Chapter 8

Archaeology of the Colorado Coal Field War 1913–1914

The Ludlow Collective

On the morning of April 20, 1914, Colorado National Guard troops opened fire on a tent colony of 1,200 striking coal miners at Ludlow, Colorado. They continued shooting until late afternoon, and then swept through the camp looting it and setting it aflame. When the smoke cleared twenty of the camps inhabitants were dead including two women, and twelve children. The Ludlow massacre is the most violent and the best-known event of the 1913–1914 Colorado Coal Field War, but its significance goes far beyond this struggle. The killing of women and children at Ludlow outraged the American public and helped to turn popular opinion against violent confrontations with strikers. It marks a pivotal point in U.S. history when labor relations began to move from class warfare to corporate and government policies of negotiation, co-option, and regulated strikes. Today, however, popular memory of the massacre has been largely lost outside of union circles, and the realities of class struggle in the United States buried.

The State University of New York at Binghamton, the University of Denver, and Fort Lewis College sponsor the Archaeology of the Colorado Coal Field War project. The Ludlow Collective includes faculty and students from these and other institutions. We are working to recover the memory of Ludlow and to exhume the class struggle of 1913 to 1914 in the coalfields of southern Colorado. To do this we are building an archaeology of the American working class that speaks to a working-class audience about working-class history and experience.

Class

Archaeology as a discipline serves class interests and those interests are frequently contrary to the interest of the working class in the United States. In the United States both scholars and the general public frequently confuse class with economic status and they define class in terms of income levels. This focus on income obscures the structural realities of class in the United States (Wurtz 1999). The class structure of the twentieth-century United States minimally includes three positions: (1) a bourgeoisie that owns or controls the means of production, (2) a working class that labors for wages, and (3) a middle class of administrators, professionals and small business owners who Mediate between these two classes. These classes do not form uniform masses and we can define class fractions rooted in regional, racial, and cultural differences (Patterson 1995).

Archaeology has typically served middle-class interests. It is part of the intellectual apparatus (things such as schools, books, magazines, organizations, and arts) that produces the symbolic capital (things such as esoteric knowledge, shared experience, certification, and social skills) that individuals need to be part of the middle class. This apparatus, including archaeology, developed as part of the historical struggles that created the capitalist middle class (Trigger 1989; Patterson 1995). Because it is set in the middle class, archaeology attracts primarily a middle-class following, and often does not appeal to working-class audiences (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Frykm 1990; Potter 1994: 148–9; McGuire and Walker 1999).

We feel that archaeology can be mobilized to address the interests of more than just the middle class. We seek to fuse our scholarly labor with working-class interests. We have entered into the developing dialogue between organized labor and scholars in the United States. The election of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO in 1995 has led to a revitalization of the organization as a broad-based social interest movement. As part of this movement a joint labor/academic teach-in was held at Columbia University on October 3–4, 1996 with over 2,500 people in attendance (Tomasky 1997).

We are contributing to these efforts by studying a history that has meaning for working people and addressing their interests in this history. The Colorado Coal Field War of 1913–1914 is not exotic or ancient history. It is familiar, close to home, relevant, and concerns issues that still confront workers today.

Goals of the project

Our project incorporates theoretical, scholarly, and political goals. We strive to address multiple audiences including scholars, people outside the academy, and most importantly working-class people. On a theoretical level we wish to build a praxis of archaeology that entails knowing the world, critiquing the world and changing the world.

As scholars we are integrating archaeological evidence with archival evidence to test propositions about how mundane experience shaped the strike. We are demonstrating that similarities in the day-to-day life of miners’ families crosscut ethnic and cultural differences within the community of miners, and that these similarities helped to form a common class-consciousness necessary for group action. Strikes do not just involve male miners; women and children were major participants in the 1913–1914 strike. We are showing how their participation sprang from their lived experience, and how the struggle changed that experience. We are obtaining the data to test these propositions through excavations of domestic deposits dating from the period immediately before the
strike, during the strike, and in the decade after the strike. Our results will have implications for understanding this important event in U.S. history, the process of labor struggle in the United States, and for current theoretical debates in archaeology over the forces of cultural change.

