

When the
Carnegie Steel Company
hired the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to
end a labor dispute at one of its mills, it set the stage for a
bloody encounter between the forces of labor and management.

“If you men don’t withdraw,
we will mow every
one of you
down.”

by William C.
Kashatus

The Pinkertons, 300 of them, came on July 6, 1892. Early that morning a lookout posted along the Monongahela River had spotted the two barges coming from Pittsburgh toward the shabby industrial town of Homestead. The Pinkerton National Detective Agency was notorious for breaking strikes, and the men on the barges were coming to reclaim the Carnegie Steel Company mill in Homestead from disgruntled workers who had seized it. As the barges advanced up the polluted river, some 10,000 people—steelworkers and their wives and children—stood ready to defend their position.

The barges attempted to land around 4:00 A.M., but Hugh O’Donnell, a spokesman for the steel-

An illustration from *Harper’s Weekly* shows Pinkerton agents surrendering to strikers at Homestead, Pennsylvania, on July 6, 1892. Union leaders promised that the agents would not be harmed, but hundreds of strikers and sympathizers set upon the Pinkertons and beat them with sticks and fence staves.





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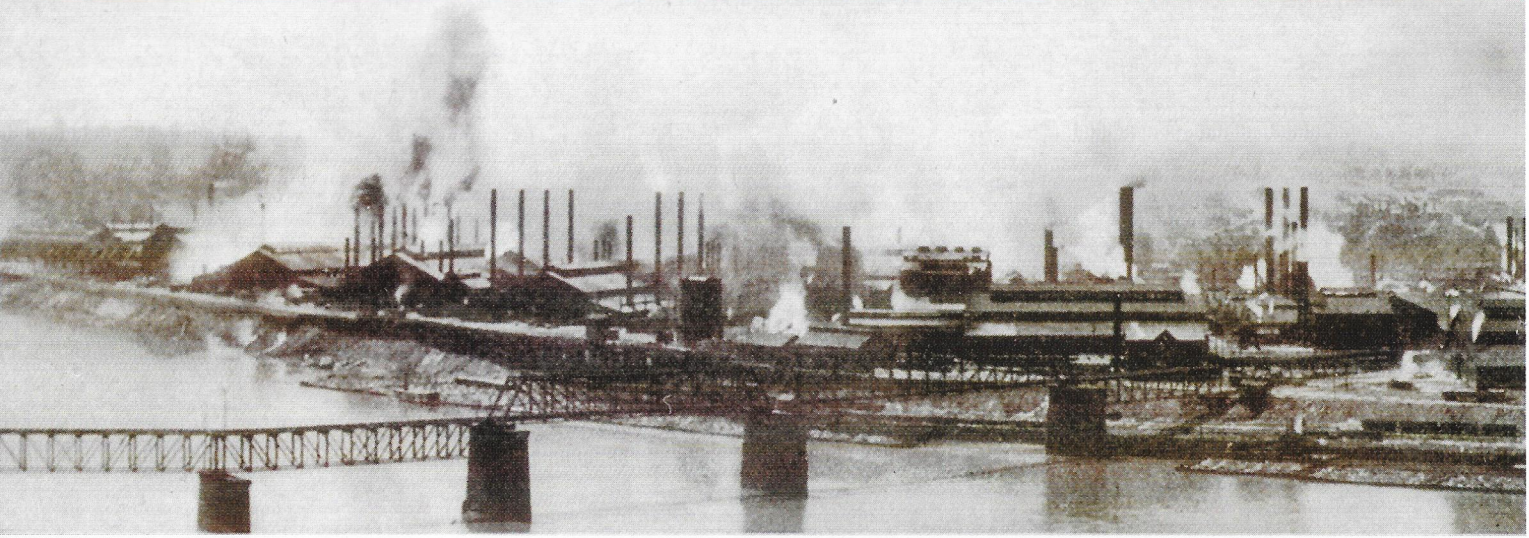
workers, stopped them at the river's edge. O'Donnell insisted that under no circumstance could the Pinkertons come ashore to take possession of the works. He shouted an impassioned plea to the men in the barges: "I beg of you to leave here at once. I don't know who you are nor from whence you came, but I do know that you have no business here, and if you remain there will be more bloodshed."

