Accounts and Roles of Baseball Associated with the Ludlow Massacre

By
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The Ludlow Massacre, one of the most shocking and deadly labor incidents in American history, has been studied, examined, and debated extensively from multiple viewpoints. Historians, politicians, journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, geographers, and even archaeologists have attempted to explain why and how the unfortunate events of the morning of April 20, 1914 happened and what they meant.

Although many areas of interest surrounding the Ludlow Massacre have been explored, one very apparent and popular American activity has been overlooked: baseball. Baseball played a significant role leading up to, and possibly influencing, the event known as the Ludlow Massacre. This paper does not try to explain or to assign blame for those events, but merely show how baseball played an important role for all involved.

This paper will show how baseball was a notable presence and may have had some influence on one of America's deadliest labor disputes. This strike, more commonly known as the Colorado Coalfield War, began in September 1913 and lasted until December 1914. It took place in Colorado's southern bituminous coal fields near Trinidad and was defined by the event since known as the Ludlow Massacre. The massacre occurred when violence erupted between Colorado National Guardsmen and strikers, resulting in the deaths of twelve children, two women and eleven men.[1]

The Ludlow Massacre plunged the southern Colorado coalfields in to two weeks of armed conflict.[2] Violence erupted between striking miners and the Colorado Militia ordered to the area by Governor Elias Ammons.[3] Although unclear and highly controversial depending on who was retelling the events, the violence was escalated by men who

The Ludlow Massacre Monument. (Courtesy of the author.)

interpreted the actions of the other side as being hostile. The U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, established by Congress in 1912, included the Colorado Coalfield War in its two-year study of industrial conditions, "and its 1,200-page final report condemned many of the practices of employers, especially those used by mine operators in Colorado."[4]

The coalfield war was ultimately a dispute between coal miners and their employers—the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I), the Victor-American Fuel Company, and the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company—over unfair compensation and unsafe working conditions.[5] Given their remoteness and austere natural environment, the Colorado coalfields were ideal for the establishment of company towns and corporate paternalism.

The lives of miners and their families were intricately linked to the coal companies. Given the environmental and logistical difficulties associated with extracting coal from isolated seams in rural areas, large companies such as CF&I had to create the necessary infrastructure and provide almost everything to their workers.[6] Company stores supplied everything that miners and their families needed, from household items to equipment required for specific tasks in the mines. Usually the closest retailer in the area, these stores often operated using company scrip or credit. This cyclical commercial system not only indebted and limited miners' commerce but also padded the company's overall profit.

The tent colonies at Ludlow and other places were the result of mining companies having the ability to "deny the shelter of a home almost instantaneously if the miner engaged in some activity—either on the job or in his personal life—that seemed to conflict with the interests of the company."[7] This included the inability to settle debt to the company. Despite having the ability to remove the strikers from "their" homes, the company could not remove workers' sense of community nor the activities that defined it.

Recreation in the Coal Camps

When miners and their employers were working and living well together, the companies would encourage these towns to develop their own subcultures, creating the illusion of independence. Company sociological departments or "welfare work" programs, presented the appearance of concern for the wellbeing of employees and their families. Policies and programs covered a gamut of concepts from safe working conditions to leisure activities.[8]

Activities not only provided workers with entertainment and personal enrichment, but also helped them cope with the day-to-day stresses and dangers associated with mining coal. Some of the more popular recreations included libraries or reading rooms, educational classes, clubs, theaters, dances and, of course, various sports.[9] The game of baseball was one of many popular communal activities. Despite what could be an oppressive, dehumanizing environment, baseball presented workers with an opportunity to reclaim some of their humanity and independence.[10]

The playing of baseball within the coal towns was deeply entrenched during the early 1900s.[11] Baseball not only provided entertainment but also a sense of community pride and identity.[12] The games also served as an outlet for young miners to relax, compete, form bonds, earn bragging rights, and gamble.[13] Baseball was played at all levels throughout the camps' social structure, from child to adult pickup games, inter-town leagues, and even included the formation of a CF&I semi-pro team.[14] Miners and their families would often go picnicking just outside of the towns or around the baseball diamond where the games would materialize. These games would occasionally be played with makeshift rules to accommodate the landscape, weather, and number of players.[15] Rocks, utilities, buildings, and such would be played around or included, forming unique ground rules.

In testimonies before the Commission on

Industrial Relations, several camp inspectors noted the playing of baseball as a focal point in the various communities (Table 1).[16] Baseball was commonly mentioned in camp reports to headquarters, local newspapers, and the CF&I company newspaper *Camp and Plant*. As in today's newspapers, *Camp and Plant* and the town newspapers dedicated whole sections and columns to reporting baseball scores, game highlights, player updates, and the banter of town rivalry.

