

## RADICAL LABOR IN OKLAHOMA: THE WORKING CLASS UNION

By Sherry Warrick\*

Sasakwa, Oklahoma, was hot in August, 1917, especially for the four men hiding in a ravine. Waiting on the edge of the depression, the posse members endured the sun that broiled down until even the knee high grass stood stiff. Fleeing from the posse for several days, the hunted men had now been cornered and expectantly awaited their fate. In the ravine a honey bee buzzed past, shearing the stillness like a slow bullet. Then the hot silence was broken again as the leader of the posse yelled, "come on out and surrender!" His command hung in the heat a moment while his men riveted their eyes to the banks of the small canyon.

Suddenly hot-tempered Wallace Cargil, one of the fugitives, screamed back from a thicket, "like hell I will!" Jumping up in full sight of the posse, he began dodging through the underbrush. Only a short distance away Arthur Bowles, a member of the posse, raised his rifle and fired. Cargil fell with a gaping hole in his stomach and slumped in the dead grass. He was a victim of Oklahoma's Green Corn Rebellion, a revolt instigated by the Working Class Union to avoid compulsory military service and to force the United States to withdraw from World War I.

Although the Working Class Union functioned from its founding in 1914 until 1916 as a nonviolent labor organization catering to the working class, by 1916 it was well on its way to aggressive radicalism, as its Ku Klux Klan-type night riding activities indicated.<sup>1</sup> Also, by this time the union had a vigorous leader at its head—L. C. McNabb.

In the fall of 1914, McNabb, the Sequoyah County Attorney, ran for and won the office of Sequoyah County Judge, and did so apparently with large popular support. However, nearly one year later, in November, 1915, McNabb resigned. Saying that the people needed an attorney to fight their battles, he left the office to accept a position handling usury cases with the Working Class Union.<sup>2</sup>

McNabb wasted no time; by his own admission he had by March, 1916, filed some sixty suits and obtained judgments in about fifty. In the middle of January, 1916, the Muskogee, Oklahoma, *Times-Democrat* stated that McNabb had gained the backing of one influential banker, L. M. Nakide-

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\*The author received her Master of Arts degree from the University of Oklahoma and is presently with the Newspaper Research Library of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>1</sup> *Nation's Weekly* (Oklahoma City), January 1, 1916, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Sequoyah County Democrat* (Sallisaw), November 12, 1915, p. 1.

men of Fort Smith, Arkansas, who agreed to charge no more than the legal ten percent interest. Continuing, the paper declared that, "every man in Sequoyah County—it matters not what profession or occupation he may follow—whether he be a farmer or a banker—should praise the good and hard labor L. C. McNabb has put forth in order to accomplish what he had for the people."<sup>3</sup>

Yet, just a month after he was so highly praised, McNabb was facing disbarment proceedings, because of the actions of area bankers in an effort to prevent him from continuing his usury fight.<sup>4</sup> Reputable Sallisaw, Oklahoma, townspeople claimed that the Working Class Union threatened trouble should any legal action be taken against McNabb. Support for McNabb was so great that authorities feared to try him in his hometown of Sallisaw, and the proceedings were moved to Muskogee. Nonetheless, the Working Class Union continued to threaten that if the court proceeding persisted "about three of these fellows will be killed in court, two or three Sallisaw banks will be blown and barns will be burned throughout Sequoyah County."<sup>5</sup> In a hushed 1:00 a.m. conference, court officials adjourned, with the stipulation that the disbarment would resume later when tempers were not so high.

To those aligned against McNabb and his radical Working Class Union the situation was grave. Ray O. Weems, who was in the farm loan and mortgage business in Sallisaw and opposed to McNabb's ideas, contacted Ancel Earp, chief clerk of the governor, and declared, "I actually believe that he [McNabb] could instigate the burning of this blamed town if he wished to do it. It won't surprise me at all if somebody is killed within two months, unless something happens to quiet things down."<sup>6</sup>

The situation was so serious that a Muskogee attorney pleaded with Governor Robert L. Williams, that the "attys representing the petitioners have been threatened with violence bodily and otherwise. The Sheriff has repeatedly told us that he is unable to cope with the threatened mob." Continuing the lawyer stated, "if the case proceeds as at present loss of life and destruction of property will follow."<sup>7</sup>

