

Wes Cowan: Our final story explores the secret history of one of America's most significant and bloody labor strikes. 1912: industrialization is remaking America. And in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the world's largest textile mills are processing over a million pounds of wool a year. Lawrence hums with activity. But beneath the surface, tension is mounting. Deplorable work conditions, starvation wages, and discrimination against the mainly foreign-born workers have reached the boiling point. On January 12th, Lawrence explodes in a massive labor strike. Angry workers smash mill windows, and tens of thousands of men, women, and children spill into the streets. Known later as the "bread and roses strike," it was a watershed moment for the American labor movement. But it is a history that has been strangely neglected. Nearly a century later, a man in Methuen, Massachusetts, has made a discovery that could shed new light on this dramatic chapter in American history.

Alan: Years ago, going through my parents' basement, I found the billy club hanging above my father's workbench. And it was just hanging there, attached to a rafter, hanging from its leather strap.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm in Methuen, Massachusetts, to meet Allan and to get a look at the mysterious club he's discovered.

Alan: Here's the club, Wes.

Wes: Oh, great. Thank you.

Wes: Wow. "Lawrence strike 1/12/1912." It's a great thing. Looks like it's ash. Or hickory maybe. Great original leather strap. Did your parents know anything about it at all?

Alan: Not much.

Wes: I understand it belonged to my grandfather, Harry Brown, of North Andover, Massachusetts, which is next to Lawrence. And he was a mechanic.

Wes: What do you want me to find out?

Alan: I'd like to find out how possibly my grandfather came upon this club. And could he have participated in the actual strike?

Wes: Allan tells me that Harry Brown was one of 11 siblings, but he has almost no information about their lives. so, who was Harry Brown? was he a mill worker? I have to say that from these photos he looks more middle class than a mill hand. Those are interesting questions about the club and your grandfather's relationship with it. Do you mind if I take it with me?

Allan: No, go right ahead.

Wes: I'm heading to the public library in downtown Lawrence. Though the mills are long silent, you can almost feel the ghosts of the past. I want to find out more about what happened here. Truthfully, the 1912 strike is not something I know a lot about. By the turn of the century, Lawrence, Massachusetts, was at the beating heart of the American industrial revolution. The fast-flowing Merrimack River provided abundant cheap energy to scores of textile mills, which in turn drew tens of thousands of immigrant workers to the city just north of Boston. But in January 1912, long-smouldering resentment over work conditions and pay reached a flash point when workers opened their pay checks and discovered that their salaries had been reduced. By noon that day, a firestorm of protests swept through the mills, with workers smashing equipment and taking to the streets. When the strike occurred, there were 25,000 workers involved representing dozens of nationalities. The state police were called in, militias were called in, the Lawrence police department was working overtime and it's very clear that clubs were used to brutalize the striking workers. I mean, there are just accounts of them everywhere here including pictures of some of the militia holding clubs. But listen to this. "I saw one military policeman with a club strike a woman, a pregnant woman, over the abdomen." so, you know, it's very clear

that clubs were being used, and maybe this billy club was there. Now the question I have is, what's Allan's grandfather, who's supposedly a worker, maybe at one of the mills, what's he doing with a billy club? Was Harry Brown a policeman? Is that why he had the club? While I look into that, my colleague, Elyse Luray, is meeting with labor historian Howard Zinn. He says that for a long time the Lawrence strike has been strangely overlooked by historians. I went all through graduate school in history and never learned anything about even the existence of the Lawrence textile strike. I had to find out about it on my own, rummaging through the stacks of the library.

Elyse: Professor Zinn calls the early successful organization of immigrant workers, many of whom were women and children, one of the most important events in American history. Professor, in your opinion, what's the importance of the Lawrence strike?

Howard Zinn: The really important thing about the Lawrence textile strike which makes it stand out from so many other struggles in American history is that it was a victory. They actually won that strike.

Elyse: Professor Zinn also says the club may be a clue that it could have had symbolic value to a Lawrence worker.

Howard: The whole history of the labor movement is a history of people going out on strike and then having to face the clubs of the policemen, or very often the firearms of the policemen.

