickly, of course. Some of them came as scabs. Lots of times when a scab learned enough English to know what he was being used for, he crossed over to the other side to the coal miner.

The United Mine Workers of America came into Colorado about the 1890s and, again, Erie was the first place where the first UMW Local was formed. Still, however, the industry was seasonal. Coal miners had to fend for themselves through the summer and it was also over developed. And, by that, I mean that they used too many workers, too much coal, and, therefore, that put the coal miner in a very difficult situation to bargain.

I've talked to early residents who still remember the mine whistles in such towns as Marshall, Lafayette, Louisville. Each mine had a distinctive whistle and the women knew which whistle was for which mine. Each change of shift was announced by a whistle. If there was to be work tomorrow, the whistle would sound a certain number of toots and if there was an accident, and that's of course what the women listened to for the most part, the whistle sounded for that. Quite often, they didn't even need the whistle to hear whether there was an accident because they could feel the explosion under their feet. But they ran to the proper coal mine to see what was happening.

About the turn of the century, there was a great deal of union movement in Colorado and it was important enough so that Mother Jones paid Louisville a visit. And some of you, I think, have heard of Mother Jones. She was an Irish widow who came here on her first trip to Colorado at the age of 74. Her hey-day was 12 years later when she was in her mid-80s. She was not what you would describe as a gentile, pleasant lady. As a matter of fact, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. called her the most dangerous woman in America. As a matter of fact, Mr. Rockefeller and Mother Jones did have an occasion to meet later on after Ludlow, which I'll get to in a minute, and they got along quite

famously which might say something about their personalities. One of examples of Mother Jones' rhetoric I picked up from a newspaper when she came to speak. She exhorted the coal miners, "If you are too cowardly to fight for your rights, there are enough women in this country to come in and beat hell out of you". And that is one of Mother Jones' more mild statements. By the way, she did not care for ladies and she thought the development of ladies in American society was one of the most dangerous things that there was. Ladies went to finishing schools and used the money up that could be elsewhere used.

By 1908, John Lawson who was a UMW organizer too, (Mother Jones was a UMW organizer too) tried to organize the Southern Field. By this time, it was realized that the Southern Field was a lot bigger, a lot richer and most of the immigrant labor was being funneled into the Southern Field. But because of the disparity of languages and cultures, he was having a hard time of it so he came up north to the Northern Field in 1908. He organized the field very quickly. He signed a contract but, however, two years later in 1910 the mine operators decided not to renegotiate the contract. Late in March, there was beginning to be speculation that there would be a strike. And, indeed, early in April 3,000 miners in the Northern Coal Field went on strike. This is known amongst the old people there as the long strike because it lasted until 1914.

The violence in Louisville and Lafayette is a matter of history. It's real. There are still photographs in some of the museums of buildings riddled with bullets. There's a man who lives in this neighborhood whose father used to tell him of taking the inter-urban train to Denver and the customary thing to do when you approached Louisville, all of the patrons of the train got down on the floor and stayed on the floor until the train left the other end of Louisville because bullets did fly. In fact, some residents have told me that they lived down in the basement in those years because of stray bullets, which could come at any time.

The coal operators retaliated by hiring what is known as Baldwin Felts Guards. These were guards that were brought in from Virginia to guard their properties. They had no experience in guarding. They were kind of a rough bunch and if you put that next to the coal miners, you had trouble. And there was plenty of trouble.

As usual, when operators ran into a strike situation, the first thing they did was try to bribe the sheriff of the county so that the coal operators could have their way. Well, we have kind of a local hero in Eastern Boulder County. His name was Sheriff M. P. Capp. He had no first name, it was M.P. And he would not accept a bribe. There are still residents in Louisville and Erie who regard Sheriff Capp as something next to sainthood.

Scab labor did come in on the trains. Finally the strike spread to the Southern Coal Field and, of course, that's where the more romantic part, if I can use that word, part of the story continues. There were no regular communities in the Southern Coal Field where people could move into the institution of the community and begin to learn English. They lived in camps away from the small towns. Such camps as Forbes, Ludlow, Aguilar--and because of that, they were kind of removed from society. When the strikes hit here, they were not allowed to stay in the company housing and so tent camps were set up away from the mines where the people lived for a couple of years.

The most spectacular massacre, and that was what it was called, the Ludlow Massacre, occurred in 1914 in April. And I don't think it's my place to go into too great detail, but just to show you that it did affect the Northern Coal Field, 21 people lost their lives, mainly they were women and children and it caused a wave of revulsion across the country. The New York Times had a story of Ludlow on its front pages. Naturally, miners in Louisville and Lafayette reacted with further violence. Some of them went down to fight in the Southern Field. Their fights erupted in this area, as well. Finally, President Woodrow Wilson was forced to send in U.S. Troops. The order was established and by December of 1914, the strike was over. But who won?

The UMW, the union, went back East, their treasury depleted. They were pretty discouraged. Some of the miners in this area were also discouraged with the union, not all. Former Senator George McGovern has written a book about Ludlow and I would like read you a sentence of his which I think describes the difference between the Southern Coal Field and the Northern Coal Field: "Here, (meaning in Boulder County) the miners lived under more civilized conditions than those in the Trinidad Field. Many owned their own homes in Lafayette and Frederick; sent their children to moderately decent schools. They were mostly English speaking, generally intelligent and industrious men. And, although forbidden even the crudest system of redress for their discontent at work, their dignity had not been warped by the kind of merciless feudalism that trapped the immigrant colonies 200 miles to the South". I'm not saying that the life of the coal miner in Boulder County was a picnic but I think there was a difference between the two coal fields.

