

The Road to Ludlow: Work, Environment, and Industrialization in Southern Colorado, 1869-1914

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Through the generosity of a Rockefeller Archive Research Grant, I made my second visit to the RAC during the week of 27 October 2002. It was a busy but rewarding week of research, and I am deeply grateful to the center for its continuing support of my research on “Power, Toil, and Trouble: The Nature of Industrial Struggle in the Colorado Coalfields through the Ludlow Massacre of 1914.

This research report will briefly survey the materials I used during this visit, then delve more deeply into two phases of the coalfield war and its aftermath as illuminated by some of these documents.

I began the week by perusing what remains of the papers of Frederick T. Gates. This seems to be just a remnant of a much larger body of material, a supposition that anecdotal evidence within the Gates papers confirms. That said, a few interesting letters remain from LaMont Montgomery Bowers, the Rockefellers' man at the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company (CF&I) and Gates' nephew, documenting Bowers' disdain for his new associates and his confidence in his ability to serve the Rockefellers well. “My forty years of activity,” Bowers wrote not long after accepting the task of turning around the western company in 1907, “has become too fixed in my mind and muscles flesh and bones to tolerate indolence, so I am like a fish out of water here.” Despite his age, Bowers believed “that I can do more good head work and handle matters requiring thought and good judgment better than at any time in my business life. I am more inclined to come to conclusions slowly perhaps, but this improves rather than lessens the quality of my work, for I am inclined to reach the end of the argument right on the spot and always have acted in that way, but doing business with corporations where we have

to deal with representatives who may not be able to close a matter, has toned down my naturally rapid way of doing things and to my advantage too I think. So I think like whiskey (though always bad) I improve with age in smoothness and effectiveness.”¹

In addition to these exchanges, the Gates papers also include drafts of essays apparently written by Gates on such weighty topics as “Competition vs Cooperation” and “Capital and Labor.” These essays provide important insights into Gates' struggle to reconcile his compassion for the plight of those less fortunate than himself, with a political ideology that led him to oppose trade unionism bitterly and absolutely. Gates could approve neither “the spirit, the principle [n]or the methods” of labor organizations. At the same time, though, he excoriated his readers that “[T]he differences between the poor and the rich, the laborer and the capitalist,” Gates proclaimed, are “due not to heredity but to environment.” He used photos of British coal miners to argue that “The blood that courses in their veins is just as pure, just as rich and probably better than that of most of the aristocracy. It is because they have been living from childhood and working from childhood in the mines. . . . Shall we hate and despise and look down upon these people whom our social system has made that [sic] they are, or shall we pity them and shall we blame ourselves for having made them what they are, for keeping them where they are, and for clothing ourselves with the fruits of their unpaid labor?” One could find few better statements of the environmentalist notions that underpinned welfare capitalism than Gates' statement that “These poor wretched miners, these uncouth, ill formed, brutal people that you despise, have been made what they are by the conditions of their lives. It is nonsense, it is subterfuge, it is false, scientifically false, historically false, false by observation, that they belong to a lower order of beings. They are the same flesh and blood as ourselves. They are what we ourselves would be under their conditions, and we are what they would be under our conditions. It is for us who have

¹ Bowers to Gates, 18 October 1907, folder 14, box 1, Frederick T. Gates Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center, Pocantico Hills, NY.

means,” Gates concluded, “not to resist the claims of these people for a larger portion. It is for us to say, yes, my stocks - let them be reduced to two per cent; my bonds - let them go down to two per cent instead of five; give the balance to these people. Cut down their hours of labor. Improve their living conditions. Give them opportunities for music, for pictures, for whatever can cultivate them in mind, whatever can beautify and adorn them in body. Let us ourselves share to some extent the manual labor of the world, and instead of a few rising to the top on the backs of the many, let us undertake up [sic] build up society in all its [sic] parts as a whole to a higher level.”² If surviving documents are any indication, Gates would express no such compassion toward Colorado coal miners when they went on strike in 1913. In a statement written one month after the Ludlow Massacre, and credited to him by Raymond Fosdick in a draft passage of his biography of JDR, Jr. and subsequently struck out, the lynchpin of the Rockefeller family's humanitarian operations fumed that “I am unable to take any other view of the situation that the officers of the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company are standing between the country and chaos, anarchy, proscription and confiscation, and in so doing are worthy the support of every man who loves his country or his kind. Our country confronts only one danger. That danger is not combination of capital, it is not the Mexican situation, it is the labor monopoly; and the danger of the labor monopoly lies in its use of armed force, its organized and deliberate war on society.”³ Gates evidently believed that individual miners who quietly went about their work deserved to be pitied and uplifted by the wealthy, while organized, militant miners posed a threat to civilization itself. He even opposed the so-called Rockefeller Plan of reconciliation developed by JDR, Jr. and William Lyon Mackenzie King; “It may be urged that this policy is the Christian policy.

