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THE HISTORY OF THE LA CROSSE RUBBER MILL

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INTRODUCTION TO LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the United States changed from being a predominantly agricultural nation to become a predominantly industrial nation. This transition was characterized by the rise of the factory system. It encouraged migration from rural regions to urban centers (pulling the sons and daughters of the farming community); and it encouraged emigration from Europe (~~Harenem~~, ^{Harenem, Tamara} Family Time Industrial Time). By the mid twentieth century the United States had experienced a second industrial revolution, characterized by light as opposed to heavy industry and consumerism. Henry T. Ford's assembly line epitomized the drive for efficiency and mass-production during this time. Since then, there had been another shift; towards service industries. The last few decades have seen the advent of foreign competition, multinational corporations, and corporate take overs.

It's safe to conclude that industry in the United State has changed dramatically. The factories of the 1800's were labour intensive; yet there was a need for skilled labourers who brought with them traditional celebrations and recreations (~~Harenem~~, ^{ven} ~~non~~). On these lines the factory was important socializing agent; formally and informally. Formally the factory owners often provided food, lodging, and in some cases moral instruction from their employees. The textile mills in Amoskeag, Massachusetts, provided social services such as parks and playgrounds. Informally, the work

place played and important role in the inaction of young men and women, facilitating the quest for independence. In Amoskeag there was definite sense of belonging (according to interviews and diaries).

Needless to say, mechanization and mass production transformed the work place. It was no longer necessary to employ and cater for large numbers of employees. Machines displaced skilled labourers and artisans. In Lynn, Massachusetts, for example, the sewing machine threatened the role played by shoe-makers who used traditional methods (Dawley, Alan Class and Community). Increasingly, work and leisure became separate enmities. The paternalism evident in places like Amoskeag during the 1800's has gradually been replaced by an impersonal and efficiency minded bureaucracy.

Herbert Gutman looks at industrial disputes and strikes and sees a recurring pattern. For instance when rural dweller began to work in the first factory there was cultural conflict which contributed to employers/employee tension (Gutman, Herbert Work, Culture, and Society in Industrial America). The same can be said of immigrants making the adjustment from rural Poland to urban Pittsburgh. Similarly when new machines and mass production, were introduced in the twentieth century there was cultural conflict. Tradition work habit were disrupted and Gutman argues that this was reflected in disputes (Gutman, Herbert). This paper sets out to examine industrial disputes at the La Crosse Rubber mill from Gutman's point of view. We will outline the

history of the Mill to see if it reflects the changes already discussed and concentrate on five disputes before reaching a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LA CROSSE RUBBER MILL

The La Crosse Rubber Mill was first incorporated in 1897 with 50,000 in capital from sixteen shareholders, all of whom were from La Crosse (Linder, Barabar Jane A Dissertation on the La Crosse Rubber Mill P 95). The original President and Vice-President were Albert Hirshheimer and Michael Funk, respectively (Linder P 96). Albert Hirshheimer was born in Germany in 1848. He worked as a blacksmith in a plow shop on La Crosse's North Side until he gained enough capital and skill to purchase the shop himself in 1865. Thirty years later the shop was 125 times greater in earnings. Albert Hirshheimer was President at the mill until 1922 (Linder, p 98). He died two years later a millionaire.

Michael Funk also was born in Germany and emigrated to the U. S. He first settled in Chicago in 1852, and thirteen years later moved to La Crosse to open a boiler works Business (Linder p 100). Like Mr. Hirshheimer, Michael Funk died a millionaire in 1922 (Linder P 100).

The Rubber Mill originally produced rubber coated rain jackets (macintosh's). But in 1906 the company made a risky decision and converted to the production of footwear. It turned out to be a profitable decision. In 1913 the mill was turning out 6,000 pairs of shoes a day (La Crosse Rubber Mill

Publication). By 1923 production had reached 40,000 pairs and was still growing (La Crosse Mill Publication). In 1925 the mill employed some 1200-1500 people, most of who were residents of La Crosse's North Side.

