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THE DISCURSIVE COMMONS:
THE ESTABLISHMENT, "OUTSIDE AGITATORS," AND "COMMUNIST SUBVERSIVES" IN
GADSDEN'S DEPRESSION-ERA POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

JOHN AGRICOLA

May 2014

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses a turbulent and often violent political environment in Gadsden, Alabama during the Great Depression. Using a theoretical construct called the discursive commons my analysis suggests how very particular ideas such as the trope of the outside agitator, and the idea of the communist radical, were used by the establishment to incite violence against United Rubber Workers union organizers who came to Gadsden to enlist members in the 1930s and early 1940s. It is my contention that these discursive formations had affective power over the people who committed acts of violence against their own class interests.

This thesis seeks to demonstrate through discourse analysis how entrenched combinations of political authority conspired to proscribe the freedom and opportunity of primarily Sand Mountain hill people. The Gadsden City Commission government, the local police, publishers of the *Gadsden Times*, business leaders, and Goodyear Company management all played a part in the attempts to dominate the underclass of former farmers taking up employment on the tire assembly lines. Concerned with maintaining their position in society, and concerned with building a “bigger” and “better” Gadsden, this hegemonic order used mythic ideas such as the sacrosanct idea of rugged individualism against the people. The establishment used the workers’ fears about an invisible communist menace against the people in order to foment violent attacks on the outsider union organizers. American violence is unique from European mob violence in the sense that it is usually mobilized as a way to protect the status quo, rather than attacking the upper class in a revolutionary or reformist way. This is what happened in Gadsden during the five-year period between 1936 and 1941.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my thesis chair Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson for how he pointed the way for writing regionalist inspired scholarship. Dr. Andy Harper was an early mentor to this project and his steadfast support and encouragement helped my vision for this project come to fruition. Thanks to Dr. Kathryn McKee for asking difficult questions. Special thanks to Dr. Gregg Cawley who shared a theory he is developing that became the backbone of my argument. Additionally, I would like to thank the librarians and archivists at the Gadsden Public Library, the Birmingham Public Library, the Anniston Public Library, The University of Alabama Special Collections Archive, and The University of Mississippi library. Sincerest thanks to my mother and father. They gave tireless help in very different but complementary ways.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis engages the early history of unionization in Gadsden, especially the turbulent series of events that are punctuated by United Rubber Worker's President Sherman Dalrymple's beating at the Gadsden Courthouse on June 5th, 1936; the mob assault on URW headquarters at the Tolson building a month later; the bombing of an Attalla, Alabama theater in the summer of 1937; the arrest of two men found with dynamite who admitted to trying to kill flying squadron leader Jimmy Karam; finally, this tumultuous period of violence ended with the beating of URW local leader John House in his office in 1941. I am intrigued by this five year "reign of terror" because of how the workers in the Goodyear factory seemed to be largely working against their own interests with respect to the promises of New Deal liberalism and more specifically the rights assured them by the 1935 Wagner Act. Earlier historians contend that this was "establishment violence" where collusion existed between the police, city commission government, and the Goodyear management.¹ My argument is that combinations of entrenched political authority conspired to proscribe the freedom of highly individualistic hill people. At times the conspiracy of newspapermen, city government officials, police and business leaders will seem illusory, but these representatives of Gadsden political authority were the recalcitrant agents who strove to prevent social change in a very conservative political landscape.

¹ Charles Martin, "Southern Labor Relations in Transition: Gadsden, Alabama, 1930-

In an earlier writing project I explored the Tennessee Valley murals of the Great Depression because I felt that I would be able to examine the role social elites played in the iterative process of mural painting. Their power and their approval of the murals themselves were visibly manifested on the walls of post offices and courthouses. In that study I found that murals became a kind of propaganda for New Deal liberalism and the Progress of TVA because New South leaders consulted by artists saw the diversification of industry as a positive direction for Tennessee Valley residents to take. The current thesis will show how New Deal liberalism was not always so universally accepted as beneficial social change. The project of expanding centralized governmental authority was accepted in some cases and seen to threaten local power in other cases.

In fact, the expressions of violence which occurred in the city of Gadsden during the Depression years were not altogether unique from earlier expressions of American violence, nor were they all that different from earlier North Alabama violence, which included such incidents of vigilante violence as white capping or Klan-based night riding. What follows will be an examination of power and social elites in neighboring Etowah County, which was only a mountain apart from the Tennessee Valley. Gadsden business leaders and distant corporate leaders' influence over laborers is examined to address what has been called a "reign of terror," a five-year period of establishment violence where highly individualistic hill people cooperated with business leaders against their own interests.

The New Deal offered relief to many workers with the passing of the 1935 Wagner Act. This project takes up the geophysical region of Sand Mountain and the Coosa-Valley, as this was the home of the laborers I propose to study. Though the last project focused more

on the visual culture of Northeast Alabama, this project is a labor history of the same geographic space. Methodologically I endeavor to analyze a series of events through the layering of literary texts as well as constructing a theory for studying the violent mob attacks on union organizers and other isolated incidents of violence occurring from 1936-1941. The “discursive commons” is the key to my study for it is my goal to look at how conflict is marshaled by business leaders in the discourses of the pro-business publication, *The Gadsden Times*.

