**LU 016 - The Union Halls**

It all started over fifty cents. Miners in the Alice and Lexington mines of Walkerville got news that their wages would be cut from $3.50 a day down to three dollars in June of 1878. The story goes that about 400 men knocked off work early that day and paraded from Walkerville down Main Street behind a brass band to the Orphean Hall, where they met to form Butte’s first union, named the Butte Workingmen’s Union. Thus began the foundation for one of the most prominent and powerful districts of organized labor in the western United States.

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That first strike was won and after six weeks, the $3.50 daily wage at the mines of Walkerville was reestablished. The union had fits and starts and further disputes with mine owners on the Hill, but by 1881 they had 800 members and reorganized under a new name: the Miner’s Union of Butte City. The union bought land and began laying the foundation for a new union hall in the fall of that year, and by February of 1882, the hall was almost complete. Strangely enough, the building had been poorly built and it collapsed as they were preparing for an opening ball.

In Richard Lingenfelter’s book *The Hardrock Miners,* he has a great quote from Pat Boland, the president of the miner’s union at that time, an all-time low for the union up to that point: He said, ‘we had enrolled and in good standing the Spartan band of seventy-eight men and the magnificent sum of 45 cents in the treasury, not a very tempting amount to flee to Canada with.’ But with the discovery of vast copper deposits underneath the Butte hill and the rapid industrialization of the United States, more miners began migrating to Butte. Silver prices were falling elsewhere, and the more productive copper mines of Butte began to attract thousands of new transplant miners, many of whom would join the union.

By 1885, union membership had soared to 1800. By the end of that year, they had cleared the rubble of the old hall and built a new one, which stood on north Main Street. In March of 1885, the union once again reorganized, and the Butte Miner’s Union was born. They had a majority of miners in Butte within their ranks, but there were some nonunion guys working the on the hill. After a confrontation at the Bluebird mine on Miner’s Union Day (June 13th) in 1887, the union finally brought in any outlying miners and achieved a closed shop.

By 1893, the Butte Miner’s Union was powerful enough to grant charters for chapters in states around the west, including Idaho and Colorado. This organizational strength would eventually lead to the establishment of the Western Federation of Miners, one of the most powerful and militant labor organizations in US history. Combined with the Silver Bow Trades and Labor Assembly, which by 1890 had organized 34 non-mining unions under its leadership, these organizations made up the reputation Butte now had as the Gibraltar of Labor.

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Thus, the backdrop is set for the union battles for which Butte is most known, those of the World War I period. By the time the war broke out in Europe, Butte’s precious copper reserves were mined almost entirely by union labor, with Butte miners as Local No. 1 of the Western Federation of Miners. But other forces were vying for control of the industrial unions in America at that time. Organized capital was intent on ridding the industry of unions altogether, and the IWW had made inroads in Butte over the decade preceding the war.

At the founding convention of the IWW in Chicago in 1905, the biggest delegation was from Butte, Montana. The IWW had made their way to Butte but weren’t widely supported by the largely WFM-aligned Butte miners. The Miner’s Union Day parade in 1914 was the scene of the first large public conflict between factions within the Butte miners’ union itself.

Fractious disagreements within the union had been accelerated with the institution of the rustling card, a system by which the Company could check workers’ religious, political, and social history and exclude men from working in the mines based on their beliefs or any other reason. The Butte Miners Union leadership hadn’t reached an agreement about the rustling card system by the week of the 1914 Miner’s Union Day parade, so when workers were asked to show their cards on the morning of June 12th, 1914, 1200 men walked off the job. That night, they would break off and form their own outfit, the Independent Industrial Miner’s Union. On the day of the parade, June 13th, 1914, the breakaway miners boycotted the event and went so far as to keep BMU miners from walking in the parade.

The parade was attacked at the corner of Dakota and Park streets and a riot ensued which ended with the ransacking of the union hall. The Montana Governor telegraphed President Woodrow Wilson and asked for federal troops to be made ready in Missoula and Helena. Wilson replied that he hoped troops would not be necessary. 10 days later, WFM loyalists and members of the newly formed Butte Mine Workers’ Union exchanged gunfire after a meeting at the Hall, resulting in two deaths. Once the crowd dispersed, 25 dynamite blasts brought down the union hall itself. The Company newspapers and even the WFM blamed the IWW, a convenient scapegoat for the anti-socialist messaging of the day.

The Company used the events as a pretense to not recognize or negotiate any contracts with Butte unions. The closed shop was over and the unions were decimated.

