



AROUND THE LOOP

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Picture: SLPSC PCC #1743 – Grand Avenue Shoe-Fly

'Washington Avenue Massacre' and the 1900 Streetcar Strike

By - Dina Young

(Some material for this essay was taken from Dina Young's essay, "The Streetcar Strike of 1900," published in Gateway Heritage, Summer, 1991.)

On June 10, 1900, three striking streetcar workers were killed and 14 of their fellows were injured when a hastily-formed posse of upper-class St. Louisans open fired on them as they paraded past the corner of Broadway and Washington. "The Washington Avenue Massacre," as the incident came to be known, was the bloodiest conflict in the long and politically-charged streetcar strike of 1900.

The strike erupted in early May, when members of the recently-organized Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees Local 131 voted to enforce their demand for recognition of their union. Working conditions for streetcar workers had always been abysmal but worsened when the different streetcar companies were consolidated in 1899, creating a near monopoly for the St. Louis Transit Company. The monopoly imposed 14 to 17 hour shifts on its workers and threatened to reduce the wages of some employees. The successful organizing of the streetcar workers was due to the intense effort and support of radicals within the Central Trades and Labor Union (the predecessor of the present day Greater St. Louis Labor Council), which was then socialist-influenced. Streetcar company officials, whose owners were among the St. Louis civic elite, believed that broader issues of control of the city were linked to unionization. Company officials fired all the union leaders, vowing to "die with their boots on" before recognizing the union. In response, the union called a strike.

From its outset the strike sounded a chord that resonated throughout St. Louis' working-class communities. Workers perceived the St. Louis Transit Company monopoly as representing the efforts of

West End businessmen to dominate the city's economic and political life. Meanwhile, workers depending on the streetcars for their transportation found that monopoly control had resulted in poor service and dangerous conditions.

Working-class St. Louisans throughout the city responded to the strike declaration as if to an alarm. On the first day of the strike, a group of young women from the United Garment Workers Union formed a human barricade at 15th and Washington Avenue, directly in the path of an oncoming car, forcing it to halt. One of the women rushed towards the car, waving her union card, and confronted the conductor, who was her brother and implored him: "Don't do what you are doing!" The non-union operators carried weapons and demonstrated their resolve to use them. On the first day of the strike, a 16 year old boy was wounded when a non-union conductor fired into a massing crowd. During the course of the strike, several people died from the same sort of action. Within a few hours of the strike vote, men, women and children pelted scab-operated streetcars with bricks and stones, cut power lines and obstructed tracks. In joining the streetcar workers struggle to establish a union, strike supporters demonstrated the control they had in their own neighborhoods while playing out their frustrations over their limited role in the life of the city.

The St. Louis elite believed that open class warfare had erupted, and that the police were unreliable instruments to repress it. Political figures who controlled the police, while decidedly favoring the company behind the scenes, did not want to alienate the political support of the working class. Missouri Governor Lon V. Stephens

refused to call up the state militia, but he did authorize St. Louis' sheriff to form a posse comitatus. John H. Cavender, a local realtor who had taken up arms to repress the St. Louis general strike of 1877, was appointed posse commander. He accepted only prominent citizens for the posse, most of whom were judges, bankers and attorneys. Posse organizers advertised for men who "would not shoot at a child...for sneering at them, but who would continue to shoot to the bitter end if necessity required." By June 8, almost 1,300 posse men were on active duty. Their headquarters was on the southwest corner of Washington and Broadway, but they were stationed in Transit Company car barns and power houses in working-class neighborhoods around the city. Posse leaders gave instructions that St. Louisans resisting arrest were to be "shot on the spot." The presence of armed members of the upper-class in working-class neighborhoods created an extremely volatile atmosphere.

On Sunday morning, June 10, about 800 strikers assembled at the Eads Bridge and crossed the Mississippi River to attend a picnic at Edgemont Park given in their honor by the Belleville, Illinois local of the Railway Employees Union. Late that rainy afternoon the strikers returned home. Led by a drum and bugle, the procession crossed the bridge and continued west on Washington Avenue. The posse headquarters was abuzz with posse men who knew that the strikers were returning from the picnic, and they stood ready to attack. There was some jeering as the strikers peacefully paraded by the posse barracks.

As the paraders' ranks stretched between Broadway and Sixth Street, a streetcar from the Delmar Avenue Division made its way west on Washington, passing between the barracks and the strikers. The posse leaders later claimed they heard a brick or rock hit the streetcar, and gave an order to arrest the brick-thrower. As three posse men charged into the crowd of strikers, a pistol went off. Hearing the shot, posse men, who had lined Washington Avenue from Broadway to Sixth Street, instantly opened fire on the strikers. So did

their fellow posse members, from windows inside the barracks. When the smoke cleared, conductors C. Edward Thomas and Edward Burkhardt, along with motorman George Rine, lay dying in the street. Fourteen other strikers were wounded. None of the posse was injured. The streetcar men had been unarmed.

Bystanders who had witnessed the fracas recounted that posse members appeared to have "lost all control over themselves" during the incident. Journalist William Marion Reedy, who was not a strike sympathizer, commented that seeing the posse men rush for their guns, quickly load, then dash for the street, showed that they "were more than half-glad 'the music had begun..'"

St. Louisans outraged by the Washington Avenue killings called for the dismissal of the posse. After several reductions in its size, the posse was finally disbanded after July 4. The Washington Avenue Massacre did not end the streetcar strike. It did, however, capture in a stark moment the volatility of turn-of-the-century class divisions in the city.

Although an arbitrated settlement was made in the strike, most leaders and many of the rank-and-file lost their jobs and were replaced by workers from the "countryside." The company claimed they would be more docile than the St. Louis workers who had tried to unionize the lines. Eighteen years later, however, these workers successfully organized Local 788 of the AASRE (now the Amalgamated Transit Union).

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After the streetcar strike, with a few notable exceptions, the elite would not personally gather arms to intimidate the working class. From this point on, the elite began to organize more effectively to control the police and to use legal means such as injunctions to control workers during strikes. For the next 20 years, St. Louis workers were given a powerful reminder that the call for law and order was connected to anti-unionism when the police held their annual "riot gun" parade in which they displayed weapons originally used by the posse in the streetcar strike.

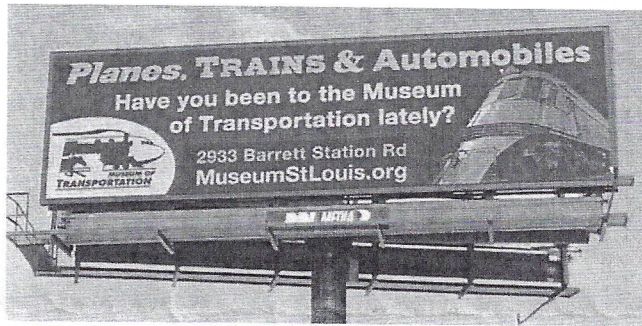


DONUTS & DETAILS – Casual drop in event held on the 1st Thursday and 3rd Saturday of each month and all are welcome to attend and share any announcements. See flyer attached to this email.

Saturday June 3, 2017 – All Ford Show – 9:00 AM until 3:00 PM – Sponsored by The Mustang Club of St. Louis.

Saturday, June 10, 2017 - Pierce Arrow Show – 10:00 AM until 2:00 PM – Sponsored by The Pierce Arrow Society.

Sunday, June 18, 2017 – Father's Day Car Show – 11:00 AM until 3:30 PM – Sponsored by The Horseless Carriage Club of St. Louis. *This always draws a large attendance crowd.*



The Museum of Transportation Billboard.