I have taken the notion of the discursive commons from a political science professor named Dr. Gregg Cawley who is developing the theory presently. Cawley uses Deborah Stone to establish just what scholars mean when they use the term discourse. He invokes Stone in the following way:

Ideas are the stuff of politics. People fight about ideas, fight for them, and fight against them... Moreover, people fight *with* ideas as well as about them” (Stone’s emphasis). Since ideas lack a corporeal presence, *fighting for*, against, and with them necessarily takes the form of discourse—talking, writing, slogans, etc.²

When I use the phrase discursive commons I refer primarily to the ideas expounded in the conservative publication known as *The Gadsden Times*. To call it conservative is to acknowledge its pro- business bias. It would be a mistake to perceive the stories in the *Gadsden Times* as false just because they are slanted in the favor of the establishment or the community’s social order. Cawley explains, “all political stories have a slant because they emphasize some ideas over others. And therein is a key dynamic of democratic politics.”³ Cawley claims that a central premise distinguishing democracy from other political orders is that people have a right to their ideas even if they differ from those of others. Therefore

² Gregg Cawley. Unpublished manuscript, 4

³ *ibid*, 7

political disagreements are a natural part of democracy. He writes that political stories are constructed to reinforce pre-existing ideas. This thesis is an exploration of some of the dominant narratives promoted in the *Gadsden Times*.

The political stories found in the *Gadsden Times*, especially those about “communist subversives,” “keeping the peace,” or “outside agitator” stories, all have affective power over the public. Cawley explains, “the words we use in political conversations often work as a kind of incantation. They are used to invoke ideas, and through that, to mobilize support or opposition for issues being discussed.”⁴ My organizing principle is that we both control the words printed in political conversations and they in turn control us. The ideas found within the commons are subject to the interpretations of the individuals consuming them. Cawley explains that we are all born into a world of pre-existing ideas and free to use these ideas as we see fit. The commons is not only about political ideas but includes religious and scientific ideas as well. It is a highly porous construct. It in fact encompasses all ideas past and present. At any given moment in time some ideas can have more meaningful power than others. I am interested in exploring in the following chapters why the “outside agitator” idea was so effective in mobilizing support for the establishment’s interest in keeping unions out of Gadsden. This is a study of conflicting ideas that people in Northeast Alabama fight over verbally and sometimes physically.

E.E. Schattschneider’s political theory found in *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* is the bedrock upon which my analysis of conflict is calcified. The author makes the essential issue of his work how a constitutive feature of politics is

⁴ *ibid*, 8

conflict. He describes politics as the universal language of conflict.⁵ He explains that conflict is tremendously contagious, and in many ways the audience determines the outcome of a fight.⁶ Imagine a Gadsden, Alabama mob forming around a group of eight United Rubber Workers union organizers who were bracing for an attack by a riotous crowd. How did the crowd become so antagonistic towards people who were peaceably there to “help” laborers? Would it matter if I told you the riotous mob were workers let off by Goodyear for an extended lunch break? Would it matter if I told you the mob were Goodyear employees kept on the clock? Equally important to explaining this story would be telling you that this labor conflict was likely incited by the local city commission government who invested authority in 250 deputized citizens for the purpose of keeping the peace. According to Schattschneider in any conflict the crowd plays a decisive role. The bystanders brought to this conflict have sympathies and antipathies that must be explored from a historical perspective. This thesis asks how was the scope of the conflict altered by the establishment? The establishment is represented by politicians, publicists, and businessmen who sought to enlarge the scope of conflict. I am supposing as Schattschneider does that these people that constitute the establishment try to re-allocate power by managing the scope of conflict.⁷ I believe that entrenched combinations of political authority conspired through the production of certain discourses to proscribe the freedom and opportunities of primarily Sand Mountain hill people.

The establishment did this to alter the scope of conflict. By discursively weaving editorials about communist subversion, and outside agitators they were able to re-allocate

⁵ E.E. Schattschneider. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 2

⁶ *ibid*, 2

⁷ *ibid*, 5

power from the expanding pressure group that was the URW organizer. By promoting the status quo in Gadsden the establishment managed to socialize conflict. Labor antagonism was made to be about preserving the “peace” and “harmony” and industrial “up-building” of a “better” Gadsden. Schattschneider argues that socializing conflict makes it contagious, which might be an explanation for how a town could become so polarized about labor rights when the vast majority stood to benefit from collective bargaining. Ideas within the discursive commons affect the scale of labor conflict. Schattschneider writes that “the very words ‘union,’ ‘collective bargaining,’ ‘union recognition,’ ‘strike,’ ‘industrial unionism’ and ‘industrywide bargaining’ imply a tremendous socialization of a conflict which was once regarded as a purely private matter concerning only the employer and the individual workman.”⁸ In the case of labor conflict the fight is often about local powers trying to restrict the scope of conflict, while Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor leader Frances Perkins were actively trying during the New Deal to expand the conflict by nationalizing it. Schattschneider explains, “Democratic government is the greatest single instrument for the socialization of conflict in the American community.”⁹ The unions are an example of a pressure group developed to break open what were once private conflicts between employer and employee. Industrialization, urbanization, and nationalization have nearly destroyed the “local” and created new arenas of conflict on an unmatched scale.

