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# The Battle of Homestead

by Eugene V. Debs

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It cannot be expected that the *Magazine* will give anything approximating a full account of the Homestead horror. Such a report would require every page of this number. Nevertheless, we deem it prudent to introduce so much of the record as will supply the reader with the main facts and serve for future reference.

As we write, July 14, 1892, Homestead is in charge of a military force and is under martial law. The report is that "all is quiet."

We go back to the closing days of June for a beginning, and find that while the steel works were in peaceful operation, the fiend, Frick, was preparing for murder; he was fortifying the Carnegie steel works. His idea was to transform them into a fort. He built a strong fence, unusually high, and surmounted it with barbed wire. He had within the enclosure large dynamos for producing strong currents of electricity, with which the wires surmounting the fence could be instantaneously charged, so that if a man touched the wires he would fall dead as quickly as a felon at Sing Sing.

In addition, he had prepared the most effective machinery for scalding men to death with hot water or kill them with jets of cold water thrown with tremendous force by his engines. Nor was this all. There were loopholes in the fence through which his mercenaries could shoot down workingmen without danger to themselves.

And it now appears, by his own statements to a Congressional committee, that the hiring of the Pinkerton thugs to man his works began in June, before the lockout. Hence it is seen that the fiend, Frick, had determined not to enter into any compromise about wages that would satisfy the workingmen, but had deliberately planned to kill them when the hour arrived to perpetrate murder.

On July 1st the lockout occurred, and immediately Frick prepared for scabs to take the place of the locked out men. The men, however, concluded that they would take charge of the Carnegie Steel

Works at Homestead, and see to it that scabs did not take their places.

This having been done as a preliminary step, the fiend, Frick, called upon the sheriff of Allegheny County to put him in possession of his works, as follows:

Dear Sir:—

You will please take notice that at and in the vicinity of our works in Mifflin township, near Homestead, Allegheny County, Pa., and upon the highways leading thereto from all directions, bodies of men have collected who assume to and do prevent access to our employees to and from our property, and that from threats openly made we have reasonable cause to apprehend that an attempt will be made to collect a mob and destroy or damage our property aforesaid and to prevent us from its use and enjoyment. This property consists of mills, buildings, work-shops, machinery, and other personal property. We therefore call upon you, as Sheriff of Allegheny County, Pa., to protect our property from violence, damage, and destruction, and to protect us in its free use and enjoyment.

***Carnegie Steel Company, Lim.***

*H.C. Frick, Chairman.*

***Carnegie, Phipps & Co., Lim.***

*H.C. Frick, Chairman.*

This was done early in July, and the sheriff, Mr. McCleary, addressing a chairman of the strikers' committee, said:

Mr. Chairman and gentlemen of the Advisory Committee:—

The Carnegie Steel Company has called upon me in my official capacity as Sheriff of Allegheny County to protect the property and buildings of the company, located here. I thought it would be a wise move to come here this morning and personally look over the ground.

To this the committee responded as follows:

The Advisory Committee is not only ready but anxious to assist you in preserving peace and protecting property hereabouts. In proof of which we now offer you any number of men, from 100 to 500, to act as your deputies. They will serve without pay and will perform their duty as sworn officers of the law, even

though it cost them their lives. Furthermore, the committee will give bond of either \$5,000 or \$10,000 for each man, no matter how many, that they will do their duty.

The sheriff made frequent attempts to respond to the demands of Frick, but the men summoned to act as deputies for the purpose of ousting the strikers generally begged to be excused, but some were sworn in and the following proclamation was issued:

**Proclamation — To Whom It May Concern.**

Whereas, it has come to my knowledge that certain persons have congregated and assembled at and near the works of the Carnegie Steel Company, Limited, in Mifflin township, Allegheny County, Pa., and upon the roads and highways leading to the same, and that such persons have interfered with workmen employed in said works obtaining access to the same, and that certain persons have made threats of injury to employees going to and from said works, and have threatened that if the owners of said works attempt to run the same the property will be injured and destroyed.