CHAPTER 1 THE 1915 STRIKE

Business at the La Crosse Rubber Mill was strong in 1915 when Frank Chopieska started discussing with fellow employees, the possibility of joining the Rubber Boot and Shoe Workers Union Number 14791, a branch of the AFL (Linder 102). Employer-employee relations were good at he time, and except for the issues of sick and death benefits, neither side had any serious complaints. This is why Frank Chopieska, and three other employees, were shocked to learn that they had been dismissed when they reported for work March 1 (Linder P 102). The men had been assured that their work had been satisfactory and that the acting manager (Albert Funk) had ordered their dismissal claiming that the men had been "agitators and dissatisfied men" (Linder P 103). The four men; Frank Chopieska (acting president), Sam Orten (Vice president), Emil Rice (treasure), and one other employee immediately contacted John Rae, the leader of La Crosse's Trades and Labour Council (Linder p 97). They also contacted Fred Hartwell, the local attorney for the AFL. On Rae's and Hartwell's advice, the four men arranged a meeting with Mr. Funk. Funk assured them of their suspicions, that their work had been satisfactory and that they had been fired

because of their attempts to unionize, Hartwell then contacted Albert Funk and tried to set up a meeting to discuss the situation. Mr. Funk refused to meet with any members associated with the union. On this point he would be very adamant throughout the dispute. On Friday Funk told the four union organizers that they would not be rehired under any circumstances. Later that day Funk called a mass meeting at the mill at which time he discharged all of the employees and stated that the factory would reopen on Monday morning and all employees not associated with the union would be reinstated, except for the original four (Linder P 98). That evening the employees held a meeting and decided to set up a picket line on Monday March 8. That Monday 138 employees (roughly one-third) refused to return to work under the conditions of the company (Linder P 98).

The first day of picketing was peaceful. In the afternoon the workers conducted a march downtown to rally public support. At this time Rae telegraphed Samuel Compers and requested a national officers. The following day John D. Chubbuck, National Organizer for AFL in Minneapolis, arrived (Linder P 102). Also at this time the management for the Rubber Mill announced that they had 100 names on a waiting list and that they would begin hiring people immediately, without hurting production a great deal. This probably was a lie, for three-fourths of the striking workers were employed in the boot and shoe room (requiring the most skilled employees). It is most likely that the names on the list

were for non-skilled personal. By all estimates production suffered during the five week strike.

On March 11, La Crosse Mayor Sorenson met with the management, and again they steadfast refused to meet with any union representatives (Linder P 105). The dispute was now considered national in scope and Chubbuck would be the acting representative of the AFL. Later that day unions members paraded downtown carrying signs conveying such sentiments as; "We are being denied our rights as American citizens", "This is no strike, this is a lockout", and "Thank God no one has a monopoly on air" (Linder P 109).

With the strike into its second week their began some concern over financial assistance for the striking workers. Chubbuck originally assured the union members that the national office would supply them with funds. Later he reneged, citing a policy that stipulated the local office must supply the donations, unless the dispute continues for a lengthy duration (Linder P 112). As it turned out this would not be a strong deterrent. Organized labour in La Crosse responded with donations from retail clerks, electrical workers, carpenters, plumber, box makers, and streetcar workers. Also, a "tag day" was organized in which fifty women, related to the strikers, strategically placed themselves in the downtown area and asked for donations (Linder P 114). Tag day was a success and netted a large amount of money.

Up to this point the management had not met with any of

the union members or national officers. Attorney Hartwell planned on going to Madison to Talk with the Wisconsin State Industrial Commission (WSIC) (Linder P 115). This three-member board was responsible for administering and enforcing laws pertaining to labor and management. The WSIC would attempt to set up negotiations, but had no legal authority to force labour and management into bargaining. Again I want to restate that the dispute was not over any alleged "wrongdoings" by the mill, but by the employees perceived right to unionize.

So far the strike had proceeded peacefully. But on March 26, violence broke out. According to police reports, eleven picketers hid behind a row of railroads ties armed with clubs and stones. At 7:30 as employees reported for work, they were jumped by the pickets and a ruckus ensued (Linder P 123). Only minor injuries were sustained to some of the non-union employees. The police ended up arresting two pickets, Frank Chopieska (the elected President), and Charles Butrem (Linder P 123). There were some allegations that the police were in part responsible because of their bias against the strikers.