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The events of the next several years are widely reported and are the subject of dozens of books on Butte history. With no unions in the mines of Butte, the working conditions between 1914 and 1917 deteriorated, culminating in the catastrophic fire at the Granite Mountain/ Speculator Mine in June of 1917, where 168 men were killed. New attempts to organize the Butte miners after the disaster were met with Company violence and military suppression, on account of the increased demand for copper during the war.

IWW organizer Frank Little came to town shortly after, made waves, and was lynched. War hysteria disguised as patriotism turned public sentiment against anything resembling socialism, and the Montana Sedition Act made it illegal to criticize the government or its agents about the war effort. The national Sedition Act, based on the Montana law, was then enacted in 1918. It made it a crime for American citizens to “print, utter, or publish... any false, scandalous, and malicious writing about the government.” By the time the war and its accompanying hysteria were over, Butte had been under military occupation for 42 months.

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Pictures of that period when troops roamed the streets of Butte and gatling guns were stationed in front of the courthouse, pointed at the Carpenters Union Hall, offer a compelling glimpse into that challenging time. With the Miner’s Union Hall destroyed and gone, the Carpenters Union Hall is one of the few architectural remnants that comprise Butte’s reputation as the Gibraltar of Labor.

So today on Life Underground, we look at the Carpenters Hall, one of Uptown Butte’s most prominent labor landmarks, and learn about its history. We’ll survey the countless events hosted in the building going back to its construction in 1906 and look in-depth at 20th-century conflicts that almost brought about its demolition. Towards the end of the show, we’ll detail recent efforts to bring it back to life as a center point of community activity.

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Full disclosure. I’ve been working with a group to renovate the Carpenters Hall since 2014, and to me it is one of the most precious spaces I get to spend time in. It has long been a meeting place for groups of all kinds, and a search through old Butte newspapers demonstrates how lively the place was for decades, spanning from 1906 until its abandonment in the mid-1970s.

For a taste of some of the events that went on at the Hall, consider the New Year’s Eve Frolic of 1935, given by the Engineer’s Union No. 83 social club, with dancing and refreshments from 10 until question mark. Or how about the Card Party and dance hosted by the Henry Zorn Defense Committee, a man who was tried and executed in Miles City for robbery and murder, whose mother burst into tears in the courtroom when his appeal to escape the gallows was denied.

Or the Butte Stationary Engineers Union dance on Friday, January 25th of 1935, where men got in for 35 cents and ladies 15 cents. In 1931, Edward Flore, then president of the National Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, gave an address at the Carpenters Hall about how the end of prohibition would improve economic conditions. That meeting was sponsored in part by the Women’s Protective Union, which had offices in the Hall for decades.

Then there was the Harmony Dancing Club, hosted by Zita Dillon’s Orchestra, which played every Friday night on the second floor in 1916.

The same night that Al Jolson was performing around the corner at Butte’s Broadway Theater in 1929, there promised to be ‘a good time for all’ at the Carpenters Hall with Palmer’s Kings of Harmony, with gents 50 cents and ladies a quarter. Another ad for 1929, sponsored by the Anaconda Clerks Union, insists that dancing commenced at 9 o’clock, and ‘those who attend will be assured a good time as the Anaconda Clerks know how to put on a social event, so everybody go.’

Then there was the 1929 fight between the ‘husky deputy sheriff from Wolf Point, Montana,’ weighing in at 222 lbs., who grappled with Professor S. Takahashi, a 140-lb. jiu jitsu champion. Takahashi had never been defeated in 279 jiu jitsu matches, and before the fight, he apparently gave a demonstration in ‘psycho nerve control.’ There was no indication of who won the match that night at the Hall.

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How about the time the Woodmen of the World celebrated their 30th anniversary at the Hall in 1924 with a committee in charge of ‘overlooking nothing that will have a tendency to put pep and enthusiasm into the proposed evening’s enjoyment.’ They even had the Anaconda String Orchestra, which at the time was the only musical organization in the northwest that made a specialty of the Slovonian tamboritza.’

Even the miners would meet at the Carpenters Hall, although they eventually established union offices in the old Silver Bow Club. In 1923, a meeting was called for the Butte Mine Workers Independent Union for ‘business of great importance.’ And John McParland, president of the International Typographical Union, visited the Hall in February of 1922 on his first trip to the Western United States.

There was a huge meeting of labor luminaries in Butte at the Carpenters Hall in January of 1920, where forty delegates representing 10 building trades crafts from bricklayers and tinners to ironworkers, carpenters and plumbers assembled to settle labor disputes which might arise during 1920 and establish a board of arbitration to deal with labor issues as they arose. The main topic was a dollar-a-day wage increase across all building trades.