The proceedings against McNabb were continued in the spring of 1917

<sup>3</sup> *Muskogee Times-Democrat* (Muskogee), January 15, 1916, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, March 6, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, February 20, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ray O. Weems to Ancel Earp, undated, Earp Letters, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

<sup>7</sup> W. C. Hallhill to Governor Robert L. Williams, February 23, 1916, Williams papers, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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and resulted in his exoneration of the charges. Soon he was campaigning against W. W. Hastings in an election for United States Congressman. In the balloting McNabb received slightly over 3,000 votes, an indication of the decreased strength of the Working Class Union and McNabb's declining influence.<sup>8</sup> He commanded the support of the union only as long as he was actively prosecuting usury cases in its behalf; however, forced to spend time fighting his disbarment and then campaigning, McNabb was abandoned by the union.

The Working Class Union members preferred instead to follow the more direct and active course begun while McNabb was yet fighting their usury cases. This was a course set by a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, H. H. "Rube" Munson. Instrumental in guiding the radical turn the Working Class Union took in early 1916, Munson bore the title of "state organizer" for the organization and was constantly promised aid from the Industrial Workers of the World.<sup>9</sup> It was Munson's brand of radicalism which flavored the attempted revolution in both Arkansas and Oklahoma.<sup>10</sup> Preaching at a meeting in April, 1917, Munson declared, according to one observer:<sup>11</sup>

He had found the locals dead and had put life into them and he, his wife and secretary had worked hard, gone hungry, not even having sugar for the rice on which they mainly subsisted, and that we were about to have the greatest war of our lives and we had better get ready for it. He said that we had to protect ourselves and our families; that if we did not, our young men would be sent to Germany to fight, our old men put on ten-thousand-acre farms to raise food to feed the young men and that college and school boys would live with our wives and daughters. He said that we had our wives harnessed to cottonsacks, our babies lying on the ground in the shade and their eyes being eaten out by ants and other insects, and we ought not to stand it any longer. We voted to oppose the draft law and fight, if necessary, to prevent going to Germany. Resolutions to this effect were to be written and sent to a convention of other locals.

Arranging to continue his speeches, Munson generally looked after the needs of the Union by posing as a peddler or pretending to be an "agent for

<sup>8</sup> *Harlow's Weekly*, August 29, 1916, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Daily Ardmore* (Ardmore), October 17, 1917, p. 1; October 31, 1917, p. 1; Harrison George, *The I.W.O. Trial* (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, n.d.), pp. 20-21.

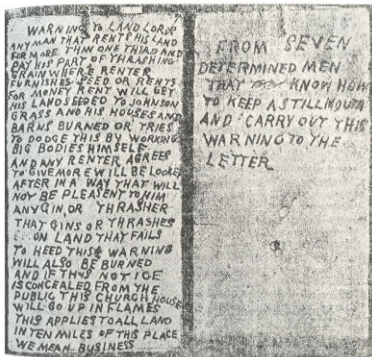
<sup>10</sup> *McAlester News Capital* (McAlester), September 20, 1917, p. 1; *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock, Arkansas), June 20, 1915, p. 2; Charles Bush, "The Green Corn Rebellion" (Unpublished University of Oklahoma Master of Arts Thesis, Norman, Oklahoma, 1932), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Ardmore*, October 31, 1917, p. 1.

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something." In this way he kept the local organizations functioning, carried messages that could not be sent through the mail and agitated for the fulfillment of his ideas.<sup>12</sup>

This action was typical of the Industrial Workers of the World, and Munson proved to be the principal agitator who fanned agrarian discontent into open rebellion.<sup>13</sup> Farmers were told that thousands of men in Kansas,



Notice posted by members of the Working Class Union warning landlords of charging usurious rates

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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Missouri and Texas were ready to revolt and that once the Federal government was overthrown there would be a general division of the money of the rich among those men "working for wages."

During the first week of June, 1917, and two months before the outbreak of violence that was labeled the Green Corn Rebellion, Munson was arrested in Sallisaw and taken to Muskogee, where he was charged by federal authorities with conspiracy against the government for disseminating anti-draft material. Jailed during the actual disturbance, Munson was nonetheless instrumental in projecting radical action and ideology into the Working Class Union.

