East Texas Labor Vignettes

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In my past life as a college professor, I often began lectures to introduce new topics with one or more readings in an attempt to create an impressionistic "feel" for the time and place about to be studied. This approach was an extension of my long-term appreciation of the works of impressionist painters developed during my post-high school assignment in London as a member of the United States Air Force in the 1950s. My wife-to-be and I spent many hours in British museums admiring the work of the impressionists whose paintings revolutionized French art with the use of light and color. One of the impressionists, Georges Seurat, covered his canvasses with brilliant dots of pure color, a technique known as pointillism. It seemed natural then, that in college I was drawn to the work of the imagist poets, who constructed "precise visual images" in the minds of their reader.

Later, after I earned a B. A. degree and began the serious study of history at the graduate-level, I became aware of the impressionistic organization described by Norman Cantor and Richard Schneider in How to Study History, a writing style designed to create a series "descriptive pictures" employed so masterfully by Garrett Mattingly in The Armada and by the Dutch scholar, Johan Huizinga in The Waning of the Middle Ages.¹

By the 1990s, I regularly had begun using readings in the classroom to introduce new topics with a series of short, descriptive vignettes in my freshman-level history classes, a technique that was directly influenced by a monograph on the New Deal by Anthony J. Badger.

The book’s first chapter, “Depression America,” began with a series of vivid passages. The first is reproduced here:

“This depression has got me licked” wrote a Houston mechanic in the fall of 1930 before he committed suicide. “There is no work to be had. I can’t accept charity and I am too proud to appeal to my kin or friends, and I am too honest to steal. So I see no other course. A land flowing with milk and honey and a first rate mechanic can’t make an honest living. I would rather take my chances with a just God than with unjust humanity.”²

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This article utilizes a series of vignettes of East Texas labor during the early decades of the twentieth century to recreate "images" of the environment of working-class Texans. Such images, similar to those created by the pointillism of Seurat, are arranged in a seemingly random order in an attempt to generate visual impressions in the reader's mind that, hopefully, will produce a realistic "feel" for place and time.3

In 1911, reporter George Waverly Briggs conducted a study of housing conditions in Texas cities, which revealed that Dallas, like other rapidly growing Texas industrial centers had an inadequate sewer system that bore responsibility for various health problems, and that the city's understaffed Board of Health was unable to cope with conditions tolerated by non-resident owners who consistently directed their local agents to make no improvements.4 In Galveston, Briggs discovered houses pressed so close together in some sections of town that he speculated on how carpenters working in such cramped quarters managed to nail up walls! Although not yet common in the Bayou City, Briggs' investigation in Houston revealed a dozen or more "dark rooms" in downtown boarding houses. These "dark rooms," common in New York City tenements, received their designation because their only light and ventilation entered through an open door facing an interior hall, and the prevalent overcrowding in these establishments made the dark rooms even more sinister. Houston, like Dallas and other Texas cities, also coped with an inadequate sewer system exacerbated by the over-crowding of working-class homes and boarding houses. These conditions, in turn, helped to create many weed-filled ditches and stagnant pools of water that became breeding-grounds for mosquitoes.5

An early success for the Texas working-class came with the passage of a child labor law during the 1903 session of the state legislature. This act prohibited employment of children under twelve years of age in mills and factories. At the same time the bill was under consideration in the legislature, paid lobbyists for Texas mill operators energetically campaigned against the measure, even while the operators loudly denied that their mills employed more than a handful of children and publicly
professed support for the measure. Refusing to be misled and effectively undercutting the mill operators’ claims, the state’s labor press published documentation of the widespread employment of children under the age of eight in Texas cotton mills.⁶

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL) followed a conservative policy as proclaimed in the 1904 and 1905 presidential addresses of Houstonian and TSFL president Max Andrew, who indicated strong support for the capitalistic system, maintaining that “labor unions are nothing [more than] the business organizations of the labor movement,” and that organized labor and capital must work together for the benefit of both. At least some business and professional men during these years responded positively to the TSFL’s conservative philosophy, offering their support for, and, on occasion, even expressing the desire to become part of the labor movement; certainly, however, an attempt in 1903 by McLennan County physicians to form a union and affiliate with the AFL represented a conspicuous exception. AFL president Samuel Gompers rejected the application and explained to field organizer R. C. Johnson that the request was denied because AFL policy did not open membership to business and professional men, or to employers of labor.⁸

