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Copper Opera: The Butte Miners' Strike of 1917: A documentary

William Crosby Platt

The University of Montana

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A Copper Opera:
The Butte Miners’ Strike of 1917
Documentary Videotape Script

by
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B.A., University of Massachusetts/Boston, 1989
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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12-2-97
The Butte miners’ strike of 1917 was a defining moment in American labor history. With the onset of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, radicalism and patriotic hysteria were at their height in Montana. The purpose of this documentary is to examine the people and events surrounding the Butte strike of 1917 as an example of how government and corporations used patriotic hysteria to attack the emerging labor movement of the early 20th century.

Among the people who played parts in the drama of this period were: U.S. Rep. Jeannette Rankin, who called on President Wilson to nationalize the Butte mines; I.W.W. organizer Frank Little, whose lynching in Butte made him a labor martyr; federal attorney Burton K. Wheeler, who refused to prosecute Little and others for expressing unpopular ideas; John Ryan a powerful ACM company executive who moved the Anaconda company from an “Irish club” to a modern corporation; Will Dunn, whose Strike Bulletin became the Butte Bulletin, one of the only non-company newspapers in urban Montana; and thousands of miners and miners’ families struggling to survive.

This documentary is narrated by Pat Williams and features interviews with David Emmons, of the University of Montana; Jerry Calvert, of Montana State University; Marilyn Maney, of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives; Jim Harrington, of the Butte Historical Society; Mark Ross, an I.W.W. folksinger; and John Shea, a retired Anaconda mine worker. The program also documents the Anaconda company’s use of Pinkerton detectives and political files to manage employees in Butte. The narrative is illustrated by hundreds of photographs from the period culled from collections at the World Museum of Mining, the Montana Historical Society, the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society Archives, the K. Ross Toole Archives at the Mansfield Library, and the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. The program also features period music including archival music from a 1940s era folk music project in Butte. This documentary will be offered to KUFM-TV to air statewide on Montana Public Television.
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<td>&quot; . . . and the Berkeley Pit viewing stand, a mile high, a mile deep and some say a mile wide.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Since mining began here a century ago more than 20.8 billion pounds of copper, 96 million pounds of &quot;Molly,&quot; 90 million ounces of silver and 3 million ounces of gold have been extracted from the Butte district.&quot;</td>
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<td>In uptown Butte today you can still see evidence that this was once one of the great industrial centers of the West. Workers here were some of the staunchest union men and women in America.(1)</td>
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(CONTINUED)
But the emerging corporation of the 20th century was not willing to cede power to organized labor, and with World War I the federal government turned its might against the unions as unpatriotic. All these forces converged in the great Butte miners' strike of 1917. What happened here had a profound effect on the national labor movement as America became a modern industrial power.

"The 1917 strike in Butte in a lot of ways was one of the most important strikes in American history."
CONTINUED:

Emmons OC

"This is a strike against the largest producer of copper in the world at a time when copper has been identified as a basic material of war and at a time when the United States is at war."

Fast montage of images:
labor dept. sign, miners w/ fuses, rescue workers, F. Little, troops, "Strike" headline

WHITEOUT

MUSIC :05 1:50
Music "Joe Hill"

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Section I

TITLE on WHITE:

"A Union Divided"

Butte Miners' Hall w/ crowd - Union Hall w/ bunting

MUSIC :10 :10 2:00
Music "A Great Day For the Irish"

NARRATION :20 :30 2:20
Butte's labor crisis of 1917 has its roots in 1914 with the destruction of the old Butte Miners' Union. (2) The BMU, as it was known, was the largest union local in the world and a political force that was respected and courted by the city's rival copper kings. (3)

NARRATION :30 1:00 2:50
Miners formed the union in 1878 to fight for "the Butte wage" of three-dollars-and-fifty-cents a day. At the time it was the highest wage in industrial America. (4) Labor and management felt they had much in common in those days. The Union's Irish leadership saw Irish businessman Marcus Daly, the

(CONTINUED)
immigrant who built Anaconda Copper Mining Company, more as kinsman than as boss and most of Daly's staff had come from a working Irish background.(5)

Calvert OC

Calvert SOT :10 1:10 3:00
"Solidarity across social class was very prevalent at that time and in other communities. Blood counted more than class."