On one of the boats Captain Frederick Heinde stepped forward and identified himself and his men as agents of the Pinkerton agency. "We don't wish to shed blood, but

mill—originally built in 1881 by a syndicate of Pittsburgh manufacturers who sold it to Carnegie two years later—conditions created a natural climate for the union movement. While the town's steel-making industry provided employment for 3,800 workers who resided there, the work was dangerous and miserable. Men worked 12-hour shifts for meager pay while facing the possibility of death from a variety of sources: white-hot ingots, fast-moving overhead cranes, and exploding furnaces.

In 1892, the country's most powerful union was the Amalgamated Association of Iron

Men worked 12-hour shifts for meager pay while fac



Top: Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie.
Center: The Carnegie Steel Company's Homestead works.
Below: Union leader Hugh O'Donnell.

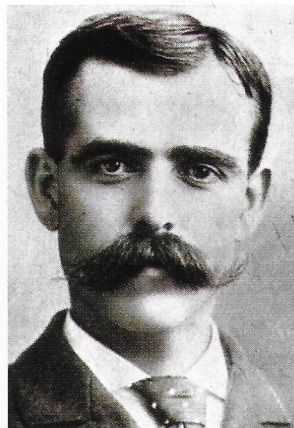
we are determined to go up there and shall do so," Heinde said. "If you men don't withdraw, we will mow every one of you down and enter in spite of you." Several agents lowered a gangplank and Heinde ordered his men forward.

No one could say who fired first, but suddenly shots rang out, wounding Heinde and William Foy, a union leader on the landing. The crowd on shore smashed through a makeshift fence at the river's edge and began throwing rocks at the despised Pinkertons. Then both sides opened a murderous barrage.

THE END OF THE nineteenth century was a time of increasing labor unrest in the United States. Rapid technological advancement and the unchecked pursuit of profits by wealthy industrialists like Andrew Carnegie (see "Man of Steel," page 62) increased the tensions between workers and management. At the 90-acre Homestead steel

and Steel Workers (AAISW). Organized in Pittsburgh on August 4, 1876, the AAISW committed itself to improving the job security and social conditions of its members and had gained major strongholds in the iron mills of western Pennsylvania and Ohio. In 1887 the AAISW had aligned with the new American Federation of Labor, and during the next five years, AAISW membership exploded to 20,975 as it became one of the Federation's largest unions and helped shape and direct national labor policy.

The AAISW did suffer from internal tensions among its various craft unions, but Homestead, in particular, seemed to enjoy harmonious relations within the work force as well as between labor and management. The skilled workers—predominantly English, German, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh—who belonged to the AAISW had achieved a significant measure of solidarity with their non-union brethren, mostly unskilled Hungarians



COURTESY OF RIVERS OF STEEL

ABOVE: USX ARCHIVE

and Slavs, who held the worst jobs in the mill. Whenever possible, the union and the work force cooperated with management, mainly due to the seemingly receptive nature of mill owner Andrew Carnegie, who believed that trade unions were “beneficial, both to labor and capital.” Insisting that he would rather negotiate with his workers than hire strikebreakers, Carnegie swore by “an unwritten law—‘Thou shalt not take thy neighbor’s job.’” In 1889 Carnegie agreed to recognize the AAISW at Homestead, yet by 1892 he had come to believe that the union had acquired excessive power and he began