On April 12, Albert Funk finally agreed to meet with the four locked out union members and commissioner Berk (WSIC) (Linder p 128). The Meeting was completely unsuccessful. The management claimed that they only needed twenty more employees, but they would put the striking worker's names on a list and rehire them as need be. By this time many of the

striking employees has either left town, or else secured other employment in the city. With management refusing to budge, and the realized importance of the mill on the North Side, the strike would come to and end with the mill owners the victors.

CHAPTER 2 THE 1934 STRIKE

Many strikes deal with the issues of wages, hours or benefits. The 1934 strike of the La Crosse Rubber mill not only dealt with these subjects, but the desire of the workers to join unions.

The strike officially began at 6:30 PM., Tuesday April 24. The time was picked specifically for the reason that it would make sure that the night crew would not be able to finish the shoes which were on the shelves, ready to be completed and shipped (Linder P 181).

The next day the union meeting was held. The union leaders wanted the workers to fight, but in a controlled peaceful manner. They would achieve what they wanted but in a civilized manner. The workers definitely thought the company was being unfair and the company believed the workers were being foolish (Linder P 183). These ideas meant for many weeks of unsuccessful deliberation and frustrations for the city of La Crosse.

The strike did in fact run smoothly. Picketers never had to be subdued or controlled by the police. They in fact had their own "Police" to make sure their picket line was a

peacefully, well-mannered one.

On May 2, it was leaked by some one to the press that a group of workers wanted to form and return back to work (Linder P 197). This rumor also turned out to be much of nothing, and the strike proceeded as planned.

On Thursday, May third the union and the company agreed to negotiate (Linder P 195). No progress was made by this meeting, as were many more to come.

Several, in a series of meetings were held and the same things discussed but to no avail. One or the other (Company or union) would become intolerant of the other. The union thought the company didn't recognize the union enough or made effort enough to increase the worker's wages.

Soon the parties became annoyed and a regional board was decided upon to investigate the background of the strike. This event was to be one of historical importance because few had ever been held in the United States, and none were in La Crosse. This turned out to be relatively futile. The company's main complaint bordered on the fact that if they increased their wages they would never be able to compete with other rubber mills, therefore going belly up and abandoning the mill at La Crosse.

The La Crosse Tribune, May 14, 1934 released a statement saying:

The real issue in this strike is the effort by the United Rubber Worker's union to force the La Crosse Rubber Mills company to impose a 'closed shop upon its community' (La Crosse Tribune May 15). Again another arbitration attempt was to be held. On

May 21 a brief description was give to the members of the arbitrational committee. The members couldn't come upon a decision in the meeting hall and went fishing, hopefully trying to solve the answer that way. Still no decision or recommendation was given (Linder P. 212).

Finally seven weeks after the arbitration council met a decision was agreed upon. Some fifty workers started back to work at the mill, only to find themselves on strike six days later (Linder P. 247).

This time the strike seemed more heated and intense, pickters march on the home of Willam Funk. The meaning behind the second strike was not immediately visible, but later it was told that the sheets with the concessions were to be posted on viable bulletin boards inside the mill with the management's names on them. The last stipulation was not met on one signature wasn't to be found posted on the bulletin boards (Linder P. 249). The second strike within this ended shortly and the names appeared on the documents. July 5, 1934 the strike ended and both parties involved came out form their sided in good standing (Linder P. 251).

The strike of 1934 seems to add to the idea that culturally people were becoming discontent with the company's unwillingness to allow unionization. This is a prime example that strikes during this time not always dealt with wages, benefits or hours.

CHAPTER 3 THREE DECADES OF GROWTH

The 1940's and 50's were important decades for the company. In 1940 the conveyor system featuring the most up to date machinery was introduced (Company Brochure 1945). Mass production increased the plants output ten times. Through this period the plant itself was modernized and expanded. This is effected by the use of express trains to distribute products (Company Brochure 1945).

The company undoubtedly benefited from the post war boom, shifting its emphasis from heavy footwear like farm and industrial to light footwear like casual shoes, canvas tennis shoes, and basketball boots. Consumerism was in by 1962 the plant was producing 20,000 pairs of shoes a day compared to 1,200 in 1912. There were more brands than ever before, including thirty-one brands of casual canvas shoes; and 'sneakers' endorsed by the Green Bay Packers Bart Star (La Crosse Tribune October 1974). On these other lines the company's development can be said to reflect the general pattern discussed in the introduction.

