His Strike, Her Fight: Gender Roles and Identity Formation in the Massillon War

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Brief Bio Statement: I am a fifth year Ph.D. student in the history department at the University of California, Riverside. My research interests are the Nineteenth-Century United States, with a focus on labor and gender. I am currently ABD and in the process of doing research for my dissertation, Mining Manhood: Gender, Labor, and Community in the Stark County Coal Mines, 1850-1900.
Life and work in American coal-mining communities during the latter half of the nineteenth century fostered gender relations which diverged in distinct ways from both hegemonic, middle-class norms and subaltern, working-class ideals. The Massillon War, the culmination of a series of labor disputes in the coal fields of Stark County, Ohio, between 1874 and 1876, highlights the importance of gender roles and identities in the coal mines. By investigating the strikes and violence this paper addresses a gap in the historiography of coal mining by focusing on the creation of gender identity in a hyper-masculinized industry. The dynamics of a strike in this coal-mining community provides insight into the influences of family, community, and the workplace on creating definitions of manhood which contrasted with the hegemonic nineteenth-century norms embodied by the middle class. While by no means comprehensive, this paper explores two distinct factors in the labor dispute which were indicative of colliers’ conceptions of manhood, specifically the questions of wages and workers control and the role of women in the strike and on the picket-lines. In doing so, this investigation exposes a distinct concept of collier manhood which embodied aspects of hegemonic and subaltern ideals while rejecting simple classification in either category. Stark County coal miners and their families instead created gendered identities which reflected their unique position in nineteenth-century America.

Coal-mining operations in the nineteenth century created an environment which fostered the creation of a manly identity centered on notions of independence and patriarchal authority. To begin with, coal mining was an almost exclusively male occupation in the nineteenth century. The Tuscarawas Valley region, with Massillon as its focal point, was no exception to this rule.¹

¹ Numbers for this section are drawn from the statistical reports published by the U.S. Census Bureau. U.S. Department of Interior, Census Office, Statistics of the U.S. at the Sixth Census; Statistics of the U.S. at the Seventh Census; Population of the U.S. at the Eighth Census; Population and Social Statistics at the Ninth Census; Statistics of the Population at the Tenth Census.
Further, unlike their industrial counterparts who steadily lost status as skilled artisans beginning in the first decades of the nineteenth century, coal miners retained their privileged position as autonomous craftsmen until the close of the century. Like other skilled laborers, colliers linked notions of manliness to abilities on the job and retained the right to determine who was a “full” man at work by establishing their own apprenticeship periods and work standards. Colliers’ conceptions of manhood and patriarchy were also bolstered by their position as supervisors of crews in the pits. Skilled coal miners provided their own crews, and their apprentices came largely from within their own families, reflecting the hereditary nature of the job as well as a level of autonomy which most wage laborers did not enjoy. Colliers also controlled the dispensation of wages to their crews, receiving a per ton rate and doling it out to crew members based on individuals’ work load and skill level. The combination of these factors set colliers apart from typical industrial workers and placed them in a role similar to independent contractors. The structure of the mines was a factor as well, limiting the ability of mine operators to supervise miners in their employ. In “longwall” operations, where miners worked a single face down a long tunnel, operatives of the corporation could easily navigate the passages. However, the mines of the Massillon region were of “room and pillar” construction, in which individual crews were responsible for their own isolated sections. The difficulties in entering these deep shafts and the cramped confines within made it hard for representatives of the owners

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to oversee day-to-day operations. Collier manhood was also influenced by the perception of the inherent danger in mining operations. The risks from cave-ins and poisonous gasses were compounded by the Massillon region's noted proclivity for utilizing more explosives in the extraction process than any other region in the state. At home, notions of patriarchy were reinforced by the dominance of single-income households among colliers. The vast majority of coal-miners’ wives did not work outside of the home; when they did, it was seen as a source of shame or failure on the part of their husbands. This made the loss of a collier's wages from a strike that much more devastating to his household and manly identity. By looking at the events surrounding the strike in Massillon, one can explore the ways in which colliers constructed their manhood.

Labor troubles in the region began more than a year before the outbreak of violence and were precipitated, as most such conflicts are, over proposed cuts in wages and disputes about workers' control. Prior to the Panic of 1873, miners in the Tuscarawas Valley were some of the highest paid in the country at 90 cents per ton; by the outbreak of the riots in 1876, wages had been reduced to 65 cents per ton. Colliers exercised multiple avenues of mediation, sending local and national leaders of the Miners’ National Association—John Pollock locally and John Siney, the national president—to negotiate with mine operators in the area. Marcus Alonzo Hanna, the political boss of Cleveland, was the operator most receptive to the bargaining process and agreed to mediation in the fall of 1874, thereby preventing a strike and keeping Massillon

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7 Lewis, Welsh Americans, 123.
miners working at a rate of 71 cents. The arbitration was short-lived however, and new
conflicts emerged around an issue central to worker's control on the job site. In April 1875, a
non-union mine agreed to raise wages to 80 cents if the miners would forgo the presence of a
check-weighman at the scales. The check-weighman was an individual hired by the colliers to
verify the weight of loads and the accuracy of the operator's scales, and he played an integral role
in maintaining the coal-miners' rights in dealing with their employers. As both David
Montgomery and Bruce Laurie have explored in their work on the subject, workers' control and
gendered hierarchies of labor were integral to notions of manhood constructed in the work
place. Ideals of gender, specifically aspects of the Massillon miners' conceptions of masculine
identity, were challenged in their contests with the local operators.