Now, I, William H. McCleary, High Sheriff of said county, do hereby notify and warn all persons that all acts enumerated are unlawful, and that all persons engaged in the same in any way are liable to arrest and punishment.

And, I further command all persons to abstain from assembling or congregating as aforesaid, and from interfering with the workmen, business, or the operation of said works, and in all respects preserve the peace, and to retire to their respective homes, or places of residence, as the rights of the workmen to work, and the right of the owners to operate their works will be fully protected, and in case of failure to observe these instructions all persons offending will be dealt with according to law.

***William H. McCleary,***  
High Sheriff of Allegheny County,  
Office of Sheriff of Allegheny County, July 5, 1892.

It will be understood that the sheriff's efforts were all made prior to the 6th of July, the day of battle.

It may be well to say just here that the population of Allegheny County, Pa., is probably near one million. Still the sheriff could not summon a sufficient number of men to dislodge the strikers. Why?

Simply because the great mass of the people of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County are in sympathy with the locked out workingmen, and hold the fiend, Frick, in utter detestation as the sworn, inveterate, and relentless foe of organized labor.

This brings us down to the morning of July 6th, forever memorable in the history of labor, as much so as the 20th of April, the day on which the minutemen of Lexington and Concord fired the shot "heard 'round the world."

The Pinkerton thugs had been concentrated at Pittsburgh. There were 300 of them, all armed with Winchester rifles, one of the most deadly weapons known to modern warfare. To convey them to Homestead, two model barges were provided, floating forts, ironclad, constructed to shield the murderers and to resist attack. These barges were towed up the Monongahela River under cover of darkness. Every movement of Frick was secret and skulking, the purpose being to land the murderers undiscovered and place them in the works. Once there, electricity, scalding water, and bullets would overawe the workingmen, or, should they resist, cooling boards<sup>1</sup> and coffins would be in active demand.

On came the flotilla. A landing was made and the battle began. The *Pittsburgh Dispatch* of July 7th furnishes the incident as follows. It seems that the workingmen had been apprised of the approach of the Pinkerton flotilla, though the *Little Bill*, the tow boat, was not yet in sight. Says the *Dispatch*:

Soon the grey streaks of dawn appeared in the sky. No boat had yet hove in sight, though thousands of eyes were straining to catch the first glimpse of her. Suddenly a cheer from the lower end of the town announced that the headlights of the approaching steamer had been sighted. Those at the mill could not see her, but the word was passed along to them so quickly that they were aware of her approach.

A few moments later the red lights of the boat were discovered through the fog by the men at the mill. Another cheer went up followed by a grand rush for the water's edge. The boat came up rapidly, the *Little Bill* between the two great clumsy looking barges, and passing up to a point directly opposite the center of the mill yard ran the barges close up to the shore.

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<sup>1</sup> Perforated wooden boards for the temporary storage of dead bodies, packed with ice to slow the decomposition process.

A moment later and 40 or 50 men stepped out from a door in the end of the largest barge to the small deck on the bow. Each man carried a Winchester repeater and on every face there was a look of determination. In the doorway behind those on the deck there could be seen many more faces and the glistening barrels of many more rifles.

A gangplank was thrown out and the men on the boat started toward it, then glancing at the multitude of determined men on the shore, they hesitated.

"Don't step off that boat!" was the cry from 50 men on the shore, but a commanding voice from the boat said, "forward." Just as the first man was about to step on the gangplank the first shot was fired. No one seemed to know from whence it came, but someone yelled that it had come from a porthole in the side of the boat and volley from a score of millworkers' guns followed.

Then followed a momentary silence, as the invaders quietly ranged in line, broken by a volley from 40 rifles. Most of them must have fired into the air, as, with the solid mass of humanity, only a few feet away from them, they could not have missed had they fired pointblank. But many of them fired into the crowd and several men fell.

