

Opinion

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Topic: State history

Ludlow Massacre remembered

Ninety years ago this week, on April 20, 1914, Colorado was home to one of the most violent and controversial events in the state's history — the "Ludlow Massacre," a bloody confrontation that took place in a field 12 miles north of Trinidad.

The dispute began in 1913 when the United Mine Workers of America District 15, headquartered in Denver and Trinidad, renewed its efforts to unionize 14,000 poor, mostly immigrant miners in southern Colorado between Walsenburg and Trinidad. When a union walkout was called in September 1913, striking miners

were evicted from their homes in company towns and forced to relocate their families to nearby union-operated tent colonies.

Violence soon broke out between the displaced miners and the coal companies, and the state militia was deployed. Tensions peaked April 20, and a fierce gun battle broke out between 35 militiamen and about 200 miners in the tent colony at Ludlow. By day's end, seven men and a boy had been killed.

The real tragedy was the asphyxiation of two innocent women and 11 children who had hidden in an underground earthen pit to avoid the crossfire. The victims had covered the pit with a mattress and suffocated after the tent colony was set on fire. One early, errant newspaper report, for example, said that the



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suffocated victims had been skewered and roasted to death.

In the 10 days that followed, Colorado became a virtual war zone as disgruntled strikers engaged in gun battles and destroyed mine properties throughout Colorado's mining districts. At least two dozen people were killed and numerous others wounded. Colorado Gov. Elias Ammons and other state leaders took nearly 10 days to persuade a reluctant President Woodrow Wilson to send federal soldiers to restore civil order.

Press coverage strongly shaped public perceptions when reporters and photographers from Denver swarmed Ludlow and Trinidad. They defined the "Ludlow Massacre" as the event remembered today. Two of Denver's leading newspapers — the *Denver Post* and *Denver Times* — provided reasonably balanced newspaper coverage. However, the *Denver Express*, a socialist newspaper, stepped up its continuing condemnation of the strike with sensationalized coverage from Ludlow. The *Express* was the first newspaper to label the incident a massacre.

The *Rocky Mountain News'* William Chenery's famous editorial, 'The Ludlow Massacre' would define the tragedy for posterity.

UMWA union leaders were instrumental in spreading the idea that Ludlow was a massacre and for ascribing blame to greedy, callous and corrupt coalmine owners. The coal operators in Denver were virtually silent, leaving the union free to define the controversy.

The burden of telling the coal operators' side of the story fell to a most unlikely source — John D. Rockefeller Jr. in New York. The Rockefellers owned a 40 percent, non-controlling interest in the Colorado Fuel and Iron Co., the state's largest coal operator. Although he was a CF&I director, Rockefeller had not been in Colorado since 1903.

Rockefeller was an attractive target. He and his father were singled out as rich, greedy absentee owners and painted as responsible for the entire affair, in-

cluding the death of innocent women and children.

The Rockefellers had little or no direct responsibility. Yet attacks on Rockefeller began almost immediately — and were abetted by John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s own missteps.

Rockefeller refused to intercede with the coal operators when an emissary of President Wilson visited him. Rockefeller had absolved himself of any responsibility for the strike in Colorado, stating, "My conscience will acquit me."

Newspaper editorial writers, clergymen and congressmen chastised the young Rockefeller for being unsympathetic and unpatriotic. Rockefeller later found himself in an all-out effort to vindicate the family name and correct the labor problems that had led to the call for union representation.

Kirk Hallahan, a Colorado State University professor, is completing a book on John D. Rockefeller's response to the Ludlow Massacre.