

The Centralia Massacre

Following World War I a Wobbly is lynched by the American Legion

Alon K. Raab

1995

As we travel north on Oregon's Highway Five, from Portland towards Seattle, places and names go by: Castle Rock, Cougar, Mt. St. Helens, Onalaska. A November rain is falling, light rain, blessed rain. We cross the Chehalis river and then approach Centralia, Washington.

There are places whose names remain connected with the past, with a specific event that will forever remind strangers of their existence. Bhopal, Selma, Auschwitz, Soweto and Chernobyl are such places. People begin lives anew on those sites, building houses, giving birth, loving, but the associations persist. Centralia also has its beast of memory.

In 1919, a fateful event, later known as "The Centralia Massacre," occurred in this seemingly typical mill town. It was a time and a place where local businessmen, police, press, and judicial system, combined to murder workers and commit a travesty of justice. A town where the forces of hatred were unleashed upon those who were perceived as less than human. A town that is just beginning to address what happened.

On the day before Thanksgiving 1994, seventy-five years after the events, my friend Seth and I are on the road. We pass by a gigantic highway billboard, erected by a local farmer. The specific targets of his attacks are changed often, but the scorn heaped on anyone to the left of the John Birch Society is constant.

Further on we are assaulted by the acrid stench produced by the town's local mill. When the road sign for Centralia appears, we take the exit into town, and into a past full of darkness and shame, but also of resistance and into a present that is slowly being streaked with light.

The Meshal, Taitinapam, Cowlitz and Nisqually tribes lived here for thousands of years before being driven away, as the European conquest and destruction reached the Northwest. Agriculture and the lumber industry soon controlled the life of the town.

Class Combat Declaration

In the second decade of this century, Centralia was not only a center of production but also of workers' activity. The most influential group was the IWW—Industrial Workers of the World. The Wobblies, as they were known, were radicals whose constitution opened with a class combat declaration, "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common." Today, unions evoke images of corrupt leaders in cahoots with company owners, but the IWW of the 1910s was a militant and revolutionary outfit.

Organizing mostly among miners, timber workers, women, and minorities, the IWW demanded better working conditions and fair pay, but also advocated the overthrow of the capitalist system by a general strike after workers were formed into One Big Union. Using innovative forms of action, from slowdowns and sabotage to humorous songs and art, the IWW was a culture of resistance.

The ruling elites perceived the Wobblies as a serious threat and responded to IWW strikes by firing upon workers, mass arrests on trumped up charges, and assassinating Wobbly organizers. In Centralia, on May 18, 1918, armed vigilantes raided the local IWW headquarters and after destroying it, marched dozens of Wobblies out of town, threatening to kill them. The Wobblies returned, however and rebuilt their office. On Armistice day, November 11, 1919, an American Legion parade was held amidst public knowledge that some of the marchers had plans to attack the reconstructed IWW hall.

Seventy-five years is not a long time in historical terms. At the center of Centralia we find Tower Street, where the parade marched. The Roderick Hotel in which the IWW office was located, at Second and Tower, was destroyed, and the block was not rebuilt. Closing my eyes, I could almost hear the sounds of the parade, the drums, the stomping, and then the storming of the hall.

As the doors were torn open, armed Wobblies defended themselves, and four Legionnaires were shot to death. One of the Wobbly defenders, Wesley Everest, fled towards the Skookumchuck River, but could not cross the swelling waters. Cornered by his angry pursuers, he shot at them, wounding one, before being captured. Led back into town, he was severely beaten by Legionnaires, Boy Scouts, and town people, until his head was a bloody mass of welts.

He was taken to the town jail, already crowded with his fellow workers, and tossed bleeding on the freezing cement floor outside of the cell block. As night fell, electricity to the city was suddenly cut off, and a mob of armed men entered the jail and seized Everest. The other Wobblies were behind locked cell doors and were thus spared. Everest was shoved into a car, castrated, and led to a bridge over the Chehalis river. A rope was fastened to his neck and he was tossed over the railing. Still breathing, he was hung again and shot, to the cheers of hundreds of Centralia's good citizens.

Several blocks away, we stand by the old police station, still in operation. Next to it is the office of *The Centralia Chronicle*. During the first two decades of the century this paper fanned the flames of hatred towards the "reds." The day following the lynching, it praised the mob action as "the natural result of a red handed revolutionary getting his just deserts without loss of time or the painfully slow process of law."

We enter The Book Quest, a store, located in the town's center. Alongside the popular books of Jean Auel and Chaim Potok we find a large selection of books about regional history. The two young booksellers know of the 1919 events and show us several titles, including the 1920 pamphlet, *The Centralia Conspiracy*, written by IWW writer Ralph Chaplin.

One of the clerks goes next door and returns with his father, Roger Stewart. An articulate man in his early fifties, he has lived here for the past 31 years. "It was a very conservative town when I moved down here. Things have changed a bit, but just a bit," Roger says.

For many years there was a code of silence about the events. The public library was not allowed to keep materials about the case, and in the town's official history book a mere three lines are devoted to the events that made the town famous. In the early 1980s, Jackie Morgan, a Historical Society worker, tried to find out more, but her bosses warned her not to pursue the research.

"People stay here all their lives, and their parents and grandparents were involved in what occurred," Roger comments. Gesturing to a lawyer's office across the street, Roger mentions that the man's father served as the lawyer for the mill owners as well as the prosecutor in the trial of the Wobblies. Roger goes on to describe how Wobblies were hunted like animals and charged with murder. Eight of the men were convicted and languished in jail for two decades.