Immigrant clubs - Duncan

NARRATION VO :25 1:35 3:25
By 1912 things had changed. Many new immigrants, including the Finns, Serbs and Italians, were more disposed to radical politics, and Butte elected socialist Mayor Lewis Duncan. At the same time a new corporate culture developed. Daly was dead, and John D. Ryan had come from Standard Oil to take over as director of Anaconda Copper. Ryan was a professional manager with none of Daly's populist instincts.(6)

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Union leaders w/ ribbons - parade

The old union leadership had not adjusted to these new times. A new progressive faction attacked the old guard, calling them tools of the company.

Irish club - Miners' Union day

Then in 1914, the BMU's older Irish leaders refused to strike in support of 500 Finnish miners fired by the Anaconda Company as socialists. On Miners Union Day, June 13, 1914, the union rift turned into a riot.

Miners' Union Day - Crowd at hall

An angry crowd attacked BMU leaders during the parade, and a mob swarmed the union hall, stealing and dynamiting the safe. A week later the radicals called a vote to form a new independent union.

Hall - Crowd at Hall - hall in rubble

The conservatives called a meeting (CONTINUED)
on June 23 to try to salvage the old BMU. An angry crowd soon gathered outside, someone started shooting, and a bystander was killed. Some of the crowd rushed to the nearby West Stewart mine and returned with dynamite. Through the night uptown Butte shook with over 20 blasts at the old Miners' Union Hall. The building, and the union, were in ruins.

Governor Samuel Stewart declared Butte in a state of insurrection and proclaimed martial law. The Montana National Guard began patrolling the streets of Butte. Meanwhile the local business community petitioned for an end to socialist government in the city.

"Duncan was impeached and removed from office for his failure to be more aggressive in putting down the riots around the dynamiting of the (CONTINUED)
Butte Miners' Union. Of course his position was to do anything more aggressive would have killed a lot of people, and that wasn't worth saving a building, and he was right."

By September Butte's socialist government was gone, troops had been used for the first time in Montana in reaction to labor unrest, and every mining company in the city, led by the Anaconda Copper Company, had declared an end to union representation on the hill. The Butte mines were officially an open shop.(7)

An uneasy peace settled on Butte for three years. Then came a disaster that propelled the city's union movement to a new level.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Section II

TITLE on WHITE:
"A Flaming Torch"

Miners at Granite Mt.

The miners' wage of four-dollars-and-fifty-cents a day in 1917 could not keep up with inflation. (8)

Union power on the hill was gone, and many skilled miners had left to fight in World War I, making work in the mines more dangerous than ever. (9)

Maney

"I think it's always important to bear in mind in any discussion about Butte's mining history and the Anaconda company, one of the most important things. The mines in Butte still rank as the deadliest mines anywhere in the world."

(CONTINUED)
On June 8, 1917, disaster brought matters to a crisis. Just over 400 men were on the night shift at the North Butte Mine. A shift boss inspecting a damaged cable accidentally ignited its exposed insulation with his carbide lamp. Fire and poison gas spread throughout the Speculator and Granite Mountain mines.

One-hundred-and-sixty-eight miners died that night, the world's worst disaster in hard rock mining history. Many bodies were charred beyond recognition. Some victims had worn their fingers to the knuckles trying to claw through bulkheads. By law those bulkheads should have had escape hatches. In fact, they were solid concrete.