² "Capital and Labor," n.d., folder 9, box 1, *ibid.*

³ Frederick T. Gates, "The Struggle for Industrial Freedom," 20 May 1914, quoted in Raymond Fosdick, draft, folder 507, box 58, RG 2, JDR, Jr. Personal, OMR, RAC.

I do not so understand Christ that he adopted any spirit of conciliation toward those who came at him in the spirit of these Unionists.”⁴

JDR, Jr.'s desire to ameliorate relationships between CF&I and its workers, however, eventually overcame the doubts of his father's old guard. In addition to the Rockefeller Plan (a well-worn topic regarding which I found nothing new of much substance), the pair also brought the largesse of the Rockefeller Foundation to bear on the unemployment problem created by the strike and a concomitant regional depression. Series 200 of the RF papers document this effort, which involved the donation of \$100,000 from the foundation to highway construction programs in Las Animas County, the heart of the southern Colorado coalfields. When the UMWA officially called off the strike in December, 1914, its members no longer received the benefits that had sustained them for over a year in southern Colorado, and as long as four years in northern Colorado. In mass meetings, impoverished miners and their families demanded relief from state and local officials;⁵ in response, a group of prominent citizens in Trinidad contacted the Rockefeller Foundation and Colorado Governor George A. Carlson. The resulting public-private relief effort provided work for between 1,000 and 1,500 men in each of the southern field counties of Las Animas and Huerfano, 300-500 in 1000-1500 families “in immediate need” in each of LA and Huerfano Counties, and 1150-1900 more in other coal-mining regions of the state.⁶ King took pains to insure that relief work would be distributed without “discrimination of any kind. No account whatever is to be

⁴ Copy of “Colorado Strike Memorandum, January 29, 1915, Gates’ [sic] Papers, Vol. II #21, Vol. I, edited by _____” in research notes, folder 480, box 53, *ibid.* The document itself no longer exists in the RAC's Gates papers; it seems reasonable to assume that there once existed a large body of Gates materials which have either been destroyed or remain in private hands.

⁵ King claimed that the first appeal for Foundation aid was made at “a mass meeting of men at Trinidad, in which appeal it was represented that conditions were desperate, and that the miners of Colorado and their wives and children were starving.” King to JDR, Jr., 26 April 1915, folder 171, box 16, Series 200, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation (RF) Papers. See also John Cundy to John White, 20 February 1915 in *State of Colorado Committee on Unemployment and Relief Report of Secretary* (Denver: Smith-Brooks, 1916), On the situation in Boulder County, see S. A. Greenwood to RF, 21 June 1915, folder 171, box 16, RF.

⁶ *State of Colorado Committee on Unemployment and Relief*, 4.

taken of the worker's politics, his church affiliation, his membership in a labor union or lack of it, or of any similar matter."⁷ Men who were "residents" of the coalfields and had families, however, were to receive first priority (relief workers assumed the others could fend for themselves).⁸ Those hired to work on road crews received 25 cents an hour for an eight-hour day, and could work no more than three days a week "to prevent relief work," in King's words, from "competing with or being accepted in lieu of other and steady employment."⁹ In response to a complaint from Jerome Greene of 26 Broadway that he devoted too much space in the Foundation's annual report to the relief effort, the Canadian rejoined that the campaign "was a very important feature, and much more a part of the work which made possible the ultimate adoption of the Industrial Representation Plan than the public or any parties to the situation will ever realize."¹⁰

While these files have helped me to understand more about attempts to resolve the labor conflict in Colorado, my research in the main body of CF&I business papers at the RAC rounded out my understanding of the company's activities leading up to the strike. I had already examined most of the Business Interests papers on the company during my first visit, but my work in October and November fleshed out some important issues. Most importantly, it improved my understanding of CF&I's business situation during the 1907-1913 period. The company faced several problems, from a shortage of railroad cars for hauling coal, to difficulties securing orders for rails and rail products, to competition from other fuel companies both within and outside of Colorado, to negative press in national magazines such as *Pearson's* and *The Survey*.¹¹ Despite these difficulties, though, Bowers' cost-cutting measures (which largely involved purging the ranks of

⁷King to JDR, Jr., 26 April 1915.