Wes: If Harry Brown was a striking worker and had witnessed police violence, the club could have meant a great deal to him. But the same might be true if Brown had been a policeman. I'm meeting with Ron Desantis, Lawrence historian and collector of police memorabilia. A former police officer, Ron gives me a different take on the strike. What do you think it was like to be a cop here in 1912 when there are 25,000 striking workers here in the city of Lawrence?

Ron Desantis: It must have been terrifying. At the time, the city of Lawrence only had 84 policemen.

Wes: 84?

Ron: They were surrounded by thousands of strikers, and they weren't very nice strikers. There was some violence involved. We had a police officer stabbed in the back.

Wes: Ron has literally hundreds of items from the police department of the era, including a collection of billy clubs. Looking at all these different clubs, I assume these are clubs that have been carried by Lawrence police officers.

Ron: Yes, they were. Some of them were homemade, some of them were -- furniture companies would make them for officers, local people. There was no standard training at the time, but most officers would pass on little tricks of the trade and things you should use.

Wes: One look at our club and Ron's certain we have the real thing.

Ron: This type of club, the design, and the fact that it's carved, I would say that this type of club could have been used at the strike in that time frame, in that time period. Doesn't mean it wasn't made prior to or even carried after, but at the time of the 1912 strike, this very well could be...

Wes: Could have been?

Ron: More than likely it was. And there's another clue. The size of the club means that it may have been used for crowd control. As a former police officer, I'm a little reluctant to talk about the trade secrets.

Wes: Aw, come on!

Ron: But what they would do is, if you were going to hit someone with this -- and now in today's day and age you cannot use this the way you could then.

Wes: Of course not.

Ron: You can't hit a person in the head. But what they would do is they would strike an individual with this, and they would aim for the brow.

Wes: Like right in here.

Ron: Yeah, and it's a very fatty tissue but if I struck that tissue and caused a small laceration, it would bleed a lot. Head wounds tend to bleed tremendously.

Wes: So it's like a prize fighter. You get hit here and you bleed and they stop the fight.

Ron: Exactly.

Wes: Do you think that something like this would have been used by one of the striking workmen?

Ron: I seriously doubt it. They wouldn't have a need to carry such a weapon. That would be a weapon that would be used by the police officers. A civilian would have no need whatsoever to carry this.

Wes: So, you think that could be a souvenir from the strike?

Ron: It could be a souvenir from the strike. It could have been left by a police officer, maybe a son or a grandson. Or it could have even been knocked from a policeman's hand and picked up by a striker and kept as a souvenir. But I -- I do believe it was probably used by a police officer at the time.

Wes: Well, the club is from the right time period, but I still don't know what Harry Brown was doing during the strike. Elyse is heading to the former wood mill. It's gargantuan; 500 feet longer than the Empire State Building lying on its side. And it once housed nearly 1,500 power looms along 16 miles of aisles. Elyse is meeting with author Bruce Watson, who's written a book on the 1912 strike. He profiled the families who came to Lawrence in search of the American dream.

Bruce Watson: There were some 30,000 people who had come from Eastern and Southern Europe in the previous 20 years. They came to get jobs, and the jobs in Lawrence were textile jobs in the mills.

Elyse: And was it everyone in the family?

Bruce: Well, children were also working in the mills. There was a law in Massachusetts that you had to be 14, but if a family was particularly needy and if they had a child who was 12 or 13 and looked old enough, they could get some forged papers and they'd be here in the mills working along with their mother, perhaps, in the next room. About half the textile strikers were women.

Elyse: And what were the conditions like?

Bruce: Well, they were pretty tough. It was a -- it was a tough road. one man said they used to drive us like an old horse. In fact, the mills were going faster every year. They speed the looms up a little bit every year. There would have been 800 or 900 machines here all working at full-bore. It was very loud. Fibers from the woolen fabric drifting through -- drifting through the mills, and they caused all sorts of respiratory diseases. And then there were a lot of accidents on the job. And then outside the conditions were even worse because people were living in very squalid tenements, six or seven people to a room.

Elyse: So it was pretty bad.

Bruce: It was pretty bad. The average mill worker died at the age of 39, and this in a time when you could expect to live to be 55 or 60.