By the end of 1910, TSFL-affiliated unions had weathered a nationwide open shop campaign during the first decade of the new century, including a troublesome street railway strike in San Antonio and Houston, but overall craft unions had prospered at the local level; Fort Worth labor leaders, for example, were able to boast that the AFL leadership in Washington credited them with “having the largest per cent of skilled workmen organized of any city in the United States.”⁹ Moreover, Union men regularly benefited from community support for their cause, as demonstrated by a strike against Southwestern Bell in Fort Worth during the summer of 1910, when a group of the city’s policemen went on strike themselves rather than guard “scab labor.” One patrolman even volunteered that he joined the strike because he did not want his daughter, a public school teacher in the city, to be humiliated by a father with a repu-
tation as “a scab herder.” The American Federationist, organ of the AFL, optimistically reported that the strikers enjoyed “the sympathy of the entire city,” and that a group of businessmen had called a mass meeting and agreed to boycott the use of telephones during the strike. It should be pointed out, however, that any union success boasted by the TSFL ignored the fact that the elitist approach of limiting their representation [for the most part] to skilled craft unions overlooked the difficult and sometimes desperate conditions faced by the unskilled and unorganized who made up the vast majority of the working-class.

The involvement and contributions of upper- and middle-class “clubwomen” during the progressive movement is well-known, but recent scholars of labor and working-class history have documented evidence demonstrating important and even vital contributions by their working-class sisters. Eva Goldsmith of Houston, state president of the United Garment Workers’ Union, became the chief spokesperson for the TSFL’s lobbying efforts in its fight for a reduction of hours for women factory workers. Goldsmith, like other women progressives, also fought for various feminist causes, including the battle for woman suffrage. Such legislative activism, as noted by historian Judith N. McArthur, “enabled working-class women to assume a public role” previously occupied by [upper- and] middle-class women.

In January, 1913, Goldsmith made a dramatic appearance before a committee of the house of representatives to testify on behalf of the Lane-Wortham bill that proposed to limit the work of women to fifty-four hours per week, with a maximum of ten hours per day. According to T. C. Jennings, chair of the TSFL’s legislative committee, the moving account of “this noble little working girl” so powerfully portrayed the plight of working mothers required to toil twelve or more hours per day, that she brought tears to the eyes of several of the committee’s members, and that [at least] some corporate lobbyists fled [in defeat] before Goldsmith completed her presentation. In an attempt to counter Goldsmith’s impassioned testimony, mill owner J. C. Saunders of Bonham, representing management’s position, submitted a petition from his employees opposing the bill on the grounds that they could not afford to work fewer hours for lower pay. Saunders, of course, denied the use of coercion to force support for the petition and argued that Texas
mill workers already earned twenty-five percent more than mill workers in the other southern states with whom his mills competed. Despite Goldsmith’s powerful testimony, the continuing power of employers and their lobbyists to influence legislation remained all too obvious when the legislature subsequently enacted the fifty-four hour law in a watered-down form.\(^5\) The limited gains of labor and their friends, therefore, represented nothing more than a Pyrrhic victory since enforcement of the bill remained inconsistent due to insufficient funds appropriated for enforcement, which was typical of much progressive era legislation at both state and national levels.

