

THE HISTORY OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN WOBURN

by Marie Coady

As the millennium approaches, old battles rise once more to be refought. The national attention given to the UPS strike in 1997 illustrates that the battles workers fought to maintain dignity and fairness in the workplace at the turn of the nineteenth century have once again reared their ugly heads.

Although today's battles are not as clearly defined as those of the 10-12 hour days working in the sweatshop conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, today's workers sense something is very wrong with an economy where corporate profits soar and the work force, along with their paychecks, shrinks. But it was this same sense of something being very wrong that led workers in Woburn to organize and stand together against the wealthy owners of the tannery factories here in the late eighteen hundreds. Conditions at Woburn's tanneries were deplorable, but workers were hard pressed to complain. To complain meant you would be fired and blacklisted at all other tanneries in the city. The late Dr. Thomas J. Glennon wrote of his experiences as the son of a tannery worker in Woburn, living on Conn Street, in his memoirs. His words speak eloquently of the plight of all tannery workers.

"More often than not there were several slack periods each year; and many claimed that some of these intervals were created by management to make men more amenable to a program of small pay and long hours...since most were honorable men devoted to wives and children, they seldom complained of poverty. They doggedly accepted the proffered wage and spread it as thinly as possible.

"Accidents that resulted in lost limbs and death were part of a days work along with the meager pay. Dr. Glennon recalls for us one particularly poignant moment.

"I recall clearly the cruel death of the man across the lane, Mr. Shea, whose head was crushed by a piece of a broken fly-wheel from a putting out machine. He lingered for two days, unconscious, in a small, stuffy bedroom of the frame house, visited a couple of times by a local doctor. But there was never a mention of a hospital nor a suggestion of a comfort to be offered to the poor widow. I doubt that the lady ever received a penny...

"It was the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869 and a rising force in the new national labor movement, who finally crystallized for Woburn's tannery workers the unfair practices of tannery owners. But it wasn't until 1884 that their voice could be heard in Woburn, because until the appearance of the Union Weekly, Woburn's newspapers belonged to the very same moneyed class who set wages, hours and working conditions. It was the Union Weekly

that finally gave labor a voice in Woburn.

On June 7, 1884, the Union Weekly published the Knights of Labor's Declaration of Principles which included fifteen goals and a Preamble which is as relevant today as it was then: "The alarming development...of aggregated wealth, which, unless checked, will inevitably lead to the pauperization of the toiling masses, renders it imperative, if we desire to enjoy the blessings of life, that a check should be placed upon unjust accumulation, and a system adopted which will secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil..."

"These words were a call to arms for tannery workers who had long felt the yoke of servitude as rich and powerful owners demanded more and more of them for less and less. Now they were no longer alone.

By March 11, 1886, Tannery workers, under the direction of the Knights of Labor, organized their first strike against James Skinner & Company of Woburn. They were ready at last to hold out for a 59 hour week and better wages. By March 25, they had settled the strike and won a small increase in pay and the desired 59 hour week. With this modest success under their belts, the idealistic Knights of Labor called for a special day to be set aside for the celebration of laborers called Labor Day. The first Labor Day in Woburn was celebrated in September of 1887. According to newspaper accounts it was a day of unusual quiet as most shops were closed. Later in the evening, a meeting of the Knights of Labor was held at Lyceum Hall on Main Street.

It was determined at that meeting that next Labor Day would be more festive. So, in September of 1888, the promised Labor Day celebration began with a procession of 700 workers through the streets of Woburn, including leather tanners, police and the National Band of the Knights of Labor.

Things seemed to be going well until Eustice Cummings & Co. informed workers, just in time for Christmas of 1889, they were cutting wages---the very same wages they had themselves signed on for in 1886. That move prompted other manufacturers to lower their wages also. This led to a call to arms and the great tannery strike of 1889, the most significant labor struggle in Woburn's history. It involved seventeen factories and fifteen hundred men.

The workers gathered at Lyceum Hall to discuss their strategy. They called upon David C. Moreland, an official of the Knights of Labor, for advice. Questions were posed as to the advisability of striking at that time while so many were unemployed and would be a ready work force for the tannery owners. But when the question went to the floor for a vote 1,100 out of the 1,200 present voted to strike.

During the strike carloads of hides were spoiling outside the tanneries. Not being able to secure one hand to help them unload the hides, the owners presented a strange picture as they donned workmen's overalls and unloaded

the cars themselves.

This strange sight caused quite a stir as thousands gathered to view the spectacle. Labor leaders mounted makeshift platforms, urging the crowd to refrain from violence. Except for a few instances of rock throwing at some teamsters who helped owners unload the wagons, labor leaders were successful in avoiding a full fledged riot.

By the time the matter went before the State Board of Arbitration, the owners had banded together and organized the Woburn Manufacturers Association. They claimed that since the workers left a week before the new lower wages were to go into effect, the strike was not a matter of wages, but a matter of interference with the management of the company. They claimed that the workers were trying to dictate how hard and how much work they should do and that was up to the owners to decide.

But in later statements owners contradicted themselves by declaring “skilled labor would be receiving about the same and only a reduction of from 5-10% in some of the unskilled labor” had been proposed.

The Knights of Labor answered by saying: “We yield to the point of dictation (of how much work the workers do) and make wages the pivot of our argument.

”On January 23, 1890, both parties met before the State Board of Arbitration. When the owners claimed that the list of prices for hides was higher in Woburn and not competitive, the Knights of Labor answered that the manufacturers didn’t conduct business fairly among themselves, and therefore the workers had to suffer wage concessions as a result of their trying to undercut every other manufacturer.

The decision of the board came down on February 7, 1890. It was decided that the workers would get 6% more than the manufacturers submitted, and although that was still below what the men were asking, both agreed. The Monday following the settlement, all the representatives of the Knights of Labor, who worked at the tanneries, were let go without explanation.

In spite of this success, the Knights of Labor had already begun to decline in membership. It was said they were too idealistic and took on too many issues, thereby spreading their power so thin that it couldn’t compete. The Knights of Labor were soon replaced by the AFL-CIO whose power had been growing steadily across the country. Following this major strike many smaller strikes took place from time to time throughout the life of the tannery industry in Woburn. But none were as important to the labor movement in Woburn as the great tannery strike of 1889.

In 1915, racial trouble set about a strike which pitted Italian and Greek workers against Turkish workers at the American Hide and Leather Co. on Cross Street

in Woburn. The trouble was settled quickly when police were brought in and concealed weapons were found on several workers. Once this matter was brought to the courts and settled, the strike was resolved.

Four years later in 1919, several strikes were seen in Woburn. Most, like the telephone operators and the Street Railway Employees, were strikes in sympathy with other workers in the same occupation. Machinists and plumbers struck that year for a 48 hour workweek and higher wages. A central figure in the settlement of many of these strikes was Mayor Golden who was praised for his efforts as mediator.

As late as 1937 leather workers walked out of tanneries demanding higher wages. By then the Knights of Labor were only a memory, and the National Leather Worker's Association took on the manufacturers at the bargaining table. These strikes lasted only a matter of days and were always settled to the satisfaction of everyone. Also, new techniques and equipment had pared down the number of workers in the tanning trade and created a more skilled work force.

By this time also the labor movement was a powerful force nationwide and had fought for and won the eight hour day that we take so much for granted today.

Today, the City of Woburn is unique in that it can claim two very prominent union official as residents, George Cashman of the President of Local 25, Teamsters Union, and Joseph Faherty, President of the Massachusetts chapter of the AFL-CIO.

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