E.J. Hobsbawm has proved tremendously helpful in defining certain elements about the nature of the riotous mob in his work, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Though his study concerns itself with European forms of social banditry, mafias, and mobs, it outlines well the contours of the

⁸ *ibid*, 10

⁹ *ibid*, 13

city mob that has bearing on several incidents of collective violence that occurred during Gadsden's "reign of terror." The peasants Hobsbawm describes were geared to an earlier pre-industrial way of life, not unlike the Sand Mountain hill people, and he writes, "it was their tragedy that a new world, which they did not properly understand, whirled them into a future with which they attempted to cope by dreams and violence."¹⁰ In Europe, the city mob is described by Hobsbawm as a perennial eddy in city life rather than a current.¹¹ He focuses on how European mobs generally represent the urban poor striving to achieve economic or political changes through direct action. In this setting they are revolutionary or reformist rather than forming to protect the status quo as I am proposing happened in Gadsden, Alabama during the late 1930s. Hobsbawm explains that the "classical mob" typically rioted because it hoped to achieve something and the general feeling was always that those in power would be sensitive to its movements. A second point he makes is that mobs were always directed against the rich and powerful.¹²

This was not the case in Gadsden, so I am asking why the poor Sand Mountain hill people found themselves moving as a mob when they were in fact serving the interests of the business leaders and social elite. I believe his third point about the nature of the mob is most revealing to the incidents of Gadsden violence. He writes, "The third constant factor is perhaps the hostility to foreigners; that is to non-townsmen. An instinctive kind of municipal patriotism seems to be a constant characteristic of the classical 'mob.'"¹³ This, as

¹⁰ E.J. Hobsbawm. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1959), 108

¹¹ *ibid*, 109

¹² *ibid*, 111

¹³ *ibid*, 112

we will see, is true especially in a southern environment where ideas about the outside agitator are floating around in the discursive commons.

Hobsbawm writes about the poor members of a society identifying themselves with the “splendor” and “greatness” of a city. Gadsden may have in fact thought of itself in these terms since booster literature had been referring to it as “The Hub of the Mineral Belt” or the “Queen City of the Coosa” primarily as a way of luring outside businesses to the area.¹⁴ Hobsbawm writes that “nothing was easier than for the *popolino* thus to identify itself with the city and rulers.”¹⁵ The Gadsden City Commission could be corrupt and unjust, but so long as it was stable the government represented the norm of life. If this stable order should be threatened from the outside the people would theoretically rally around the government because the local government represents the personification of the social order. The URW bringing ideas to the Gadsden local community was perceived as a threat because businesses such as Goodyear had located in Gadsden because of the promise of tractable labor from the Sand Mountain agricultural community. If unions became entrenched through the socialization of conflict then future business recruitment would assuredly suffer.

American violence is unique from the European collective violence Hobsbawm describes. Richard Maxwell Brown’s masterful work, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*, articulates the point that Americans have a long standing heritage in violent episodes of conflict that dates back to the colonial period. This heritage has imprinted upon the citizenry a propensity towards violence as a mechanism

¹⁴ Justin Fuller, “Boom Towns and Blast Furnaces: Town Promotion in Alabama, 1885-1893” (*The Alabama Review*, #29, January, 1976), 39

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, 115

for conflict resolution. He writes, “Much American violence has been devoted to preserving the status quo.”¹⁶ This may account for why the violence occurring in Gadsden was serving the interests of the establishment. He writes of the “violence-prone region” as a geographical entity that impacts the world beyond its tendentious boundaries.¹⁷ In the following study I attempt to unpack the sub-region of Northeast Alabama as a violence-prone region with a very specific history and relationship to people taking the law into their own hands. Though Brown delineates the intricate histories of South Carolina and Texas violence I will be treating the violence of Northeast Alabama.

In an early chapter Brown makes the crucial point that it is not merely the “vile” members of a society who commit acts of violence, but the most solid citizens that do so in the interest of “community order.”¹⁸ This thesis looks at the discourses found in the *Gadsden Times* and elsewhere which reveal how community leaders were constructing a narrative of impending doom and threats to the Gadsden community by outside agitators and communist subversives. Violence done in the interest of preserving the community order is to be seen as socially conservative, unlike in the European mob uprisings Hobsbawm describes. The salient feature to both works is how outsiders can threaten the sense of community order. Despite working class solid citizens fighting against the union organizers who they deemed as a threat to their community, Brown claims that most 19th and 20th century violence has represented the attempt of the established Americans to preserve their favored position in the social, economic, and political order.¹⁹ So the

¹⁶ Richard Maxwell Brown. *The Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), vii

¹⁷ *ibid*, viii

¹⁸ *ibid*, 4

¹⁹ *ibid*, 5

question becomes not why, but how, did the established hegemonic powers within the Gadsden community create a climate ripe for collective violence?