The Silver Bow Trades and Labor Council, that powerful entity we discussed earlier, met every Tuesday night at 8pm at the Carpenters Hall. The Butte Streetcar Men’s Union met every first and third Wednesday. The Machinists Union met every Thursday evening. The Workingmen’s Union met every Friday night. Different aspects of the Carpenters Union had five meetings a week in the Hall, and the Ironworkers met on Mondays.

The list continues!

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In 1911, committees from the Western Federation of Miners met Samuel Gompers at the Carpenters Hall. Gompers was the first and longest serving president of the American Federation of Labor, the AFL, which is still today one of the largest labor organizations in the nation.

In 1910, Emma Goldman spoke at the Carpenters Hall on the subjects of Francisco Ferrer and the Modern School, as well as The White Slave Trade, or prostitution. She’s described as ‘a noted anarchist who boasts that during her present tour of five months, she has had no trouble with the police.’ She was touted as the leader of the anarchist movement in America in the Butte Miner in 1910 when she spoke at the Hall. She was quoted as saying, “White slavery and the downfall of our women will not cease until they are paid more than $3 per week, the average weekly wage of 6 million women workers of the United States. Starvation and cheerless homes are the causes which drive girls into the streets and send them into a life of shame.” She described then President Taft as a ‘nonentity’ and the advertisement for her lectures at the Carpenters Hall had the question ‘Do You Want to Lose Your Religion?’ in large print across the top center.

These are just a few examples of the sort of events that took place all the time at the Carpenters Union Hall in Butte’s days of old.

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By the time I first went up the wide staircase to the upper floors of the Hall and walked into the long-abandoned ballrooms, the plaster was falling down and the windows were boarded up. There were dead pigeons and broken glass everywhere, and there was no electricity, water or heat in the upper floors. I wanted to know what the hell had happened, for such a vital and amazing place to have fallen so silent. How did the Hall come to be in this state?

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To learn more, I spoke with Paddy Dennehy. He trained as a union carpenter in Houston and came back to Butte, where he was born and raised, in 1976. He became business agent for the Carpenters Local 112 in 1985, a job he had for 11 years.

[Paddy Dennehy 1]
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[Paddy Dennehy 2]
[Paddy Dennehy 3]

After Paddy Dennehy and his group of volunteers got the first two floors of the union hall whipped into shape and in use again, their organization, Carpenters Union Hall, Incorporated, was doing pretty good for a while. They were able to save a bit of money and continue making improvements to the building with rent money from all their union tenants.

Then, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, of which the Local 112 was a chapter, decided to consolidate all the locals in the State of Montana, eliminating the 112 and combining it with all other unions into the newly formed Local #82, under the jurisdiction of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters. This meant that the building was now in the hands of the International Union, and a Montana Standard article from 2012 shows their intention to potentially demolish the Hall.

Well, the carpenters of Butte fought back and filed a lawsuit against their own international to intervene and save the building. Paddy explains how it went down.

[Paddy Dennehy 4] – internal music break

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That’s Paddy Dennehy with a bit of background on unionism in Butte and the specifics of the lawsuit over the Carpenters Union Hall. Paddy mentioned Mike Boysza, who was in the middle of the lawsuit as well. We sat down with Mike for an oral history recording and got his take on the whole ordeal. Here he recounts a bit about how the union functioned and how things began to change when the International started consolidating locals.

[Mike Boysza 2]

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Boysza says that the International sent in representatives of the regional council to assert ownership over Butte’s Carpenters Union Hall, but he took it upon himself to intervene.

[Mike Boysza 1]

So the building didn’t fall into the hands of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters, and today it’s seeing renewed life as a community center with the help of the Butte America Foundation and the radio station KBMF that has led the volunteer effort to fix the upstairs. As of the date of this program’s production, there are almost weekly concerts in the building, and the upstairs is nearing completion, with tenants renting the upper floor offices for the first time in almost 50 years.

Grant funding from SARTA, the Urban Revitalization Agency of Butte-Silver Bow, and the Montana State Department of Commerce has allowed new electrical, plumbing and heating throughout the building, and the upper floors are alive once again. In a place where largescale demolition of historic buildings is the norm, it has been rewarding to see a place repaired, and to be able to create new memories inside the walls of the Carpenters Hall for years to come.

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I’m Clark Grant and this is Life Underground. Thanks for listening.

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