

Red Panic: The Drumright Telephone Operator's Strike of 1919



*By Michael Molina**

During the post-World War I era, the United States faced unprecedented challenges to its deep-rooted social and economic systems. Millions of Americans returned home after aiding in the defeat of Germany only to find a lack of jobs, a dramatic increase in the cost of living with little increase in wages, a volatile streak of unionism that demanded improved working conditions, and changes to the social system with the coming of Prohibition and women's right to vote. The period of the late 1910s and early 1920s represented an explosive period in American history in which it seemed the very fabric of the nation was torn asunder by so-called radicals who wished to forge a new society based on egalitarian and socialist values. US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer spearheaded a campaign against such agitators, drumming up fear against the supposed Communist menace. These events became part of the First Red Scare, a wave of anti-Communist sentiment and reactionism that pervaded the postwar era. During this

time of increased volatility, the small town of Drumright, Oklahoma, became a hotbed of supposed radicalism and took the national stage. A strike by telephone operators in the town exploded into a seminal event in 1919 and catapulted Drumright into sensationalist headlines across a country already in the grips of Red Scare panic. The ensuing debacle resulted in false claims of a Communist takeover of the Oklahoma town, the governor calling out of the Oklahoma National Guard, and negative publicity that harmed the reputation of Drumright. The governor-appointed State Board of Arbitration later released a report on the event and revealed that the media's claims of violence were overblown, and much of the drama fabricated and sensationalized. A court only convicted one individual on a misdemeanor charge for causing a disturbance, and even then the jury nearly split on the verdict. The end result revealed that even small town Oklahoma was susceptible to the nationwide fear and paranoia. The affair stands as a major event of the First Red Scare, as authorities and the media turned an ordinary disturbance into a full-blown Communist plot to take over Oklahoma.¹

As the state entered 1919, a series of events had already rocked America, leaving millions on edge and in a state of fear. Still reeling from the hype and paranoia induced against Germany during the First World War, the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia and large labor demonstrations occurring elsewhere in the world put the state and nation on edge. A nationwide bombing campaign by anarchists that April exacerbated worry over an imminent Communist coup.² In late 1919, an event in Drumright, Oklahoma, occurred that epitomized the First Red Scare and the paranoid attitudes surrounding it. On September 22 a group of striking female telephone operators demonstrated peacefully in the sleepy town. During the march down Main Street an unidentified individual fired off a gun, causing supporters of the strikers and the local police force to engage in a brief scuffle. With only two shots fired in the air there were no injuries, and by the next day the trouble had ended. Despite the lack of severe violence during the Drumright incident, initial reports told a far different and highly sensationalized story. Initial Associated Press telegrams told of a serious disturbance, including a mob that rounded up the mayor and law enforcement officers and demanded their resignation. By the end of the event the National Guard occupied Drumright to restore order, the local newspaper engaged in a feud with the *Tulsa World* over the latter's negative portrayal of the town, and false tales of a Bolshevik conspiracy flooded the national media.³

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Broadway in Drumwright, Oklahoma, 1916 (19823.1, Galen D. Glass Collection, OHS Research Division).

The buildup to the incident offered little indication of the dramatic series of events that would follow. In the small town of Drumwright, situated near the eastern oil fields of the state, the worries of Bolshevik uprisings appeared far off. On September 2 a Labor Day parade occurred without incident as labor organizers, pastors, judges, and citizens gathered to celebrate the holiday.⁴ The local newspaper, the *Drumright Derrick*, took a casual approach to labor disturbances occurring in other parts of the state. A strike in Shawnee by telephone operators was met with relaxed undertones by the *Derrick*, with the outlet reporting ongoing mediation and possible reconciliation.⁵ Drumright soon approached their own troubles, as local operators threatened phone service across the town. A report circulated before a proposed walkout that phone service was inadequate. Heralding an early warning of the event, the article pointed out that, "Here in Drumright, we are told, that much of this inefficiency of service is due to poor equipment, a lack of modern facilities and too much work being placed on a few operators, long hours and low pay for the operators."⁶ A pattern of



Aaron Drumwright, the founder of Drumwright, Oklahoma (4480, Mat Duhr Collection, OHS Research Division).

overworked and underpaid workers appeared as demand for service skyrocketed, with two hundred more phones desired by the town.⁷