In some ways the establishment preyed upon the southern Appalachian hill person's psyche with ideas about communist subversives and outside agitators. The outsider rhetoric was effective because of the generations of hill people whose livelihoods had been so adversely impacted by the loss of their individual autonomy. This loss dates back to the gradual dissolution of the agricultural commons. The collective memory of a southern past built upon a life of leisure was becoming a distant recollection for industrial workers of the 1930s, but many who came to Gadsden from Sand Mountain for work were fresh off the farms and it is fair to say that leisure as an idea may have existed within the discursive commons. The farms of these workers' families were tenant farms where they were trapped by King Cotton and the injustice of the merchant class' credit system. It had not always been this way. Slavery, though less common in Northern Alabama, and the open range system of grazing livestock made it possible for many southerners to enjoy a life of leisure.²⁰ Historian Grady McWhiney writes, "In many areas of the Old South people by tradition and choice raised cattle and hogs as their principal occupation. 'The people [in much of Alabama and Mississippi] are for the most part pastoral,' noted a traveler in the 1840s, 'their herds furnishing their chief revenue.'"²¹ Once branded, hogs and cattle could roam the countryside in the open range system. This system allowed animals to graze on unfenced land as a customary habit of agricultural practice. McWhiney writes, "every year

²⁰ Grady McWhiney. "The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Alabama Agriculture" (*Alabama Review*, Vol 31 1978), 5

²¹ *ibid*, 8

droves of hogs would be driven through the country from Tennessee and North Alabama.”²² In antebellum Alabama livestock droving was a “universal activity.”²³

This droving tradition stems from the celtic-anglo-saxon cultural origins of many southern farmers. For centuries these people had taken part in the life of herding. McWhiney describes them as “indolent to a high degree, unless roused to war, or to any animating amusement,’ they were full of ‘pride, and consequently are impatient of affronts and revengeful of injuries.”²⁴ McWhiney described them as excellent fighters though often they were too individualistic for military duty. In his historical account the ancestors of these people imposed their customs on the environment of Alabama and other parts of the Old South.²⁵

A person could raise livestock without ever owning land before the Civil War, but the War brought a cataclysmic change to the Alabama agricultural system. The Confederate armies impressed the hogs and cattle for the purpose of feeding troops. In February of 1864, General Joseph Johnston reported that North Alabama and Georgia were nearly entirely devoid of meat. Advancing Union troops and retreating southerners had impressed all the available meat supply.²⁶ During Reconstruction black freedmen foraged the country for remaining livestock.²⁷ The system faltered and the South would experience a new order where merchants discouraged self –sufficiency. Merchants enforced a system of dependence where farmers could only buy credit in the stores if they intended to plant

²² *ibid*, 9

²³ *ibid*, 12

²⁴ *ibid*, 16

²⁵ *ibid*, 17

²⁶ *ibid*, 23

²⁷ *ibid*, 24

all of their fields with cotton.²⁸ They were discouraged from planting wheat or corn, but in Northern Alabama corn grew better than cotton. Landowners encouraged farmers to buy their meat and corn at the store. The rise of tenancy and sharecropping devastated Alabama's livestock industry.²⁹

The open range was finished by the 1880s. Dozens of counties outlawed the practice and the already powerful bourbon planters siphoned off farmers' dwindling economic power. The lifestyle of the herder could not be more different to the yankee outsider. To the outsider he seemed shiftless and indolent, and so many viewed the herder as a "poor white." But the herder had time for leisurely pursuits such as hunting and fishing. He may have valued comfort more than wealth but he was not poor. His life was different and therefore misunderstood by smug progressive industrialist observers, but it was the new order of cotton that made him truly poor. For those Appalachian hill people who knew their history, life had gotten progressively worse with the coming of outsiders. The market forces that demanded cotton came from the outside, and outside capital backed the railroad and timber companies as well.

The study of collective violence can provide insight into the forces shaping a period of history. White-capping is a term used to describe a variety of night riding activities. In South Mississippi this late nineteenth-century practice represented a movement of poor farmers who used violence to protest the crop-lien system by driving laborers off the lands that merchants had acquired through mortgage foreclosure.³⁰ In 1893 white cap clubs attacked people in two counties which neighbor Etowah County. Cherokee and Cleburne

²⁸ *ibid*, 25

²⁹ *ibid*, 27

³⁰ William F. Holmes. "Moonshiners and Whitecaps in Alabama, 1893" (*The Alabama Review*, January 1981), 32

counties are situated in the Northeast part of Alabama on the Georgia state line. Historian William F. Holmes explains that the local economy of this region was ill suited to cotton production and in these counties farmers relied heavily on grain production.³¹ In Northeast Alabama the impetus for night riding came from moonshiners who wanted to protect themselves from informers and revenue agents. Holmes believes that since the Ku Klux Klan had been active in this part of the state that whitecap clubs may have looked to that earlier organization as a model.³² This group was convinced of their right to homebrew whiskey despite what the federal government said, as they had been doing so with impunity for generations. The federal government's practice of paying informants created deadly feuds and distrust within these hill communities.

