

Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation

(nonprofit 501(c)3 – Tax ID #87-1825043)

October Newsletter, 2023

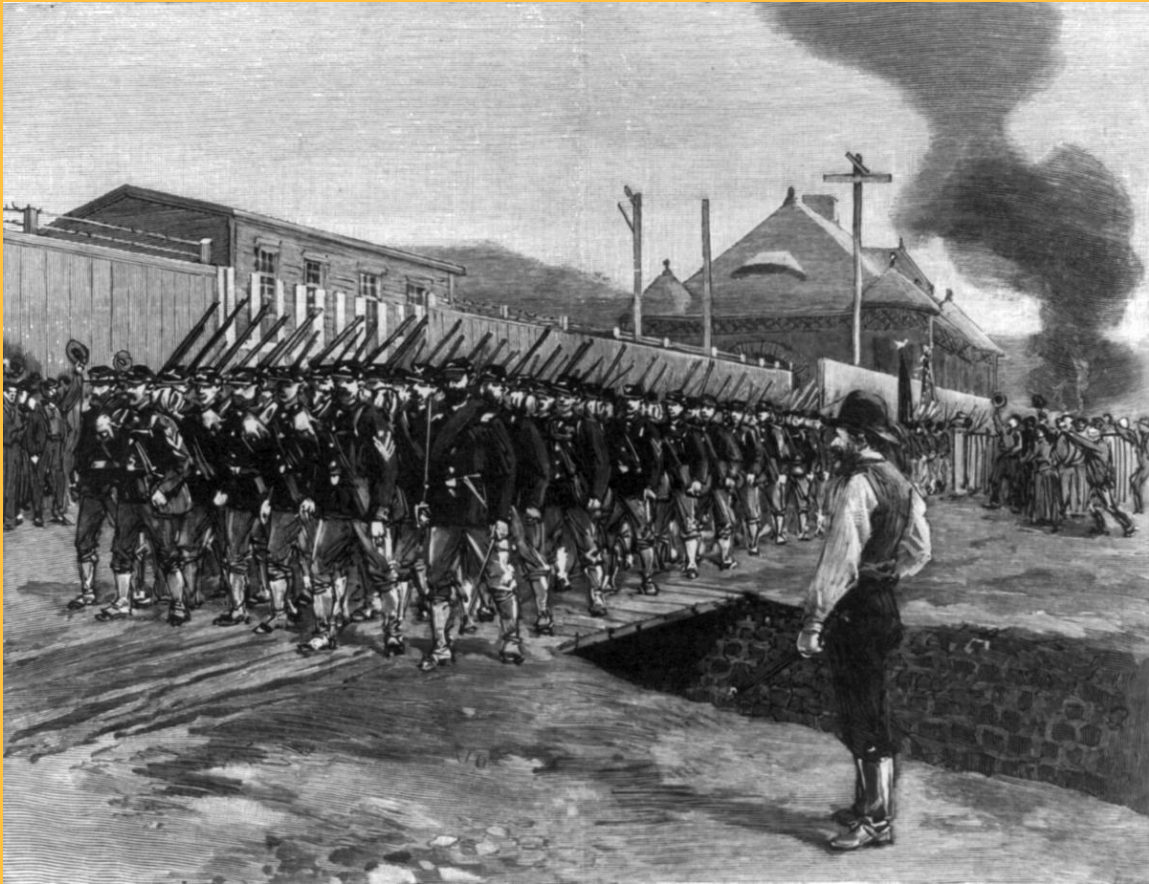
This is a Story About the Amador "War" of 1871

There is good reason you may have never heard of this “war”. There was no ACTUAL war, but rather the *Amador War* was the name given by the press to an early labor conflict affecting the Amador County gold mines. The “Amador War of 1871” was the first of four strikes affecting local gold mines.

The First Strike – 1871

The strike was called on June 1, 1871. Several well-armed members of the Amador County Labor Association (also known as the Miners' League, and called the Amador Communists in the San Francisco press) “visited” various mines in the county demanding higher wages for miners. Violence against owners and managers as well as destruction of equipment, was threatened if demands were not met. Only a small number of local miners were members of the Miners' League, however mine owners decided to close down operations in order to prevent any violence or workplace “accidents”. The strike had effectively stopped the entire local gold mining industry. The Miners' League was demanding that the minimum wage for miners be increased from \$2.25 to \$2.50 per day for the lowest wage earners.