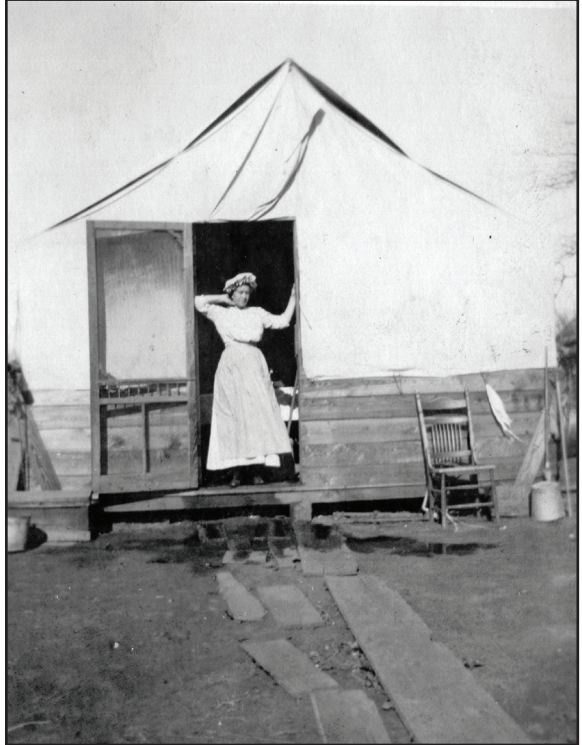
On Saturday, September 20, eighteen out of twenty-one female telephone workers of the Southwestern Bell Company went on strike.⁸ The workers demanded recognition of their organization and better hours and pay. They received support from the Drumwright Trades' Assembly, which represented every union in the town.⁹ The women demonstrated the rising tide in female activism that had become a staple during the early 1900s. While barred from outright participation in politics through voting, they nonetheless took matters into their own hands and championed their own rights against a company dominated by men. The telephone operators later conditionally went back to work pending a decision from the State Board of Arbitration.¹⁰ The town kept relatively calm during the event, and the *Derrick* reported that the strikers were "very quiet," and that they were "quietly abiding the decisions of the company and are not making any demonstrations."¹¹ Several workers made public statements regarding the conditions at Southwestern Bell, revealing their unacceptable work environment and their ten to eleven-hour work days.¹²

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Above: Oilton oil fields postcard, printed c. 1910-18 (23139. IO.O.F.O.1.9, Devon/Dunning Petroleum Industry Collection, OHS Research Division).

Below: Postcard of a temporary home on an Drumwright oil field, printed c. 1910-18 (23139. IO.O.F.D.4.73, Devon/Dunning Petroleum Industry Collection, OHS Research Division).



On September 22 the Drumright strike took a turn for the worse. The telephone operators were conducting a demonstration in the middle of town with several hundred sympathizers when, as the *Derrick* explained the following day, “some kid with a howitzer about as big as himself took a shot at one of the policemen and when the attempt was made to arrest the kid the riot started.”¹³ When police attempted to arrest the youth the strike supporters and law enforcement squared off. The newspaper reported that some overzealous sympathizers took Police Chief Jack Ary into custody, disarmed him, and made him promise to resign his office. The *Derrick* reported, “Good natured Jack didn’t seem to be very badly scared, neither did he resign from the office.”¹⁴ The newspaper humorously stated that “with all the excitement there was no serious disturbances and no one was hurt, but it was bully fun while it lasted and there were many who thought that there would be rioting and killing.”¹⁵ It proclaimed that the only serious side of the trouble appeared the next morning when twenty special officers appeared on the streets armed with Winchesters, intent on keeping a wary eye on all who had the appearance of making trouble.¹⁶ Unfortunately for Drumright, the brief brush with violence coincided with a nationwide steel strike that affected thousands of union workers. The striking ladies quickly and permanently took a back seat to the developing story, as US newspapers categorized the major walkout as a coup masterminded by radical labor and Communist supporters who intended to overthrow the government.

News of the Drumright outburst spread far and wide across a nation already gripped by the fear of Bolshevism, with many papers choosing to escalate the hysteria. *Harlow’s Weekly* characterized the event as “the first serious attempt to dethrone constituted authority by mob law.”¹⁷ They stated that authorities believed the radical group Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) and Bolshevik elements perpetrated the so-called riot, despite a signed statement from unions and the striking telephone women that organized labor held no support for the outburst.¹⁸ The same day the *Derrick* printed its version of events, the national media took hold of the story and reported on the exaggerated events based on the faulty Associated Press reports. Hundreds of miles away in Mississippi, the Biloxi *Daily Herald* declared that “mob members assume control of Oklahoma Town: law and order apparently thrown to the wind in Drumright as result of telephone strike.”¹⁹ They reported the unsuccessful attempts to reach Drumright, citing a mob taking over the wires. The *Herald* also brought up the town’s choice location in oil rich Creek County, and told of reports stating a mob drove the police department from the

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

city and assumed control, disarming the chief of police and threatening his life if he did not resign. They mentioned an unconfirmed report from Oilton that stated a group was attempting to burn down the Drumright Bell telephone building.²⁰ The *Herald* further claimed that not only had the majority of police been driven out, the police chief threatened with death, and the telephone building threatened with destruction, but also three women operators who refused to strike were reportedly held prisoner by the mob in the telephone building where their friends were refused admittance or the right to supply them with food. The paper clarified that the trouble supposedly started when a policeman clubbed a picketer that morning.²¹ From as far away as rural Wyoming, news of the Drumright affair made front page news. With an entire section devoted to strikes and disturbances across the country, the *Wyoming State Tribune* headlines stated, "Oklahomans shoot up streets and otherwise conduct themselves scandalously."²² They further claimed that a mob detained Mayor W. E. Nicodemus, Councilman John Baxter, and Chief of Police Jack Ary, but released them later that same day.²³