As the Montana Commissioner of (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

labor and industry put it, "Butte for some time had been a volcano on the point of eruption. The heavy toll of life in the Speculator catastrophe proved to be the flaming torch."(12)

NARRATION :15 2:15 8:00

Four days later the newly-formed Metal Mine Workers' Union reported more than one thousand members at a mass meeting at Butte's Columbia Gardens. The new union was headed by Tom Campbell and Joe Shannon.

NARRATION :35 2:50 8:35

The Union drew up seven demands: ONE, recognition of the Metal Mine Workers' Union by all of Butte's mining companies; TWO, abolition of the rustling card, a "right to work" card the company could withhold at will; THREE, a minimum wage of six dollars a day; FOUR, monthly safety inspections; FIVE, escape plans for all mines; SIX, a (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Clark - Kelley

Calvert OC

Spec crowd - IBEW banner - headline

miner shot

-AUDIO-

The mining companies answered quickly.

CALVERT SOT :10 3:05 8:50
"Absolutely not, we're not going to negotiate with you, you're a bunch of wobblies, get back to work, end of story. That's the company's position."

Butte workers were outraged. On June 14, the Metal Mine Workers sent out the strike call. By month's end as many as fifteen-thousand miners, electricians, and metal tradesmen were idle in Butte. The mighty Anaconda Copper Company was paralyzed.

NARRATION :20 3:25 9:10

The new union won the support of not only labor radicals and the revolutionary Industrial Workers of (CONTINUED)
the World but of steady Butte men who had families and long connections to the community.

"I think that the symbol of the strike of 1917 was that hypothetical Irishman who had been in town for twenty years, working the mines for all of those years, married with six or seven kids, a stable member of the community and of the Irish enclave within that community."

The Union outspokenly rejected violence and avoided pickets where it feared company thugs could provoke a confrontation that would be used to isolate the movement. The strike committee wrote in June, "Our members understand that it is our business to see that no detectives or stool-pigeons be given the opportunity to create a disturbance." (15)

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Papershots - the strike bulletin - Dunn

The Anaconda Company owned most of the state's newspapers which denounced the strikers as Bolsheviks, Anarchists and Wobblies and suggested the strike was funded by German agents out to scuttle the American war effort. (16) To counter the company newspapers, the union circulated The Strike Bulletin edited by William Dunn, a union electrical worker. Dunn editorialized that the miners wanted only their rights as free men, self respect, a fair wage and a safe workplace. (17)

Maney OC

"The attitude I don't think changed significantly from the first union that organized in 1878, the Butte Workingmen's Union, and their organizing, their rallying cry was simply, a man is worth more than a mule."

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Miner w/ mule

MANEY VO :15  5:15  11:05
"The mules cost the company. The men didn't. The mules were more valuable."

WWI headline

NARRATION :10  5:25  11:15
But in 1917 the Metal Mine Workers faced not just the mining companies but the Federal government which had something much bigger than a local riot to use as ammunition against the miners.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Section III

TITLE on WHITE:

"War Hysteria and Murder"

MUSIC :10 :10 11:25
Music: "The Man Who Put the Germ in Germany"

NARRATION :20 :30 11:45
America entered into World War I in April 1917, and isolationism was replaced by a patriotism fueled by the government propaganda effort. In Montana, the Anaconda Company's position was now enhanced by its patriotic mission as producer of a strategic metal, but there was little enthusiasm for war among Butte miners.(18)

CALVERT SOT :30 1:00 12:15
"I think probably for a lot of miners and other workers in Butte, World War I was remote from their interests, really was remote from their interests. Why did the United States go to war? Think about it. It had nothing to do (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

with the immediate interests of the United States. Woodrow Wilson being reelected under the slogan, 'He kept us out of war.' That was the public sentiment in the country generally. And so it took the government to swing public opinion toward the war by making it a patriotic issue."

Miners faces.

NARRATION :10 1:10 12:25

And U.S. entry into World War I became an ethnic issue. The idea of fighting along side the English was unthinkable to many of Butte's Irish.