Elyse: I tell Bruce about our club, but he isn't sure Allan's grandfather was ever a mill worker. And does the name Harry Brown ring a bell to you?

Bruce: Well, it rings a bell. It's a rather unusual name for a striker in this particular strike. There are people from 30 different nations participating in this strike. But predominantly they were the ones who are in the lower end of the economic ladder, and that would be Italians, Polish, Lithuanians, French-Canadians, Franco Belgians. Harry Brown's an unusual name for a striker because it -- the English and Irish weren't that represented.

Elyse: I'm not sure what Wes is going to make of this, but it looks like Allan's story may not be quite accurate.

Wes: I've asked Louise Sandberg of the Lawrence public library to see if there's anything that can help us in the local archives. Louise?

Louise Sandberg: Hi.

Wes: Hi, Wes Cowan. Nice to meet you.

Louise: Nice to meet you.

Wes: What did you find out about Harry Brown?

Louise: Harry was from a family that lived in North Andover. They were an English-speaking family.

Wes: Now brown, that's sort of an unusual name for a striker to have in a city full of immigrants, right?

Louise: That is correct.

Wes: And what Louise tells me next confirms that he almost certainly was not a striking worker.

Louise: I discovered from his registration card for the First World War. This shows that he was a machinist at the Davis & Ferber Company in North Andover.

Wes: Now, Davis & Ferber, were they one of the mills that participated in the strike?

Louise: No, no, they were not involved at all.

Wes: So it's unlikely that he was involved in the strike.

Louise: I would believe that was the case, yes.

Wes: Okay, all right. But just as I was getting ready to leave, Louise handed me some additional research.

Louise: I also looked at census, 1910, 1920, and 1930.

Wes: What she showed me next gave me my answer for Allan.

Wes: You know, Allan, this little club, for me, was a great entree into a period of American history that I really didn't know a lot about, and particularly the history of the American labor movement. You wanted to know, did your grandfather work in a textile mill, and could he have participated in the strike? The answer to your question is no. He -- he didn't seem to

be involved in any way. I do have some other information, though, that is going to require us to leave your house. So, if you're ready, I'd like to take you to some other places to show you some things.

Allan: Sure.

Wes: Well, you know where we are?

Allan: North Andover.

Wes: This is the house that your grandfather was living in 1912 at the time of the strike.

Allan: Oh.

Wes: I tell Alan that Louise had made a couple discoveries in the Lawrence archives. Harry Brown hadn't been a striker. And although he'd lived in Andover, not in Lawrence, his home was alongside tracks that had carried workers to the Lawrence mills. And Harry had shared that home with several siblings.

Allan: His entire family was here?

Wes: The whole family was here. And Louise made one more discovery in the census records. This shows that there were two other siblings that probably worked in the mill at the time of the strike.

Allan: Really?!

Wes: Yes.

Allan: So, they were there in the years right before, a few years after, and then up into the '30s working in the textile mills?

Wes: That's correct. Two brothers. I also was able to find, Arthur was a director for the textile workers union of America, C.I.O., which means he was involved with the union. So although your grandfather wasn't working there, his two brothers were. And that's where we think the club came from.

Allan: It's still in the family.

Wes: Essentially he had brothers apparently working in the mills at the time of the strike.

Allan: That's a great thing to know.

Wes: Now there's a little bit more there so maybe the mystery is basically solved. And you know what? That club is a fantastic relic of the history of the textile workers movement. It just encapsulates the struggle that they had between management and labor. In the months following the strike, Lawrence textile manufacturers gave in to the workers' demands for better pay. But it was a short-lived victory. Within a few years, most of the workers' gains had been rolled back. In the years and decades that followed, the bloody events of that January 1912 were largely forgotten. It took 50 years, until the 1960s, when the Lawrence strike was rediscovered by scholars and workers as a key moment in U.S. labor history.

Wes: The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the anti-war movement, the movement of farm workers out in California, I think all of that created a different atmosphere in the country, and a different atmosphere even in the academy. And I think there arose out of those movements a greater interest in the history that had been neglected in the orthodox teachings of the past. Today, the Lawrence strike stands as a symbol of the immigrant workers' spirit of rebellion and hunger for dignity.

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