Our project is a form of memory. Our excavations at Ludlow draw attention to what happened there. Local people come out and they tell us the story of their grandmother or great uncle who lived in the camp. The excavations also attract the attention of the media, newspapers, television and radio. Our excavations make the events of 1914 news once again. We are also developing programs for students and teachers that tell the story of the strike. We do not have to recover this memory for a working-class audience, especially a union audience, but we can lend our expertise to assist them in maintaining this memory. The memory of Ludlow is strong in the United Mine Workers, the place is sacred to them. Memory is one way to address a working-class audience, to speak to their experience, in a language that they can understand, about events that interest them and about events to which they feel directly connected.

The Colorado Coal Field War of 1913–1914

In 1913 Colorado was the eighth largest coal-producing state in the United States (McGovern and Guttridge 1972). Most of this production centered on the bituminous coal fields in Huerfano and Las Animas counties north of Trinidad, Colorado. These mines primarily produced coke for the steel mills at Pueblo, Colorado. The largest company mining coal in this region was the Rockefeller-controlled Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I). This company employed approximately 14,000 miners in 1913, 70% of whom were immigrants. The conditions of the mines, and of miners’ lives, were appalling (Beshoar 1957; McGovern and Guttridge 1972; Papanikolas 1982). In 1912 the accident rate for Colorado mines was triple the national average (Whiteside 1990). The mines in southern Colorado operated in flagrant violation of several state laws that regulated safety and the fair compensation of miners. The miners lived in rude, isolated coal camps owned by the companies. Companies controlled the housing, the store, the medical facilities, the town saloon, and all recreational facilities. Company guards acted as police and regulated who could enter or leave the communities. The companies also dominated most of the local political structure and instructed their employees on how to vote. Contemporary accounts described the situation as feudal (Seligman 1914).

In 1913 the United Mine Workers (UMW) launched a massive organizing campaign in southern Colorado and launched a strike in the fall of that year (Beshoar 1957; McGovern and Guttridge 1972; Papanikolas 1982). The strikers demanded the right to unionize, higher pay, and that existing Colorado mining laws be enforced. Simultaneously the companies brought in the Baldwin Feltz detective agency to violently suppress the organizing efforts and later the strike. On September 23, 1913, over 90% of the miners left the shafts to begin the

strike. The companies forced people out of their company-owned housing and several thousand people moved into tent camps set up by the UMW. Ludlow, with approximately 150 tents and about 1,200 residents, was the largest of these camps and the UMW strike headquarters for Las Animas county (Figure 8.1). Each of these camps contained a mix of nationalities including Italians, Greeks, Eastern Europeans, Mexicans, African Americans, and Welsh.

Violence characterized the strike from the very beginning, with both sides committing shootings and murders (Beshoar 1957; McGovern and Guttridge 1972; Papanikolas 1982). In October the governor of Colorado called out the National Guard. Over the winter of 1913–1914 relations between the strikers and the guard deteriorated, especially in April when the governor removed the regular troops and the mining companies replaced them with their own employees under the command of Colorado National Guard officers. In Ludlow the strikers dug cellars under their tents as refuges for women and children.

On April 20, 1914 the Guard attacked the tent camp at Ludlow. At about 9:00 that morning the Guard commander ordered Louis Tikas, the leader of the colony, to meet him at Ludlow Station. Fearing that this might be a pretext for an attack, armed strikers took up a position in a railroad cut overlooking the station. The National Guard had positioned a machine gun on a hill one mile to the south of the tent colony. Someone fired and the guardsmen began firing the
machine gun into the tent camp. As the day progressed up to 200 guardsmen joined the fight and a second machine gun was added to the first. After a few hours of firing the tents were so full of holes that they looked like lace (Thomas 1971). The armed strikers engaged the Guard and tried to draw their fire away from the camp. In the camp there was pandemonium. Some people sought refuge in a large walk-in well, and many people huddled in the cellars under their tents. The camp’s leaders worked all day trying to get people to a dry creek bed north of the camp. In the early afternoon a 12-year-old named William Snyder came up out of a cellar to get some food and was shot dead.