⁸ "Committee" to King, 1 April 1915, folder 170, box 16, *ibid.*

⁹ King to JDR, Jr., 26 April 1915.

¹⁰ King to Greene, 19 January 1916, folder 171, box 16, *ibid.*

¹¹ On Rockefeller concerns with these press reports, see Gates to Bowers, 8 April 1911 and Starr J. Murphy to JDR, Jr., 9 February 1912, folder 190, box 21, CF&I Papers, Business Interests, RG III 2C, Office of the Messieurs Rockefeller, RAC.

middle management and introducing stringent economies), turmoil within competing firms, and the company's successful switch from a focus on steel made through the Bessemer process to open-hearth steel-making ideally suited for the company's ore supply together made the company successful enough that Bowers considered resuming dividend payments in 1910.¹² Gates advised JDR, Sr. against this measure; he believed that the company should keep this cash in reserve to insure it against future downturns.¹³ Along with the high dividends paid by CF&I's Colorado Supply Company and other subsidiaries, this evidence suggests that while the company was hardly a lucrative investment, it was not quite so burdensome as the Rockefellers would later claim during investigations of the 1913-'14 strike.

Bowers and CF&I president Jesse F. Welborn kept 26 Broadway well-informed not only about the company's financial performance, but also about the activity of union organizers sent into the southern field by the UMWA beginning in 1912.

Bowers had earlier complained about the \$20,000 annual budget for the company's detective force, and he may have cut back on the department or eliminated it entirely.¹⁴ The UMWA, though, made no effort to conceal its intentions of organizing the southern field, and CF&I retained enough of an intelligence network in its mines to know that the union was following through on its public declarations. Fearing that “The compromise between the operators and miners in the bituminous coal states [in the] east, together with unusual activity on the part of spies sent out by the Western Federation of Miners [Bowers repeatedly conflated the UMWA with the more militant WFM] and their activity in endeavoring to unionize our coal mines,” was priming the southern fields for unionization, Bowers decided in April, 1912 that the best policy was “to advance our miners 5c a ton and day labor in proportion, before they had made any demand. As you

¹² On trouble within Victor-American, see Bowers to Gates, 20 November 1910, folder 190, box 21, *ibid.*

¹³ Gates to JDR, Sr., 17 June 1910, folder 190, box 21, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Bowers to Gates, 28 February 1908, folder 187, box 21, *ibid.*

know, our mines are non-union, and I know of no better way than to anticipate demands and do a little better by the men than they would receive if they belonged to the unions. This keeps them in line and reasonable happy.”¹⁵ Five months later, he wrote JDR, Sr. that “Our men are well paid, well housed, and every precaution known taken to prevent disaster. So far as we can learn, they are satisfied and contented, but the constant dogging of their heels by agitators, together with the muckraking magazines and trust-busting political shysters, has a mighty influence over the ignorant foreigners who make up the great mass of our ten thousand miners. Still,” Bowers concluded with guarded but misplaced optimism, “everything now seems to be favorable and the outlook good.”¹⁶

Such letters from Bowers in the period leading up to the 1913 strike call would continue to shape the Rockefellers' view of the conflict until well after the loss of life at Ludlow. Only in the winter of 1914, with Mackenzie King tentatively on-board and Ivy Lee providing public relations damage-control, did the family finally lose faith in Bowers.¹⁷ JDR, Sr.'s long-time associate was too intelligent and too irascible not to detect abandonment in the family's unsubtle request that he step down as vice-president and director of CF&I in January, 1915. “That there is some underlying reason for this move in asking my retirement from every position in that company, after so many years of activity,” Bowers wrote JDR Jr. in a pained tone, “is hardly to be doubted. I assume that the nearly twenty years of confidential relationship has made it plain to you, that I do nothing under cover and give and take all business matters out into the open, and am not happy without perfect confidence and an open mind and heart in all matters that we have