The violence that resulted from the new federal laws against moonshining bears a striking resemblance to later violent episodes occurring in Gadsden in the 1930s. In 1891 and 1892 vigilantes dynamited seven homes in Cleburne County suspecting each of housing revenue informers and women of bad moral reputations.³³ The explosions destroyed the homes but did not injure the residents. Here the weapon of choice was dynamite, and the availability of it is revealing because in the summer of 1937 an Attalla theater was blown up in Etowah County with dynamite. In this case the *Gadsden Times* reported that the United Rubber Workers (URW) were to blame. A few days later two men who were said to have union sympathies were found by police with dynamite on them, and they admitted to wanting to kill a strike breaker named Jimmy Karam. The historical continuity reaches beyond the substance of dynamite to the issue framing tactics of the

³¹ *ibid*, 33

³² *ibid*, 35

³³ *ibid*, 36

local newspaper reporting. Both the *Gadsden Times* and Cleburne County press shifted blame away from the local offenders to the people who had bad moral reputations or to those seen to have outside affiliations.

Another parallel to the Gadsden violent episodes of the 1930s and white capping in the 1890s is found when we examine the instances of collective violence. On January 27, 1893 a band of about twenty men knocked down the door of White and Mary Cotton. The family was brutally beaten and Mary had her leg blown off by a shotgun blast through the door. As we shall see with the *Gadsden Times*, the local newspapers were in favor of the violent vigilantes. The newspapers in Cleburne and Cherokee counties practically ignored the issue.³⁴ It was not until months later that the papers began to discuss the issues, but they played down the seriousness of the crimes and hinted that the victims were immoral people who had gotten what they deserved. The *Gadsden Times* does not ever go this far, but its conservative bias or slant will be discussed at length within the pages of this thesis.

Holmes writes in closing:

These episodes of whitecapping represented a form of reactionary violence committed by men who wanted to maintain a way of life that was being threatened. The threat came from outside their local communities, from the central government. The Alabama whitecaps resembled primitive rebels and members of rural secret societies who have appeared in other parts of the world during the past two centuries and who resorted to violence in the hopes of keeping some aspects of their culture being threatened by change.³⁵

The residual historical effects of federal agents and outside capital changing the landscape and the local economies must be seen as historical precedence for later violent episodes where individualistic hill people take the law into their own hands.

³⁴ *ibid*, 48

³⁵ *ibid*, 48-9

Using Douglas Reichert Powell's methodology for critical regionalism, a strategy for writing regionalist scholarship Powell published in his work *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, my second chapter discursively treats literature that emanated out of Northeast Alabama. I position myself, and my family, as insiders to the story of labor and business in Northeast Alabama. Using Rick Bragg, Jake York, and John Beecher I construct a discursive sub-region by interweaving layers of texts that will operationally help me create a story line. Bragg is useful for describing factory life and the tough conditions people suffered in the comparable industrial environment of Anniston, Alabama. York writes in "Elegy for James Knox" about the demise of the convict lease system. I use this poem as a way to introduce Governor Bibb Graves as the abolishment of convict lease made him a progressive Democrat, and it also aligned him with organized labor. In a later chapter I will take up the story of Bibb Graves' involvement in demanding peace be restored in the city of Gadsden, and the way he managed the scope of conflict in his home state. This will be an important section because a federal investigation into local wrongdoing by Sherriff RA Leath might be viewed as ligature for creating the shape of establishment violence. John Beecher's poem "News Item" is operationally vital to my narrative because it specifically addresses the violence committed against URW leader John House in 1941. Because it is House, and because of speculations Beecher makes about police collusion, this is an effective layer of text to my critical regionalist chapter. Beecher mentions Dalrymple, but what is more, House was assaulted on two different occasions in Gadsden. There was the 1941 incident that Beecher specifically discusses, but there was also a June 1936 Tolson building mob attack in which House was beaten terribly.

Now that the region has been articulated in my second chapter I move to the third chapter that begins to apprehend one of the political discourses from the 1920s that the Gadsden business elite expounded. Open shop policy allowed laborers to work without necessarily having to join a union. Gadsden business leaders held a mass meeting to discuss the importance of open shop after an early industrial enterprise known as the Elliott Car Works mysteriously burned and the jobs were relocated elsewhere. This became a turning point in the history of labor relations in Gadsden. This chapter pivots around the story of my great-great grandfather Otto Agricola, who bought the land that the Car Works had existed on in order to build a furnace manufactory. He was outspoken for open shop, and his furnace factory experienced labor unrest in the form of a shooting and strikes in 1926. In this same year Goodyear was in conversation with Otto and several other town leaders about the prospect of moving to Gadsden. Goodyear Company was promised by Gadsden's business leaders that the town's hill people from Sand Mountain would be a tractable labor force. This chapter also develops the central labor union's position against open shop, and therefore lays the groundwork for a town divided. Both positions will be explained to exist within the discursive commons. The chapter concludes with the town's celebration of Goodyear choosing to locate a new plant in Gadsden.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal at length with the discursive commons and lay out the chronology of violence in the five-year period beginning in June 1936 that lasted until John House's beating in 1941. To reconstruct this narrative I draw extensively from the *Gadsden Times*, historian Charles Martin's description of this period, the URW's historical record of this period of "establishment violence," and Charles Phillips history of the URW. This five- year period is suggestive of the combinations of entrenched political authority I

mentioned above that were conspiring against the workers to restrict their freedom and opportunities.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND NORTHEAST ALABAMA

