

Labor History Rocks Small Town

Honea Path, South Carolina

Before two documentary filmmakers traveled from New York City to Anderson County, South Carolina, and unearthed sixty years of buried labor history, former textile worker Kathy Lamb had never heard of the Great Textile Strike of 1934—the largest single-industry strike in U.S. history. Nor did she know that the strike's bloodiest incident took place in her own hometown. Textbooks on South Carolina history make no mention of the strike, says Lamb, and long-time Honea Path residents have kept mysteriously silent.

In 1992, a fellow unionist at a textile-workers' convention handed Lamb a flyer about a documentary called *The Uprising of '34*, which New York University film professor George Stoney and his former student Judith Helfand were making.

"There was a note on the literature, that if you knew anything about Honea Path, to call the toll-free number," says Lamb, still sounding amazed. "My dad was born and raised in Honea Path, so I came home and asked him about the strike, and he said, 'I was there when it happened.'"

Nearly sixty years after the strike, Lamb's father, J.P. Hughes, finally revealed to his daughter—and later, to the filmmakers—what he had witnessed on September 6, 1934.

Just eight years old at the time, Hughes had gone down to the town's Chiquola Mill, where his father worked as night watchman, and where a large crowd of strikers had gathered. Protesting meager wages, increased workloads, and a nearly medieval way of life—the mill owners also owned all the town's housing and stores, and controlled its police—the Honea Path mill hands had joined with 400,000 fellow textile workers in a nationwide walkout. By September 6, the strike was in its second week, with mill owners calling for National Guard troops and deputizing locals.

J.P. Hughes described to his daughter how the men and women assembled outside the mill that day had just begun to



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sing "We Shall Not Be Moved" when "the pop, pop, pop of guns" cut through the air. Seven men were killed, seventeen wounded, many of them shot in the back.

No one was ever convicted of the shootings. Bitterness and silence set in when the mills openly blacklisted former strikers, or coerced promises from potential rehires to never again mention the word "union."

Generations of Honea Path residents experienced a kind of forced amnesia, says Stoney, whose previous films include *Images of the Great Depression* and the Emmy Award-winning *We Shall Overcome*. Armed with strikers' names from old newspapers and copies of protest letters written to government officials, the filmmakers searched for former activists.

"A great many people were reluctant to talk," Stoney says. "People would say, 'How'd you get my name?' Very often it was a matter of courting them over years." It took six years to make the three-part, ninety-minute film.

Relatives of the strikers and gunmen alike learned their families' secrets from the *Uprising* screenings. Writer Frank Beacham, a Honea Path native who now lives in New York City, found out about the strike when a friend called from the South to report the film's conclusion. Beacham's grandfather, superintendent of Chiquola Mill, had ordered the gunmen to open fire on the strikers. Worse yet, he had upheld the installation of a machine gun, which fortunately malfunctioned at the last moment, forestalling the certain murder of hundreds more. "This was going to be a mass killing," says Beacham.

Although Beacham's mother was a history teacher, she never discussed the strike. "I never knew that my family name had evoked fear in a lot of people in this town," he says.

Now Beacham, Lamb, the filmmakers, and the strikers' families in Honea Path want to ensure that the town's labor history does not get buried again. On Memorial Day, they will gather in Honea Path's town square to unveil a red granite marker that Lamb designed to memorialize the slain men. Framed by cottonwood blossoms, the triangular stone is etched with a statement uttered by one of the felled workers as he lay dying in his brother-in-law's front yard: "They died for the rights of the working man."

The story of the 1934 uprising remains controversial in Honea Path. Local churches and businesses have refused to support the memorial project. Lamb has been battling with the town over her proposal to show the film at the local middle school before the unveiling. She has been told that she needs approval not only from the city council but also from the Chiquola Mill, now owned by Springs Industries. Still, Lamb knows the story is getting out. She has heard that pirated copies of *The Uprising of '34* are circulating in Anderson, about eight miles from her home.

The Uprising of '34 premieres nationally on PBS's *Point of View* on June 27.

—HOLLY METZ

Workers at the plant gate before the shooting began: sixty years later, the secret is out.

MARCH FOR JUSTICE

On June 17, a coalition of labor, human-service, and other activist groups from around the Chicago area will hold a rally to protest the Contract with America and to demand social justice and a positive role for government in society. Among the groups involved are the trade-union-based Jobs With Justice, the Coalition for New Priorities, the Coalition Against the Contract, the People's Congress on Families and the Economy, and the Metro Chicago Coalition to Promote and Defend the Rights of Immigrants. For more information, contact the Coalition for New Priorities, 202 S. State Street, Chicago, IL 60604, (312)363-0500, or Chicago Jobs With Justice, c/o ILGWU, 910 West Van Buren, Chicago, IL 60607, (312)738-6060.



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