Two years later, Goldsmith, the first female member of the TSFL’s legislative committee, reported to the TSFL’s annual meeting on labor’s lobbying efforts\(^6\) on behalf of a proposed minimum wage bill, detailing its uphill and only partially successful battle against corporate interests in an attempt to improve the fifty-four hour law. Testimony by Goldsmith and others before the legislature overcame the cynical opposition of lobbyist and former Senator Q. U. Watson who, after impatiently listening to testimony given by a group of Austin “Club Women” on behalf of a minimum wage bill, sarcastically wondered if, in addition to applying to working-women, the measure also included a provision to provide for “GOATS.” Upon finding that he could not intimidate the women, Watson scolded them with a tongue-lashing, claiming that they “had too much religion,” and that their place was “at home and not in the Capitol trying to pass sentimental legislation.” In her report, Goldsmith commended the “good women of Austin” for their courage and willingness to “stand up for the rights of the womanhood of Texas” and to endure “the insults and criticism” of mill owners, lobbyists, and their allies. A somewhat improved fifty-four hour law did finally pass, although the minimum wage proposal never reached the floor of either the house or senate. Nonetheless, by 1917 the Houston Labor Journal optimistically reported that members of the Texas garment workers’ union “are among the best paid female wage earners . . .” and claimed that the union’s efforts had virtually eliminated competition from convict-made goods, and successfully had reduced the demand for non-union made garments.\(^7\)

In a fascinating footnote to her report, Goldsmith gave an account of the $100.00 appropriated by the previous TSFL annual meeting for her use to continue the fight to amend the fifty-four hour law. She indicated that her expenditures included $7.50 for printing, $12.00 for “railroad and car fare,” $44.00 for room and board, $7.00 for stamps, special
delivery, telegrams, and one long-distance telephone call. Furthermore, she refunded the remaining $29.50 of the $100.00 appropriation, which, from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, makes one long for a simpler time. [According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Inflation Calculator, $100.00 in 1915 would amount to $2,244.21 in 2012.]

In the fall of 1913, the National Child Labor Committee conducted an investigation in which the noted sociologist and photographer Lewis W. Hine, documented numerous violations of the state’s child labor statute in cotton mills, in department stores, and in factories manufacturing a variety of items such as brooms, mattresses, candy, and handles for tools. Hine and his colleagues found that young boys working for news and messenger services frequently were assigned to carry messages, packages, and drugs to houses of prostitution, a practice especially condemned by the Committee’s investigators. In an example cited by Hine, fourteen year-old Charlie Price, who worked as a runner for the White Wing Messenger Service in Fort Worth, recommended a five-dollar house to Hine, if he were so inclined, in order to avoid catching “a disease” at other, presumably less expensive, establishments. Hine’s report to the Committee did not indicate whether he acted upon Price’s advice or not.

In October, 1914, Committee on Industrial Relations investigator Peter A. Speek found high unemployment in Houston during the course of his investigation when he interviewed working-class residents. His report listed “real down-and-outs,” long-time immigrants, and citizens who wintered in cities in eastern Texas after “freighting” in from midwestern cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Sometimes called “birds of passage,” these temporary residents begged, sought charity, and on occasion competed with blacks for odd jobs, before their springtime return north. Speek labeled another group “home-seekers,” lured to Texas by unscrupulous real estate and land developers who sometimes were assisted by business interests. The “home-seekers” frequently lost several thousand dollars before falling prey to “eager loan sharks.”
ally comprised of native-born citizens and long-time immigrants most of whom came from central and southern Europe, these home-seekers often remained in Houston and became casual laborers. Ordinary common laborers, according to Speek, made up the largest group of the unemployed. About half were Mexican, Mexican American, or African American, who consistently were unsuccessful in applying for charity, but competed for odd jobs, and according to Speek, refused to beg, although they sometimes stole food from residential areas in well-to-do suburbs.22

Houstonians interviewed by Speek included Socialist Party members Ira Tucker, E. C. Kuester, and several socialist sympathizers, including E. B. Hadstall, business agent for the Houston Building Trades Council and county commission candidate for the Socialist Party. While all of these men confirmed that the state’s AFL labor lobby had been instrumental in securing passage of labor-friendly legislation, they were quick to point out that the effectiveness of these measures often was minimal due to the lack of personnel with authority to enforce the legislation.23