Northeast Alabama is a unique sub-region of the American South in part because of its location at the foothills of the Appalachians, but also because it can be imagined as the furthest extension of the Carolina Piedmont and the Tennessee Valley. As a result of its location, towns within its tendentious boundaries experienced a seismic shift from yeoman practices of agriculture to industrialization in the late 19th century. This shift is connected to larger patterns of history and the transformative culture of the New South's industrialist pioneers. Agricultural mechanization and consolidation were also a part of this shift; both were a function of modernization, and the result was the decline and demise of agriculture.³⁶ Northeast Alabama in the first forty years of the twentieth century was a mixed economy of both industry and agriculture.

Regional divisions are discernible in Alabama around class lines.³⁷ This chapter is concerned with the progressive era of 1900 to 1930, as well as the subsequent years of economic depression in Northeast Alabama that terminated around the beginning of World War II. Before the Civil War most whites farmed and had little interest in paying taxes for internal improvements that would encourage manufacturing, banking, or business.³⁸ The power structure was altered sometime around the turn of the century when the Big Mule

³⁶Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 115

³⁷ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 4

³⁸ *ibid*, 4

coalition of bankers, railroad executives, and industrial entrepreneurs—primarily based out of Birmingham, but including a network that extended from Anniston and Gadsden to Tuscaloosa—joined the planter class of the Black Belt region in South Alabama in order to fight the Populist revolt of the 1890s. This Bourbon oligarchy would organize their power around the problem of politically disenfranchising the poor whites and blacks with a new state constitutional convention held in 1901. These elites wanted to prevent blacks and poor whites from voting together thus ensuring their political hegemony.³⁹ The success they had with this convention ensured white supremacy for roughly sixty-four years, and the democratic gains of Reconstruction were suppressed for a time.

This chapter is about conflict between the Big Mules and their poor white employees in the industrial cities of Anniston, Gadsden, and Birmingham. These three cities, including Bessemer in the Birmingham district, were the urban production centers of iron and steel in Northeast Alabama.⁴⁰ In 1901 increasing numbers of yeoman farmers were losing the farm lives they knew, unable to pay property taxes, and what was worse for these poor whites was how the new constitution required that they own 40 acres or 300 dollars worth of personal property in order to vote.⁴¹ Historian Wayne Flynt explains, “Restricting the vote only to those who owned property helped ensure dominance by wealthier Alabamians.”⁴² Northeastern Alabama residents from the foothills of Appalachia, and residents from the Wiregrass country of Southeastern Alabama, attempted to mobilize as these were traditional Populist strongholds, but their attempts were in vain.⁴³ Large

³⁹ *ibid*, 8

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 129

⁴¹ *ibid*, 9

⁴² *ibid*, 10

⁴³ *ibid*, 11

landowners in South Alabama intimidated blacks into voting against their political interests for ratification.⁴⁴

Many tenant farmers and independent yeoman farmers from North Alabama were deposed from their land because of increased taxes, poor health, and the cyclical demands of cotton; these individuals sought alternative ways of providing for their families in many cases by entering into the rapidly developing industrial life that was taking shape in the early years of the twentieth century.⁴⁵ In fact, the highly individualistic farmers of Sand Mountain were one reason industry decided to locate in Gadsden. The anti-union president of Goodyear, Paul Litchfield, was particularly impressed by the farmers of Sand Mountain, an area just north of Gadsden. On this ridge of the southern Appalachians the hill folk were almost entirely innocent of industrialism and unionism. This fact enhanced their value as Goodyear employees. Like at the Republic Steel and the Dwight Textile Mill, the other major Gadsden factories, Goodyear carefully screened applicants to ensure they were not prone to unionism. When individuals were lucky enough to pass the initial screenings of loyalty oaths they were typically told “protect our good name,” and, “there’s a barefoot boy (from Sand Mountain) waiting at the gate for your job.”⁴⁶

Since the early twentieth century industrial peace had been encouraged by the use of “yellow dog” contracts that forced workers to agree that they would not join a union before the company would hire them.⁴⁷ Employers also orchestrated espionage rings to inform on agitators who would then be fired. “Blacklists” were traded amongst industries

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 13

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 107

⁴⁶ Charles Martin, “Southern Labor Relations in Transition,” 548

⁴⁷ Charles Phillips, *A History of the United Rubber Workers in Gadsden, Alabama, 1936-1943*(MA Thesis, UAB, 1974), 2

to keep “trouble makers” outside the labor force.⁴⁸ Historian Charles Martin explains, “Such techniques, the surplus of labor, and the economic uncertainty caused by the Great Depression assured Goodyear, Gulf Steel, and Dwight relatively acquiescent labor forces.”⁴⁹ This chapter engages how entrenched combinations of political authority conspired to proscribe the freedom and opportunities of this tractable labor force.