The quality of baseball played at these coal communities was so high that their teams sometimes played against semi-professional and professional nines. From 1900 to 1904, CF&I's select team won four of its nine games against Western League teams from Omaha, Kansas City, Colorado Springs, and Des Moines.[17] There are many accounts of miners who could play ball, which often improved their chances of employment and the quality of their jobs.[18] Some young miners also used baseball as a way out of the mines.

The Walsh Commission

The U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, referenced above, also known as the Walsh Commission, was established by Congress on August 23, 1912. The nine-member commission, appointed by President William Howard Taft, operated from 1913 to 1915. The commission's final report, published in 1916, consisted of eleven volumes. The report explored a wide variety of labor issues around the U.S., with volumes seven through nine focused on or highlighting The Colorado Coal Miners' Strike.

These volumes included many eyewitness interviews and testimonies describing the reasons for the strike, the circumstances of the strike, the efforts to resolve the strike, and its unfortunate culmination in human lives lost. To ensure that the full story was being told, the commission encouraged the individuals testifying to include not only their allegiance, but their description of everyday life and events. Depending upon who was being interviewed, individuals focused on different aspects of the events. The playing of baseball, however, seems to have been acknowledged by most of the individuals who provided testimony.

Given that the testimonies heard by the Walsh Commission covered events leading up to the Colorado Coalfield War, events during the war, and the Ludlow Massacre itself, these references

Volume	Page Numbers	Number of Individuals	Number of Times
VII	6345-6990	Pearl Jolly Hon. Thomas M. Patterson Capt. Philip S. Van Cise	8
VIII	6993-8013	Hon. Thomas M. Patterson Capt. Philip S. Van Cise	2
IV	8015-8948	Morris Hillquit E.S. Gaddis Dr. McCorkle Hon. Thomas M. Patterson O.F. Adams Dr. W.R. Corwin Col. Kirkpatrick	11
Totals	6345-8948	12	21

Table 1: Baseball References in the Final Report of the Commission on Industrial Relations *in Volumes VII, VIII and IX.*

to the playing of baseball suggest its popularity, importance, and commonality. To quantify and show how baseball was viewed and by whom, the author has identified the references to baseball in those volumes of the *Final Report of the Commission on Industrial Relations* that dealt with the Colorado Coalfield War (Table. 1).

Baseball and the 1913 Strike

Leading up to the coalfield war, tensions had been high for several reasons. Trinidad, Colorado, was filled with disgruntled miners, members and leaders of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), CF&I representatives, and hired guns. CF&I had hired the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to serve as watchdog and act as muscle to deter the miners from striking.[19] Gatherings, meetings, protests, and parades were held throughout Trinidad leading up to the autumn of 1913.[20]

The refusal of CF&I, Victor-American, and Rocky Mountain Fuel to meet with UMWA leaders and the murder of union organizer Gerald Lippiatt by two agents of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency all but ensured an unprecedented strike.[21] In September 1913, mine guards evicted the striking miners and their families from their company homes.[22] As many of them had no place to go, the UMWA provided tents and the strikers established makeshift colonies. Although several were set up around the region, the Ludlow tent colony was the largest.[23]

Unaware of how long the strike would last or of its outcome, the miners and their families prepared these tent colonies for daily life. They arranged the Ludlow tent colony (and others) by placing the tents around a central area that had a "Big Tent" that served as the local headquarters and communal space.[24] Unbeknownst to CF&I, Victor-American, and Rocky Mountain Fuel, the removal of the striking miners "buttressed the growing sense of conviction that led migrants from radically different backgrounds to embrace

Baseball being played at the Ludlow tent colony. Notice the crude backstop and grandstand and the tent colony at the left rear. (Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.)

a common identity and a common interest in the success of the strike."[25]

Given the importance of baseball among the striking population and in a symbolic showing of normality, the building of a baseball field at the Ludlow tent colony and at other tent camps was a sign of the establishment of community and unity. Although no written documentation exists of the planning or building of these fields, photographic evidence does. The accompanying photographs clearly show how much pride and how many resources the striking miners put into their playing grounds.

In most cases, the baseball facilities were built more soundly than the walled tents in which the striking miners lived. The building and maintaining of a proper ballfield were not only encouraged as a recreational outlet for the communities by the sociological departments or "welfare work" programs established by CF&I and the other coal companies, but allowed miners to express creativity and individualism in an otherwise overbearingly controlled setting. This again indicates that the playing of baseball was not only a familiar activity, but one of communal comfort, social unity, and pride.

As mentioned above, a baseball culture was well established throughout the coal communities. Baseball was so popular and important to residents that the playing and watching of the game was not only a daily activity but often a highlighted event associated with Sundays and holidays. It is unfortunate that in the case of the Ludlow Massacre it can be directly linked with events that left twelve children, two women and eleven men dead.