With the UMW going back East to kind of lick its wounds and brood for a while, coal mining continued. However, the natural gas, as a fuel, was being introduced in Colorado as well as further use of electricity and this put even further pressure on the coal mining industry. Great numbers of foreign born were pouring still into this area. The Klan, regrettably, was extremely active in this county as it was in most of Colorado and the fear of the foreign born added to the Klan activity in this area. There are still people living in Boulder who do remember the crosses burning on the lawns.

At the same time, a young woman who was the daughter of the owner of the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, was receiving her education at Vassar - Josephine Roach. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth, perhaps the kind of lady that Mother Jones did not care for, she went on to Columbia and quite different from her father, developed quite an interest in social matters. She became Denver's first policewoman before she got into the coal mining work. Her father died

and left his interest in the Rocky Mountain Fuel to Josephine. At the time she was trying to get full control of the company, the Wobbllys moved into Colorado - the Industrial Workers of the World, another union. They are known mostly by their socialist views, however, the Wobbllys in Colorado kind of downplayed their socialism because they wanted to get some action in the coal mining fields. In 1927, November, the Wobbllys called for a strike, a general strike, and were they surprised when the members of the Northern Coal Fields walked off their jobs! I have a feeling that the organizers, themselves, were more surprised than anyone. One mine that did not close was the Columbine. This was a mine owned by the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company and Josephine Roach was at the same time trying to gain control of this company. The Columbine was in Weld County, the postoffice was called Serene, Colorado. The post-office was actually inside the electric fence of the coal mine. This is the first time I've ever heard of a postoffice where you had to go through an electrified fence to mail your letters.

Pickets formed around the Columbine every day except Sunday. At dawn, the pickets would form before light, sometimes 200, sometimes 600. Some of the younger folks carried American flags. Many of the strikers had red bandanas around their necks so you could tell the difference between the scabs and the strikers. Of course, the operators immediately started calling them "rednecks". Someone had a trumpet and often the picket lines were formed by the call of the trumpet. I have no idea as to his musical ability. Sunday evening, before these people were forming for their Monday picket line, Captain Lewis Sherforide(sp) with the State Militia(a few), unannounced came - and evidently, as history finds, the Governor did not order him into the area. But he did come. Now it has been said that these militia established themselves at the Columbine and it is alleged that much drinking took place. Anyway, that morning at dawn, the pickets formed as usual, not knowing that Sherforide was inside. Some of his men, by the way, had been at Ludlow. The shooting started around 6:10 and by 6:15, six had been killed and 20 wounded. What happened depends on what side you're on. There are many, many different stories as to what happened. The militia claimed that the strikers had guns. Why they were throwing rocks if they had guns, I do not know. Anyway, this whole Columbine massacre has been memorialized in a three act opera which is performed from time to time in the area by Joanna Sampson and Mary Davis. It's still performed now and again.

Josephine, of course, took great steps to clear the situation at the Columbine. She finally had gotten control of the Fuel Company and the strike ended in February of '28. The UMW signed a contract with Miss Roach; she was the first one to sign. The other coal operators, of course, were pretty unhappy about that and tried to lower the price of coal on her but she survived and by the mid '30s, most of the coal fields left in Colorado were unionized.

Well, what do we have left from all this fear? The decline in the use of coal, of course, caused the industry to slow down. By the '50s, just one or two mines were open. The men who worked the mines now have black lung disease, some of whom are not being paid by Social Security for that. We have something called subsidence in the Louisville/Lafayette/Erie area. Some new homeowners may learn about that. The miles and miles of empty coal chambers

which run underneath these towns cause, from time to time, the houses to settle and tilt and your house might be a few feet lower than you anticipated.

Highway construction is difficult in that area. Repair is often quite costly because of subsidence.

We're also left with underground fires. There's still one burning near the Turnpike. It's been burning since the 1930s. I think there are others too. Once in a while from time to time, these fires will come to the surface. I recall in 1973 there was an article in our local paper about an underground fire that had reached the surface. The flames came several feet above ground and went back down again to continue burning. As far as I know, it is still on fire. I believe the area that I'm thinking of is now part of the Boulder Greenbelt and there are signs in this area saying, "Unstable ground; please do not walk in this area".

We're also left, as I said before, with the antipathy toward Boulder by some of these communities. I think it is very, very strong. But perhaps the most important thing is the hardiness of these families who came in the first place. They're still here and the generations are growing more strong. Many of these people, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren still live in the area and they're very proud of background of their grandfathers.

I'd like to close with a poem and it's a poem, not a song, although it was written by Merle Travis, "Dark as a Dungeon" which I think you probably know:

Come all ye young fellas, so young and so fine  
And seek not your fortune in a dark, dreary mine.  
It will form as a habit and seep in your soul,  
Till the stream of your blood runs black as the coal.  
Where it's dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew,  
Where the danger is doubled and the pleasures are few.  
Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines,  
It's dark as a dungeon way down in the mine.