Beginning in 1916, the Working Class Union instigated a series of night riding flogging sprees which indicated a tendency toward violence and a disregard for the law.<sup>14</sup> The union, catering to its tenant farmer following, ordered that no farm was to be worked the coming year if it belonged to a banker or lender charging usurious rates. R. W. Hines was a special target of the Working Class Union, and his tenant, Harry Berna, was dragged from bed in the middle of the night, tied to a tree and flogged with a wet rope until the blood ran. This action was a result of Berna's insistence of working the land in defiance of the Working Class Union demands<sup>15</sup>

In late February, 1916, when the members of the union were threatening dire consequences if McNabb was tried, three houses were burned within twenty-four hours—two of them belonging to Hines and the third to a strong supporter of Hines. By this time five men had endured the wet rope treatment by masked and slicker-covered night riders. Yet, during the fall and winter months there was a noticeable decline in violence. This resulted from the sentencing of several Working Class Union members to the penitentiary for their actions in the night riding and wet rope sprees.<sup>16</sup>

As the union was obviously becoming more violently active, it also was beginning to expand beyond the Sallisaw area. A coal company at Milton, Oklahoma, reported trouble in March 1916, with a "bunch of I.W.W. sympathizers who claimed to be Socialists and have organized themselves into the 'Working Class Union.'" This group was reported to be "part of the same bunch that is operating around Sallisaw, Oklahoma."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Hartow's Weekly*, December 13, 1916, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, December 19, 1915, p. 1; *Ada Weekly News (Ada)*, January 6, 1916, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, February 24, 1916, p. 1; *Hartow's Weekly*, January 31, 1916, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> E. S. Lawther, to Governor Robert L. Williams, March 4, 1916, Williams Papers, Oklahoma State Archives.

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In April, a local was formed in Muskogee by A. R. Bayers who declared that, although the county was just beginning to organize, there were already 1,800 members. Stating that the organization was not guilty of many of the things claimed, Bayers pointed to the first paragraph in the Muskogee County chapter's constitution which read, "We stand for law and order and just and equal rights to all and special favor to none."<sup>18</sup>

No matter how passive the new Muskogee chapter started, by August its members were as threatening as those around Sallisaw. Members of the Muskogee local were posting Ku Klux Klan letters on the doors and gateposts of every farmer's residence in the area who was not a member of the Working Class Union. One threat in McIntosh County declared: "Notice to the people that don't belong to the W.C.U. they have got to join, the W.C.U. is called the Working Class Union. We hereby notified you to come in and join our lodge in sight of 30 days, if not we have got a way to make you join, take warning, the W.C.U."<sup>19</sup> The *Muskogee Times-Democrat* commented on the situation, and stated that many "of the farmers of the Warner district are expecting a civil war between the farmers who are not members and those who are members of the Working Class Union."<sup>20</sup>

Violence also was spreading to Pontotoc County where night riders dynamited dipping vats and burned the barns of two county commissioners. County Attorney Arden L. Bullock contended that the "barns were situated in widely separated parts of the County and were destroyed about the same hour of the night, and is undoubtedly the work of the same parties who were responsible for the blowing up of the vats, in as much as these two County Commissioners voted in favor of the appropriation [of money apparently for building the vats]."<sup>21</sup>

Several Pontotoc County officials received threatening letters. One addressed to the sheriff warned him to "let up on dipping cases or git out of office. We aim to run things to sute us and ull git what Comming to you if you interfe."<sup>22</sup> County Attorney Bullock was warned, that if he "don't go dam slow trying to catch the ones that blew up the vats and burnt barns you'll git what Malone and Gilmore [the owners of the barns] got and worse. Your to dam smart."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, April 1, 1916, p. 8, and April 6, 1916, p. 31; *Nation's Weekly*, April 15, 1916, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, August 8, 1916, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Arden L. Bullock, to Governor Robert L. Williams, December 16, 1915, Williams Papers, Oklahoma State Archives.