The event made headlines in countless other newspapers across the country from Idaho, where an outlet trumped up the foreign influence of the riot, to Michigan, New Mexico, and Ohio. Stories told how one individual, a union leader named Ed Welch, led oil field workers on a rampage.²⁴ Welch would later be one of the few individuals actually convicted of inciting a riot, though he received a light sentence. One uncharacteristically calm portrayal of events came from the *Lexington Herald* from Kentucky, which reported that that the town was "perfectly quiet." It said that "there were no deaths, no hospital cases and no property damage," and that after the telephone operators went on strike, "considerable feeling developed in the community and there was some disorder, in the course of which two harmless shots were fired."²⁵ The newspaper elaborated that the first shot was aimed at Henry Carlos, assistant chief of police, who was on guard at the telephone office in front of the mob-like crowd. City Commissioner John Baxter seized the assailant's weapon and fired a second shot in the perpetrator's direction. Far from being detained by a group of angry Bolsheviks, the paper claimed that Chief of Police Ary escaped the crowd and made his way to neighboring Cushing, where he signaled alarm and returned with three deputy sheriffs.²⁶

Apparently, city officials insisted that political opponents of the mayor who sympathized with the striking workers brought about the demonstration to hurt Nicodemus's administration.²⁷ This ran counter to the national tendency to sensationalize, with most papers printing

stories similar to the one featured in the *Tucson Citizen*, which told of IWW involvement in the riots.²⁸ The IWW had previously maintained a strong presence in eastern Oklahoma, agitating in the oil fields for members. In 1917 authorities conducted a raid on local headquarters, and effectively neutralized the union's presence in the region by 1919. The *Citizen* went on to link IWW and Bolshevik elements among the oil field workers, repeating a sensationalist line fed by Mayor Nicodemus.²⁹ Papers that reported in dire tones about the issue were among the first to introduce notions of the ethnic makeup of those committing the lawless acts, and were also prone to exaggeration. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, for its part, linked the oil richness of the area with the day's outburst in its article and repeated the story that one of the perpetrators came from Germany, harkening back to World War I fears of infiltration.³⁰

The *Drumright Derrick* condemned the Associated Press, which irresponsibly sent out exaggerated telegrams to dozens of other newspapers.³¹ On September 23, the same day news outlets across the country told of anarchist rule, the *Derrick* explained, "There is no mob and there has been no semblance of one. However, there are millions of people throughout the country who are hearing of Drumright . . . who would probably never know the town existed."³² It called the Associated Press releases sensationalist pieces that maintained no regard for the truth.³³ The *Derrick* also attempted to bring clarity to the situation, saying that "there has been no attempt to destroy property. Chief of Police Ary and Mayor Nicodemus have not disappeared and the Chief of Police has been attending to his duties as usual today. Mayor Nicodemus is well and hearty and smiling."³⁴ The editor for the *Derrick*, obviously outraged by the faulty reporting, printed a direct rebuttal against a major perpetrator of sensationalism, the *Tulsa World*. The *Derrick* stated that the *World's* stories were a "misrepresentation of fact, in other words, it is a story manufactured out of the vivid imagination of some one who wants to resort to sensationalism and such a statement as appears in that paper of this morning only lends to inflame an element that is always inflammable [*sic*]."³⁵ The feud between the two newspapers escalated, as the *World* would later print their own counterargument.³⁶ In the meantime, officials attempted to keep the situation calm. On September 23, the union president of the Drumright Central Trades and Labor Council, H. M. Boyle, requested that there be no mass meetings that might disrupt law and order, and instructed all union affiliates to that effect. Lois Reenh and Ina Woods, representing the striking telephone operators, also put out a statement requesting their friends and sympathizers to in no way or manner

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



General Charles F. Barrett, September 19, 1930 (1071, OHS Photograph Collection, OHS Research Division).

cause any disturbances on the streets and not to make demonstrations that would cause trouble, owing to the false reports that left the town.³⁷

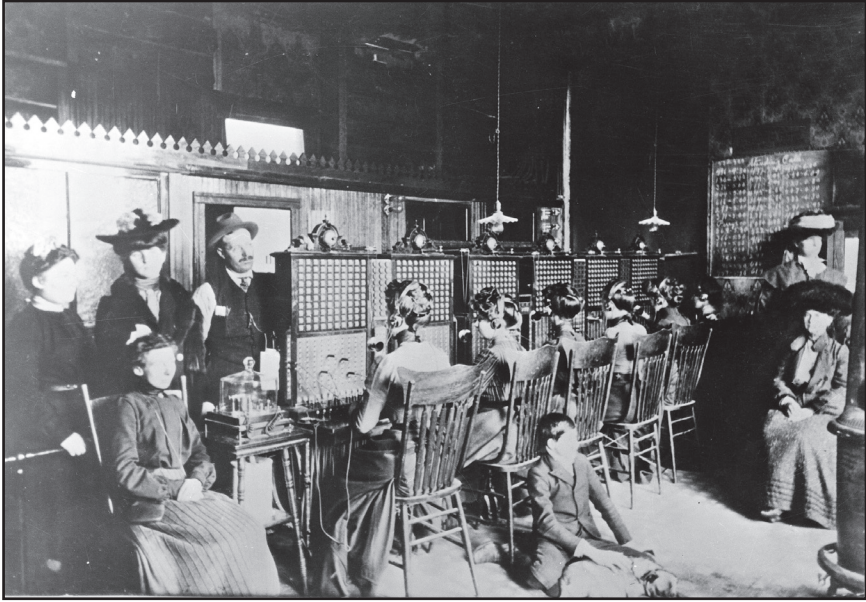
That same day, however, Oklahoma's Governor James Brooks Ayers Robertson took action that severely undermined the normalcy during the Red Scare. Believing the sensationalist reports about Drumright, he sent in the Oklahoma National Guard to quell the supposed revolt, adding further fuel to the erupting firestorm.³⁸ Under orders from Robertson, Adjutant General Charles Barrett and roughly two hundred soldiers from Companies H, I, M, G, Supply, 2nd Infantry, and Companies B and D 1st Separate Battalion, fully armed and equipped, marched into Drumright.³⁹ Barrett informed the governor that night that intelligence showed the situation as "extremely dangerous," and citizens expressed "grave alarm for fear mob may resort to fire and more intense rioting."⁴⁰