In 1911 the Houston Labor Council claimed that the city’s labor force [in rounded-off numbers] consisted of approximately 25,000 workers, of whom 15,000 were male, 6,000 were women, and some 4,000 were children under the age of fifteen. The Labor Council boasted that fifty-five percent of the men were organized, but only two percent of women, all of whom belonged to the Garment Workers local. Some eighty-five percent of the skilled trades were unionized, and numerous locals, including printers and printing pressmen, brewery workers, coopers, plumbers, marble workers, and structural iron workers, were one hundred percent organized. All of these craft workers enjoyed reasonably good pay and steady work, although some work was seasonal; on the other hand, about ninety percent of common laborers remained unorganized, and some twenty-five percent of the unorganized consistently failed to find regular employment.24

The creation of the U. S. Conciliation Service in 1913 during the
presidency of Woodrow Wilson resulted in close ties between the national government and the American labor establishment, especially during World War I. After local disputes in Texas involving streetcar workers in Waco and conflict between union workers and shipbuilding contractors in Orange, Beaumont, and Houston failed, the disagreements were referred to the Conciliation Service, which helped achieve satisfactory settlements. The promise of a new era of labor-management accommodation offered by successful conciliation in these instances proved illusory, however, when labor confronted the united opposition of oil producers during the Texas-Louisiana oil field strike of 1917-1918.

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Rising costs of living, poor working conditions, and paternalistic company policies prompted Goose Creek oil field workers, aided by the state federation and the Houston Trades Council, to form a local in December, 1916. By the following spring, oil field workers throughout the Texas-Louisiana gulf coast area had established locals that affiliated directly with the American Federation of Labor since no national union for oil workers existed. When the gulf coast locals invited producers to meet with them in Houston to discuss worker grievances on 15 October 1917, the producers refused, and sent letters to their employees. Representative of the employer stance, Ross S. Sterling, president of the Humble Oil & Refining Company, wrote in part: “We see no reason why we should confer with outsiders or strangers upon matters which concern our employees and ourselves.” These employer declarations, ignoring strong worker sentiment in favor of the democratic principle of self-determination [as opposed to management’s top-down control], fed worker anger and prompted the union to issue a set of demands and call a strike vote in which some 5,992 oil field workers, representing 97% of those participating, voted in the affirmative. Worker discontent spread, and on 1 November 1917, approximately 10,000 men in some seventeen oil fields in Texas and Louisiana walked out.

With U. S. commissioners of conciliation and agents of the newly formed President’s Mediation Service unable to effect a settlement, oil producers floated rumors of the possible involvement of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and German spies. Such blatant propaganda disseminated by the producers found a sympathetic ear in the person of Texas governor William P. Hobby, who requested that the army
send troops into the oil fields to guard company property from the IWW and enemy agents.\footnote{32} While some evidence exists to indicate that the army initially maintained an impartial stance,\footnote{33} the very presence of government troops could not help but influence public opinion by lending credence to employer claims of subversive influence within the ranks of the strikers. Despite the creation of the International Association of Oil Field, Gas Well and Refinery Workers of America (OFGWRWU) in June, 1918, division in the ranks of the union men, which included failure of the unskilled oil field roughnecks to win support of refinery workers, many of whom were skilled craft unionists, in stark contrast to employer unity, doomed the strike. The final settlement represented a near total victory for the producers and killed union effectiveness. Approximately one-fourth of the strikers lost their jobs as a result of the strike, including R. E. Evans, president of the Goose Creek local and one of the union’s guiding lights. Reacting with an apparent paranoid fear of the unionization of their employees, which potentially could lead to loss of their top-down control, Gulf and Humble granted wage increases equivalent to union demands within two months of the settlement. Furthermore, several of the oil companies soon inaugurated housing programs and stock-purchasing plans for employees, all of which thoroughly undermined any effective demand for unionism.\footnote{34}

While the new oil workers’ international union grew rapidly for a time, the combined effects of the failure to attract refinery workers, craft union hostility, jurisdictional conflicts among workers, employer initiated benefits, and a new open shop movement at the end of World War I, all contributed to a near total decline of the OFGWRWU until its reincarnation during the New Deal.\footnote{35}