¹⁵ Bowers to Gates, 15 April 1912, folder 190, box 21, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Bowers to JDR, Sr., 30 September 1912, folder 190, box 21, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Complaints about Bowers began to flow into 26 Broadway from businessmen as well as labor leaders and reformers. A Cleveland railroad and coal executive, for instance, wrote that “I have recently asked several prominent Cleveland business men about Bowers, all of whom say he has done more in this vicinity (and they think elsewhere) to ‘queer’ Rockefeller than he (R) has been able to overcome by his many benefactions. . . . It is thought here that Bowers has always been one of the men upon whom Rockefeller has depended to quite an extent for information of various kinds, yet no one who knows Bowers seems to understand why this has been the case because of his very disagreeable personality.” W. R. Woodford to George Peck, 15 December 1914, folder 190, box 21, *ibid*.

to act upon together. Any other relation is unsound and if you have been led into this move by anything that I have done or have failed to do in connection with the affairs, that I have had a pretty active part in that company, it is but right between us, that I am made acquainted with it. While I am more than willing to send in my resignation to Mr Welborn, I am not willing to do so if under criticism, without facing whatever it may be that brings such a request at this time, and by whom it is inspired.”¹⁸ JDR Jr., though, maintained the pretext “that only through [Bowers'] complete withdrawal from official connection with the Company would the full measure of responsibility be assumed by the officers.”¹⁹ His final letter to Bowers on the subject of the latter's resignation concluded that “This has been an interesting experience, and I trust that good will come from it.”²⁰

If Bowers was to emerge as one of the big losers of the conflict, JDR, Jr. faced a more ambiguous legacy. The memory of Ludlow continues to tarnish his name into the present, yet Ludlow also inspired in him a change in heart through which he would eventually add new gloss to the Rockefeller shine. He also reaped the reward of tens of millions of dollars worth of CF&I stocks and bonds from his father. Somewhat perversely, Sr. expressed his pride in his son on four separate occasions -- after Jr.'s testimony before the House Committee on Mines and Mining in April, 1914, after his testimony before the Committee on Industrial Relations in January and May of 1915, and upon his return from his famous Colorado visit in October, 1915 -- by giving him securities.²¹ Ever the grateful son, Jr. wrote his father that “Just plain ‘Thank you’ sounds so insufficient, so heartless and so inexpressive, in comparison with the deep feelings of love and gratitude which I have in my heart for you. Words can never express these feelings. My only hope is that in my life and the things which I undertake to do, I

¹⁸ Bowers to JDR, Jr., folder 190, box 21, *ibid.*

¹⁹ JDR, Jr. to Bowers, folder 190, box 21, *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ e.g. JDR, Sr. to JDR, Jr., 24 May 1915, folder 504, box 58, Fosdick Research Files, Business Interest Series, RG II 2 Z, OMR, RAC.

can prove to you my gratitude and my profound appreciation of the confidence which you repose in me and the unbounded love which you have ever shown me.”²²

Before returning to this crucial question of memory and legacies, perhaps the most important single finding of my research visit concerns the failure of one of the most promising attempts to settle the strike. In November, 1913, Colorado Governor Elias Ammons called a conference between three mining executives, CF&I's Jesse Welborn, Victor-American's John C. Osgood (the man from whom the Gould-Rockefeller interests had acquired CF&I in 1903), and H. Brown of Rocky Mountain Fuel, and three striking coal miners, Archie Allison, David Hamman, and T. X. Evans. The RAC's transcript of these proceedings is a fascinating and invaluable document, one whose insights I have only begun to unpack. The conceit behind the conference was Ammon's notion that operators and strikers could come to an amicable settlement if the insoluble issue of union recognition was taken off of the table. During discussions that stretched late into the night, filling more than 200 pages, the miners, operators, and Ammons talked over their differences. These conversations provide important insights into the different worldviews of miners and mining operators, giving the reader an excellent sense of the seemingly petty daily grievances that accumulated over time to fuel discontent among mine workers. Allison, Hamman, and especially Evans overcame their discomfort at confronting powerful politicians and capitalists face-to-face. “You understand gentlemen,” Allison implored, “that we are just simple miners. We are . . . a bit awkward and we have not got the same expression and we would like a little consideration on account of that.”²³ As they warmed to the task before them, the colliers began to express the spirit of independence common among skilled coal miners. “I don't not have to bow my head to any man in Colorado,” T. Evans put it, “as far as mining is concerned.”²⁴