As dusk gathered a train stopped in front of the machine guns and blocked their line of fire. With a brief respite from the machine gun fire the majority of the people left in the camp and the armed strikers fled, while the guardsmen swept through the camp looting and burning the tents. Four women and eleven children in a cellar below tent 58 huddled in fear while the flames consumed the tent above them. The guardsmen seized Louis Tikas and two other camp leaders and summarily executed them. When the morning came the camp was a smoking ruin and in the dark hole below tent 58 two of the women and all eleven children were dead.

Following the attack the strikers throughout southern Colorado took up arms and took control of the mining district. The strikers destroyed several company towns and killed company employees. Finally, after ten days of war, President Wilson sent federal troops to Trinidad to restore order. The strike continued until December of 1914 when a broken UMW had to call it off.

The killing of women and children at Ludlow shocked the nation (Gitelman 1988). Prominent progressives such as Upton Sinclair and John Reed used the events to demonize John D. Rockefeller Jr. The United States Commission on Industrial Relations investigated the events of the strike, and issued a 1,200 page report. In response to this national attention Rockefeller hired the first corporate public relations firm and instituted a series of reforms in the mines of southern Colorado. It is not clear what practical impacts these reforms had on the lives of miners and their families but throughout the 1920s the district was embroiled in strikes. Union recognition in southern Colorado only came with the New Deal reforms of the 1930s (McGovern and Guttridge 1972).

**What can archaeology tell us about the Colorado Coal Field War?**

Several major historical works on the strike have mined the rich archival record of documents and photos related to the Colorado Coal Field War (Beshoar 1957; McGovern and Guttridge 1972; Papanikolas 1982). These studies have focused on the events, the strike leaders, and the organizational work of the UMW. They have tended to emphasize the male miner and the commonalities of the work experience as the source of the social consciousness that united ethnically and racially diverse miners. The histories usually imply, and sometimes assert, that the miners shared a common lived experience at work but then returned to ethnically different home lives. In this way they accept a very traditional hypothesis of labor action that emphasizes the agency of men and downplays the role of women. This hypothesis tends to equate class and class struggle with active men in the workplace, and ethnicity and tradition with passive women in the home.

We, and many others, are skeptical of this traditional view (Long 1985, 1991; Beaudry and Mroczowski 1988; McGaw 1989; Cameron 1993; Shackel 1994, 1996; Mroczowski et al. 1996). We agree that ethnic identities cross-cut class in southern Colorado and that they hindered the formation of class consciousness but we question the equation of class = workplace = male, and ethnicity = home = female. Alternatively we would propose that class and ethnicity cross-cut both workplace and home, male and female. We would thus expect to find that working-class men in the mines and working-class women in the homes shared a common day-to-day lived experience that resulted from their class position and that ethnic differences divided them in both contexts.

We can demonstrate from existing analyses that ethnic divisions existed in the workplace. In southern Colorado the miners worked as independent contractors and formed their own work gangs. These work gangs were routinely ethnically based (Beshoar 1957; McGovern and Guttridge 1972; Papanikolas 1982; Long 1991). Historical and industrial archaeologists have also demonstrated in many other cases that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century workplaces were ethnically structured (Hardesty 1988; Bassett 1994; Wegars 1991). In the traditional hypothesis it is the commonality of the work experience that overcomes these ethnic divisions in the workplace and in an ethnically based home life to create a class consciousness. The idea that there existed a commonality of lived experience in the home that also aided in the formation of a common class consciousness is harder to demonstrate from existing analyses. The histories all agree that the day-to-day lives of miners’ families were hard, but they provide little more than anecdotal evidence of the reality of these conditions. The historian Friscilla Long (1985), in an analysis that supports our alternative hypothesis, has demonstrated that women in the Colorado coal fields shared a common experience of sexual exploitation, but she also lacks detailed data on the realities of day-to-day lived experience in the home.