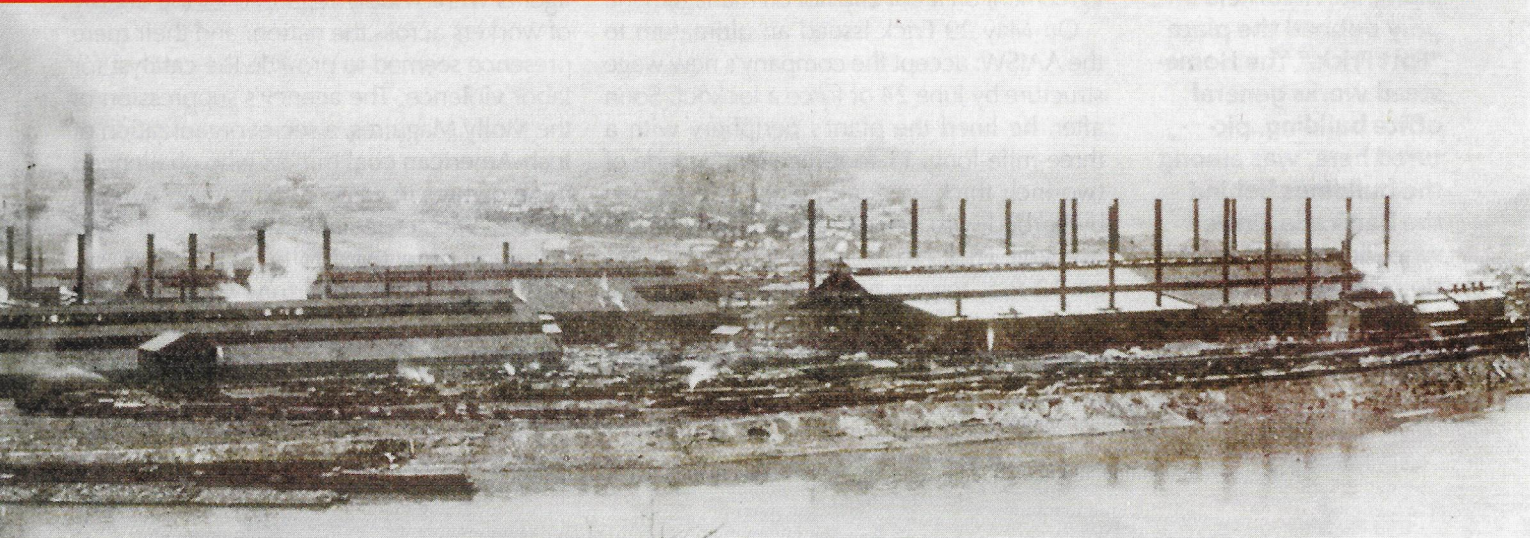
combative relationship, Carnegie trusted Frick and made him chairman of Carnegie Bros. & Company. In 1892, Frick took over as manager of all plants within the Carnegie empire and amalgamated the mining, milling, and transportation operations.

In January 1892, superintendent of the Homestead mill John Potter initiated negotiations with the AAISW to change the wage structure. Wages were fixed to the price of steel, rising or falling as the price did, with an agreed-on minimum price fixed at \$25 a ton. Carnegie’s company wanted to lower the minimum to \$22 per ton. Frick defended



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ing the possibility of death from a variety of sources.



planning to destroy it even as he portrayed himself as a friend of the working man.

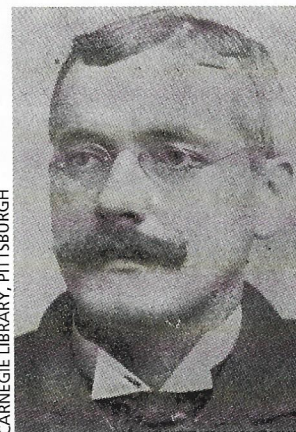
During the ensuing conflict, Carnegie would remove himself from the fray. His chief instrument for breaking the union would be his chairman and plant manager, Henry Clay Frick. Like Carnegie, Frick had risen from humble origins. As a youth, he worked on his father’s Pennsylvania farm and, later, his grandfather’s distillery. In 1871, Frick invested in bituminous coal and in the beehive ovens used to convert coal into coke for iron production. Not only did the 21-year-old budding entrepreneur possess the business acumen to succeed, but he also had the confidence and iron-fisted will to squelch any labor movement that got in his way. Within a year, Frick’s company controlled 100 ovens; by the end of the decade he was a millionaire. When he joined his business with Carnegie’s in the 1880s, Frick’s financial fortunes grew even more dramatically. Despite a sometimes

the decrease by insisting that the company had “spent large sums of money on new machinery” which, in turn, enabled the workmen to increase both the “daily output” of steel and the “amount of their own earnings.” AAISW rejected the lower price and negotiations deadlocked.

That spring, Carnegie and his wife departed for Britain, where they remained for the rest of the year. With tension rising between management and labor, Carnegie chose to protect his public image as a beneficent capitalist, and he left Frick—who had severely criticized Carnegie’s decision to recognize the AAISW back in 1889—to enforce his anti-union policy. Carnegie told Frick that he “approved of anything you do, not stopping short of a contest with labor.” By July the Carnegies were on their way to Rannoch Lodge, a rented retreat in a remote section of the Scottish Highlands.