There were two strikes during the 1940's. The first was in October of 1941; 800 workers went out on strike with two related objectives (La Crosse Tribune October 1941). They wanted the right to form a local union and they wanted the company to recognize their right to collective bargaining (La Crosse Tribune October 1941). The right to collective bargaining is guaranteed by law so the company didn't have a leg to stand on; and because of this the strike lasted only a

week (La Crosse Tribune October 1941). Neither side was willing to speak to the press in any great detail so it is difficult to evaluate the strike from Gutman's point of view. It maybe that in light of the transformation that occurred during the period, the strike resented and attempt by the workers to ensure their position in a rapidly changing environment.

The second dispute in which occurred in 1945 saw the workers demanding new machinery and new tools (La Crosse Tribune October 1945).

The company maintained growth through the 1950's and 1960's. By the 1970's however the company forced increasing competition form foreign companies and sales dropped. Several branches were dropped and there was a new emphasis on efficiency. Not surprisingly the two strikes that occurred during this period one in October 1974 and one in October 1980 and they revolved around wages. Taking the 1974 strike as an example, the company offered a thirty-one cent per hour increase. The union rejected this offer and on the twentieth day of October went out on strike. Two weeks late the union accepted a thirty-five cent per hour increase. At first glance looking at the strike from Gutman's perspective it's important to see that younger employees were more willing to strike that older ones. Their may be practical reasons for this, such as family responsibility; but it could be argued that younger generations have grown up in a society which doesn't expect people to stay at one job for there whole

life.

CHAPTER 4 THE DECADES OF THE 1980s AND 1990s

The decade of the 1980s was kind of had a rocky beginning because the company was under a series of takeover bids from all over the globe. In 1982 the La Crosse Rubber Mill was going to be sold to Endicott-Johnson for 4.5 million dollars; but first it had to get approval from the FTC (federal trade commission) which they quickly got (La Crosse Tribune April 19, 1982 Section A, P 1). Endicott-Johnson next had to promise to keep the corporate headquarter in La Crosse, which they did; and next get a majority vote from the shareholders. When it was time to vote the shareholder received a letter from Endicott-Johnson saying that they might move the headquarters from La Crosse and dispose of the local management, subsequently they voted the takeover down (La Crosse Tribune April 19, 1982). In the middle of the year another takeover bid came in but this time it was someone they could trust it was by the current president Frank Uhler Jr an his friend from California George Schneder and the subsequent sale was approved in June 21, 1982 (La Crosse Tribune June 21, 1982 Section A, P 1).

On January 2, 1986 the company decided to change their name from the La Crosse Rubber Mill to La Crosse Footwear because they felt that the new name is a better representative of the nature of products that they sell (La Crosse Tribune January 2, 1986 P 9). Another reason is for

the change is through advertising they found out that this name sound better than the old one (La Crosse Tribune January 2). Later in the year the company decided to expand because of additional sales in the area of sporting goods shoes and other footwear lines (La Crosse Tribune July 16, 1986 P 8). This new plant is being built in the state of Wisconsin. On July 18, 1986 the company announced that they were going to have a plant in Hillsboro because Hillsboro has been a supplier of liners for the leather topped PAC line (La Crosse Tribune July 19, 1986 P 8). This plant will employ sixty to eighty people and it is a real boost to the Hillsboro economy because they have had some recent shutdown in there. The next major event for the company is they instituted a profit sharing plan where the employee will receive a percentage of the companies net profits. Because of this idea the company received the prestigious La Crosse Labour Appreciation award for such an innovated idea (La Crosse Tribune 1986). The fortunes for the company turn around in 1988 where they had a strike.

Union workers (members of Local 14 of the United Rubber workers) scheduled to strike at midnight Saturday (La Crosse Tribune October 16, 1988). The dispute involved the two sides not coming to an agreement on a new three year contract. They turned down an offer by a vote of 331 to 94 that would have given them a twenty-five cent increase an hour the first year and a ten cent boost in each of the next two years (La Crosse Tribune October 16, 1988).