Several historians have linked or used baseball as a social indicator as to how local populations are "feeling;" thus can the available accounts of the baseball games played at the Ludlow camp be used as a crude barometer of relations between the strikers and their perceived oppressors.[26] Although based on a limited number of eyewitnesses, the earlier games in 1913 seem to have been

A baseball game at the Ludlow tent colony, with the gazebo, or bandstand, to the right and the tent colony on the left. (Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.)

friendlier, whereas the games played leading up to and on the day before the massacre seem to have been more contentious. This comes as no surprise, given that the intensity of both violence and resentment increased between the two sides from the fall of 1913 through the winter of 1914. Captain Philip S. Van Cise of Company K of the First Infantry testified that

> the old mine guard element, led by Lieutenant K. E. Linderfelt, was always in trouble with the colonists. This group and the strikers constantly sought opportunities for assaults upon each other, and each made the most of its opportunities. . . . The result was that while the First Infantry company [*sic*] at Ludlow was usually on good terms with the strikers, played baseball and football with them, and its men could go into the colony unarmed, Lieutenant Linderfelt and his men went in parties armed to the teeth, in constant danger of being wiped out if caught unaware.[27]

Van Cise's observations suggest that the emotions of each side influenced whether they played baseball.

The first documented report of baseball being played between the strikers and the Colorado Militia was on November 2, when soldiers and strikers played a good-natured game, with the soldiers winning 19-6.[28] Another account involving baseball occurred while Company K of the First Infantry, also known as the "College Company," was stationed at Ludlow. On guard duty from late October 1913, the boys of Company K "won the praise of mine operators and strikers alike and were commended for their gentlemanly conduct."[29]

It seems that both the strikers and their families developed a mutual respect or an unofficial accord with the young men of Company K. Captain Van Cise noted a little friction with the strikers at first, but being just across the railroad tracks "we had to be neighborly."[30] He went on to say that the company "has participated in no clash of any kind with the strikers except in football and baseball."[31] Van Cise elaborated further, stating that "our football and baseball teams played the strikers' teams, and we won, too."[32] Regardless of which guard unit was present or the way in which it interacted with the striking miners, the importance of baseball and its social bonding capabilities are apparent.

The presence of soldiers as spectators at games was not unusual. However, according to the testimony of Pearl Jolly, a miner's wife, "on April 19 [the day before the massacre] we had a baseball game. The militia had always been in the habit of attending the baseball games, but never before had they attended with their rifles. On April [1]9 was a Greek holiday, [Orthodox Easter] Sunday, and they thought perhaps that they would be drinking, and those men, if they were to go down there with their rifles, would be able to stir up some trouble. They stood right in the diamond with their rifles. One of the men asked them if they would please get out of the diamond. He told them if he wanted to watch the baseball game it was not necessary to guard them, to put their guns to their side."[33] This incident demonstrates how baseball could be a point of contention, as well as of concord, between the two sides.

Baseball and Union Activities

Although baseball games were enjoyed by both sides as a stress reliever and as a source of recreation and community-building, they also presented the strikers with a rare opportunity to gather in large groups. In late 1912, the United Mine Workers of America started establishing itself in southern Colorado. The union would send groups of organizers to gain support and membership for the union. Given that the companies tried to prevent workers from joining the union, organizers would use camp social events, such as dances, sing-alongs, and sporting activities, to de-

ceive the guards as to their true intentions. These large social gatherings allowed information to be communicated and exchanged with little difficulty.[34]

No direct accounts exist of baseball being used to mask a union recruitment meeting, but the gathering of such a large and diverse group of people would have made games a perfect opportunity to disseminate information without raising suspicion. During the hearings before the Commission on Industrial Relations, Dr. Daniel Spencer McCorkle, a Presbyterian minister at CF&I's iron-mining company town of Sunrise, Wyoming, highlighted the fear that the coal companies had of the use of baseball games to organize or to pass information. When McCorkle was asked about recreational activities available to miners, he stated that "in the summer time [*sic*] by going a mile on the hill they have a place to play ball. Since the agitation has been going on in Sunrise, I heard that the company has given orders for a playground to be made down near the school building for baseball."[35]

McCorkle could not confirm that this relocation of the field had occurred, but the idea itself illustrates that CF&I viewed baseball as an influential and potentially problematic activity, especially during times of unrest. Given that the Ludlow tent colony was a direct result of such unrest, baseball games played at its field would provide an excellent opportunity to communicate information or distract the guards from an area where a meeting was taking place. The presence of guards at the baseball games, previously noted, likely was intended to deter the exchange of information as well as to keep an eye on the striking miners.