None of the lynch mob was ever tried even though their identities were well known. They were all leading citizens, lawyers, doctors, store owners, church-goers. They hid their actions for many years, preferring to present their version of what happened. "In this town there are just too many skeletons in the closet," adds Roger. "Who wants to find out their parents lynched a human being just because he thought differently?"

We see this official history a few minutes later at the very center of town, by the library. Along marble slab leads toward a large statue. On it are the names of townspeople killed in U.S. wars, from World War I to Desert Storm, with space left for the names of future cannon fodder in the service of the empire. Entitled *The Sentinel*, the statue is a larger than life soldier standing and gazing vigilantly outward.

On the base of the monument is an inscription praising the Legionnaires who died during the assault on the IWW headquarters, “slain while on peaceful parade. It was their destiny—rather it was their duty—the highest of us is but a sentry at his post.” The statue and its location at the heart of this town frame the context in which the city leaders chose to enshrine the past in the collective memory.

Roger phones his friend John Baker and informs him of our interest in the 1919 events, and we are invited over. Baker is the owner of Sticklin Greenwood Memorial Park, where Everest is buried.

Driving through the town, past taverns with “No Firearms Allowed” signs, down a street lined with fast food restaurants and a lone cafe advertising espresso, we turn north, and, by the freeway, see John. Tall and thin, with sharp movements, bespectacled with closely cropped hair, he is raking leaves. As we get out of the car he greets us with a handshake.

Twenty years ago he taught philosophy in Florida, but his wife inherited land in Washington. When he arrived, he discovered their 30 acres included the cemetery. The marriage ended, but John remained. The walls of his house are covered with dozens of paintings given to him by mourners. John tells us he has become so immersed in the life of Wesley Everest and the events surrounding his death that he even changed the last four digits of his phone number to 1919.

I am always amazed by people who retain every bit of information about the Kennedy assassination or UFO sightings, and Baker possesses a similar memory. Gesturing with his hands, he speaks passionately about bullet projectiles, the position of the IWW workers when their hall was raided, the various books that were written and the various shortcomings of their accounts, as well as of his current research into the true identity of William Shakespeare.

An Unmarked Grave

My head is swirling with names and figures as we walk to the cemetery. My favorite cemeteries are London’s High Gate and Prague’s old burial grounds, full of shrubs and bent stones. Here, however, crypts stand in rows, like cars in a parking lot, creating an eerie effect. After his murder, Everest’s body was dumped into an unmarked grave. Fifteen years later a marker was erected bearing the IWW emblem. It announces simply and without detail, “In memory of Wesley Everest, Killed Nov. 11, 1919, age 32.” A man’s life squeezed into a single date. An identity in stone.

The dead Legionnaires and the local elite are buried in the town’s other cemetery, so Wesley’s peace is assured. Several years ago, a Centralia resident, Goldie Horst, began to place flowers by the grave, fulfilling the request of a friend who knew Everest. Only our visit and the sound of an occasional crow make a dent in Wesley’s eternal rest.

John suggests we go to the Lewis County Historical Museum where, for the first time in 75 years, an exhibit about the 1919 events is displayed. The museum sits by the Chehalis railroad tracks and an old military tank is stationed at its entrance. Wondering what secrets this machine of death is guarding, we enter.

The museum resembles many other county museums I have visited—a collection of knickknacks honoring the lives of the area’s pioneers and their wealthy descendants, with barely a word about the Native Americans who inhabited the land or the workers who made the wealth possible. Yet here, nestled between dance shoes of society ladies and a fancy car from a bygone era, is a small wall devoted to the events that drew us to the town.

The exhibit consists of photos and newspaper reprints, with short captions. It seems like an attempt to provide even handed treatment. The union is presented as an organization with a clear and legitimate political agenda and the repression it experienced is described. There is biographical information about Wesley Everest, from his birth in Newberg and Portland childhood, to his union organizing. There is even information about his participation in a 1913 Coos Bay strike, where armed company goons forced him to crawl in the streets and kiss an American flag before beating him up and leaving him for dead in a ditch.

The curator, Brenda O’Conner explains that she tried to present “just the facts.” The exhibit has aroused much interest, she tells us, and save for the grumbling of several older war veterans, has been well received. Another museum worker, Jane Brock, a woman in her early fifties, joins the conversation. “I grew up in Centralia, but I

always believed the Wobblies' side of the story. What was done to them was a terrible thing, a shameful thing. It is good that at last the town is confronting its past."

Ideology of Greed

The museum exhibit is a step in the right direction. However, any attempt to situate the events of 1919 in the context of other struggles for social and economic justice is missing. Nineteen nineteen is not just ancient history. The forces that controlled the town 75 years ago are the same ones still dominant today, in Centralia, in Portland, everywhere. The local mill owners have been replaced by multinationals and their methods of repression are usually subtler since resistance has lessened. However, their ideology of greed and their willingness to use violence against those who would challenge their rule is as powerful as ever.

As we drive out of town, passing by the spot where Wesley Everest's body swayed from a trestle (still known by the locals as Hangman's Bridge), I think of the need to build alternatives to the way the world was ruled in 1919 and still is today. Not waiting for the revolution, but as Wesley Everest and the Wobblies believed, engaging in the important task of creating the new within the shell of the old.

Alon K. Raab's "The Revolt of the Bats" appeared in FE #343, Fall/Winter 1993.

fifth Estate

Alon K. Raab
The Centralia Massacre
Following World War I a Wobbly is lynched by the American Legion
1995

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/346-summer-1995/the-centralia-massacre>
Fifth Estate #346, Summer, 1995

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net