

Oh, gee, what a mess, oh boy. Too bad I didn't have a camera with me. Hell, we couldn't afford a camera in them days. We couldn't abought film for 'em, anyway.

Well, Binks, Riley, he didn't get killed; he got a hole through his leg. Yeah, they shot his legs out from under him. Is he alive? No, he's dead. You know, there ain't very many of us left. No, '27.

The Wobblies come in then. The IWW come in, the Wobblies they called them. They tried to organized us. They tried to organize but they didn't have anybody to talk to after they organized. We shut down every mine in the northern field.

"Who in the hell do you think we are? Wobblies, Wobblies, ha! ha! ha! We're rough, we're tough, we never take a bluff. Of free speech, we never get enough. Who? We, Wobblies, Wobblies, Wobblies". Now that was a rally!"

We have to get more for our labor. That's all we've got to sell, is our labor. You don't have anything else when you're a workin' man. You've got your labor to sell.

Song:

"A miner's life is hard, I know. His world is dark and far below. And while he's starved and goes in rags, he's deeper than the coal he digs. Now don't you see that funeral train, don't you see that funeral train. Rollin' down that lonesome valley. It's the longest one I've seen."

This program is about labor war in Boulder County, Colorado. On November 21, 1927, six unarmed pickets at the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company's Columbine Mine were killed by the machine guns of the State Militia. 21 others were wounded. This event is known as The Columbine Massacre. The story of the massacre is recounted here by six eye witnesses: Walt Silensky(sp?), Louie Brugger, Boyd and Jack Miller, Claude and Lawrence Amicarella. Historical background is provided by Ron McMann and Eric Margolas of the Coal Project. Briefly, a synopsis of the Columbine Massacre:

In August, 1927, the Industrial Workers of the World called a two day, nationwide general strike to protest the impending execution of Socco Zanzetti (sp?). The greatest response came from the coal fields of Colorado. Ignored by the conservative United Mine Workers Union, the coal miners in Colorado's northern fields were organized virtually overnight by IWW organizers, A. S. Embry and Adam Bell. On October 18, 1927, the Colorado miners struck to protest wages and

conditions, utilizing inovative strike tactics, the miners brought the Colorado coal industry to a standstill. In Boulder County, only the Columbine Mine remained open. A detachment of the Colorado State Militia, many of whom had participated in the massacre at Ludlow in 1914, was sent to the Columbine Mine, allegedly, by Jesse Welbourne (sp?), president of the Rockefeller owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. According to plan, the following morning, November 21, 1927, the State Militia opened fire on pickets at Columbine.

There were more miners than they needed coal. More mines - a lot of competition. That's what made the poor conditions in the mines. There was nobody pushin' conditions, nobody had to because there was a lot of competition. Where you needed the timber, to hell with it, let it go. Where you coulda got four more feet of coal, hell with it, let it go. Just get this virgin coal; get everything that comes ut of there cheap.

They wasn't askin' for no outlandish thing, they were just askin' for what was fair. But the operator didn't see it that way. And that's the only way they had of comunicating with the mine operators. You couldn't go in there like today and make an appointment and jump in your car and go see him like that. Hell, he wouldn't talk to you. He was too big and important person to talk to a lowly miner. Let's say they was gettin' 65¢ a ton for machine loaded coal - or hand loaded coal - machine cut. So we'd say that we think we're entitled to 70¢ a ton. That would be one demand. And then like in this particular mine - and all mines weren't the same - this one particular mine that I worked at, we had that one type of machine that cut and left the bottom. Well, we demanded pay for that. And what we wanted to do, though, was fair - we wanted to assess a machine man for that dead work, that would cure them of that habit, but they wouldn't do it. He was the king up there and whatever he done was okay by him; they didn't give a damn, how they abused the miners. And that was what was causin' the most trouble around there, was that damn machine man. How he got by with it without somebody breakin' his head in, I never will know to this day. If I'd abeen a bigger man then, I sure woulda tackled him. Because that was just outright dirty, that's all there was to it. But see, that would be another issue. Some places there in other mines, you'd have a streak of rock in between the two veins of coal. Well, you had to sort that out and throw it back on your own time. Well, they wanted pay for that. So much a car for that, or so much a ton.

The wages were just so low among coal miners that they were just ripe for almost anybody to come in and talk to them which happened to be in 1927.

The basic rights - the eight hour day, a check weighman of the men's choosing on the tipple to check the weights. One of the big complaints was that they had 600 to 1,000 tons of coal stolen off of every car that they loaded by crooked company weigh bosses that worked on the tipple - leaded scales and that sort of thing.