Our alternative hypothesis stresses the importance of the home in the creation of class consciousness. We seek to prove that the day-to-day material conditions of home life cross-cut ethnic divisions, before, during, and after the strike. If this is the case then we will argue that women and children were active agents, with male miners, in formulating a social consciousness to unify for the strike. Alternatively, if our analyses show that each ethnic group had distinctive day-to-day material conditions of home life then we will accept the traditional notion that families followed the lead of male miners who acquired a common class identity in the shafts.
Historical archaeology offers a very productive arena for archaeologists to examine the relationship between social consciousness, lived experience, and material conditions to cultural change (Orser 1996; Shackel 1996). In historic periods the archaeologist can integrate documents and material culture to capture both the consciousness and material conditions that form lived experience (Beaudry 1988; Leone and Potter 1988; Little 1992; Leone 1995; DeCunzo and Herman 1996). In the documents, people speak to us about their consciousness, their interests, and their struggles, but not all peoples speak in the documents with the same force or presence. Also, they rarely speak to us in detail about their day-to-day lives. People, however, create the archaeological record from the accumulation of the small actions that make up their lived experience. Thus the archaeological record consists primarily of the remains of people’s mundane lives and all people leave traces in this material record.

Archaeological research provides one means to gain a richer, more detailed, and more systematic understanding of the everyday experience of Colorado mining families. These families unknowingly left a record of that experience in the ground. Archaeologists can recapture it in the burned remains of their tents, in the layout of camps, in the contents of their latrines, and by shifting through the garbage that they left behind. Linking this information with documentary and photographic sources gives us a useful way to reconstruct that experience. By applying these methods to company towns occupied before the strike, the strikers’ tent camps, and to the company camps reopened after the strike we can test our propositions. The United Mine Workers maintain the site of Ludlow as a shrine to the workers who died there. There is presently a monument at the site but little or no interpretive information (Figure 8.2). In this context our archaeological work also becomes a powerful form of memory and action.

**Archaeological work to date**

We have completed two years of excavations both at Ludlow and in the company town of Berwind. The massacre site itself represents a near perfect archaeological context. It is a short-term occupation that was destroyed by fire and subsequent use of the area has had little impact on the archaeological remains. In Berwind, the streets, foundations, latrines, and trash pits remain visible on the surface.

At Ludlow we have been able to find features associated with the strike camp and to define the distribution and types of artifacts at the site. The site is quite shallow with features appearing at depths of 10 to 20 cm. We have found and excavated tent platforms and privies. The distribution of artifacts matches the plan of the camp as shown in contemporary photographs.

From photos we know that the tents were constructed by first digging a shallow basin, then laying wooden joists directly on the ground to support a wooden platform and frame. Once covered with canvas the strikers piled a ridge of dirt around the base of the tent. In 1998 we excavated one platform and we were able to define it by stains in the earth, remains of the shallow excavation, and rows of nails that followed the joists (Figure 8.3). A wide range of small artifacts were associated with the tent including fragments of miners’ lamps, buttons, ceramics, bottle glass, and fragments of shoes. A collection of religious medals suggests that the occupants of the tent were Italian Catholics.

Photographs have proven a great aid in our excavations and a rich source of information. Several hundred photographs exist of the strike including dozens of the Ludlow tent colony. One photo taken from nearby a railroad water tower shows the camp a few days before the massacre. We used a technique pioneered by Gene Prince (1988) and James Deets (1993) to define the position of the tents and other features in the colony. We had a 35 mm negative made of the photo and then mounted it on the ground glass of an SLR camera with a removable viewfinder. With the negative in position we could look in the viewfinder and see through the negative. We know where the water tower was and we placed a lift jack on that spot and raised it. At that point we could view the site area with the tent in the negative superimposed on it. We were able to locate over a quarter of the tents in the colony using this technique.

![Figure 8.2 1997 archaeological field crew in front of the Ludlow monument. (Photograph by Randy McGuire.)](image-url)
Berwind was a CF&I town located in Berwind canyon near Ludlow, occupied before and after the strike. Many of the strikers at Ludlow originated from there. CF&I built the town in 1892 and abandoned it in 1931. In 1998 we made a detailed map of the community and we were able to define numerous discrete residential neighborhoods. Test excavations revealed stratified deposits of up to 50 cm deep in the yards associated with houses. We have been able to sort these deposits into ones dating before, during, and after the strike. Our preliminary examination of artifacts from the tests, of photos of the community at different points in time, and of company records indicates that some of the neighborhoods date to before the strike, while others were constructed as part of the program of town improvements that followed the strike. We also contacted and started doing oral history interviews with people who lived in Berwind during the 1920s and 1930s. Currently we are excavating in trash deposits and latrines dating to before and after the strike.