<sup>22</sup> *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* (Muskogee), January 6, 1916, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

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The radicals followed the threatening letter to Bullock with an attempt on his life. Early one morning when he arose from bed to get some medicine for an upset stomach, he struck a match for light and someone fired a shotgun into his house. However, hearing a noise at the window, Bullock dropped to the floor, and escaped injury, even though the buckshot narrowly missed him.<sup>24</sup>

Threatening to "blow a hole" in the town of Ada, Oklahoma, the radicals notified the *Ada Weekly News* that the "paper accuses the socialist [of] burning up those barns. We did and we will blow up your office by Jan. 1st. You watch. Our plans are complete. You may think it is a joke. Watch and c. RED FLAG."<sup>25</sup> From the Ada area the Working Class Union spread west, and by September it had members in Washita County. A sign was found nailed to the door of a church near Cordell, Oklahoma, indicating that the organization was active in that part of the state and that a feeling of bitter discontent was growing in regard to the tenant farmer situation. The message declared:<sup>26</sup>

Warning to Land Lord any man that rents his land for more than one third and pay his part of thrashing grain where renter furnishes seed or rents for money will get his land seeded to Johnson grass and his houses and barns burned or tries to dodge this by working big bodies himself and any renter agrees to give more will be looked after in a way that will not be pleasing to him any gin or thrasher that gins or thrashes on land that fails to heed this warnign will also be burned and if this notice is concealed from the public this church house will go up in flames we mean business from seven determined men that know how to keep a still mouth and carry out this warning to the letter.

By June, 1916, officials in McCurtain County also were investigating an organization "working almost fully with farmers who say they will resist even unto death and that officers coming to arrest them can come at their own risk."<sup>27</sup> Defiance of the government, similar to that in McCurtain County, was prevalent throughout much of eastern Oklahoma in the months before the Green Corn Rebellion. Union organizers flocked to Oklahoma, particularly from Kansas, to hold "agricultural meetings." After conducting brief discussions of crops, they seized the opportunity to present radical speeches including the advocating of the overthrow of the

<sup>24</sup> *Ada Weekly News*, January 6, 1916, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*; *Harlow's Weekly*, January 1, 1916, p. 4; *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, December 17, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Harlow's Weekly*, September 17, 1916, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, June 6, 1917, p. 4.

government. Linking World War I with the economy, the agitators argued that the war was the immediate source of the farmers' woes and the draft a threat because it would take them and their sons from the land.<sup>28</sup>

After indoctrinating enough people, a local would be formed, and secret meetings held. Consequently, late-night radical gatherings grew more numerous. This was particularly true among the blackjack covered hills ringing Sasakwa and along the valley of the Canadian River. The gatherings continued to increase to the point that immediately preceding the rebellion, union members were meeting as often as three times weekly.<sup>29</sup>

Earl Ebert was among the more active of the agitators. Jailed in Henryetta, Oklahoma, for urging coal workers to strike, Ebert was completely dedicated to the radical movement. The twenty-six-year-old agent carried a personal letter ordering him to keep the mines from operating, and a photograph of Frank Little, an agent of the Industrial Workers of the World, who a few weeks earlier had been lynched in Butte, Montana—"Martyr" was written on the back, perhaps to add encouragement. Ebert also had illustrations of train wrecks labeled "our Revenge."<sup>30</sup>

Other speakers at Working Class Union meetings were as radical as Ebert. H. C. Spence, a Sasakwa man who avidly followed Munson's preaching, obtained a position in the union's hierarchy and at one meeting reportedly declared, "Abraham Lincoln said that the most dangerous weapon in the world is a match. There are plenty of matches left (and he held a handful aloft). We can beat this army draft by using matches."<sup>31</sup>

The entire area along the lower Canadian River blossomed with antiwar posters. Among other things the messages declared: "Now is the time to rebel against this war with Germany boys. Boys get together and don't go. Rich man's war. Poor man's fight. The war is over with Germany. if you don't go and J. P. Morgan & Co., is lost. Their great speculation is the cause of the war. Rebel now."<sup>32</sup>

Answering the call to rebellion, many farmers attended secret meetings at night in the countryside. There, facing their leaders with leathery hands on both a Bible and a butt of a six-shooter, they repeated what was known as the creed:<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *End Events* (Enid), August 10, 1917, p. 1; *Great Amalgam, If You Don't Weaken* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916), p. 351.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), August 6, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Holdenville Democrat* (Holdenville), November 2, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *McAlester News-Capital*, August 10, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Harlow's Weekly*, August 15, 1917, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Shawnee Daily News Herald* (Shawnee), September 23, 1917, p. 1; *Daily Oklahoman*, September 29, 1917, p. 8.