Before he left the United States, however,

Top: Henry Clay Frick enforced Carnegie’s policies. Below: Homestead’s burgess John McLuckie miscalculated management’s resolve.



CARNEGIE LIBRARY, PITTSBURGH

On May 29 Frick issued an ultimatum to the AAISW: a

After Frick ordered the construction of a three-mile long fence topped with barbed wire around the Homestead plant, steelworkers angrily dubbed the place "Fort Frick." The Homestead works general office building, pictured here, was among the buildings behind the barricade. Frick, who liked all his operations in good order, hired a man to white-wash the fence.

Carnegie sent Frick a notice that he wanted posted at the Homestead works. It announced that due to the planned amalgamation of other Carnegie steel mills to form the Carnegie Steel Company, Homestead would have to become non-union just as the other mills were. Frick quietly filed the notice away. Although the plant manager agreed with Carnegie's position, he favored more devious tactics. His idea was to offer such severe terms to the AAISW that the union would not accept them, thus placing the onus for non-agreement on labor and not on management.

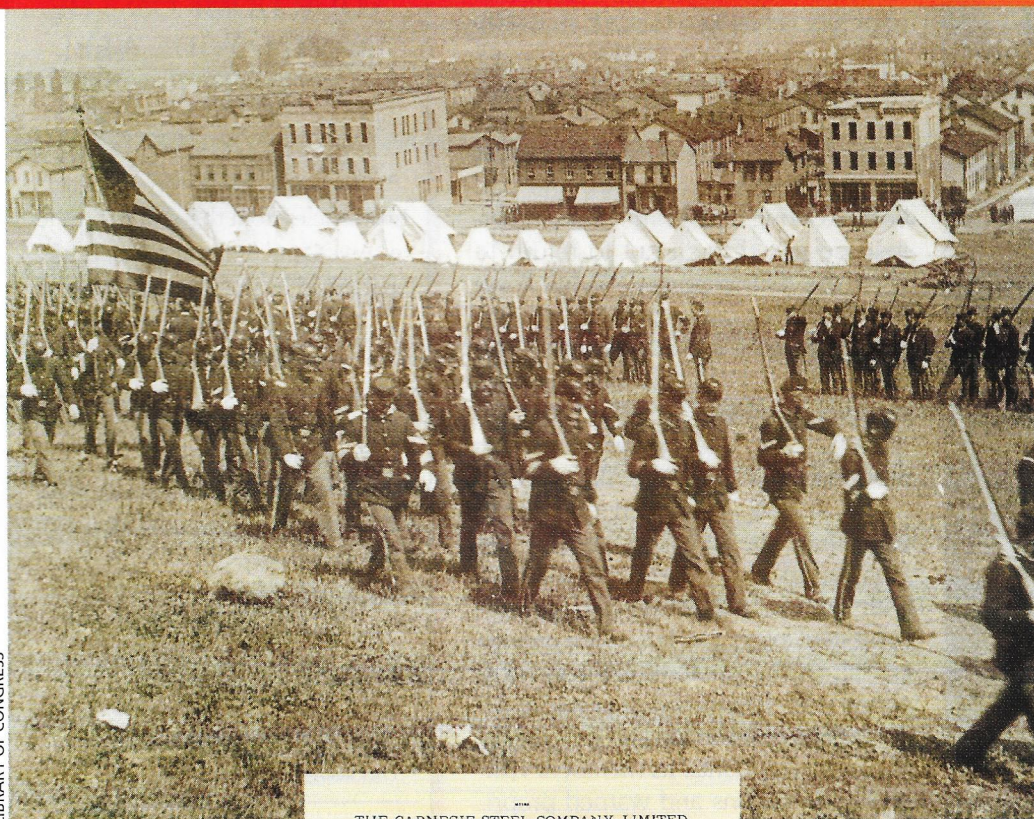
On May 29 Frick issued an ultimatum to the AAISW: accept the company's new wage structure by June 24 or force a lockout. Soon after, he lined the plant's periphery with a three-mile-long, 11-foot-high fence made of two-inch thick wooden planks and topped by barbed wire, leaving it open only on the riverside. Frick's workers erected searchlights on 12-foot towers and bored holes in the fence every few yards so sharpshooters could thwart any attack by strikers. Now, in

the event of a strike, boatloads of strike-breakers could safely reach company property. The infuriated steelworkers saw the fence as a declaration of war and renamed the mill "Fort Frick."