The President Frank Uhler Jr. said work rules that govern the movement of people inside the plant is a fundamental issue but there may be others (La Crosse Tribune October 17, 1988). The Union president Madelin Dahlby said that workers want justice, dignity and equality on the jobs (La Crosse Tribune October 17, 1988). She continued to say that employees are not being treated fairly at work (La Crosse Tribune October 17, 1988).

The company did not stand idle during the strike they met with the head of the union almost everyday, and it seem that every time they got close that there was something that got in the way of an agreement. On Thursday October 25, 1988 the members on the union's bar committee reached an agreement with the company and they expect that the union workers will vote yes for the new deal (La Crosse Tribune October 26, 1988). The company expects that 500 of the 600 workers to be on the job Monday. On October 27 the union workers members accept the contract calling for a twenty-five cent increase the first year and twenty cent and hour the second year and fifteen cent and hour the third and final year of the contract (La Crosse Tribune October 28, 1988). The most important part of the compromise is that the employes will have more say in the job that they will working and more autonomy to change jobs (La Crosse Tribune 28, 1988). One reason that they settled the strike so quickly is because they were heading into their busy period and the company will loose a lot of money; they were already loosing a substantial

amount during the strike. Another reason is that they are under contract by the federal government and they felt that the company can live with this decision.

I believe that Gutman was right this strike was not about money but about the freedom for the workers to move from job to job based on seniority. The worker did get a pay increase but this was not the main motivation behind the strike.

Some recent development to the plant is on March 5, 1990 the La Crosse footwear said that the total shipments for 1989 reached 50 million dollars for the first time in the history of the company (La Crosse Tribune March 5, 1990 Section B, P 2). A month later the Company has struck a deal with the neighbors to add a two million dollar distribution center. The city planing commission gave approval to the plan which proposes closing of a 200 feet section of Prospect Street, which is to the south of St. Andrews Street (La Crosse Tribune April 4, 1990 Section A, P 7). This building will make possible for La Crosse Footwear organize inventory and shipments greater and serve its expanding customers (La Crosse Tribune April 4, 1990). The company had a four month conflict with the neighbors to get it passed. The company enter into a ten point plan including restrictions on building height and widths, an assurance to landscape, and a pledge not to destroy most large tree during construction (La Crosse Tribune April 4, 1990).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is little doubt that the history of the La Crosse Rubber Mills reflects the history of industry in the United states as a whole. When the mill was founded in 1897 there was an emphasis on skilled labour. Workers were involved with every stage of production and often turned out the finished product unaided. By 1925 there was an emphasis on machinery although the mill remained labour intensive (Company Brochure 1925). Products were shipped out on trucks as opposed to horse and carts and the plant itself, was expanded. In the 1940 the conveyor system and mass production were introduced and the mill was producing more shoes and more varieties of shoes than ever before. As stated consumerism was in; the mill produced canvas casuals, tennis shoes, and basketball boots to meet the demanded. By the 1970's foreign competition dampened the mill's prospect and as company entered the 1980's it was nearly taken over by a multinational corporation. The company responded to the market in the 1940's and it did so in the 1980's, dropping a wide variety brands to concentrate on high quality outdoor footwear. Today there's an emphasis on advertising and marketing and company has recently reported record profits. There changes undoubtedly reflect the transformation discussed in the introduction.

The strikes at the mill also reflect changes in industry and society as a whole. The 1915 strike centered around a

small number of artisans and skilled workers who were predominantly male. In the 1941 strike involved 800 workers (both male and female). The 1915 strike involved the community, some people gave food to strikers' families while others marched with the strikers. The mayor intervened in disagreement between the owners and workers. Yet in recent years there has been general apathy towards strikes. As far as Gutman's concept of receiving pattern of cultural conflict is concerned, there is no clear conclusion. Before the 1915 strike the plant was expanded. Before the 1934 strike the company introduced new policy emphasizes efficiency. Before the 1941 strike the conveyor system was introduced. The 1988 strike received around management in the plant, which seemed important to those workers and groups we talked to at the mill. These disputes support Gutman's concept; working habit were disrupted or the workers rights were threatened and they reacted. Needless to say, there were often strikes where this wasn't the case. In 1945 the workers went out on strike because they wanted new machinery. It is perhaps best to leave on that conclusion.

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