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We know this was a war brought on by Wall Street, and we poor devils have got to fight it. Therefore, we have and will continue to organize under the title W.C.U. until our membership is great enough to protect us from going to Europe. We will stand by each and everyone of the W.C.U. members from arrest by any federal, state, or county officers in the following manner. [This statement was followed by seven lines of X's.] War is hell and we are not going to hell. How we are going to resist. [Five more lines of X's.] We and our families are going to live while we stay out of war. [Again five lines of X's.] We must keep our membership cards hid.

As the farmers swore to this, they moved from a mild socialist position to a radical, direct-action form of Industrial Workers of the World socialism. It was no longer reform through elections as the Socialists advocated, but reform through "any means necessary." During Munson's tenure as organizer, the union devised a membership card with a "Constitution" printed on one side. The last line of the document declared that members of locals shall use "any means necessary" to secure the aims of the union to better the condition of the working class.<sup>54</sup>

"Any means necessary" included rebellion, and as the date for the revolt neared, the dissident farmers stubbornly believed their numbers totaled 35,000 in Oklahoma; 50,000 in Texas; and 3,000,000 nation-wide. Some of the leaders worked with the understanding that the revolt had connections in Germany and would be well-financed.<sup>55</sup>

Expecting to be a part of the 3,000,000 who would force the Federal government to capitulate, many local men collected arms to prepare for the insurrection. Guns and dynamite were hidden or buried in creek beds, plowed fields and weed patches. One man traveled to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and purchased high-powered weapons and ammunition in a "Black Cat" hardware store where the dealer told the buyer that the members of the Working Class Union could count on 6,000,000 Germans in this nation to help them in their revolt.<sup>56</sup>

The revolt, as the agitators planned it, was to begin July 27, 1917; however, the date was postponed to August 2. Planning to burn bridges, destroy railroad trestles and cut telephone lines, the radicals then were to raid Sasakwa and loot it for arms and provisions before their subsequent march

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<sup>54</sup> *Daily Ardmoreite*, October 30, 1917, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> *McAlester News-Capital*, August 18, 1917, p. 1; *Ida Weekly News*, September 27, 1917, p. 1; *Wewaka Capital-Democrat* (Wewaka), August 9, 1917, p. 1; *Harlow's Weekly*, September 26, 1917, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, Man; Bond, Holdenville, Oklahoma, November 4, 1971; *McAlester News-Capital*, August 18, 1917, p. 1, and August 20, 1917, p. 1; *Daily Ardmoreite*, October 31, 1917, p. 1.

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Deputy Sheriff Bill Cross who was wounded in an ambush by members of the Working Class Union.

on the nation's capital. Yet, these plans, two years in the making, barely materialized.<sup>37</sup>

The revolt was not a complete surprise to lawmen. Members of a smaller affiliated group of the Working Class Union, the "Jones Family," had been arrested on July 18, through the work of two federal secret service agents who had infiltrated the organization. An anti-draft organization in Pottawatomie and Cleveland counties, the "Jones Family" planned to raise "the red flag of revolution in all parts simultaneously, to burn property, raid grocery stores for supplies and hardware stocks for guns and ammunition, and to slay and pillage."<sup>38</sup> Fear of the "Jones Family"

was so great that one member of the organization, J. C. Harrod, attempted to commit suicide during his trial rather than testify concerning the aims of the group.<sup>39</sup>

With members of the "Jones Family" in jail, officials learned something of the plans of the Working Class Union. The lawmen also had an informant, Al Huckleberry, who was a former Socialist and to the radicals a potential union member. Attending the radical gatherings, Huckleberry attempted to discourage the growing tendency toward revolution. And after every meeting, he met Seminole County Attorney Al Nichols and County Sheriff Frank Grall to discuss the situation.<sup>40</sup>

This information enabled the local peace officers to discover what was happening in the countryside. As a result, in an attempt to observe a radical meeting on August 7, Sheriff Grall and Deputy Bill Cross rode into an ambush near Sasakwa. Cross was wounded and the two men were forced to flee to Wewoka, Oklahoma, for medical aid.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *McAlester News-Capital*, October 6, 1917, p. 1; *Ada Weekly News*, September 27, 1917, p. 1; *Wewoka Capital-Democrat*, August 9, 1917, p. 1; *Emid Express*, August 10, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> *McAlester News-Capital*, August 5, 1917, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, October 6, 1917, p. 1 and September 21, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, Al Nichols, Wewoka, Oklahoma, October 30, 1971.