Oklahoma Governor James Brooks Ayers Robertson (6722, Joseph Thoburn Collection, OHS Research Division).

During and after the incident, descriptions tended to play up the severe nature of the disturbance. Most histories of the event portray the affair as a serious threat and that a large, threatening mob actually existed and did detain the local mayor and police chief. Articles, newspapers, and recollections from the commander of the National Guard all corroborate the sensationalist point of view. Nevertheless, according to various primary sources, no such dramatic event occurred. While there was undoubtedly some kind of a disturbance in Drumright, many news outlets in the state and nation succumbed to the illogical fears of the Red Scare, and sensationalized the event. Throughout the papers of the day, alarmist stories of Communist disturbances prevailed, giving rise to the unease and overreaction that characterized the period. Article titles included “Red Troops are Nearing Capital,” in reference to the Bolshevist victories in Russia, and “Riots and Disorder Prevail in the East.”⁴¹ News stories carried further headlines

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Telephone switchboard operators at Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, 1901 (21412.BH57, Barney Hillerman Collection, OHS Research Division).

incriminating strike leaders in the national steel strike as members of the radical IWW.⁴² Whether large scale violence in the town appeared or not, the *Derrick* took a positive view of National Guard troops entering. It stated, “The authorities backed by every peace loving citizen stand behind the troops and are backing them up in the effort to see that law and order is maintained and that a repetition of Monday night’s trouble is not repeated.”⁴³ The newspaper went on to state that “violators will be severely dealt with. This is a country of free speech but free speech does not consist of allowing . . . agitator[s] to inflame the lawless and incite them to acts of violence.”⁴⁴

Authorities initially arrested nine suspects in connection with the disturbance, and according to a Sapulpa dispatch two of the men “are alleged to have been sent to the United States from Germany by the Bolsheviki element for the purpose of inciting unrest in this country.”⁴⁵ *Harlow’s Weekly* portrayed the action by protestors as revenge against Drumright’s mayor, who achieved victory over a socialist challenger in the previous election, and the telephone strike was used as a means of embarrassing and overthrowing the administration.⁴⁶ Trumping up alarmist calls of revolution, the newspaper also mentioned,

Whatever the underlying cause of the Drumright disturbance may be, the fact stands out in bold relief that it was the first serious attempt in Oklahoma to substitute mob rule for constituted authority and thus the situation calls for the most careful consideration. Good citizens were thoroughly aroused and brought to a realization that the bolshevist element, although doubtless in a hopeless minority, is attempting to rear its head in Oklahoma.⁴⁷

In a piece written for *Harlow's Weekly*, author Orville Hall claimed that developments with the incidents in Drumright "have removed all doubts that the disturbance was caused by the IWW or bolshevist element."⁴⁸ Hall claimed that Bolshevik elements used the telephone strike as an opportunity to unseat the government and that while some initial reports appeared overblown, criticisms of Robertson's handling of the situation remained unfair. He maintained that the troops sent by the governor kept a restraining effect on supposed radicals, and forestalled a superior show of violence.⁴⁹

The situation remained at a standstill between operators and Southwestern Bell, though the citizens of Drumright appeared indignant at the false reports sent out to the nation. Practically every citizen in the city supported the striking women, and the *Derrick* held that their newspaper was "for the girls and as their demands are within reason, and should be granted, we hope that the telephone company can be made to see that their claims should be granted."⁵⁰ The *Derrick* went on to say that the early reports sent out that escalated the hysteria resulted in much damage to the city.

In so far as the statements of rioting and destruction of property is concerned each and every one is a point blank lie and the man or men who sent them to the press associations are barefaced liars as every citizen in Drumright knows. There has been not one single man, woman or child hurt or injured and aside from the fact that some one threw a rock through the sign of the Southwestern Bell telephone Co.'s sign, there has not been five cents worth of damage done to any property in the city.⁵¹

Countering the *Derrick's* earlier reports and attacks on their journalistic integrity, the *Tulsa World* printed a rebuttal after troops had "restored order" in the town.

