

259 Lives Lost

Labor Joins Cherry, IL in Memorial to Great Coal Mine Disaster of 1909

The tiny town of Cherry, population about 500, was overrun with visitors from as far away as Italy on November 13-14, 2009. All had come to join in the memorial ceremonies for the 259 men and boys who died 100 years ago in what, at the time, was the biggest coal mine disaster in Illinois history. Cherry is in Bureau County, just a few miles north of LaSalle.

ILHS Was Co-Sponsor

The event, initiated by the Cherry Booster Club and co-sponsored by the Illinois Labor History Society, received essential support from the Illinois Valley Trades and Labor Council and its president Kelley Reffert (since retired).

Central to the event was the dedication of a new monument in the form of pyramids suggesting the tailing pile at the mouth of the mine where the underground fire occurred. The fire took the lives of more than half of those who were on the job the morning of November 13, 1909. Many rescuers also died. The new memorial, located in the town center, bears the names of the victims.

The Cherry Booster Club led the fundraising campaign for the memorial monument. Local unions contributed money and services.

The mine was owned by the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. At that time employers were not legally responsible for the safety of their employees. The tragedy left behind a great number of widows and orphans. The world wide outpouring of relief funds was gratifying. Funds from private sources poured into Cherry to assist the victims and their families. The government of France offered repatriation to those with French connection. The Italian government raised funds for the sixty-nine orphans of Italian descent.

Spurred Legislation

In response to the Cherry disaster, the Illinois legislature, after lengthy wrangling, passed its first Workmen's Compensation Law in 1911.

The commemoration began with a procession to the town center, led by the color guard of Chicago Fire Fighters Local Union 2. They came to honor the Chicago firefighters who had joined in the rescue efforts.

At the dedication of the sculpture, the mayor of Cherry, Bob McCook, read a letter from President Obama honoring the disaster victims. A resolution adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives was presented by Rep. Debbie Halvorson (11th District). A similar resolution was adopted by the Illinois State Legislature

and presented by State Rep. Frank Mautino from Spring Valley.

From the United Mine Workers of America Intl. came Gary Butler. Representing the Illinois AFL-CIO was Secretary-Treasurer Tim Drea, a former coal miner. Mark Lipe of the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration spoke about issues of mine safety that persist to this day. ILHS President Larry Spivack concluded, pointing out that labor history is relevant to current political and economic issues.

After the speeches, Bucky Halker, well-known folksinger, presented a concert of appropriate labor songs. His performance was funded by a grant to the Illinois Labor History Society from the Illinois Humanities Council, a state agency.

2nd Day of Ceremonies

On Sunday, ceremonies took place in the cemetery where the United Mine Workers Memorial was erected in 1911 to memorialize all the miners. Since many of the Cherry miners had immigrated from the area around the city of Bologna in Northern Italy, Allesandro Motta, the Consul General of Italy, attended the ceremony and spoke to the gathering. Rita Cut, representing the regional government of Emilia-Romagna, reported that commemorative ceremonies were also underway in Bologna.



Laborers Local 393 members behind the Cherry Mine Monument. They and others of the Illinois Valley Building Trades Council donated their labor to set up and landscape this memorial.

The 'Reaper' Has Passed Our Way

Some tall trees have left the labor history landscape in recent months to our deep regret. Among them have been such luminaries as Chicago's 5th ward alderman Leon Despres, once a towering figure on the political left; Studs Terkel, who was Master of Ceremonies at the 1969 rally in Haymarket Square which led to the formation of the ILHS.

Even closer to home was the death on September 15, 2009 of ILHS founding Vice President William Adelman by heart attack at the age of 73. From his position at the University of Illinois, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, Bill inspired countless union officers, staff and rank and file, a fact evident from the outpouring of 30 gifts to ILHS in his memory totaling \$3660. His guidebooks and films on Pullman and Haymarket include *Touring Pullman, Haymarket Revisited, Palace Cars and Paradise, and Packingtown USA*.



Bill Adelman and Bill Neebe in Forest Home Cemetery.

Almost simultaneously came word of the death of O. W. (Bill) Neebe, grandson of Oscar Neebe, one of the Haymarket Martyrs, who is buried at the monument in Forest Home Cemetery. Bill was a graphic designer who created the powerful poster which promoted "Landmark Day" when the Martyrs Monument was named a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. His presence was always evident at any ceremony connected with the events of 1886.

We also must note the death of Franklin Rosemont, announced in our June 2009 Reporter. A long-time trustee of the ILHS, he was editor of the monumental *Haymarket Scrapbook* published by the Kerr Co. which he headed.

More recently came word of the death of Atty. Eugene Cotton, a founding member of the labor law firm Cotton, Watt, Jones and King. Cotton was the general counsel for the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA-CIO) and a passionate advocate for the advancement of working people. In 2001 Cotton was entered into the ILHS Union Hall of Honor. (continued next column)



Vicki Starr

The Botto House



ILHS Photo Show Closes Run at Botto House

Our impressive exhibition History of Labor in Chicago was on view at the American Labor Museum/Botto House in Haledon, New Jersey from September 6 until December 31. It opened in conjunction with the Museum's 18th Annual Labor Day Parade. The Grand Marshall of the Parade was Jason D'Errico, President of the Passaic County Central Labor Council who viewed the exhibition as did many unionist and their families from Northern New Jersey.

During its three-month run, the show was visited by school and community groups, and by college students from the Labor Center at Rutgers University, as well as students from William Paterson University.

The Botto House was strike headquarters for the famous Patterson New Jersey textile strike of 1913. It is now a National Landmark and received general operating grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, a state agency. (For more information see www.labormuseum.net)

The ILHS originally developed this exhibit at the invitation of Nathan Mason, Curator of Public Art for the City of Chicago. It was displayed in the Pedway beneath the Daley Center in 2006.

(Vicki Starr continuation)

Finally, we mourn the death of Vicky Starr, November 26, 2009. Under the name of Stella Nowicki, she was one of the three women featured in the acclaimed film *Union Maids* which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1978. Staughton and Alice Lynd included interviews with Vicky in both of their well-known books, *Rank and File* and the recent sequel *The New Rank and File*. She had been a packinghouse worker in the formative years of the UPWA.

In the 1970s as a clerical employee at the University of Chicago she became a leading figure in the organization of Teamsters Local 743. A long-time ILHS member, Vicky bequeathed to us her work apron and union dues buttons from her days on the sliced bacon line at the Swift & Co. Chicago plant. Gifts in her honor have been received at ILHS from many of her friends and admirers.