As word of the ambush reached the town, citizens held mass meetings and organized a group of home guards to protect against possible rioting. At the same time plans were made to put bridges, water plants, public buildings, industrial plants and ammunition storage houses under close guard.<sup>42</sup>

While various towns were making defensive preparations, Sheriff Grall returned to the area where he was attacked with a posse from Konawa, Oklahoma. Near Rocky Point the posse surprised a group of radicals gorging themselves on stolen beef, and instead of fighting, the rebels fled. Nonetheless the posse managed to capture twelve.<sup>43</sup>

In the meantime another posse inadvertently dispersed a large group of rebels in the area. Some 125 radicals under the leadership of John Spears were located on top of two hills. However, as the posse, unaware the radicals were so close, marched between the two knolls, the radicals became frightened and fled.<sup>44</sup>

From the viewpoint of the Working Class Union, the ambush of Grall and Cross had been a surprise. Officially the malcontents had planned to begin the revolt at midnight on August 2. Yet, with the rebellion prematurely exposed there was little to do but follow what scant plans they had. Meeting that evening on the sandbars of the Canadian River, as they previously had planned, the radicals divided into small groups and attempted to carry out their objectives.<sup>45</sup>

As the bands dispersed, the "Lone Dove" local led by W. L. Benefield remained at the river to burn a wooden railroad trestle. Loading a handcart with brush and timber, the radicals fired it and shoved it onto the railroad bridge.<sup>46</sup> Several hours later a freight train was flagged down just in time to prevent it from rolling onto the damaged structure.<sup>47</sup>

After the trestle was burned the groups, which had divided on the sandbar to perform their various missions, began to reassemble and move in the general direction of Sasakwa. On their way they impressed various people

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Bill Cross, Wewoka, Oklahoma, March 20, 1968; *Wewoka Capital-Democrat*, August 9, 1917, p. 2; *Daily Ardmoreite*, October 31, 1917, p. 1; *Daily Oklahoman*, August 4, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 4, 1917, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*; *Wewoka Capital-Democrat*, August 9, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 4, 1917, p. 1; *Ada Weekly News*, August 9, 1917, p. 1; *Holdenville Democrat*, August 10, 1917, p. 1; *Norfolk's Weekly*, August 8, 1917, p. 3; *Daily Ardmoreite*, October 13, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> *McAlester News-Capitol*, August 12, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Reita Sturdivant, "Francis Chickasaw Nation, 1894," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XLV, No. 2 (Summer, 1967), p. 151.

into their ranks. Jim Benham was walking unarmed and alone when he was overtaken by a wagon load of armed radicals.<sup>48</sup> One lanky rebel, a rifle crooked in his arm, directed Benham to join the cause. Hesitating on the demand, the rebel gave Benham five minutes to decide. It was then that Benham crawled into the wagon. Jim Houston found himself in a similar predicament but managed to outwit a rebel party under Benefield's leadership. After being confronted by the radicals, Houston indicated he would go home for a rifle and rejoin them on their way to burn Sasakwa. However, once released he rushed to the little community and warned the citizens of the approaching danger. As the men armed themselves, some climbed to the roofs of stores to make a stand against the rebels, while others, like Houston, returned to their homes in rural areas to defend their families.<sup>49</sup>

The people in outlying regions, unlike those in the towns, feared the threat of poison more than fire. Word had spread that the insurrectionists were plotting to poison all the local wells, and lawmen later found a radical cache containing not only seventy-five sticks of dynamite and a rifle with sixty-four shells, but also eight ounces of strychnine.<sup>50</sup>

While Houston hurried to warn the residents of Sasakwa, the rebels changed their plans. Instead of continuing to the town, they turned north, marched past Little River and camped on a hilltop known as "Roastin' ear Hill" or "Spear's Bluff." There on the morning of August 3, 1917, the sheriff of Pottawatomie County leading a posse numbering nearly a thousand men—including twenty-five national guardsmen from Okemah, Oklahoma—surprised the radicals.<sup>51</sup> On top of "Roastin' Ear Hill" the 400 rebels were suddenly awakened by the possemen under orders to shoot to kill. In the rebel camp no one took command, and the men fled. Hopelessly isolated from each other in small ineffective groups, the stragglers were easily taken prisoner.<sup>52</sup>