A wild scramble of 3,800 or 4,000 men and women followed. Up the steep bank, 40 feet high, and down the riverbank toward the village they scrambled in a wild frenzy of terror. Men fell and were trampled under foot by those who came after.

All this time the invaders were keeping up a rattling fire, which was briskly returned by a couple of hundred of the millworkers, some of whom had stood their ground while others had retreated to the mill yard at the top of the bank and were screened behind piles of metal and steel piled along the front.

The first man to drop was Martin Murray, shot through the side. A moment later Joseph Sodak stooped to pick up Murray, when a bullet struck him on the upper lip just below the nose, dropping him dead beside Murray. In the meantime, Henry Streigle, who had retreated to the top of the hill and was firing at the men on the boat, fell over with a bullet through his neck. He died in a few moments. On the boat the man who seemed to be leading the armed party was shot and fell on the deck. After he had been carried inside and the men on the boat had all retreated into the covered barges firing ceased on both sides.

Then came a conference between the leaders on the shore and a stout, middle-aged man on the boat, who seemed to be a leader. Said the millworker who had stepped down to the water's edge:

“On behalf of 5,000 men I beg of you to leave here at once. I don’t know who you are or from whence you came, but I do know that you have no business here, and if you stay there will be more bloodshed. We, the workers in these mills, are peaceably inclined. We have not damaged any property, and we do not intend to. If you will send a committee with us we will take them through the works, carefully explain to them all the details of this trouble, and promise them a safe return to your boats. But, in the name of God and humanity, don’t attempt to land. Don’t attempt to enter these works by force.”

The leader on the boat, resting his rifle across his left arm, stepped to the front and, speaking so that those men on the bank above him could hear, said:

“Men, we are Pinkerton detectives. We were sent here to take possession of this property and to guard it for the company. We don’t wish to shed any blood, but we are determined to go up there and will do so. If you men don’t withdraw we will mow every man of you down and enter in spite of you. You had better disperse, for land we will.”

A deathly silence followed this speech. Then the leader of the millworkers spoke again. Everyman within the sound of his voice listened with breathless attention.

“I have no more to say,” said he, “what you do here is at the risk of many lives. Before you enter those mills you will trample over the dead bodies of 3,000 honest workingmen.”

It will be observed that after the workingmen had been killed by the murderous Pinkertons, the Homestead men sought for peace, and that their overtures were disdainfully thrust aside and the defiant threat made that they, the Pinkertons, would “mow every man of you down, and enter (the mills) in spite of you.” Then the battle raged with increased fury until in the afternoon the Pinkertons surrendered, gave up their guns and ammunition, and were ready to leave Homestead.

Thus ended the bloodiest battle ever fought between workingmen and the hirelings of capitalists in this or any other continent, and when the battle was over, victory perched upon the standard of labor. The thugs were vanquished. Their prestige was utterly wrecked.

It should be remembered that the workingmen of Homestead were not armed as were the murderous invaders. Their guns were not Winchester rifles. They were not aware until it was too late of the banquet of blood their friend Frick had prepared for them, but such arms and means as they had were splendidly utilized. We could fill

pages with incidents of splendid heroism on the part of the working men and of their wives and mothers.

After the battle, quiet reigned at Homestead, the locked out workingmen were in possession of the town and of the Carnegie steel works.

Frick besought the sheriff to place him in charge of his works. The sheriff protested his inability to respond, and then the Governor of Pennsylvania was asked to send troops — the State Guard — and he finally responded and 8,000 armed men marched upon HOMEstead, took possession, declared martial law, and with rifles and Gatling guns, and all the pomp and circumstance of glorious dress parades was inaugurated.

The Pinkerton thug business, the bloody battle, the murder of innocent men, aroused the nation's representatives in Congress assembled, and an investigation was ordered, and is going forward as we write.

What the result will be no one knows. Possibly the states will enact laws by which Pinkerton thuggery will be abolished, and in many ways benefits may result from the bloody battle at Homestead.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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