Emmons

EMMONS OC :30 1:40 12:55

"The American declaration of war against Germany in April 1917 was seen by them, by many of them anyway, as an act of betrayal. Certainly it broke their hearts. I would never argue that they walked as a protest to American involvement on England's side, but (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

I would argue that that involvement made it easier for them to walk.

At the same time Montana's wartime patriots were growing more frenzied. Burton K. Wheeler was Federal Attorney for Montana in 1917. He recalled, "All labor leaders, miners, and discontented farmers were regarded by these super-patriots as pacifists -- and ipso facto agents of the Kaiser. There were increasing reports of enemy airplanes operating out of mountain hideaways south of Missoula. . . . Just how and why the German High Command expected to launch an invasion of the United States through western Montana, six-thousand miles from Berlin, never made the slightest bit of sense to me."

"This was a strike against copper during war, and the tendency to (CONTINUED)
ignore the legitimate strike demands of Butte Miners proved irresistible. Nobody paid any attention to the demands of working people. This was an act of sedition, an act of treason."

It was in this atmosphere that Frank Little, an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, appeared on the scene.

"His arrival was probably seen as a mixed blessing at best by the local miners who were trying to lead this union, because he's pushing an even more radical agenda then they're willing to endorse. The press focus on Frank Little and ties him to the strike, and now you've got this nice package all wrapped up."

Little spoke to several meetings in July to try to get the Metal Mine (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Workers' Union to affiliate with the revolutionary IWW. The Butte press recorded many of his statements that the super-patriots gleefully touted as proof the strikers were seditious. The Anaconda Standard quoted Frank Little before a crowd at the Columbia Gardens ballfield saying "The IWW does not object to the war, but the way they want to fight it is to put the Capitalists in the front trenches and if the Germans don't get them, the IWW will."(20)

Hennessey - Evans -

Hennessey

NARRATION :25 4:20 15:30

On July 31, Wheeler was summoned to the Anaconda Company offices on the sixth floor of the Hennessey building where Company attorney L.O. Evans demanded he "do something about Frank Little."

Wheeler said he knew of no law by which he could prosecute Little for unpopular public statements.(21) At three o'clock the next morning (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

someone else took care of the company's problem.

Harrington

HARRINGTON SOT  :30 4:50 16:00
"The story was that six unidentified individuals, whom apparently everybody in the community knew who they were, entered the building. They apparently beat Frank Little. Some indicate that he was dead before he left the room. Anyway, he was dragged behind an automobile probably about three-and-a-half miles to Centennial avenue where he was hanged."

Note

NARRATION :05 4:55 16:05
A note was pinned to Little's body.

Ross OC

ROSS VO :30 5:25 16:35
"The card pinned to his underwear when he was found the next morning 3-7-77 supposedly the dimensions of a grave three feet by seven feet by seventy-seven inches, which is what the vigilantes used to warn their
prospective victims back in the 1860s, and which you still see on state highway patrol cars."

Thousands marched in Little's funeral procession, the biggest in Butte history. Little had become a martyr, and the strike captured national attention. Meanwhile, at Governor Stewart's request federal troops arrived in Butte. It was the start of a four-year occupation.

Little's murder became a rallying cry for Union organizers, but some company papers welcomed the lynching. Will Campbell, editor of the Helena Independent, called it good work. He wrote: "It is beyond the comprehension of the average citizen why the war department has not ordered certain leaders arrested and shot."(23)
Two days after the murder, police said the culprits would probably never be found. That same day the Strike Bulletin accused six Anaconda company thugs. (24)

As it turned out, the investigators were right. No one was ever prosecuted for the murder.

"The coroner's records have disappeared, the FBI files are silent on this intensely interesting question. One is surprised that one doesn't find any speculation about it in the surviving files of the FBI, and all I can think of is, they speculated about everything else under the sun in Butte. Those particular speculations were excised from the files by persons unknown, for whatever reasons."

