

Amazon Army By Linda O'Nelio Knoll

Originally aired 3/1/21

The Kansas Balkans refers to the coal mining regions of Southeast Kansas, particularly Crawford and Cherokee Counties. It is an area known for its rich cultural heritage and for its turbulent strike ridden history.

There were few places on earth where the struggle between labor and capital were more intense or colorful than Southeast Kansas during the early 20th century. Some of the most vivid examples of this conflict occurred between coalminers and the coal companies they worked for. The miners were in a constant battle to achieve worker's rights against often insurmountable obstacles.

Labor strikes were numerous, particularly the series begun in 1919, that garnered national attention and brought about the Court of Industrial Relations Act which denied labor the right to strike. Determined to take action against an unlawful act, miners went on strike in 1921, when "scabs" were brought in to replace them. As months passed the miners and their families were starving.

On December 11, 1921, nearly 500 women met at the union hall in Franklin, Kansas in support of "the loyal union men of Kansas" and against the Industrial Court Act. Within a few days, between 3,000 and 6,000 women, my grandmother among them, marched from mine to mine to protest the law, carrying red pepper to throw into the faces of "scabs."

The women marched behind large American flags with the intention to speak to the workers and ask them to cease working and join the union cause. At times they were met at mine entrances with fire hoses or mine guards firing guns at their feet. In three days, they marched on 63 area mines.

Kansas Governor Henry Allen first denounced the women, then called out the National Guard. On December 15th, three days after the disturbances began, three troops of Kansas National Guard Cavalry soldiers and horses came pounding down the county roads from Topeka. Newspaper headlines across the nation carried the news of the protest. *The New York Times* dubbed the women the "Amazon Army."

Although women were arrested and the strike was broken, they actively campaigned against the governor's reelection. In 1922, Governor Henry Allen was defeated by Jonathan Davis and the local sheriff lost his bid for reelection. Some years later, the Industrial Court Relations Act was deemed unconstitutional. Social reforms like the 8-hour workday, equal rights for women and minorities, child labor laws, and equal pay for equal work, now accepted standards of the American way of life, were all fought for in the coal fields of Southeast Kansas.

I'd like to end with a poem by Gene DeGruson from his book *Goat's House*. The poem, which is dedicated to his mother Clemence Merciez DeGruson, is titled "Alien Women."

ALIEN WOMEN

For Clemence Merciez DeGruson

In '21, my mother still herself
at seventeen marched for Alexander
Howat to bust the scabs who worked
the mines in place of the fathers
and husbands of the thousand women
who marched with her carrying
their men's pit buckets filled
with red pepper to throw in the eyes
of the poor scabs who cursed back
in English to their Slovene, German,
French, and Italian over
the State Militia's rifle fire.

It's all dim in her mind now. She
remembers only that she was hungry
and frightened. She does not remember
Judge Curran, who said, "It is a fact
that there are bolsheviki, communists,
and anarchists among the alien women
of this community. It was the lawlessness
of these women which made necessary
the stationing of the State Militia
in our county for two months
to preserve law and order."
She does not remember they
were called an Army of Amazons.

From: Goat's House

By: Gene DeGruson

This transcript of "Amazon Army" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.