They wanted the right to form unions. They always wanted that and they didn't have that. Without that kind of representation, it was hand work, it was hand loading and they were in a situation where they would be shut down in the summertime in these mines - especially in these domestic coal as opposed to steel coal. They just went out of business in the summer. As soon as the weather got warm and the demand for coal slacked off, they closed the mines down and they wouldn't open them up until Labor Day again. And everybody would just tossed off. A lot of these guys just rode the rails all summer - you know, got on a train and disappeared for a while. And they'd come back to these fields, knowing that the work would pick up again in the fall. The family men that were here went into debt. The Company Store - they were paid in scrip - they could get credit to make it through the summer but then they'd start out in the fall with an enormous debt that wouldn't get paid off until after Christmas. And so this was a cycle, a constant cycle - in debt and unable to get out and unable to change your circumstances.

When that strike actually happened, it happened right on the heels of the time when the company came and asked them to take a cut in wages. And those were kind of strange circumstances - they just came and said that they could go home or take 50¢ cut in wages. And so a lot of people took the cut and then shortly afterwards they went on strike.

The Rocky Mountain Fuel Company had the company stores. And you know, they had these stores in all these camps. And then they sold scrips to the miners - \$5.00 and \$10.00 scrip and you traded at the Company Store because you didn't have a dime to go anywhere else, because you didn't draw any pay. A lot of men never even saw a dollar. And, of course, the prices would be 20-25% higher than other stores. But what was a person gonna do?

This was the vengeance of the western frontier. The CF&I owned the State of Colorado. They said, "Jump" and the governor said, "How high?" And that was it. And it wasn't that way in the East - nobody at that late date could own Pennsylvania. It was an industrial state that had a diversified economy and while there were plenty of sons-of-bitches in power down there, I'm sure, it wasn't like here. Southern Colorado was like that - they called them industrial towns - they owned these towns and the company stores and company camps.

The same in Utah and New Mexico - all these coal countries way out in the boondocks - the only way you could get anybody to go there was to build a town and move them in and that gives you absolute control over the conditions. And if a Wobblie comes to town, you hear about it the minute he checks into the hotel 'cause you own the hotel. 'Cause company spies are everywhere in town. And those circumstances were hard to beat. They used the place in the mine as a weapon against the miners. If you got a place that had a lot of rock in your coal, you spent all day pickin' the rock out from your coal and you weren't gonna load very many tons. If you were in a place with a bad top, it would take you all day puttin' up timbers and you weren't going to load very much coal. They could send you to a place where the coal was 10 feet tall and it was on a little pitch and you could push your car right up against the face and shoot it into the car, practically, and it was easy to get. So if you were nice and kissed the boss's ass, you know and that kind of stuff, you'd get a good place to work in the mine. Make a little payoff in whiskey or beer or homemade wine or cash money or something like that, you could make a lot of money diggin' coal. If you were hardnosed, if you were a union man or you gave him a hard time, you'd get worse and worse places. And you couldn't make a living. Another thing that happened is you wouldn't get cars. The mine owned the cars but you were a contract laborer. If you didn't have a car to put the coal in, you could sit down in that pile of coal all day long and you weren't going to make a penny. And so, by doling out the cars on the same basis - favoritism and manipulating one miner against another, they were able to control the whole circumstances. Fire people and move everybody around.

The Columbine was a Rocky Mountain Fuel coal mine. It was midway between Lafayette and Erie. At the time, it was also a town. There were company towns around these coal mines and the postoffice was there. And the Columbine Mine was Serene, Colorado. And it was always referred to as Columbine. It was about three miles east of Lafayette. The Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, of course, had been around since the early days of mining in the state. It was one of the three major coal companies in the state: Rocky Mountain Fuel, Colorado Fuel and Iron and Victor-American Fuel were the three big ones. Many of the people working in the mines were the immigrants who came to this country around 1910; had been through the entire Ludlow incident and were now experiencing a terrible depression in the coal industry and these were the immigrants and the sons of immigrants who were mining coal at that time. We were getting some second generation coal miners in Colorado already; this was 14 years after Ludlow.

These mines that were here were all relatively new - the Columbine, the State, the two Morrissions, the Clayton, they were all relatively new mines. And this was around '27.