(continued)
CONTINUED:

Emmons OC

EMMONS SOT :15 7:00 18:10
"I am not of the mind that the company did in Frank Little. I don't think that the company would have done something that stupid. I don't know who killed Frank Little."

Calvert OC

CALVERT SOT :10 7:10 18:20
"But it's clear he was murdered by agents of the company and/or local law enforcement."

Ross oc

ROSS SOT :10 7:20 18:30
"If it was not sanctioned from the sixth floor officially, I'm sure the company knew what was going on."

Little poster - funeral - miners - WHITEOUT

NARRATION :20 7:40 18:50
The lynching of Frank Little brought new intensity to the strike, which had begun to wane in July, but the murder also diverted attention from the miners' demands for union representation, a safer (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

workplace, and elimination of the rustling card.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

Section IV

TITLE on WHITE:
"Blacklists and Private Eyes."

Washington - Rankin

MUSIC :10 :10 19:00
Music "Threepenny Opera"

NARRATION :15 :25 19:15
A week after Frank Little's murder
Montana's new Congresswoman,
Jeanette Rankin, introduced a bill
to nationalize the hardrock mines
in the West. Rankin said Anaconda
Company President John Ryan could
determine the troubles that day by
abolishing the rustling card
system.(25)

NARRATION :15 :40 19:30
Rankin asked how the copper
companies could call the striking
miners traitors while refusing the
government's offer of sixteen-and-a-half cents a pound for the vital
metal. The industry was negotiating
with the war department for twenty-
four cents a pound.(26)

(CONTINUED)
After the speech Rankin told the Washington Post she expected the Anaconda Company to seek revenge through the company papers. Said Rankin, "They own the state, they own the government, they own the press. First, I'll be roasted from one end of the state to the other. Every newspaper will print my shortcomings, real or fandied, in the largest type in the composing room."(27)

That's just what happened. The Montana papers reported that Rankin had accused John Ryan of the murder of Frank Little. She was mocked for her paranoid fears of company retaliation, and Editor Will Campbell dubbed her Montana's IWW representative. Rankin's mine nationalization bill died without a hearing. Kelley did not acknowledge her call for
elimination of the rusting card, saying the speech disqualified her as a mediator. (28)

Kelley letter - union office - strike committee

The company said the card, which every miner needed in order to "rustle" a job, was a reasonable way to keep troublemakers out of the mines. The strike committee said it was a blacklist that "degraded the miner to the level of chattel." (29)

Emmons

"Working people were less concerned with hours and wages than they were with a simple acknowledgment of the dignity of what they did, significance of what they did and a respect for what they did, and the rustling card violated their own sense of themselves as working men."

(CONTINUED)
Billing records show the Anaconda Company had used Pinkerton detectives since the beginning of the century. These detectives kept tabs on everything from the honesty of conductors in the company-owned streetcars to the private deliberations of labor organizations. (30)

Jim Harrington's father, a machinist in the mines, was luckier than most. His mother had met Anaconda President John Ryan several times, raising money for her Dublin Gulch Charities.

"My father was apparently supporting William F. Dunn in the election in 1918, and according to his story was called to the sixth floor of the Hennessey building and had a very brief meeting with Mr. (CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

John D. Ryan that they appreciated his job and everything else, but he had a mother and seven kids to support. Therefore, if he liked his job he should keep quiet about the political aspects of the community, and that was just one of the stories he always told to impress upon you that you don't say too much."

And Anaconda Company file cards from the era show someone was watching closely. The typed notations include comments like, "J.C. Heineck, Machinist at Anselmo Mine, always talking against the ACM co., advocating IWW stuff. His brother . . . talks very different and is O.K." (31)

Some of the files indicate the company was watching people who didn't even work for Anaconda Copper. One on real estate dealer (CONTINUED)
David Roach noted, "This party is against the ACM Co. and would like to see another company in here instead of present company. Claims they try to run everything . . . ." (32)

Meanwhile editor Will Campbell’s patriotic zeal landed him at the head of the Montana Council of Defense. This wartime board had the self-appointed mission of fostering production, promoting liberty bonds, and sniffing out German spies. The committee’s accomplishments included banning German language classes from Montana schools and running McCarthy-like hearings on people who spoke against the war or refused to buy bonds. (33)

"There was even a move afoot to change the name of German measles to liberty measles. The music of (CONTINUED)"
CONTINUED:

Bach, Mozart, Brahms and Beethoven were banned because they were German."