On September 25 the *Tulsa World* printed a scathing editorial on the entire affair, allowing fears of Bolshevism to override the common sense coming from the *Derrick*. The *Tulsa World* told its readers that if

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

one wanted to know the true situation in the town, then one needed to go to Drumright and talk to the people. The paper claimed that while initial reports of the rioting were exaggerated, the causes leading up to it “must be written in terms of red card Socialists and Bolsheviki and terrorism.”⁵² They labeled the event a reign of terror by radicals, and painted one of the suspects, Ed Welch, as a radical extremist and even an IWW member. The *World* told that from his jail cell Welch admitted as much, and that he and the element he represented did not like the way the local government had conducted itself during the strike. The article went on to say that the instigator’s intention was to force Mayor Nicodemus, Councilman Baxter, and Chief of Police Ary to resign. The suspect denied that the mob had used violence though, and that he merely wanted the officials out of office.⁵³

To prove their credibility, the *World* mentioned that there was an active IWW organization in Drumright, which routinely agitated for membership. The newspaper maintained 1,195 Wobblies still resided in the town, and that they were the people responsible for the recent affair.⁵⁴ The news outlet characterized the situation as a fight between radical and conservative elements that became bitter, especially during the last city election. “It was so intense that the ordinary political lines were wiped out and the contest for office was fought out in the lines of the conservatives against the radicals.”⁵⁵ Nicodemus headed one ticket, while a radical, chosen by Welch, headed the other. Eventually the town elected Nicodemus, which created a near final obstruction for the leftists, and eventually culminated in the “lawlessness” of September 22. The paper went on to say that the telephone strike was a minor matter and had nothing to do with the demonstration, “it merely provided an excuse.”⁵⁶ The article concluded that

upon the head of Welch is heaped bitter condemnation. He is the man who organized the Oil Field Workers Union. He is the business secretary of the organization. He does no work except to look after the affairs of the union. He has lived in Drumright several years and bears the reputation of an “extremist.” There are some who call him a Socialist and one of the officials of the central trades union declared that he is an IWW by sympathies if not even an actual member.⁵⁷

Welch later denied these accusations, and emphatically said that he refused to consider any application to his union if he knew the applicant was a member of the IWW. Welch called himself a pacifist by nature and opposed all violence. He maintained that he prevented

the lynching of the chief of police, and persuaded mob members not to burn down Councilman Baxter's home. Welch mentioned that he was involved, but issued a complete denial of any physical part in the demonstrations, though he was part of a group that desired members of the administration to resign.

The *World's* rebuttal, directly contradicting the *Derrick*, also reiterated that the mob had disarmed the chief of police and threatened his life unless he left town. The chief, not wanting to become a martyr, decided to feign agreement and fled to Cushing where he sent out calls for help. The newspaper claimed he was later joined by other officers and Baxter, who escaped the scene in an automobile. The mayor stayed off the streets and sent out calls to the governor's office asking for troops to be sent, and upon hearing affidavits describing the event, Robertson agreed. Purportedly, a band of three hundred oil workers intended to arrive on September 23 to finish the job begun by the mob, and upon finding out, officials deputized more than one hundred citizens to defend the streets.⁵⁸

Labor unions denied responsibility for the event and offered to supply their men for patrol duty. Citizens expected the small army of radical oil workers to invade, and, as the *World* attested, the reason why no such event occurred was not known, though they suggested it was a false report in the first place. The *World* later attributed the lack of appearance to the arrival of the troops, who deterred any would-be invader. The *World* warned how seriously near Drumright came to anarchy, and that "it was not only a riot that was stopped in Drumright Monday night. Bolshevism in an aggravated form has been squelched and now energies are being turned toward wiping it out."⁵⁹ In the wake of troops arriving, few newspapers attempted retractions. One exception appeared in the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, which called the riots "greatly magnified."⁶⁰ This remained a unique example, as most outlets opted to continue the hysteria.

The reporting by the newspapers did considerable harm to the image of Drumright, and Governor Robertson attempted to repair the town's, and by extension the state's, image. He contacted Earl Foster, the county attorney for Creek County, on September 25 and said that the disturbance at Drumright incurred great expense to the state and gave it undesirable notoriety. He called on the attorney to prosecute all those guilty of perpetrating the disorder, and expected officers of Creek County to "spare no effort in bringing about the immediate arrest, prosecution, and punishment of the offenders." He offered to give the attorney all the assistance in his power to support the investigation, and stated that he had directed the attorney general to make a special

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

investigation of the matter.⁶¹ To that end, he sent a letter to the attorney general, telling him, if necessary, to call a grand jury, and to “kindly use all the machinery of your office looking to the immediate arrest, prosecution and punishment of those guilty.”⁶²

Judge Lucien Wright, representing the county attorney’s office, responded to the governor’s letter. He offered his assurances that they remained busy in procuring evidence for the preliminary hearing of those arrested, and also said that he was away from the county at the time of the occurrence and all knowledge he had of the event was from hearsay. Nevertheless, he vowed to assist Robertson in his crusade against the troublemakers of Drumright.⁶³ Mayor Nicodemus, for his part, appeared more than willing to assist in the investigation, and offered profound thanks to the governor for sending in troops. Despite earlier claims from the *Derrick* that nothing of note happened during the riot, and that the mayor was not in any danger, Nicodemus stated that since the county attorney and sheriff were away the night of the event, they were unable to “fully realize the seriousness of the situation.”⁶⁴ A complete statement of the situation was sent to the governor on September 26 asking him for arbitration.⁶⁵