At that time, the United Miners weren't in here. No union was in here. And the miners were gettin' so damn abused it was pitiful. They was lookin' for any way. And somebody, I don't know who, come in - that was the Wobblies - some say it was Communists - we didn't know at the time and we didn't give a damn, because we wanted something there because we was sufferin'. The mining people were really pourin' it on us, see, as you know about the Ludlow and all of them. So, you never really had a choice. Just this - that you could vote for a union or not - of the two. Well, after you got kicked in the face as many times as some of them people did, why they figured, "Hell, I've got nothin' to lose and everything to gain". So they went into the Wobblies - the IWW Union. And that went on for a couple of years and then that's when they started bringin' out - I didn't even know about it at the time, I heard about it later - they said they was Communists and all of that, but nobody knew about it at that early time. Just a union to help them - they had their arms out waitin' for somebody to give them a hand because, man, they were gettin' so abused it was pitiful.

The Wobblies were real radical.

Well, in a way, and in another way, by god, they were right. We went out with them - we struck - you'd do anything, man, when they robbed a thousand pounds off of every car of coal you had comin' up that shaft with your check number on it. It's just like a drowning man grabbin' for a straw. If we could get 50¢ a day - that's all they was askin' - 50¢ a day - that might put a loaf of bread on your table for the kids, see.

In New Haven, Connecticut, Senator Burton Wheeler of Montana told an audience about a worker who was asked how 15 Wobblies were able to pull out 6,000 strikers. He replied, "Oh hell, the WCTU could have pulled this strike, the conditions were so rotten".

Song:

"Would you have freedom from wage slavery, then come join the grand industrial band. Would you from misery and hunger be free, come on do your share, lend a hand. There is power, there is power in a band of workin' folks when they stand hand in hand. That's a power, that's a power that must rule in every land with industrial union grand. Now would you have mentioned the gold in the sky and live in a shack that is way in the back. Or would you have wings up in Heaven to fly and starve here with rags on your back. But there is power, there is power in a band of workin' folks

when they stand hand in hand. And that's a power, that's a power that must rule in every land with industrial union grand. Now if you like sluggers to beat in your head, then don't organize all unions _____. If you want nothin' before you are dead, shake hands with your boss and look wise. But there is power, there is power in a band of workin' folks when they stand hand in hand. And that's a power, that's a power that must rule in every land with industrial union grand. So come all ye workers from every land, come join the grand industrial band. Then we our share of this earth shall demand - come on, do your share, lend a hand. There is power, there is power in a band of workin' folks when they stand hand in hand. And that's a power, that's a power that must rule in every land with industrial union grand. "

A.S. Embry came in and people saw what was goin' on here and there were some grass roots requests for some organization from some place. It's never been made quite clear, nobody knows. But Embry did come in. The IWW sent people in here to see what they thought the sentiment would be and they got very strong feedback. What really turned them on to it was that they called a meeting just to find out what the possibilities were in Lafayette early that spring of 1927 and they jammed the halls. The people just came packing in and that was just like, well, my gosh, this was the first meeting these people had had since 1914 - well, no there was something going on in 1921 - but at any rate, they immediately set to work and they brought in organizers.

But when they went in the Columbine up there that time, they liked to beat his head off. They riddled the American flag. Adam told everybody before they went in, "Don't take anything, not even a pocket knife in there with you". Because there's a postoffice in there, it was a public place and that road is supposed to be open. And all they was gonna do was just march through there and ask those people that was workin' in that mine to come out on strike with them to help win this 50¢ a day that they desired. When they got to the gate, they had a gate down there - I could show you exactly where the gate was - yeah, those rocks are still piled up there -. Here was these thugs - hired company thugs - waitin' and told them they couldn't go in. Well, this is a public road in there. It has to be a public road because there's a postoffice in there - I bring that point out again. There's where the fight starts. They told them and they just went over the gate - first it was gas pipes that the thugs had and they beat old Adam right down to the earth. And the others went on carryin' that flag and they had three machine guns. They had one on the tippie; they had one on this side and they had one over here - over on the water tank. And they opened up a cross fire with those machine guns. I was on the hill. I'll tell you the reason

I didn't go in - there was a deputy sheriff from Frederick over there - a Weld County deputy sheriff - and he was a friend of the miners and the people - and he come there that morning and he begged those people, "Don't go in" - he knew what they had settin' up waitin' for them.