Determined to force a showdown, Frick wrote to the Pinkerton National Detective Agency on June 2, requesting a force of 300 guards to "deal with the trouble we anticipate" when the company "reopens non-union on July 6th." It proved to be the decisive step in the conflict. The Pinkerton agents were widely regarded as the enemy of workers across the nation, and their mere presence seemed to provide the catalyst for labor violence. The agency's suppression of the Molly Maguires, a secret organization of Irish-American coal miners who challenged mine owners in eastern Pennsylvania in the 1870s, was especially well known (See "Undermining the Molly Maguires," August 1999). The Pinkertons were also instrumental in combating strikes at the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago, the



cept the company's terms by June 24 or force a lockout.



Left: Members of the Pennsylvania state militia drilled on the outskirts of the town during their occupation of Homestead. Pennsylvania governor Robert E. Pattison called out the troops to prevent further violence and to secure the property for its owners. Center: Before workers could return to their jobs after the strike, management made them sign a legal document affirming that they had not taken "part in any rioting or disturbances." Workers also had to state where they were and what they were doing on July 6, 1892.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

THE CARNEGIE STEEL COMPANY, LIMITED.

I, _____, employed in the works of
 THE CARNEGIE STEEL COMPANY, LIMITED, at Monhall, Pa., prior to July 1st, 1892,
 as _____ in the _____ mill, do hereby apply for re-statement
 in the position held by me.

My age is _____ years, _____ married, have _____ children.

I was not present on the grounds of The Carnegie Steel Company, Limited, in Millin Township on July 6th, 1892, at any time, nor did I take any part in any of the rioting or disturbances occurring in the Borough of Homestead or in Millin Township from July 1st, 1892, to the present time, nor do I know of my own personal knowledge of any one who did take part therein.

On July 6th, 1892, I spent the day as follows:

Sworn to and subscribed before me this _____ day of _____
 1892

Notary Public.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

iron molders lockout in Troy, New York, and the Burlington Railroad strike during the 1880s. Their involvement at Homestead would only reinforce the agency's reputation.

On June 19, more than 3,000 delegates to the AAISW annual convention in Pittsburgh assembled in the Homestead opera house to hear John McLuckie, the town's burgess (mayor), address the impending crisis. The epitome of labor republicanism, McLuckie fancied himself a "citizen-reformer." Though he had little more than a grade-school education and worked as a semi-skilled hand in the local steel mills, the 40-year-old burgess had distinguished himself in the union's earlier fights against the forces that sought "to de-

prive the working men of their rights under the constitution of this government." A legion of admirers within the AAISW knew McLuckie as "Honest John," and the union appointed him to its advisory committee to negotiate a new contract with Carnegie Steel. Doubting that Carnegie had the stomach to spill blood for the sake of profits, McLuckie urged the steelworkers to take a hard line. While Honest John rallied the rank-and-file, several hundred unskilled workers formed their own amal-

gamated lodge and voted unanimously to follow the AAISW lead in case of a strike. Negotiations ended in failure on June 23, when Frick refused to accept the AAISW offer of a sliding-scale minimum of \$24 per

COURTESY OF RIVERS OF STEEL

ton instead of the \$22 the company wanted. Six days later, Frick ordered the closing of the mill's open-hearth and armor-plate departments, locking out 800 men; on June 30, other department closings locked out 300 more workers. At a 10:00 A.M. mass meeting in Homestead on June 30, steelworkers and union members agreed not to accept Frick's offer. A union delegation met men who had been working at the time of the meeting and asked them not to return to work the following day. "What if we don't want to come out?" cried one worker. "Come out anyway, or if you don't you'll have to be a rapid runner," shouted another. On July 1 the remaining 2,700 steelworkers refused to report to work, and the strike was on.

