The Anaconda Road

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

1920 marked the precipitous decline, in fact the abrupt end of the labor movement that had been at the forefront of Butte news since 1914. On April 21, 1920, striking miners were marching on the Anaconda Road, the primary artery that served the big mines on the hill. The Anaconda, Neversweat, St. Lawrence, Pennsylvania, and Mountain View each employed 400 to 600 men per shift in their heyday, and every day at shift change thousands of men would pour down the Anaconda Road to its junction with Wyoming and Copper Streets to fan out to saloons, bars, boarding houses, restaurants, churches, and homes. The Anaconda Road also followed the lower reaches of Dublin Gulch on the eastern edge of Corktown, and was lined by miner’s cottages and boarding houses full of Irishmen.

The 1920 strike, fomented by the radical Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), was apparently the last straw for the Anaconda Company. Armed gunmen came from the Neversweat Mine and began shooting into the mob of unarmed miners—at least that’s the likely story, though the truth will never be known. Something like 15 miners were shot as they ran down the hill, and two were killed. The event became known as the Anaconda Road Massacre and it spelled the end of labor union activism in Butte for the next 15 or more years.

The best known of the dead was Tom Manning, a 25-year-old Irish immigrant who lived at the two-story boarding house at 20 West Quartz, the Montana *Standard* parking lot today. He intended to bring his wife and infant son to Butte from Ireland that fall, since he had nearly saved enough money after three years of mining to do so. But he never got the chance; he lingered for nearly four days but died on April 25 as federal troops arrived in Butte to occupy the city and put down rebellious strikers. The troops stayed at the Florence Hotel on East Broadway, while Tom Manning lay in state at Tom Scanlon’s house at 316 North Idaho, now a vacant lot. Scanlon was an I.W.W. sympathizer, but sympathy for Manning went beyond the radical union; thousands came to the Scanlon house to pay their respects, and something like 3,000 followed Manning’s casket from St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church to Holy Cross Cemetery.

In the wake of the Anaconda Road Massacre, union activism in Butte was quieted by the Anaconda Company’s control, but union voices were not stilled. Ralph Chaplin, poet of the I.W.W., characterized it this way:

The overlords of Butte will not permit their right to exploit to be challenged. Drunk with unbridled power and the countless millions profiteered during the war, with lying phrases of “law and order” on their lips, the blood of workingmen dripping from their hands, and the gold of the government bursting their coffers, they face the nation unreprimanded and unashamed – reaction militant, capitalism at its worst. The copper trust can murder its slaves in broad daylight on any occasion and under any pretext. There is no law to call a halt. In the confines of this greed-ruled city, the gunman has replaced the Constitution. Butte is a law unto itself.

Strong words for a challenging time.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.

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