By 1930, the year in which the Goodyear Tire Company opened its gates in Gadsden, all essential elements of Alabama’s political culture were firmly in place. Big mules hated the masses, and the masses hated big mules.⁵⁰ It matters who is delimiting the space, and this particular sub-region has always been my home. I have lived in the “Magic City” of Birmingham, the “Queen City of the Coosa” better known as Gadsden, and the town of Guntersville, impacted by the TVA’s plan to modernize the Tennessee Valley and diversify the local industries. This chapter is largely concerned with Gadsden as a primary industrial artery of Northeast Alabama, though it tangentially deals with neighboring Calhoun County.

My family settled in this part of the country as early as 1840 when Gabriel Hughes and his brother Joseph Hughes settled in the area known as Double Springs, but which later became the city of Gadsden. These early settlers saw tremendous economic opportunity in this scenic hamlet no longer populated by the Creek and Cherokee tribes who once roamed the valley between Lookout Mountain and Red Mountain. The Hughes brothers saw the

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 2

⁴⁹ Charles Martin, 548

⁵⁰ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 56

commercial opportunities that could be reaped from the Coosa River, whose mighty waters meandered through the valley.⁵¹

My great grandfather Hugh “Big Daddy” Agricola married Mary George Hughes on April 13th, 1916. Mary George is described by newspaper writer Caroline Cooper as “a local belle and member of one of Gadsden’s oldest families.”⁵² Mary George Hughes is a descendent of Gabriel Hughes. Her husband, Hugh Agricola, was born to Otto Agricola and Katherine Hamlin, and Otto was of the pioneer capitalist breed famous for their habits of industry. Otto was President of the A&J Manufacturing Company, the Agricola Foundry, the Agricola Brick Company, and the Agricola Furnace Company.⁵³ He was also President of the First National Bank in Gadsden, a bank that would after Otto’s lifetime become Central Bank as a result of a merger with a Decatur, Alabama Bank. Central Bank would ultimately become Compass Bank, and now BBVA.

From this description of Otto’s industries it is easy to situate him as a Big Mule. It is less easy to speculate with any authority about whether he hated the masses. Wayne Flynt explains:

Economic historians have made good sense out of this struggle to get ahead. They describe a backward economy where a few progressive business people prospered. Sometimes they prospered because they were lucky. Other times they had the advantage of controlling natural resources or they profited from superior education. They convinced themselves (and tried to convince others) that their success resulted

⁵¹ Compiled by the Workers of the Writer’s Program of the WPA in the State of Alabama. *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1941), 191

⁵² *Gadsden Times*, “Work, Determination helped make Hugh Agricola a success” 6/25/78

⁵³ Oliver Barksdale, “Organized Labor in Etowah County,” MA Thesis, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1956), 92

from their superior moral qualities, work ethic, willingness to take risks, or perseverance in the face of adversity. They dismissed less-successful aspirants as lazy, inept, ignorant, or morally undeserving.⁵⁴

Otto is the unlikely hero of my family for breaking away from his father's bread business in Marietta, Georgia. In many ways his is an epic story, but the shreds of evidence about his life can only suggest a mercurial and obdurate determination to succeed. He grew up in the house of RJT Agricola baking bread and working in RJT's hardware shop, but at the age of twenty-one he set out to make his way in the world. Unlike the select few Alabama businessmen who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, it was likely a considerable advantage to Otto's education to see a hardware business run by his father in Marietta. He likely developed business precepts as well as experiencing the privilege of working in a kind of apprenticeship under his father RJT. If Otto Agricola did loathe the masses, or view them as "lazy," "inept," or "ignorant," this position would have been shortsighted.

Otto had no doubt heard rumors of Gadsden as up and coming when he left Marietta in 1886. Booster literature was promoting the city as the "Hub of the Mineral Belt."⁵⁵ Rome, Georgia and Gadsden, Alabama were both burgeoning cities in the late nineteenth century because of their location on the Coosa River. Hydroelectric power was harnessed for the manufacture of textiles in Rome, and later in Gadsden at the Dwight Textile mill. Writers of the Works Progress Administration report the story of Captain W.P. Lay coming to Gadsden in 1874. He was born to a riverboat captain, and Lay reportedly saw the Coosa's commercial potential. Lay built the first electric plant in Gadsden in 1887 (the same

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 108

⁵⁵ Justin Fuller. "Boom Towns and Blast Furnaces: Town Promotion in Alabama, 1885-1893" (*Alabama Review* # 29, January 1976), 39

year Otto arrived in Gadsden) with northern capital infusions. Lay organized and incorporated the Alabama Power Company in 1906.⁵⁶

Otto Agricola's first business venture in Gadsden cost him fifty dollars to buy in to a partnership with E.R. Anderson on August 11, 1886. E.R. Anderson agreed to give Otto half the profits of a hardware store, or fifty dollars per month, for his labor in the store. In exchange, Otto simply agreed to run the operation full time, and took on the responsibility of half the debts of Agricola & Anderson Hardware.⁵⁷ Agricola & Anderson's biggest product was the wood-burning stove.