Not only was baseball most likely used for the passing of information, it also could have been used as a source of diversion from the actions and movements of union organizers. On October 7, 1913, a gun battle broke out near the Ludlow camp. A car carrying a group of Baldwin-Felts detectives was attacked by striking miners. The Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency's job was to keep tabs on union organizers through confrontation and infiltration.[36] Walter Belk of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency testified that during the attack, "when we got over the hill in sight of the colony, we noticed a bunch of men—I supposed it was boys playing ball—running across the prairie in our direction."[37] The possibility of using baseball as an effective distraction against the professional Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, shows just how unsuspicious the playing of baseball was.

The playing of baseball being a communal activity, the games attracted many not directly involved in the armed confrontation, such as women and children. Ironically, given that mostly women and children perished on April 20, 1914, their presence at games probably reassured both strikers and guards that violence would not occur.

The numerous accounts of and references to the everyday playing of baseball illustrate the passage of time and daily life. In a way they show that even a disenfranchised population such as that of the Ludlow tent colony was still holding on to its American or Americanized roots. The Greek Orthodox Easter Sunday game of April 19, however, seemed to be a point foreshadowing the events that occurred the following day. One newspaper reported several days later that a "battle is being waged between mine guards and the strikers. A fight at a ball game yesterday started the trouble and it was resumed today."[38]

An excerpt from a United Mine Workers' pamphlet entitled "The Ludlow Massacre," written by Walter H. Fink, publicity director for UMWA's District 15, which included the mines around Ludlow, highlighted not only the strikers' "passiveness," but also the importance baseball had within the tent community. Fink mentioned baseball five times in "The Ludlow Massacre," including in recounting the following incident.[39]

> The strikers and their families were enjoying themselves at a baseball game. They were a happy, care-free audience of twenty-one nationalities, thinking of nothing but

the freedom from industrial and political slavery that they were willingly purchasing by an incessant war with the elements, with the imported assassins of John D. Rockefeller, with the corporation-owned state and county officials of Colorado. It had been a day of joy, a day such as victory in the strike will bring them every twenty-four hours of the future. The baseball game was almost over when down out of the hills, where these strikers had lived in hovels like hogs, had been robbed of their coal, had been deprived of their political, industrial and religious liberty, had been driven into unsafe mines to be slaughtered, came the gunmen of industry, the hired murderers of Sunday school teacher and "philanthropist" John D. Rockefeller Jr. There were five of these gunmen on horseback and armed with high-power[ed] rifles. They came to break up the baseball game. But they realized that even high-powered rifles and machine guns trained on the baseball diamond from the hills might not be able to combat the crowd of fans, and they started away chagrined. Some of the strikers' wives and children laughed at these imported assassins who were too cowardly to carry out their purpose. "Oh, that's all right; have your fun today; we'll have our roast tomorrow," said one of the gunmen, and they rode away." Little did the peaceful men, women and children realize the horrible prophecy this thug was making.[40]

Baseball being played at the Ludlow Tent Colony.
(Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.)

The same pamphlet described the morning of the Ludlow Massacre, April 20, 1914, as being a "typical" one, with men and women doing chores while children played. Offering yet another example of its significance within the Ludlow tent colony, Fink mentioned that "in the rear of Snodgrass' store men and boys were playing baseball."[41]

Baseball and Ludlow

Journalist Scott Martelle provides another telling of the incident at the ballfield using Pearl Jolly's testimony:

> The day before, April 19, had been Easter Sunday for the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Ludlow tent colony, with its large Greek population, had held traditional and non-traditional celebrations, from a feast to a baseball game. Some of the soldiers "had always come over and would watch the games, but Sunday they brought their rifles over with them, and they stood there and held their rifles up, some got right on the diamond, and one of the fellows asked him to move out of the way of the runners." There were four soldiers in all, and the one who strolled out onto the field—about thirty years old, tall, with light skin and wearing a militia uniform—began swearing at the players, then yelled to his comrades to raise their rifles, an act of intimidation that merely drew jeers from the onlookers.[42]

Regardless of which side described events leading to the Ludlow Massacre or from which perspective that person viewed daily life in Ludlow's tent colony or militia camp before that event, it is clear that baseball was played and that it served several roles for all parties involved.

Whether or not baseball directly served as a catalyst to the unfortunate events of April 20, 1914, it clearly played a significant role in daily life at the Ludlow tent colony. As a backdrop to one of America's deadliest labor disputes, baseball provided a sense of normality, created community, and both relieved and created stresses and tensions.

Called "America's pastime," baseball's nationwide acceptance and its adaptability allowed it to be used as a tool by both miners and coal companies to try to manipulate or control the situation at Ludlow. Baseball proved a source of pride to many individuals, regardless of which side they represented. Despite various ethnicities, political differences, degrees of company loyalty, and views on labor unions or corporate greed among those involved in the Colorado Coalfield War, the playing and enjoyment of baseball at the Ludlow tent colony reminds us that a common activity can both unite and divide.

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Notes:

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3. Scott Martelle, *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 146.
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