By September 27, authorities released a majority of the men arrested after they had posted their bail bonds.⁶⁶ Judge Gaylord Wilcox of the superior court of Creek County sent a letter to Robertson explaining that authorities had indicted twelve men in all, and that the real trouble stemmed from the war. He told how local officers had to deal with the IWW, socialists, and the revolutionary element in the oil field, “where there are thousands of men employed, more than any other place in this state.” He reiterated the *Tulsa World*’s influential article rebutting the *Derrick*, and after a failed bid for electoral power running, radicals took the opportunity of the striking ladies to exact revenge. He praised Robertson for his decision to send in troops, saying that “the best possible thing and the only proper thing, in my judgment, under the conditions, was to do just exactly what you did.”⁶⁷

That same day phone service resumed in Drumright, though none of the operators on strike went back to work.⁶⁸ By October law enforcement officials rounded up and indicted sixteen men for rioting, with all but two able to make bail.⁶⁹ Later, the State Board of Arbitration, appointed by Governor Robertson, attempted to solve the crisis between Southwestern Bell and striking operators.⁷⁰ Their eventual report served as the major piece of evidence in debunking the sensationalist tales from the *Tulsa World* and newspapers across the country.

The State Board of Arbitration remained in Drumright to conduct an investigation of the differences between the company and employees, and on October 9 they issued a statement recommending a course of action for the opposing parties.⁷¹ A key demand of the board was that all employees of the telephone company be immediately reinstated without discrimination of membership in any organization to which they may or may not belong.⁷² Such language directly targeted membership in the Socialist Party or other far leftist organizations and showcased a remarkable sense of clarity in the hysteria-laden time period. The board also recommended the institution of an eight-hour workday, attention be given to sanitation and ventilation, and a three-man group be appointed by Southwestern Bell and the telephone operators to assist in reaching a satisfactory agreement.⁷³

The official report of the board sent to the governor's office concluded several key facts about the riot in Drumright. The document emphatically condemned the early reporting on the strike. "We believe that the spread of false and misleading statements concerning the early stage of the strike situation in Drumright was the cause of a lot of dissention in this community, and was put out by unknown, irresponsible parties."⁷⁴ In one telling example of inaccuracies, the board commented on reports of hundreds of shots fired by rioters; the claim that Mayor Nicodemus, Councilman Baxter, and the chief of police were jailed by the mob; and mob demands for resignation of the officials under threat of lynching. The board declared, "We have been unable to find any truth, whatever, in this report. Relative to the question of violence in Drumright, we will state that the State Board of Arbitration and Conciliation has been unable to find the slightest evidence which directly connects the telephone strike with it."⁷⁵

After the report came out, the accused IWW agitator Ed Welch saw his day in court. On November 3 Judge Lucien Wright presided over the case against the indicted in the *State vs. Ed Welch* in Sapulpa, the county seat of Creek County. County Attorney Earl Foster, assisted by R. B. Thompson, prosecuted the case, while John Hill of Drumright and Judge E. B. Hughes of Sapulpa acted as defense. The court proceedings occurred in an atmosphere rife with Red Scare paranoia. A mere two days earlier, on November 1, a nationwide strike of coal miners began. Media outlets throughout the country painted the strikers as treasonous Communists aiming to destroy the US government. Oklahoma miners joined in the strike and Governor Robertson refused to comply with their demands. Judge Wright commented on the issue during Welch's trial. He praised Robertson for his tough stance against labor during the crisis, and ended his letter by stating, "I am just beginning to realize

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

the insidious spread of Bolshevism. In my judgment it is imperative that those of us who believe in the perpetuation of the principles on which our government is based, stand shoulder to shoulder against radicalism in every form.”⁷⁶ The private opinions of the judge presiding over the case of an accused radical demonstrated how predisposed Wright was to suspect Welch.

On November 6 the trial concluded, finding the defendant guilty of the misdemeanor offense of rioting. The court sentenced Welch to thirty days in jail and a fine of \$500. The event showcased the true exaggeration of the Drumright riot, as the judge was hard-pressed to convict even a single individual for the disturbance. Originally, the first ballot on return to the jury room was six for conviction on a felony and six for acquittal. The jury took another ballot resulting in eight for conviction and four for acquittal. In a letter to Robertson betraying the confidentiality of secret trial proceedings, Judge Wright slandered the four jurists voting for acquittal, calling them socialists. He later said that an individual advised him that one of the four saw jail time for preventing the draft from being carried out and encouraging draft dodging. This information came too late to effect the outcome of the trial, the judge lamented, and originally the four jurists intended to remain for acquittal. When the jurors found out they would have to remain in session indefinitely until they could reach a consensus, they finally assented to a guilty verdict, carrying with it a fine of \$500 and thirty days in jail.⁷⁷ The eight who stood for conviction assented to the verdict, Wright said, to prevent a mistrial. The judge complained that while this was not the result the county attorney and others were seeking, it would have a constructive effect on individuals inclined to cause disturbances. He went on to say that County Attorney Foster “conducted one of the most vigorous prosecutions I have ever seen, confronted as he was with the difficulty of securing witnesses who were willing to testify to the truth and that four men in the jury box evidently opposed a conviction from the start.”⁷⁸ The governor responded to Wright’s letter, stating that while he regretted the light penalty, he felt it a victory nonetheless.⁷⁹