Amid the hysteria many strikers were struggling to feed their families. As the strike neared the three-month mark some nine-thousand miners had returned to work. Then the union turned to the Smeltermen at the huge Washoe smelter in nearby Anaconda for help.

On August 24, a group of smeltermen sympathetic to the Metal Mine Workers gained control of the Mine Mill and Smeltermen's Union in Anaconda and won a strike vote. The walkout at the smelter forced the shutdown of every Anaconda Company mine in Montana.

The company moved quickly to shore up support in the smeltermen's (CONTINUED)
Continued:

union by offering improved work conditions and a fifty-cents-a-day raise at the smelter. On September 17, the smeltermen took the raise and went back to work under military escort. (34) As fall progressed many miners straggled back to work in Butte. The strike had been broken.

Emmons OC

"The strike ended in December because cold weather was on the land, and Christmas was approaching. It simply could not be sustained beyond that date, and none of the demands of the strikers was met. In that sense they won nothing from this stoppage."

Company officials - miners

The company came out of the six-month shutdown stronger than before. The federal government did set the war-time price of copper at twenty-four cents a pound, Anaconda Company shareholders earned a (continued)
record twenty-three dollar dividend on Company stocks in 1917, and the biggest labor action in Butte's history was crushed. Finally, thanks to fears of revolutionary unrest in Butte the legislature was ready to pass new laws to make it easier to prosecute radicals. (35)
In February 1918, the state legislature passed the Montema Sedition Act and the Criminal Syndicalism Act. It was now illegal to utter, print, write or publish any attack or criticism of the United States government, Constitution, military, flag or uniform. Radicals and unionists could now be jailed simply for their words.(36)

Montana Senator Henry Myers sponsored the federal sedition act which Congress passed in May 1918. Many constitutional scholars consider this law one of the most repressive in U.S. history.(37)
"So the unions were effectively crushed by the power of the state and the power of the state giving validation to that idea that free men organizing into free labor unions and collectively bargaining were in fact treasonous."

The repressive laws and the stigma of treason that came after the Butte strike also crippled the union movement in America for a decade. But in Butte it is the men, not the rhetoric, people remember. In 1996, the city dedicated a monument to the victims of the Spec fire, as it is known here. Many of the old-timers who come out every year on the anniversary of the fire remember the strike of 1934 when the miners reorganized under the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

John Shea OC

SHEA SOT :10 1:50 26:20

"I was here in 34. Us kids got pretty good at hitting the company gunmen with rocks."

Spec ceremony

NARRATION :10 2:00 26:30

For the older generation in Butte, to have been a miner and a union man carries nothing but honor.

Shea SOT

SHEA :10 2:10 26:40

"As a kid it was the greatest honor in the world to walk with your dad in the Miners' Union Day parade."

Credits - Miners - BLACK

MUSIC :30 2:40 27:10

Music: "Remember me."
NOTES


5. Ibid., pp. 20-21.

6. Ibid., p. 240.


9. Ibid., p. 368.

10. The death toll was established by Granite Mountain Speculator Monument Committee, 1995.


15. Metal Mine Workers’ Union.


20. Ibid., p. 139.

21. Ibid., pp. 139-140.

22. Ibid., p. 141.


24. Gutfeld, p. 29.


26. Ibid.


32. Ibid.
33. Gutfeld, pp. 61-65.

34. Morris, p. 263-264.

35. Ibid., p. 284.


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