Local law enforcement was not of sufficient numbers to provide protection to the mines. An attempt was made to call up the Volcano Blues militia, however, the militia roster was locked in a safe (which was not able to be opened) so the owners petitioned the Governor for assistance. The June 24, 1871 Ledger Dispatch reported that the entire first regiment of the California National Guard was being dispatched to “*stop the mischievous proceedings of the strikers at*



California National Guard marching to quell disturbances.

This deployment of 177 soldiers appears to have been far in excess of what was needed. However, as reported in the June 24, 1871 Dispatch “perhaps they did not have anything else to do”. It is unclear exactly where the troops were encamped. Some say they occupied the itinerant miners camp located at the current Miners’ Bend Park, while a second detachment was stationed on Oneida Mine property, near today’s PG&E offices at the top of Jackson Gate Road. It was called Camp Morgan, named after the owner of the Oneida.



Camp Morgan located on Oneida Mine property.

Regardless of where they were stationed, the soldiers, miners, and local citizens appeared to enjoy each other's company. In fact, before departing, the troops provided a "grand musical and dramatic entertainment" in Sutter Creek to benefit the local school (which would have been the newly completed Historic Grammar School).



Typical military band - 1870's

The strike was resolved peacefully by early July. The settlement included an increased daily minimum wage and a commitment by the owners that all non-white miners would be fired (racial and ethnic discrimination and persecution was widespread throughout California's early history) and agreement that the owners retained the right to decide which striking miners would be rehired.



Chinese miners underground to be arbitrarily fired.

Although this was the end of the *Amador War*, it was far from the end of labor actions affecting the local mines.

The Second Strike – 1903

March 27, 1903, the Dispatch read "*the Western Federation of Miners is to meet at Jackson, Amador County, on Saturday and prepare demands to be presented to the mine owners*". The single major point of contention was a demand to reduce the daily hours of underground work from 10 hours to 8 hours, without a decrease in daily wage.

The settlement established a 9-hour underground workday, prevented discrimination against union members by management, allowed the owners to retain control of which striking miners would be rehired but did not give formal recognition to the union. The 9-hour workday was a very significant improvement to the already very difficult life of hard rock miners.



Hard rock mining was, and is, dangerous work.

The Third Strike - 1916

The next major action took place in 1916. This was a very unusual strike. The rumors of a pending strike and of widespread dissatisfaction of the miners were instigated and promoted by a private investigator, W.W. Holther, of Thiel Detective Agency in San Francisco. Mr. Holther eventually explained that *“conditions in the mines were becoming too quiet and that unless something was started to create excitement his salary would be cut off”*. Mr. Holther was instrumental in establishing a new Miners’ Union at the Kennedy mine, which became the driving force behind the “need for a strike”.



Kennedy Mine and miners - 1914

Eventually there was a widespread work stoppage, which affected most of the Amador region. There were several marches and protests against the mine owners, but no significant violence. On November 3, the Western Federation of Miners voted to call off the strike stating that it was never formally approved by the Federation and that the miners had been “ ill-advised and made their demands at a very inappropriate time”. This could be called the “strike that never was”.

The Fourth Strike – 1934

The last and most significant strike was in affect from October, 1934 until January, 1936. The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers called a strike on October 1, 1934.

It's interesting to note that this union was founded in Butte, Montana in 1893 as the Western Federation of Miners, later becoming the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMMSW). After World War I, it was a shell of its former self and tried to shed its radical image. IUMMSW was expelled from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1950 in an effort to rid the CIO of communist members and influenecers.

The Argonaut, Kennedy, Eureka and original Amador mines immediately ceased operation.



Original Amador Mine works in Amador City

The union demands called for recognition of the union, a ban against discrimination toward union members by the mine owners, a standard 6 day work week, and the unique demand for a floating wage scale based on \$4.50 a day to increase or decrease according to the gold prices.

These were very significant demands. At the time it was not uncommon for miners to work months at a time with very few days off. According to long time Amador County resident Amelio Fistolera, “if you wanted to take time off to go fishing you had to work a double shift and trade schedules with someone else to provide you with a “day off”. “If you did not like the schedule, you could quit but there was a line of people outside waiting to take your place”.



Waiting for work - 1935

It is important to remember that this strike was called in the middle of the Great Depression. Millions of men had no work at all. The Amador County economy had been somewhat protected by the critical importance of the gold mining industry to the local, state, and national economy.