The disputes between miners and operators over wages and the presence of a check-
 weighman were closely related to notions of collier manhood. Male workers in the nineteenth
century frequently forswore wage increases in order to maintain control in the workplace.
Miners in the Tuscarawas Valley were no different and, as one collier noted, the presence of a
check-weighman was a "privilege" that had been hard-won from the areas operators. Colliers
were not the only ones to recognize the security and control which a check-weighman's presence
afforded. Many operators were aware of the value which miners placed on worker control;
Hanna even insisted that allowing a check-weighman to operate at his mines was a valid reason

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10 *The Miners' National Record*, Cleveland, (April 1875), 97 & (May 1875), 111-112.
11 David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and
Labor Struggles* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13. Laurie’s work hints at some of
these elements in his discussion of “traditionalists.” Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-
12 Montgomery, *Workers' Control*, 17. Historical examples can be found in labor newspapers throughout the
nineteenth century. See *The Workingman’s Advocate* (New York), November 21, 1829, for an example of printers
forgoing wage increases in order to keep women out of their jobs.
13 *The Miners' National Record* (Cleveland), (April 1875), 97.
for the miners to accept lower wages. Colliers embraced these ideas of workers’ control that bolstered both their independence and manhood on the job. As long as the wage reductions were reasonable and the miners were involved in the negotiations, Stark County colliers agreed to these conditions. However, mutual negotiations broke down completely in March 1876 when operators throughout the region instituted unilateral wage cuts.

Economic concerns cannot be separated from their cultural implications. When the Massillon miners walked out in March 1876 it was as much to defend their manhood as it was a question of wages. Despite the arbitration agreements in effect between colliers and operators, mine owners made the unilateral decision to cut wages to 65 cents per ton, a 28% cut from the wages miners were receiving just two years earlier. Colliers decided to walk out after these cuts, a decision influenced by a variety of factors. First, they noted the injustice of wage cuts for miners when coal was selling at a ten-year high—between $4.00 and $4.50 per ton—in the Cleveland markets. While some miners tied these inequalities to the labor theory of value, the decision to walk out was not solely based on economic reductionism. Indeed, miners had continued to work through larger pay cuts so long as they were active participants in the negotiations. It was the operators’ exclusion of the miners—in effect depriving them of their independence and control—which led to the strike. When coupled with the miners' role as sole income-earners for their families, colliers perceived these wage cuts to be an attack on their positions as patriarchs and household providers.

The Massillon War began in April and extended through May 1876, consisting of acts of violence that included arson, riot, and murder. While cutting wages and endangering families’

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15 *The National Labor Tribune* (Pittsburgh, PA), May 20, 1876.
livelihoods can easily be seen as an act of violence in itself, the contemporary view was that physical attacks by the striking miners were to blame for the events which transpired. Attacks on scabs (blacklegs in the miners' vernacular) and a riot which resulted in the beating and shooting of a mine owner and his superintendent prompted Governor Rutherford B. Hayes to send the state militia to the region to restore order. However, the militia presence further antagonized the miners who set five of the areas mines ablaze on May 5. One miner, Abraham Williams, was fatally wounded by militiamen who accused him of resisting arrest for his role in the fires.

Random skirmishes followed as miners fired upon the militiamen who protected the blacklegs as they worked. The region remained under martial law until the end of the summer.\(^{17}\)

Perhaps the most notable instance of violence during the Massillon War—particularly in regards to gender roles—involved participation of colliers' wives. The first act of physical violence during the strike occurred on April 1, when operators brought in a group of blacklegs from Cleveland. Miners' wives attacked the scabs as they built housing near the mines, pelting them with "stones and other missiles."\(^{18}\) Operators worried that the situation was getting out of hand and called in the sheriff to quell the disturbance. This incident is significant in understanding colliers' conception of gender roles specifically because, on the surface, it diverges so dramatically from typical nineteenth-century gender norms. The same miners who expressed shame over the thought of their wives laboring outside of the home accepted physical violence as a positive behavior in defense of the household. The participation of women in miners' struggles constituted a form of militant motherhood and can be seen in coalfields throughout the

\(^{17}\) These events are pieced together from a wide array of local and regional newspapers, including *The Stark County Democrat* (Canton), *The Canton Repository*, *The Massillon Independent*, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and *The National Labor Tribune* (Pittsburgh). See also George Warmington to R. B. Hayes, April 14, 1876, *Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Papers (RBHPP)*, microfilm, series 4, roll 35, frame 829.\

\(^{18}\) *The Canton Repository*, April 7, 1876.
nineteenth century. To some extent, this behavior was analogous to contemporary middle-class women's activism which justified their activities outside of the home as a means of protecting their households. However, the manner in which colliers' wives participated in strikes—specifically their role in the Massillon War—were sharp divergences from the hegemonic norms of the middle class or the manifestations of subaltern working-class ideals.

Nineteenth-century coal miners, working in a hyper-masculinized industry, constructed a distinct concept of manhood which reflected their experiences in the mines. Colliers' notions of independence and patriarchal-based authority in both the mines and at home mirrored the ideals of their middle-class counterparts. However, they also shared characteristics of manliness with their working-class brethren, notably in expressions of republican equality and mutualism as well as in their control over knowledge and skilled craftsmanship. By looking at the interactions of coal-miners—and their wives—with mine operators during times of stress, we can get a glimpse into their ideas regarding gender and identity construction. The Massillon War highlighted aspects of workers' control which were integral to constructing collier manhood. Women’s participation in the events and their key role in violent attacks indicates the extent of acceptable behavior by men and women in the community. By exploring this group in a time of stress, it is possible to discern the ways in which colliers combined both hegemonic and subaltern ideals to create their own concept of manhood.

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