²² JDR, Jr., to JDR, Sr., 29 October 1915, folder 504, box 58, *ibid.*

²³ “Proceedings of Joint Conference. Held in the State Capitol, Denver, Colorado, at 10 o'clock A. M., November 26, 1913,” typescript, box 26, CF&I Papers, BI, 30.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 12.

Miners and operators alike claimed that they possessed a common interest, yet they could not agree upon how to distribute control over this common interest among workers and managers. The conversation wound around the six planks of the union strike platform, but neither Ammons nor the operators could keep it from circling back to the seventh plank, the issue of union recognition that was not even supposed to be on the table during that meeting. None of the miners were officers of the UMWA, yet all believed that any settlement which left the union out would fail to protect the miners' interests. The miners argued that a union pit committee was the only way to solve such grievances as disputes between miners and foremen or so-called "dead work," tasks ancillary to removing coal such as setting props or cleaning up rooms for which miners received no direct compensation. The proceedings thus reveal the heart of the 1913-'14 strike to be a question of raw power over the workplace: Would the mines be industrial democracies in which union miners wielded collective power equal to or greater than that of CF&I and its competitors, or would the companies continue to extend their control over work and workmen underground?

Significant as issues such as scrip payments, political repression, and the company store system were in expanding the strike coalition and garnering public support for the UMWA, the arguments made in the joint conference by Evans, Allison, and Hamman suggest that power over what I call the mine workscape was the dominant factor that motivated mine workers to strike. This is why union recognition was so important to them, for it insured them, they believed, a collective voice that would counterbalance the tremendous authority of the operators. The governor and the operators alike, though, turned a deaf ear towards these arguments. Ammons continued to direct the discussion toward a settlement, and even believed he had succeeded at forging a compromise by the end. The miners, though, felt otherwise. "We are in no position," Evans exclaimed after Ammons believed he had forged an agreement, "without

an organization to defend ourselves.”²⁵ The joint conference failed to bring peace to the coalfields. By taking union recognition off of the table, Ammons had made it possible for strikers and operators to sit at the same table and discuss their differences, but without any agreement on this issue, no settlement was possible. After this failure, the violence in the coalfields would intensify until tragedy struck at Ludlow on April 20, 1914.

Even as men, women, and children were dying in southern Colorado, union leaders, journalists, company officials, and others began to mold understandings and memories of the massacre. This process constituted the second major component illuminated by my recent research. This was the conscious effort to mold how the events of the massacre and strike would be conceived of and remembered. Papers in the RAC document some aspects of this struggle over memory. Some of the most interesting involve what later-day political observers would term “spin.” Already addressed to some extent in my previous research report was 26 Broadway's decision to hire Ivy Lee to shape public opinion regarding the strike. No less important were other efforts not initiated by the Rockefellers and their associates, but which 26 Broadway nonetheless aided. Two notable cases are Jerome Greene's involvement in trying to arrange speaking engagements for Major Boughton of the Colorado National Guard, who insisted that no massacre had occurred at Ludlow, and Greene's participation in the efforts of Colorado conservatives to block the publication of Henry Atkinson's report on the strike to the Federal Council of Churches.²⁶ Through these and other measures, the Rockefellers sought to shape public discourse regarding events in Colorado, not only through the work of Lee's publicity, but also through Greene's circumspect but strident efforts through the Rockefeller Foundation to put pro-company accounts of the massacre and strike before the public.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 254-5. By this point in the day, Secretary of Labor W. B. Wilson had joined the conference.

²⁶ Charles Loughridge of Denver elicited Greene's aid on the latter issue. See folders 146 and 147, box 20, Series 900: Administration, Program and Policy, 900 Organization: Industrial Relations--Colorado Fuel and Iron Co. 1914-1915, RG 3, RF, RAC.