In the hunt that followed some 100 rebels were captured and jailed.<sup>53</sup> No one was slain in the fighting on the hill, although several radicals were wounded. Nonetheless some tense moments were caused by Wallace Cargil. Surviving the run on the hill, he retreated several miles southward with three other rebels to the shelter of a small ravine. Surrounded by a posse, Cargil refused to surrender, and was so critically wounded in the exchange of gunfire that followed that the posse did not bother to try to locate a

<sup>48</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 3, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, Mrs. Allen Harrod, Wewoka, Oklahoma, March 10, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> *Holdenville Democrat*, August 10, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 4, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, August 5, 1917, p. 1; *Ada Weekly News*, August 9, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 5, 1917, p. 1.

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doctor. Later Cargil's son was jailed after trying to get a doctor in Sasakwa to treat his father, and soon leading newspapers across the nation reported Cargil dead. However, a neighbor was finally able to secure medical aid, and Cargil recovered from his wounds.<sup>61</sup>

Another man, a Mr. Boggs, managed to flee from the hill without being shot or captured. However, a posse found him crawling under a barbed wire fence with two rifles and two hundred rounds of ammunition. Agreeing to surrender, Boggs to his surprise found the posse ready to hang him. If not for Sheriff Grall's insistence that the law be followed, Boggs would have been lynched on the spot.<sup>62</sup>

Many local radical leaders were promptly arrested; however, John Spears remained free. Especially wanted by law officers, Spears at the beginning of the revolt had flown a red socialist flag on a pole in his yard. The banner, the only known "red socialist banner in the state," had a circle design which portrayed two hands shaking across the world with the words, "Socialist Party—Workers of the World Unite," and a yellow torch burning behind the design. The field of the banner carried the legend in white letters, "Oklahoma for Socialism."<sup>63</sup>

Spears was finally captured when lawmen, acting on a tip, approached his home much like they had done several times since the beginning of the revolt. This particular time, though, they removed a few rocks from the foundation and found him huddled beneath the house surrounded with green corn cobs.<sup>64</sup>

After the early morning march on "Roastin' Ear Hill" and the scattering of the rebels, the opportunity for escape came for many of the men who had been forced, like Benham, to enlist for the cause. Most of these men, once they fled, headed for Sasakwa where they provided officers with valuable knowledge.<sup>65</sup> Although they freely gave information, they were afraid of retaliation by the radicals. One man told the officers all he could and then made his will, swearing the rebels would "get him." Such fears were not groundless, and several times informants' homes were pelted with gunfire as rebels halfheartedly attempted to retaliate.<sup>66</sup>

With the end of the first day of abortive revolution, many of the less active questioned the worth of the cause and soon surrendered. Often officers

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*; *Breweks Capital-Democrat*, August 9, 1917, p. 1; Interview, Bud Walton, Sasakwa, Oklahoma, October 31, 1971.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 5, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *McAlester News-Capital*, August 10, 1917, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, Al Nichols.

<sup>65</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, August 5, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*; August 10, 1917, p. 1.

received telephone calls from a small band of tired, hungry men who were willing to capitulate if the lawmen would only meet them.<sup>60</sup>

However, at the same time there were groups attempting to reorganize and regain sufficient numbers to continue the "rebellion." Officers found such a party planning new action near Calvin, Oklahoma, where several members of the Working Class Union had retreated to an old school building and refused to surrender. In the gun battle that followed Ed Blaylock, a draft resister, was killed.<sup>61</sup>

Blaylock was only one of three deaths associated with the uprising. In Holdenville, Oklahoma, residents feared an attack, and city leaders posted groups of armed men on all the roads leading into the town, who were given orders to let no one pass without a proper explanation. One night a lone car failed to obey a deputy's order to halt, and the guards, thinking the car contained armed rebels bent on carrying out their threats of burning the town, opened fire and killed J. F. Moose, a young school teacher who had nothing to do with the revolt.<sup>62</sup> A third man, named Clay, was shot and killed by Craven Brown, who swore that Clay and another man were members of the union and had tried to make him fight for the rebels. Brown claimed he had resisted and Clay was shot in the scuffle that followed. But the *Wewoka Capital-Democrat* hinted that Clay and Brown were enemies and that the revolt only furnished a pretext for murder.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, Clay was the last man to die during the revolt.

