

LABOR UNREST IN JEFFERSON COUNTY 1877

Labor unrest swept through the industrialized areas of the United States in the 1870s, and despite its mainly rural economy, Jefferson County was not immune. A series of railroad strikes swept from the east coast to the west and came to Urbana, East St. Louis, Mt. Vernon, and McLeansboro in Illinois.

After an economic downturn in the early 1870s railroads cut workers' wages, and they spontaneously reacted by withholding services and blocking the trains. Railroad owners and managers with the help of federal and state authorities reacted quickly and harshly against what they considered to be mob action. Many of those in the Illinois dispute either had strong connections to Jefferson County or were from Jefferson County.

The Railroad Troubles Begin

The Illinois railroad problems began in 1874 as the Indianapolis, Bloomington and Western Railroad and the St. Louis and Southeastern Railway (later known as the Louisville and Nashville Railroad) went bankrupt, owing their workers at least six months of back wages. The machine shops of the St. Louis and Southeastern in Mt. Vernon burned to the ground on May 27, 1874, with an estimated loss of \$100,000. Although there isn't proof that the fire was started by the workers, it must have caused suspicions. The following report was published in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*.

MOUNT VERNON, ILL., May 27.—The machine shops of the St. Louis and Southeastern Railway took fire at 7 o'clock this evening, and now (8:45) the entire building and machinery are total wrecks. The loss is in the neighborhood of \$100,000. There is no fire department in town, and the citizens are all exerting themselves to the utmost, but without avail. As far as can be learned at present there is no insurance.

Both railroads went into receivership under federal district Judge Samuel Treat. (Treat was a former justice of the Illinois Supreme Court and was in Mt. Vernon for each session of the court from 1841 to 1855.) Judge Treat appointed a former vice president of the St. Louis and Southeastern Railroad, James Wilson, to head the company. (Wilson was a native of Shawneetown who became a well-known Civil War general. He was in Mt. Vernon many times, specifically the 1878 soldiers' reunion with Generals Sherman, Logan, etc.) Under the receivership Judge Treat and other federal judges ordered the lines to continue operating and issued warnings that any attempt to disrupt their operation would lead to contempt of court citations.

Prominent Mt. Vernon Men Appointed

The railroad workers of the St. Louis and Southeastern went on strike July 22, 1877, in East St. Louis. Since the line ran through Mt. Vernon and since it had shops there, Jefferson County became involved. Anticipating trouble in Mt. Vernon, James Wilson asked that Thomas S. Casey and Charles W. Pavey be appointed deputy federal marshals with authority to arrest strikers. Both of these prominent Mt. Vernon residents were appointed. Casey was a former director of the St. Louis and Southeastern and a son of former Lieutenant Governor Zadok

Casey. Pavey was an officer in the Civil War and at the time of his appointment was the commander of the 3rd Brigade of the Illinois National Guard.

The Mt. Vernon Strike

On July 26, 1877, a delegation of strikers from East St. Louis met with the shop workers in Mt. Vernon. About noon the Mt. Vernon workers voted to join the strike. However, about six hours later they met again and voted to rescind their earlier strike vote. Meanwhile on the same day Wilson telegraphed this message to Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz: "Time has come when president should stamp out mob now rampant... The law can be found for it after order is restored."

By July 28, 1877, over 1,000 federal and Illinois National Guard troops were in East St. Louis. (Governor Shelby Cullom, a frequent visitor to Jefferson County, ordered General Pavey's 3rd Brigade to move into East St. Louis.) The strike was soon over and strike leaders from Urbana, East St. Louis, Mt. Vernon, and McLeansboro were arrested.

Mt. Vernon Men on Trial

In early August of 1877 Judge Treat heard the cases of the men from Mt. Vernon. They were A.M. Rupert (alleged to have attempted to seize a train), a man named Downey, and three men—Charles Talley, Fred Baker, and Al Tankesley—who were alleged to have disabled a locomotive. Despite evidence against them from L. B. Salisbury, superintendent of the railroad shops in Mt. Vernon, Rupert and Downey were released. Talley, Baker, and Tankesley plead guilty and received ninety days in the Mt. Vernon jail.

By early September all of the strikers from Urbana, East St. Louis, Mt. Vernon, and McLeansboro were released, even though their ninety-day sentences had not been fully served. Apparently the federal judges felt that the point had been made—do not strike or you will face harsh punishment. Of course other punishment—losing their jobs and being blacklisted by the railroad companies—would continue for these men.

Source: *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (V.49, No.2) "Railroad Strikers in Court" by Elwin W. Sigmund, pp.190-209