In February 1920 an inquiry by the US Bureau of Investigation into the riot revealed conflicting information. The agent interviewed Mayor Nicodemus and Police Chief Ary, who confusingly told that the riot occurred on September 21, rather than the 22 as papers at the time reported. They reiterated that the leaders of the riot were Secretary of the International Oil Field Workers J. M. Fitzgerald and Recording Secretary of the Labor and Trades Union Ed Welch. Members of the International Oil Field Workers Association remained under indictment

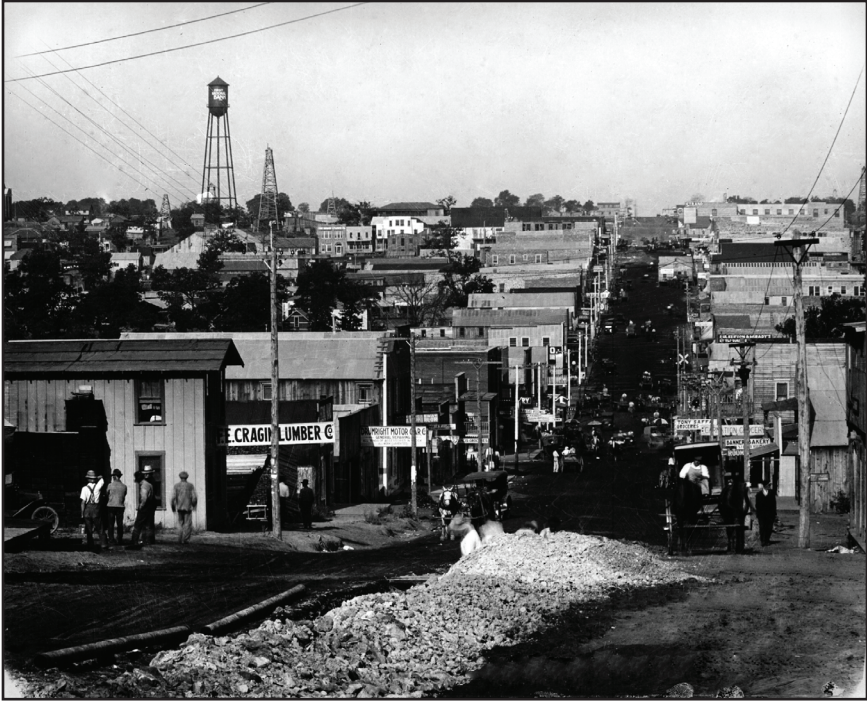
for rioting, of whom Ed Welch was the primary suspect and the only one so far to receive a penalty. Nicodemus and Ary claimed that Welch, along with the other indicted men, were members of the IWW as they had been told from hearsay accounts that they regularly attended the group's meetings. The police chief continued the report, writing that all the other suspects were confirmed IWW members who kept association with local radicals, including one "notorious IWW woman attorney of Drumright." The two local officials in question classified the incident as "serious rioting and disturbances," though with no deaths, no major acts of violence, and lasting only one night, one can call into question the definition of serious.⁸⁰ The report remains part of a larger series of investigations done by the federal agency into radical union activity in Oklahoma. The testimony by Nicodemus and Ary does little to clarify the situation, and contradicts earlier information given by newspapers and townspeople. Despite this, it shows how concerned US officials were about radical activity in the state, and their willingness to investigate a headline-grabbing incident that thrust Oklahoma into the heart of the First Red Scare.

Order was restored in the town, though the rampant hysteria had already claimed Drumright's reputation. Newspapers failed to help the matter, and acted only to make the situation worse. The town of Drumright served as a microcosm for the fear and paranoia that gripped the nation, as no town, no matter how small, was safe from the irrationality of the times. Strong blame lay directly with Governor Robertson, as the calling of the Oklahoma National Guard proved to be a gross overreaction. As a major test of leadership, he gave in to the prevailing attitudes and committed forces to what would have been, in any other time period, an insignificant event in the history of



US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, April 20, 1910 (LC-DIG-npcc-01410, National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress).

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Drumwright, Oklahoma, 1916 (19823.2, Galen D. Glass Collection, OHS Research Division).

Oklahoma. Years later, important figures in the event would attempt to glorify their role in the Drumright affair.

Adjutant-General Charles F. Barrett, commander of the Oklahoma National Guard forces, demonstrated that he still succumbed to the hysteria when, writing in 1941, he labeled the incident a Bolshevist and IWW riot. He argued the events in the town, though originally a simple telephone operators' strike, "were directly traceable to IWW influences and leadership."⁸¹ Contradicting the State Board of Arbitration, he repeated the alarmist and inaccurate storyline, saying the rioters "had gone so far as to disarm and assault the chief of police, drive the mayor out of the city, and to threaten to 'burn up the town.'"⁸² Barrett maintained the situation looked for a time like a second Omaha affair, in which the local mayor was hanged by a mob during a race riot. He told how the county judge of Creek County, along with the mayor of Drumright, requested military protection from the governor, and by the time of the National Guard's arrival on September 23, they faced

an armed group recruited by Wobblies from the surrounding oil fields that intended to make good on their threats to local officials.