The morning of the shooting - well practically every day - the Weld County Sheriff, I think his name was Anderson, he was down there every morning. But this morning, his deputy - when he saw the picket line come, he drove from inside the camp out to the county road on the north side and he got out on the hood of his car and he said, "Now, I tell you people, I'm for you, but I can't help you. Don't go in here this morning, because there's gonna be trouble. They've got their guns set up and they mean business this morning". And some of them paid attention to him; I did for quite a while. And some of them went for the camp. And he had, probably, three or four dollars worth of change - nickels, halves, quarters, etc. - and he said, "Hey, I haven't got much money to help you, but I'll give you this" And he threw that up in the air and a bunch of them was scramblin' for the money. They told the sheriff, "To hell with you; we're gonna go on in". "We're gonna shut her down". So they go across this dirt road up to the other fence, the north fence of the Columbine camp. After we left the county road, that was Rocky Mountain Fuel ground. We were on their property. But they the gate locked and they had five or six guards there at the gate. A whole bunch came up there. They didn't shoot at them right then. The guys went for the guards and then, of course, they didn't have the high corrals there, they had the hog wire about that high and then three or four strands of barbed wire above that. But the guys were busy with 40 or 50 over here and a bunch jumped over the fence about 100 feet away. They tore down the fence and a bunch of them grabbed the gate and broke the lock and broke the gate and the guards made a run for it about 1000 feet south of there to where the water tank was at. And then when they all got in there, all the pickets running after the guards, they opened up the machine gun from the water tank after the guards got there. By that time, I was up with them. I was in behind, probably a couple, 300 feet, seeing what the heck all was goin' on. Just followin' the whole bunch in. Then I made a run for it and Johnny James was along side of me and we made a run to the front end and got about 150-200 feet from the water tank was and they opened fire and we knew it was live ammunition. And I knew the whole camp, I knew the whole area because of peddling ice at that time; there was no electric refrigeration at that time. I peddled ice to all the mining camps, Erie, Lafayette, Louisville, Monarch, Centennial, Superior - for the whole mining area here. And then when I saw that was all live ammunition and people fallin' around me, I just made a dash to one side and got behind Borenson's house. I run around the house and laid behind the concrete foundation

on the north side of the house because the fire was comin' from the south side and when they quit shootin', I just stayed on that side and got clear down to the end of the houses and I went back out on the country road where I should have stayed in the first place.

Did the miners have guns?

No. That was the deal. Every morning when you go on picket line and you get to Erie then Adam Bell and Tom said, "Okay, now we can't have no ammunition, no guns, or nothin'. Not even knives. You couldn't have even a huntin' knife or a pocket knife. Now you checked all your guns and your knives at that place in Erie where we met. Nobody had a gun.

Do you think the guards thought that you were armed?

No, they knew we weren't. Or they would have been shot there at the gate. They'd have opened fire at the gate. They weren't going to use their fists if they had guns, with the other guys buttin' them with guns. As I told you before, who was carrying the flag was Jack Beranek's mother. And they did use tear gas at the gate. And knocked her out and a bunch of others got tear gassed right at the gate. But they couldn't get tear gas to all the other guys 'cause the picketers was jumpin' the fence, 100, 150 feet to the east and they could get behind them then, see. Oh, I'd say between 150 to 200 people that morning. The records show 27 - 29 shot.

They knew that as soon as any kind of a violent thing went down that in would come the state troops. They had been to Ludlow and they knew what state troops meant. They were called the State Rangers at that time. Involved with the State Rangers was a man named Major Pat Hamrock who was at Ludlow and Captain Shirf (?) was one of his boys and a lot of the guys were from the famous Troop A down at Ludlow.

I'll try to give a very brief scenario of what was going on here. By this time, the entire state had been shut down. The miners were conducting a very popular strike. It was getting good press from the east. These poor deprived miners in Colorado would finally have leadership and they were getting good publicity. The coal companies were freaked. Jesse Welbourne of the CF&I in particular. Josephine Roach was a known liberal and she said that - see the Columbine Mine kept working - it was the only mine that was still working - she said, "They may picket there daily; that's fine with me. They can march through the barbed wire gate, go up to the postoffice, turn around and go back every day". Well, everybody knew that this

was it. And it obviously was a good place for a confrontation. And Josephine Roach, in a memo in 1944, makes rather straightforward accusations that Jesse Welbourne at CF&I Company, Corporation, sent Shurf and Company A up to the Columbine Mine for this attack. We have other substantiating evidence like mine operators - that they were arming people the night before with pick handles and they were setting up - they were preparing for a shoot-out. They were gonna make it a confrontation. They were gonna make a confrontation happen.

