Examining Narratives on the Homestead Strike

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Abstract

The Homestead Strike of 1892 is one of the most important moments in American labor history, highlighting the need for labor rights and better working conditions. Using the University of Pittsburgh Archives, this project looks at the experiences of the strikers of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW) and the Pinkerton detectives during the Strike, as well as what motivated strikers and management in the events leading up to the violent encounter.

Background

- With the contract renewal date approaching in 1892, industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, and manager, Henry Clay Frick presented a new contract with lowered wages.
- Failed negotiations with the AAISW led to a series of uprisings, leading to Frick’s decision to lock down the mills.
- On July 6th, Frick ordered 300 Pinkertons to guard Homestead. Violence broke out and Pinkertons surrendered to the strikers.
- Pennsylvania State militia arrives on July 12th. Operations at the mills resume and the labor conflicts disperse.

Left: The cover of a newspaper from July 16, 1892, depicting wounded Pinkertons surrendering to the angry strikers. Media provided perspectives and coverage of the labor tensions and Homestead Strike. Interviews also allowed the voices of Pinkerton detectives and strikers to be heard all over the world.

Below: Image of burning barges in Leslie’s Weekly from July 14, 1892.

Carnegie Steel Company and Wage Cuts

Above: One of many competitor wage comparisons by William Martin, the Chief of the Bureau of Labor at the Homestead Mills. His elaborate compilations of wage and steel outputs helped Carnegie Steel execute wage cuts.

Above: A telegram sent by Carnegie to Frick on July 7th, 1892, in which he was willing to “let grass grow over works” than continue to employ the strikers. Private exchanges between Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick often revealed they were not willing to negotiate wage cuts with the union from the very start.

Economic Motives of the Strikers

Above: Excerpt of an interview with William Roberts, a striker describing how rollers at the American Iron Works, Carnegie’s competitor, are paid more, despite similarities in products. The archives reveal strikers’ motives lean more towards economic incentives rather than power struggles, since strikers’ wives and their children were also participants in the violent strike.

Above: Excerpt from a letter from John Miller to William Martin, asking for his and his son’s job back, despite involvement in the strike.

Pinkerton Detectives During the Conflict

Left: An excerpt of an interview with A.L. Wells, a medical student, with the Boston News. He was hired by the Pinkertons and noted the lack of knowledge and secrecy of the operation. Like Wells, many men accepted the watchman position as a side job. Many knew they were sent to guard property, but the extent of their knowledge they had about the task often varied, such as the exact location and details of the task.

Right: Court testimony of John T. McCurry, who described being scouted and the chaos during the strike. He recalls being shocked when a man shoved a weapon into his arm after shots were fired. He and many others were unaware of the possibilities of violence and gun usage.

Future Discussion

- To what extent did media equally cover the perspectives of the strikers and Pinkertons, on a local and national level?
- How did other corporations and labor unions respond to the Homestead Strike?