**Archaeology as memory**

The story of the 1913–1914 Coal Field War and Ludlow is a history that has been hidden, lost, or at best selectively remembered outside of union circles. Within the union movement Ludlow is a shrine and a powerful symbol used to raise class consciousness and to mobilize union members. The new signs on the interstate identifying the exit to the 'Ludlow Massacre Memorial' draws a small but steady stream of summer tourists to the site. Most of the individuals arrive expecting to find a monument to an Indian massacre. In this context our excavations become a form of memory that recalls what happened at Ludlow, the sacrifices of the strikers, and that the rights of working people were won through terrible struggle. Memory leads to action as working people realize how their contemporary struggles are a continuation of the struggle at Ludlow.

The story of Ludlow has great popular appeal. The violence of the events and the death of women and children make the history a compelling story. It is also not a tale of distant or exotic past. Descendants of the strikers still regularly visit the site and the United Mine Workers hold an annual memorial service at the monument.

Our focus on everyday life humanizes the strikers because it talks about them in terms of relations and activities that our modern audiences also experience. For example, relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, and activities such as preparing food for a family, or how to get the laundry done. The parallel between the modern realities of these experiences and the miners' lives provides our modern audience with a comparison to understand the harshness of the strikers' experience.

In the United States archaeological excavations are considered newsworthy. Our first two seasons of excavation both resulted in articles in every major newspaper in the state of Colorado. Eric Zorn, a columnist with the Chicago Tribune, picked up on our excavations for his Labor Day column in 1997. He
titled the column 'Workers' Rights Were Won With Blood'. Our excavations
give the events of 1913–1914 a modern reality, they live again and become news
again. We have also focused on developing interpretative programs at the massacre
site. The United Mine Workers have made Ludlow and the massacre a symbol of
their struggle today. But, the tourists off the highway need educating. During the
summer of 1998 over 500 people visited our excavations and heard the story of
what happened.

At the Ludlow memorial service in June of 1999 we unveiled an interpretive
kiosk. The kiosk includes three panels, one on the history of the strike and
massacre, a second on our archaeological research, and a third on the
relationship of Ludlow to current labor struggles. Over 700 working people
viewed the kiosk and our traveling exhibit of artifacts, and listened
enthusiastically to a short presentation on our work.

Working people in southern Colorado still struggle for dignity and basic
rights. Several hundred of the participants in the June 1999 Ludlow memorial
service were striking steelworkers from Pueblo, Colorado. They had been on
strike from CF&I for two years to stop forced overtime and thus regain one of the
basic rights that the Ludlow strikers died for, the eight-hour day. They have used
the Ludlow massacre as a powerful symbol in their struggle. It is so powerful that
the parent company (Oregon Steel) changed the name of their Pueblo subsidiary
from CF&I to Rocky Mountain Steel to distance themselves from the events of
1914. The company now seems determined to break the union and to deprive
the steelworkers of another of the basic rights that the Ludlow strikers struggled
for, the right to collective bargaining. In June of 1999 we twice addressed the
Pueblo steelworkers and afterwards several individuals insisted that we accept
small donations of money to further our research.

An important component of our education program is the preparation of
school programs and educational packets for the public schools of Colorado. We
are currently writing a curriculum for middle school students on the history of
labor in Colorado with the 1913–1914 strike as its central focus. During the
summer of 1999 we held a Colorado Endowment for the Humanities sponsored
training institute for teachers. The purpose of this institute was to educate the
teachers on labor history and to develop classroom materials to use in the
Teaching of Colorado labor history.

In the Colorado Coal Field War Project we have built an archaeology that
working people can relate to both emotionally and intellectually. It is one of the
few archaeological projects devised in the United States that speaks to working-
class people. It speaks to their experience, in a language that they can
understand, about events that interest them and about events that they feel
directly connected to. By doing this it also becomes a form of praxis that seeks to
know the world, critique the world, and most importantly take action in the
world.

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