In still another setback for Texas workers, the Houston Labor Council in 1927 refused the application of African American locals for affiliation with the explanation that “under the present and prevailing conditions . . . it would not only be impractical, but almost impossible to admit . . . delegates from the colored unions.” Houston African American longshoreman and TSFL annual meeting delegate John North criticized such shortsighted thinking, citing the need for black organizers, and declared that while black waterfront workers wanted to be loyal to the white man’s union movement, he non-too subtly warned that if the
white labor establishment ignored the black man, employers were likely to organize a non-union workforce composed of African Americans in Gulf ports, where black and white locals had shared work for many years on a fifty-fifty basis.\(^6\)

In conclusion, the unprecedented degree of prosperity and acceptance won by AFL and the railroad brotherhoods during the World War I proved to be only temporary, and resulted, not from any sense of employer benevolence, but from the demands of the wartime emergency, and did not conceal lessons inherent in the wartime experiences of these unionized workers: in the short run, loosely organized union men, who often squabbled with colleagues over jurisdictional matters, provided no effective opposition to organized and determined employers. Even more ominous for the future of organized labor, however, was the labor establishment’s failure to recognize the futility of its conservative strategy. For the most part, labor leaders in state and nation, composed almost entirely of the representatives of craft unions and railroad brotherhoods, represented an elite cadre whose leadership gradually had evolved from a position of support for those with ties to the Knights of Labor and Populist traditions of the nineteenth century, to a new strategy that supported business-oriented leaders amenable to the conservative-Samuel Gompers-AFL brand of unionism. In what proved to be an ill-fated long-range strategy for the future of the working-class, these new leaders adamantly opposed any move toward industrial unionism.\(^7\) While they occasionally paid lip service to, they for the most part ignored, the plight of the unskilled and the unorganized who composed the vast majority of the American work force. The wartime gains enjoyed by the labor establishment soon clashed with a new open shop movement bred amidst the hysteria of the Red Scare and enflamed by national labor troubles in 1919, which led to drastic retrenchment of organized labor in both Texas and the nation during the 1920s.
ENDNOTES


3. Lawrence S. Ritter used such vignettes in *The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told by the Men Who Played It* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), in a highly effective way, to create what has been called the best baseball book ever written.


7. Proceedings, TSFL, 1904, 3; ibid., 1905, 7.


10. *American Federationist* 17 (Oct. 1910): 930; Fort Worth *Union Banner*,
March 19, April 16, 30, June 11, 1910; C. W. Woodman to Samuel Gompers, June 6, 1910, Woodman Letterbook, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.


16. Beginning in 1903, after several years of duplicating efforts and competing with the railroad brotherhoods, the legislative committees of the two labor organizations began, along with the Farmers' Union, an effective collaboration after establishing the Joint Labor Legislative Board.


25. Proceedings, TSFL, 1918, 34.


28. Each producer sent letters to their employees.


31. F. C. Proctor to T. W. Gregory, Oct. 29, 1917, file 33/754, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service Records (Record Group 280, National Archives); telegram J. B. Rogers to Gregory, Nov. 6, 1917.

32. Hobby acted after receiving an appeal from Houston sheriff M. Frank Hammond whose telegram suggested that he could not protect nearby oil fields from "I. W. W. or alien enemies." Telegram, Hammond to Hobby, Oct. 31, 1917, United States Army, Southern Department, Records, file 370.6 (Record Group 393, National Archives); Telegram, Hobby to Commanding General, Southern Department, Fort Sam Houston, Nov. 2, 1917, ibid., file 370.61; Hobby to Major Gen. John J. Ruckman, Nov. 16, 1917.


35. The decline is documented by OFGWRWU membership: 1919--45,000, 1920--20,900, 1921--24,800, 1924--2,000, 1929--1,100, 1933--less than 300. O'Connor, History of the Oil Workers Intl. Union, 15-21, 29-35; Oil and Gas Journal, Dec. 20, 1918, 51, 58.


37. For an elaboration of this view, see Grady L. Mullennix, “A History of the Texas State Federation of Labor” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1955), 198-199, 236-238.