In response to the huge impact the strike had on the local economy, a group of local citizens formed the American Protective League of Amador County. The stated objectives of the group were to "Protect labor, protect employers, and most importantly to protect the general public of Amador County." The league called for the reopening of the mines staffed by non-union workers, for the benefit of the unemployed and the local economy as reported in the February 8 article abstracted below;

Whereas, an intolerable condition exists in Amador County, because of the local strike situation, which requires immediate action, if serious and permanent injury to the general welfare of the county is to be obviated;

Whereas, needlessly, and in direct opposition to Governmental efforts

to provide employment, through private enterprise, the local strike is stifling the mining industry of the county, by the refusal of the strikers to accept the available employment, and by their taking the stand that no other employees shall be permitted to accept the employment which they, themselves, decline;

And, whereas, employment is the vital element in the programs of economic recovery, of both our National and our State Governments, and millions of dollars are being expended, by both governments, in the effort to provide employment, and, therefore, Patriotism calls aloud for the community to assert itself, and to see that the employment at our mines is made available to those who are willing to accept same;

Therefore, be it resolved that this Association shall call upon the mines of this county to resume operations, and that we pledge the Association to see that those who are given employment shall receive that protection to which they, under the law, are entitled."

Although the League position had no effect upon the strike itself, it did result in the almost immediate reopening of several of the mines. Unfortunately, the act of reopening the mines staffed by non-union 'strike breakers" resulted in a series of serious conflicts between the out of work union members and the non-union miners which had returned to work.



Strike breakers going to work.

As the strike continued, the conflict between the out of work union members and the non-union workers increased.

Union Pickets Dispersed By Citizens This Morning

Determination that employees of the Argonaut and the Original Amador mines should be protected from violence, prompted a large group of residents of this county to proceed to the two mines this morning where pickets of the Mother Lode Miners Union had congregated, and make a determined request that there be no further interference with the operation of the mines.

The action of the citizens prompted an outbreak yesterday afternoon when members of the picket group began throwing stones, eggs and mud at the mine employees and officers assembled to escort them to this city from the Argonaut mine. The glass in several machines forming the escort caravan was broken and several persons of that group were struck by missiles or shattered glass. Resultant of this outbreak five arrests were made, these being:


The strike continued through Christmas, 1935. In appreciation of their continued support during the strike, mine owners rewarded their non-union employees with special Christmas bonuses and a unique celebration as described below:

Mining Companies Present Gifts to Employees Christmas

Employees of the Argonaut Mining Company were the guests of the company at a Christmas tree party held on the 5500 foot level of the mine on Tuesday morning. A tree had been placed in the big stope at the underground station and was brilliantly lighted and adorned with ornaments. A specially arranged electric sign greeted the guests with a "Merry Christmas." A brief program had been arranged for the occasion which provided fun in unusual surroundings.

One hundred and ninety-eight employees of the Argonaut Mining Company were presented with Christmas gifts of \$25 each on the occasion of the holiday this week. The gifts were presented by the directors of the company to all the employees that had served during the past six months.

The Kennedy Mining and Milling Company presented checks of \$20 to each of fifty men who had remained with the company during the period of the late labor disturbance.



The strike was finally called off by the union in early January, 1936. There was no new contract or formal agreements regarding any of the original demands.

With the exception of the strike in 1903, which produced the 9-hour workday, none of the strikes produced any significant improvements to the work life of the hard rock miner.



Does this look slightly dangerous?

Industrial scale hard rock gold mining was suspended by Federal Order 208 in 1942 which closed the mines for the duration of World War II. Very few of the mines were ever reopened.



Closed! By Executive Order - 1942

If you or someone you know has any firsthand accounts of life as a hard rock miner, please do not hesitate to share them with us at info@sccbf.org.

References.

Ledger Dispatch Archives
California Military Museum.org

SAVE THE DATE
NOVEMBER 28, 2023

AMADOR GI ING TUESDAY

Do you know someone who would like to receive our newsletters? Send contact information to info@sccbf.org to be added to our distribution list.

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SCCBF's current renovation project is the Historic Sutter Creek Grammar School which is rich in Gold Rush history. This beautiful building is California's second oldest two-story brick schoolhouse. There are four rooms within the Historic Grammar School that can be rented.



Contact the City of Sutter Creek for information on rates and availability - (209) 267-5647 ext. 230 or email info@cityofsuttercreek.org / [website - cityofsuttercreek.org](http://website-cityofsuttercreek.org)

The Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation (SCCBF) is dedicated to the restoration, preservation, and development of the community's historic assets both now and for future generations. (nonprofit 501(c)3 – Tax ID #87-1825043)

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