The AAISW responded quickly. In early July its members seized the Homestead mill but did not interfere with the few watchmen and government steel inspectors left on the premises. The union-appointed advisory committee was determined to preserve order and protect the life and property of the town's residents. Its members visited liquor saloons and warned proprietors against drunkenness and disorderly gatherings on their premises, advised McLuckie that he could ask the committee for assistance in preserving the peace, and sealed off the town to prevent any strikebreakers from resuming operations. The union stationed patrols at the entrances to the town and on the river and posted pickets around the works. When Allegheny County Sheriff William H. McCleary and his 11 deputies tried to take possession of the mill on behalf of the company, members of the rank-and-file escorted them out of town. The advisory committee now controlled Homestead.

McLuckie understood that the union had no legal right to invade Carnegie's property or to interfere with his effort to hire strikebreakers, but he insisted that it had no choice in the matter. "We do not propose that Andrew Carnegie's representatives shall bulldoze us," he said. "We have our homes in this town, we have our churches here, our societies and our cemeteries. We are bound to Homestead by all the ties that men hold dearest and most sacred."

Then, late in the evening of July 5, the Pinkertons made their way up the river from Pittsburgh.

FOUR HOURS AFTER the initial confrontation at Homestead on July 6, the Pinkertons, armed with rifles and revolvers, made a second attempt to come ashore, only to meet another volley of fire. Sporadic shooting continued throughout the day. "It was a place of torment," recalled one Pinkerton guard. "Men were lying around wounded and bleeding and piteously begging for someone to help them. The booming of cannon, the bursting of dynamite bombs, the burning of oil on the river, and the yells and shouts on the shore made our position appalling. It is a wonder we did not commit suicide." The shooting finally ceased in the late afternoon when the Pinkertons surrendered. The *Pittsburgh Post* reported that as the agents marched up the river embankment, "No mercy was shown them . . . The men were knocked on the head and struck in the face, begging for the mercy which they received not."

When the conflict ended, six steelworkers and two Pinkertons lay dead and dozens were injured.

When the conflict finally ended, six steelworkers and two Pinkertons lay dead and dozens were injured.

The Pinkertons may have surrendered, but the shoot-out proved to be a strategic blunder for the strikers. It only served to strengthen Frick's resolve to destroy the union. Publicly, he made every effort to

make the AAISW members appear as if they were the offenders. "The question at issue is a very grave one," he told the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*. "It is whether the Carnegie Company or the Amalgamated Association shall have absolute control of our plant and business at Homestead. We have decided to operate the plant ourselves." Frick insisted that he had done everything in his power to avert the calamity, and he placed the blame for it squarely on the strikers' shoulders. "Not a man known to raise a rifle or a revolver in the bloody fight, or openly asserting his affiliation with any union will ever be employed in the Carnegie Works again," he said emphatically.

Four days later, at Frick's insistence, Pennsylvania Governor Robert E. Pattison called out the entire state militia of 8,615 National Guardsmen to occupy Homestead. The strikers welcomed the news, anticipating a quick resolution of differences with the company now that the state was involved. At a rally, McLuckie announced that "any man who insults the militia shall be taken to



the river and ducked," and the crowd greeted his words with cheers. To their great dismay, the men soon discovered that the militia intended to enforce the company's position and protect the strikebreakers who were hired to resume production at the mill. When Major General George R. Snowden, commander of the Pennsylvania National Guard, arrived on July 13, he brusquely dismissed the citizens' delegation that had come to greet his troops and ordered them to "go home and behave yourselves." McLuckie appealed to the governor in Harrisburg, but to no avail. In September, McLuckie, O'Donnell, and 13 others were arrested for the murders of the Pinkerton agents. Although the men were acquit-

ted, McLuckie felt powerless in the eyes of the local people, his strategic plan a failure, and he resigned as burgess in November and left town.

