

Labor's Legacy: Remembering The Railroad Strike Of 1922



Clerk's Corner

By Megan Schoeman

Rockingham County Circuit Court Clerk's Office

As the first Monday of September approaches, so does the occasion to honor the backbone of our society: the workforce. Labor Day, a holiday with deep historical roots since the late 19th century, serves as a time to acknowledge the relentless dedication and significant contributions of workers across various industries. From factory floors to office desks, farms to high-tech startups, this day stands as a testament to the progress achieved through collective efforts.

Labor Day, a creation of the labor movement, has been observed in the United States for over a century. The holiday originated when labor unions advocated for fair working conditions and reasonable working hours. The Haymarket affair of 1886 and subsequent protests paved the way for the establishment of the national holiday.

Recent discoveries shed new light on local labor history, as Thomas Kidd, a former Graduate Assistant, uncovered overlooked records while exploring historical criminal court cases in the Rockingham County Circuit Courthouse. These documents provide insight into

a tumultuous period known as the Great Railroad Strike of 1922, also referred to as the Shopmen's Strike.

In June of 1922, this nationwide labor conflict saw over 400,000 railroad shopmen and maintenance workers locked in a bitter struggle against deep wage cuts sanctioned by the Railroad Labor Board. These railroad workers faced the grim possibility of losing their jobs to new hires willing to accept lower wages.

Across the nation, the air was thick with tension as the clash between railroad shopmen and their management unfolded. The decision by the Railroad Labor Board permitting companies to slash wages became the spark that ignited a firestorm of protest. Workers and shopmen, grappling with the economic aftermath of World War I, were left infuriated and financially strained. This anger would soon transform into a nationwide strike that would change the course of labor history.

The strike swiftly escalated into a clash of immense proportions, with violence erupting between the striking workers, strikebreakers, and law enforce-



Contributed Photo from Rocktown History

Railroad crew on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad line near Harrisonburg in the early 1900s.

ment officials. The nation's rail yards became the battlegrounds where these opposing forces collided. Reports of clashes, riots, and even bloodshed flooded newspapers across the country. The strike wasn't just about wages anymore; it had become a battle for survival and dignity.

One tragic incident that remains etched in local history occurred on Aug. 26, 1922, in Shenandoah and Rockingham counties. Railroad worker Bernard Lam allegedly committed a heinous act that shook the community to its core. Lam, reportedly a striking worker from the Norfolk & Western Railway shops in Shenandoah County, was accused of shooting and killing Albert Grim. Lam allegedly shot Grim and his father, Milton Grim, firing through the window of Grim's home in the Baughers Chapel neighborhood with a .38-caliber revolver. Albert Grim later died of his wounds and Milton Grim survived. The

prosecution argued that Lam's actions were driven by revenge. Grim had purportedly broken the strike by accepting a job at Norfolk & Western, a move that was viewed by the striking workers as a betrayal.

Lam's jury trial lasted for four grueling days in the Rockingham Circuit Court. In the trial's chain of evidence, the prosecutor established three facts. First, the act was a result of the animosity that existed between the railroad strikers from the Norfolk and Western shops in Shenandoah. Lam was a member of the union and had previously made threats to Albert Grim if he did not give up his position as a strike-breaker. Second, Lam had purchased a .38 caliber revolver from Joe Hering shortly before the shooting. Third, Lam purchased bullet cartridges from an Elkton merchant. However, days after the shooting the cartridges were found with his wife. The revolver used to kill Grim was

never found by law enforcement.

The jury listened to numerous witness testimonies throughout the trial; however, the testimony of Lam's wife was the most important of the defense witnesses. She stated that her husband accompanied her back home from church the night of the shooting. They did not find out about the shooting until later the next day. Lam was later acquitted by the jury and the murderer was never found.

Furthermore, later criminal case records reveal that Lam's acquittal did not end the tensions between the Lam and the Grim families. In July 1923, Milton Grim was charged and found guilty of the attempted murder of Bernard Lam. Grim shot Lam in the back as Lam was riding his motorcycle past Grim's house. The strife between the families continued the long-lasting pressures from the railroad strike.

Today, the echoes of the

Great Railroad Strike of 1922 reverberate through history, reminding us of the struggles faced by workers and the societal upheaval that can arise. These pivotal events are not relegated to mere memory; they serve as a reminder of the power of collective action and the impact of worker's struggles to build our nation and communities.

For those seeking to delve deeper into the details of these cases, Commonwealth v Bernard Lam and Commonwealth v Minton Lam, and other historical records from Rockingham County, Histories Along the Blue Ridge offers a window into the past. The accessible archives provide valuable resources for researchers and history enthusiasts, shedding light on a period that shaped the nation's labor dynamics and societal fabric.

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