By August 5, the revolution was broken, and citizens were left generally unharmed but nervously watching lest another outbreak occur. The rebels were locked in crowded jails and faced various charges—including treason.<sup>64</sup> Behind bars the farmers began to realize the seriousness of their action and how they were fooled by the agitators. In letters home they indicated their remorse over the violence:<sup>65</sup>

dear wife i will rite you a few lines this leaves me will i hears you was bad off i hope to god you are better. I give up at Calvin they air going to take a lot of us to McAlester i dont know what they air going to do with us i do hope i will get out if i do god being my helper i will never get into nothing else no bunch will ever git me in nothing else so i will close hoping you air better when i get to where i am going—W. L. Benefield

Margaret, I want you to see after the crop and stock the best you can. I am

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, August 5, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*; *Holdenville Democrat*, August 10, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Wewoka Capital-Democrat*, August 16, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Hartow's Weekly*, August 8, 1917, p. 3; *Seminole News (Seminole)*, August 9, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ada Weekly News*, August 9, 1917, p. 4.

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Members of the Oklahoma National Guard from Okemah who helped crush the rebellion

very sorry I was led into anything like this, you no, and our naber no I have done everything I could to keep our country from being tore up, so take care of everything and do all you can for me. Go down to town and see all them people and there advice, so I will close now. Don't write till you here from me again. M. E. Hailey. Have the boys to cut the hay and hali it in. You seem Jim Pecte and get him to see about getting me out and others. talk to some one that can tell you what do do, I Jess tha will start to south town with us some time today. Well, Margaret, advise all the Boys never Be guilty of joining the W.C.U. I wish I never Heard of it.

As the men began to understand what had happened to them, so did law officers, and finally the officials realized that the ragged rebels were to be

permitted rather than strongly prosecuted. As a result, no radical was given more than a ten-year sentence, with the average man being sentenced to little, if any time.<sup>64</sup>

For many people "nothing happened." Even Governor Robert L. Williams found little to cause him anxiety. On August 4, the day of the big charge by possemen, Williams notified Secretary of War Newton Baker, that "Investigation leads me to believe that persons who are opposed to the selective draft such as those belonging to the Socialist and I.W.W. and W.C.U. organizations are buying arms. I don't apprehend any serious danger."<sup>65</sup>

The next day in answering the *New York World*, which had been questioning him about the revolt, Williams declared that the, "majority of the people in every county in this state are in favor of law and order. We stand strictly with the Federal Government in its prosecution of the war."<sup>66</sup> And on August 8, he made one more statement concerning the revolt when, after viewing newspaper clippings on the violence, he commented that this, "kind of advertisement does not help our state," and that the "matter is greatly exaggerated. The press reports greatly exaggerate it. The Matter is absolutely under control."<sup>67</sup>

Indeed the situation was under control. Most of the rebels were able to return to their tenant shacks shortly after their trials. There they found things changed, as many landlords were unwilling to rent to their former tenants. Consequently, some of the rebels left the area and traveled to California or Mexico.<sup>68</sup>

Although this revolt was not of great importance to a nation in the midst of World War I, it, like its counterparts in Texas and Arkansas, was indicative of a socio-economically deprived section under radical exploitation. This was armed draft resistance encouraged by ignorance and poverty, and coupled at times with a stubborn pacifist patriotism. Thus this ignorance, poverty and pacifism constituted the seedbed for the would-be revolution, while the Working Class Union played on these problems and exploited those they were claiming to aid.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Minneapolis Times-Democrat*, November 1, 1917, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Robert L. Williams to Newton Baker, August 4, 1917, Williams Papers, Oklahoma State Archives.

<sup>66</sup> Robert L. Williams to the *New York World*, August 5, 1917, Williams Papers, Library, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

<sup>67</sup> R. L. Williams to H. B. Reeler, August 8, 1917, *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Mont Bond; Interview, Frank Harnal, Sapulpa, Oklahoma, March 20, 1968.

<sup>69</sup> *Minneapolis News-Capitol*, August 26, 1917, p. 1.