ON JULY 23, 25-YEAR-OLD Alexander Berkman burst into Frick's office in downtown Pittsburgh, stabbed him three times in the back and both legs, and shot him in the ear and neck. Berkman, a Russian-born anarchist who wanted to champion the cause of a workers' revolution, had no connection to the strike. Frick survived the attack, however, and even remained at his desk to complete his day's work after his wounds had been treated. He was just as unyielding in his defense of company profit as he was in his oppo-

Andrew Carnegie's life story was the classic "rags-to-

THE MAN OF STEEL

innovative cost-cutting techniques.

riches" dream. The son of a poor weaver in Dunfermline, Scotland, Andrew immigrated with his family to the United States in 1848. There the 12-year-old found a job as a bobbin boy in a Pittsburgh textile mill, earning \$1.20 for a 60-hour workweek. He still managed to find time to take a night course in double-entry bookkeeping. A year later, Carnegie became a Western Union messenger boy and learned how to operate the telegraph. As he handled messages for every major business in Pittsburgh, the youngster quickly gained an insider's view of their operations.

Carnegie's big break came in 1852 when Thomas Scott, superintendent of Pennsylvania Railroad's western division, hired him as his secretary and personal telegrapher. The ambitious young Scotsman soon mastered the complex details of the era's most innovative industry, and when Scott became vice president of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1859, Carnegie succeeded him as head of the line's western division. Not only did he more than double the railroad's mileage by running trains around the clock, Carnegie also slashed commuter fares to keep ridership at capacity and developed other

Professional success guaranteed his personal financial success. By 1868, Carnegie earned more than \$56,000 a year on investments alone. In the early 1870s, he decided to enhance his fortune by building his own steel mill, a logical choice considering that railroads were the nation's largest purchaser of steel.

Widely known for his salesmanship, Carnegie cultivated the personal friendship of railroad executives, securing their steel orders for rails, bridges, and other related structures. In 1891, he acquired a substantial interest in the vast western Pennsylvania coal and coke holdings of Henry Clay Frick. This gave the Scotsman guaranteed supplies of coke, which, together with iron and limestone, is a major ingredient of steel.

By the 1890s, Carnegie had become the nation's foremost steel magnate, owning three large mills in western Pennsylvania at Homestead, Braddock, and Dusquesne. He mechanized each one, using the latest technology to fabricate the steel beams, sheets, and plates used by urban America to build the metal skeletons of the Gilded Age. In 1901 he sold the Carnegie Company to U.S. Steel for \$480 million, retired, and concentrated on his philanthropic work.

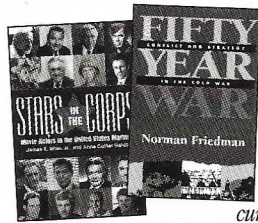
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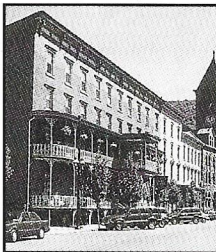
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sition to unionism. "I do not think I shall die," he said, "but whether I do or not, the company will pursue the same policy and it will win."

Ultimately, Frick emerged the victor. Not only did he fully recover from the assassination attempt, but he also triumphed over the union. On November 20, the workers declared the strike over and returned to the mill without a contract. The combined authority of the state and the steel industry had forced the AAISW to capitulate. It was a severe blow to unions throughout the United States.

Carnegie's concern for his public image was so great that he refused to accept any responsibility for his role in instigating the bloody strike, emphasizing instead the "reward that comes from the feeling that you and your employees are friends." Still, he was excoriated in the press and shunned as the "arch-sneak of his age" by both liberals and conservatives alike. He tried to distance himself from the criticism by continuing to plow his money into trusts, university endowments, and public libraries.

Years later Carnegie was still seeking absolution from John McLuckie, saying he "would rather risk McLuckie's verdict as a passport to Paradise than all the theological dogmas invented by man." Blacklisted from employment in the steel industry and ignored by the rank-and-file, the former burgess wound up in Mexico, looking for mining work. When Carnegie learned of McLuckie's whereabouts he dispatched an associate to offer him money. The steel magnate would have to look elsewhere for his passport to Paradise, however. McLuckie turned down the offer. ☼

William C. Kashatus is a professional historian who works at the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

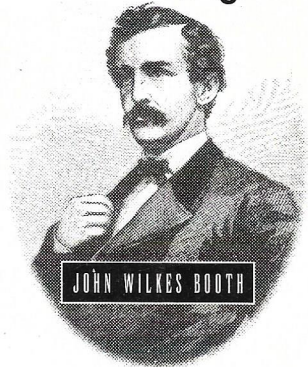


For more about labor and management struggles, read "Undermining the Molly Maguires," by Joseph H. Bloom.

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