

This Land: Ludlow

Frank Petrucci was the youngest to suffocate to death, six months old. Lucy his sister was next youngest at 2 ½ years old. Their older brother died with them along with eight other children and two women. They hid in what became named the Death Pit during the battle end between the striking miners and the Colorado National Guard, which had been called out to defend Colorado Fuel and Iron owned by Rockefeller. The bodies were discovered huddled together. In the battle of that day, twenty-one are believed to have been killed. Sixty-three more were killed in the ten day running battle that ensued. Only after President Wilson sent in Federal Troops did the war between the strikers and the National Guard. A train with an armored car containing a Gatling gun would periodically drive by the tent city and spray bullets into the tents.

Why must life always be a fight?

The miners, evicted from their company homes, set up this tent city on land leased for them in solidarity by the United Mine Workers. They were evicted because they dared to demand better pay, safe working conditions, an eight hour day. They objected to wretched company housing, the price-gouging company store, company police.

From Woody Guthrie's song, "Ludlow:"

*It was early springtime when the strike was on,
They drove us miners out of doors,
Out from the houses that the Company owned,
We moved into tents up at old Ludlow.*

*I was worried bad about my children,
Soldiers guarding the railroad bridge,
Every once in a while a bullet would fly,
Kick up gravel under my feet.*

Who is to blame? Well, when you bring machine guns something is going to happen.

The day before the massacre the strikers celebrated Orthodox Easter in honor their leader, a Greek. Among other happy amusements, they played a baseball game.

April 20, 1914: the simmering hostilities exploded, literally. A mistake. There was a shot or perhaps a loud explosion of some kind. Both sides opened fire. Who is to blame? Violence heats violence to a boil, hatred engenders hatred. Nerves on edge. Then comes the bloody mistake.

We've seen it before. Where else? Kent State. The Boston Massacre. The Concord Green. Police killing men despite black hands touching the roof of the car. By dusk, most of the children and women retreated to the hills. Thirteen to the cellar. Later, the Colorado National Guardsmen (you cannot dare call them soldiers) set fire to the tent city.

*That very night your soldiers waited,
Until all us miners were asleep,
You snuck around our little tent town,
Soaked our tents with your kerosene.*

Who is to blame? Well, when you bring machine guns something is going to happen.

The public outcry that followed this travesty resulted Rockefeller agreeing to accommodate some union demands and effect some labor reforms. Little justice for eleven little graves.

The surnames of the dead listed on the bronze plaque attached to the memorial – Cosa, Rubino, Fyler, Tikas, Snyder, Valdez, Pedregone, Bartolotti -- show us how the strikers may have come from twenty-one different nationalities but were united in the truly American demand for justice against company oppression.

We remain grateful that the United Mine Workers erected a memorial and pavilion where this calamity took place, even though the town itself is long gone. It is there to remind us of our past and our past sins. It doesn't help to have a public with the attention span of a Labrador Retriever. Our black Labrador loved circling about our backyard chasing whatever caught her attention: squirrel, bird, cat, squeaky toy, her tail, our daughter Penelope.

Dangerous it is to whitewash wrongs, reducing muscular hope into lazy silence. Lest we forget.

Nostalgia can be fun, like munching on a Milky Way.

Honesty is far more nourishing, even when distasteful. Even when our past is sordid. Copme on now, despite the drunken fraternity boys shouting, "WE'RE NUMBER ONE!" we haven't always been. We pay attention to our shadows.

*You struck a match and in the blaze that started,
You pulled the triggers of your gatling guns,
I made a run for the children but the fire wall stopped me.
Thirteen children died from your guns.*

Why do I find that line from the movie "Cowboys and Aliens" comforting? "I've seen good men do bad things and bad men do good things."

You may remember how whilst I am visiting these sites of Woody Guthrie's songs, I also am interviewing my classmates from the Class of 1975 Hobart and William Smith Colleges for a radio show about what we experienced and learnt over our years. These interviews have forced me to look back on my own sixty-four years and look at the joys and wounds, the successes and failures, the people I've helped and the people I've hurt.

First thing you realize is that you sure can't dial the clock back.

Second thing is when you realize retrospectively when you were wise enough to avoid the potential regret in the first place. But few of us are that wise. The heart (or other organs) oft overrules the brain. Appetite oft overrules sense. Passions over conscience. Ambition over decency.

But some of us can look back on the choices -- some that you didn't expect were mistakes -- and realize how with support, confession, honesty, love, forgiveness you were able to become a better person because of them. Even glad for them. Thank you.

If you're smart, when someone asks you if you love them, say "no."

Guess what happens when you tell someone you love them. You lose yourself. You have to start acting loving toward them. You're no longer your own. It means you will, out of love, do things you don't want to do: cut your lover's toenails, clean your child's soiled bottom, hold hands when chemotherapy begins. Poet John Donne wrote: "Without outward declarations who can conclude of an inward love."

Love sure cramps your style, right? Bummer. If you say you love, you must show love.

You choose and it is wonderful. So wonderful it becomes a problem.

Cut yourself on a thorn and the skin wants to heal. Wounded hearts take longer.

Is there ever such a thing as do-overs?

Maybe when you are boys and little brother gets to swing away. Five strikes rather than three. But only when big brother decrees. Rarely in life do you get to swing again. You're out.

No redemption for all missteps, mistakes. Some you tuck tail. Some you can only do your best to repair the damage. You glue the china cup but the crack remains visible. It really cannot be fixed.

It can remind you that you broke it.