And CF&I, Welbourne's motive in directing troops against Rocky Mountain Fuel and Josephine Roach was --

It was double. First of all, it was to get marshal law declared in the state because there was a lot of resistance. As soon as marshal law is declared, you can bring in scabs all you want; you can open your mines up immediately. The second was business politics. These two companies had been terrible, old time, competitive companies, ever since the early strikes. They had always been quite competitive. Josephine Roach, when she found out the company had been sent up there, claimed that she called the governor and asked if it were true. And the governor said, "I don't know, I didn't order them up there". And she and the governor tried all night, she claimed, to call the Columbine Mine to get those troops out of there before something tragic happened. And, of course, she didn't succeed. Nobody answered the phone. They refused to answer.

This was not like an accident. This was not like a spontaneous riot.

The guys would take turns to picket each place. And they picked out so many, maybe 30-40 guys to go to Columbine to picket there. So I wasn't a miner then. I was just a junior Wobblie. But us kids, we tagged along. Hells bells, you couldn't keep us kids away from there. That's the only excitement in town, anyway. We didn't have TVs, radios or motorcycles. So we followed along. Well, they come up to this gate. And they opened the gate and started walkin' down the road towards the mine. They got in there, oh I'd say possibly a block, block and a half and the bullets started shootin'. A machine gun - 30 caliber machine guns. We all turned and ran, what the hell else could we do? And like I told you, Jerry Davis was right next to me; I heard that bullet hit him right in the back and I'll never forget that sound till the day I die. He fell right there. And I was just a kid and I was really layin' them down, gettin' the hell out of there.

It wasn't a good business proposition for the United Mine Workers to invest their organizing money in the west. It was better for them to invest in Indiana and Illinois which at that time was the west, maybe. But the high productivity was in the industrial areas and it had more of a promise. So the UMW just simply didn't organize out here.

Well, naturally, it's like two businesses. When you're comin' into the field, and you sell Fords and I sell Chevys, your Ford ain't worth a damn - my Chevy's better. It was a business policy; that's all it was, see. And that's how they got into this feud and I'll face up to any man that says different. 'Cause I seen it with my own eyes. They broke that Wobblie strike to get the United Mine Workers in this northern field. And I seen that and I seen three guys shot and a dozen of them with their damn heads almost knocked clear off with pick handles and that. Fightin' to keep those goddamn miners back - to send 'em back which they did the first trip. The second trip, they didn't. They was loaded with rifles and about 14 extra carloads more of 'em, see.

Well, the United Mine Workers was comin' in from the eastern fields. Illinois and places like that - to come in here to man these mines that was on strike. To take over their jobs. Well, you'd be workin' in one of those jobs and you was on strike - well, what would you do? Here comes a guy from Illinois that's gonna go down there and mine coal where you used to mine.

So the UMW was comin' in to scab?

Yeah, strike breakers is what they were.

Well, it's an IWW victory. This was one of the most successful strikes the IWW ever had. They brought out 12 dozen coal miners no matter how you count it. They had some incredibly successful organizing activities and operators were forced to make successions because of this strike. Yeah, it was a successful strike but the IWW, of course, didn't hang around. They were winners but so they left. That was it.

What did they win?

A dollar a day.

As I explained, see, one of the aftermaths of the strike was that the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company did sign with the United Mine Workers. Colorado Fuel & Iron ???? so the Victor-American. They didn't sign with the UMW which made - which upset the competitive knowledge here. They were able to pay their workers less than the Rocky Mountain Fuel mines. That was eventually the demise of the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company. The material things that were goin' on at the same time the coal was out. (?????)

What I read in the paper and all that, a lot of pressure was comin' from the governor because the mine people, the big moneyed people, the bankers and all that, probably would put pressure on the governor and our state officials and stuff like that. But the miner, he couldn't do that; he never had the money in the first place and all he wanted was a decent chance to make a decent livin'. That's all in Christ's world he wanted.

Song:

"Oh, the new dirt's falling on the new made coffin. The new dirt's falling on a new made coffin. Away over in that union buryin' ground. Oh, tell me who's that they're letting down, down. Oh, tell me who's that they're letting down, down. Away over in that union buryin' ground. Another union organizer."

Material for this program about the 1927 Columbine Massacre was provided by the Coal Project, a Boulder based oral history group. Ron McMann and Eric Margolas of the Coal Project are currently producing a series of television programs about western coal mining for PBS. Without their help and resources, this radio program would not have been possible. This show was produced by John Woodruff and John Stark for the 51st anniversary of the Columbine Massacre.

Song:

"A union brother, a union sister. A union brother, a union sister. Away over in that union buryin' ground. Every new grave brings a thousand members. Every new grave brings a thousand members. Away over in that union buryin' ground".