The sudden and unexpected appearance of the guard in large numbers alarmed the mob, causing them to disperse and allowing for the restoration of order.⁸³ No guard members fired any shots, according to Barrett, and “no person was hurt or injured from the time the guard reached the scene of the disturbance, but the timely presence at Drumright of a formidable number of fully armed troops undoubtedly prevents wholesale destruction of property and the possible loss of lives.”⁸⁴ From his remembrance of the event, one can see the Red Scare mentality manifesting itself yet again. Barrett likely would have scoffed at the idea of downplaying the event, as in his version of events the National Guard achieved a heroic victory, standing as a bastion of order against a lawless chaos that threatened to engulf an entire town. According to the State Board of Arbitration, the truth of the matter was far simpler. For Barrett and his men however, much like the media and general public, deeds of daring and sensationalism far outweighed the necessity for truth.

The disturbance at Drumright wreaked havoc on the state during 1919, plunging Oklahomans deeper into a sense of paranoia and fear. They saw Communist conspiracies everywhere, threatening to usurp their form of government. The affair especially epitomized what the First Red Scare was all about; the town entered into the national spotlight, appearing as one of countless events blown out of proportion by a news media swept up in hysteria. What began as a symbol of female activism quickly escalated, with the striking ladies taking a back seat to the dramatic pronouncements of doom from major newspapers. For the first time during the 1919–20 period of the First Red Scare, the state was making national headline news, becoming a central story in the countrywide panic. The events proved that even small-town Oklahoma was susceptible to the worldwide fears of Communist overthrow, and that these fears led directly to a reactionary response by the government and much of the media. Oklahoma continued to suffer during the First Red Scare, as a nationwide miner’s strike in November 1919 directly affected the already anxious state. A sense of normalcy finally returned by 1920. Nationally, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer appeared disgraced over his false claims of the radical menace and fears of a hostile takeover finally subsided. The events in Drumright, however, stand as a major event during the First Red Scare in Oklahoma, and showcase the dangers of fear and paranoia that ran rampant across the entire country.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Endnotes

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² "36 Were Marked as Victims by Bomb Conspirers," *New York Times*, May 1, 1919; A. Mitchell Palmer, "The Case Against the 'Reds,'" *Forum* (February 1920): 173.

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⁴ "Labor Day in Drumright was Attended by Many and Fine Time Enjoyed," *Drumright Derrick*, September 2, 1919, 1.

⁵ "Hello Girls at Shawnee go on Strike," *Drumright Derrick*, September 5, 1919, 1.

⁶ "Inadequate Phone Service is Daily Complaint Made by Patrons in Drumright," *Drumright Derrick*, September 6, 1919, 1.

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⁸ "Telephone Operators Go On a Strike This Afternoon at 2:30 and Service is Tied Up," *Drumright Derrick*, September 20, 1919, 1.

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¹⁰ "Telephone Girls Will go to Work," *Drumright Derrick*, September 22, 1919, 1.

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¹² "A Statement Made by a Girl Who Worked for the Bell Telephone Company," *Drumright Derrick*, September 22, 1919, 1.

¹³ "Telephone Strike Becomes Serious: Big Riot Last Night Was Narrowly Averted," *Drumright Derrick*, September 23, 1919, 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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¹⁹ "Mob Members Assume Control of Oklahoma Town," *Daily Herald* (Biloxi, MS), September 23, 1919, 1.

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²² "Mob Demands Resignation of Officials," *Wyoming State Tribune* (Cheyenne, WY), September 23, 1919, 1.

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²⁵ "Troops Sent to Oklahoma City," *Lexington (KY) Herald*, September 24, 1919, 1.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.; The *Herald* incorrectly reported the chief of police's name as Jack Ayers.

²⁸ "State Troops Patrol Streets at Drumright," *Tucson (AZ) Citizen*, September 24, 1919, 1.

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³⁰ "State Troops go to Western City," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 24, 1919, 1.

³¹ "Telephone Strike Becomes Serious," *Drumright Derrick*, September 23, 1919, 1.

³² "Sensational Report Sent Broadcast Over Country Regards Telephone Strike," *Drumright Derrick*, September 23, 1919, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "Telephone Strike Becomes Serious: Big Riot Last Night Was Narrowly Averted," *Drumright Derrick*, September 23, 1919, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Political Grudge," *Tulsa World*, 1.

³⁷ "Telephone Strike Becomes Serious," *Drumright Derrick*, 1.

³⁸ "Arrival National Guard Last Night," *Drumright Derrick*, September 24, 1919, 1.

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⁴⁰ Charles F. Barrett to J. B. A. Robertson, September 23, 1919, folder 22, box 3, General Correspondence, Governor J. B. A. Robertson, Governors' Papers, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City, OK (hereafter cited as Robertson Papers).

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⁴³ "Arrival of State Troops Last Night Put a Crimp in Plans of the Lawless," *Drumright Derrick*, September 24, 1919, 1.

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⁴⁵ Orville D. Hall, "Radicals Attempt to Dethrone Drumright Officials."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

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THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

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⁷⁰ “Arbitration of Phone Strike Refused by Co.,” *Drumright Derrick*, October 2, 1919, 1.

⁷¹ “Statement by State Board of Arbitration,” *Drumright Derrick*, October 3, 1919, 1.

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⁷⁶ Lucien Wright to J. B. A. Robertson, November 3, 1919, folder 4, box 13, General Correspondence, Robertson Papers.

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⁸¹ Barrett, *Oklahoma After Fifty Years*, 204.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*