In 1887, as a private in the Etowah Rifles, a militia attached to the Third Regiment, Otto was encamped in Selma. When he returned in July of that year there was a celebratory ball held to honor the men. *The Gadsden Times* reported that one of the pleasant features of the evening was the "fancy dress worn by Katie Hamlin." This notable pronouncement makes clear her class status as an insider in Gadsden social circles. Hamlin was the daughter of a Gadsden probate judge named Lemmeul Hamlin. Otto and Katherine fell for one another at this ball and ran off together two days later to get married.⁵⁸ They went to Jacksonville, Alabama in neighboring Calhoun County for the ceremony. Judge Hamlin was an Episcopalian.⁵⁹ Three years after the marriage Otto attended an organizational session of the Episcopal Church in Gadsden. He was instrumental in the construction of the Church of the Holy Comforter on Ninth Street, which was not completed

⁵⁶ Compiled by the Workers of the Writer's Program of the WPA in the State of Alabama. *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1941), 192

⁵⁷ *Gadsden Times*, "Contract Begins Industrial Life of Otto Agricola," 3/5/1959

⁵⁸ Chautauqua event held in Gadsden called, "A Walk Through Time" 10/9/2011

⁵⁹ Chautauqua event held in Gadsden called, "A Walk Through Time" 10/9/2011

until decades after the organizational meeting.⁶⁰ Otto became an active member of the vestry and this may have been because he was originally Lutheran and the Episcopal Church was theologically similar, but it also might have been a gesture to appease a lukewarm father-in-law. In either case, becoming active in the Episcopal Church was a clear move towards upper class standing in the community.

By the turn of the century Otto had moved from poor immigrant to successful businessman. His capital accumulation seems to have grown at a tremendous rate by the 1910s. His family had grown rapidly as well. Katherine gave birth to seven children, and Otto built a Greek revival mansion on Turrentine Avenue in downtown Gadsden. In 1909, Otto sold his interests in the hardware store, and he established the A&J Stove Works, that became the A&J Manufacturing Company.⁶¹ The company manufactured stoves like the Majestic stoves he used to sell in his hardware store. He sold these stoves throughout the United States. In 1910, Otto organized the Agricola Pipe Company, and subsequently acquired an interest in 13 other pipe shops. In 1920, after selling his interest in all of the pipe shops, he purchased control of the First National Bank, of Gadsden, Alabama. In 1922, he helped establish the Wetter Pipe Company. Two years later he organized the Agricola Furnace Company. By 1938 this industry grew to a half million-dollar concern.⁶² My family has been tied to Gadsden through land ownership since Otto purchased roughly a thousand acres in Whorton Bend, a rural community on the outskirts of town, in the 1920s.

Now that I have explained my rootedness to Gadsden, I will tell a story that helps constitute my identity as a member of the sub-region of Northeast Alabama. Critical

⁶⁰ Chautauqua event held in Gadsden called, "A Walk Through Time" 10/9/2011

⁶¹ Citizens Historical Association Bio, written March 12, 1938

⁶² Citizens Historical Association Bio, written March 12, 1938

Regionalist theorist and practitioner, Douglas Reichert Powell, explains that ideally scholarship on regional cultures should treat them as rich and dynamic cultural constructs as opposed to treating them as a static geophysical entity.⁶³ Understanding region to be a process that is constructed through the layering of cultural texts is foundational to my critical regionalist approach to the study of Northeast Alabama. Powell's methodological approach to region explains that writing about a region creates and sustains definitions about it.⁶⁴ My work seeks to treat Northeast Alabama writers' and artists' senses of place as discursive formations rather than as essential qualities that gather around particular geographical spaces. By taking the Alabama history written by Wayne Flynt, whose family has roots in Anniston, the poetry of John Beecher, a native of Birmingham, and the poetry of the late contemporary poet Jake York, whose family hails from Gadsden, I will attempt to layer their texts, much like a bricoleur, in a way that fashions regionalist scholarship on Northeast Alabama.

Place is a discursive formation—a layered network of worries, desires, debates, ambitions, and most importantly for my purposes, conflict. The focus of the interconnected web of related discourses is labor conflict in Gadsden, Alabama in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1926 Otto was a member of a civic organization-- alongside W.P. Lay and several other notables-- that were responsible for luring The Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company to the town of Gadsden. The promise Gadsden leaders made was about tractable labor,

⁶³ Douglas Reichert Powell. *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 6

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 7

electric power, and shipping facilities.⁶⁵ The issue of “tractable labor” is a defining feature of Northeast Alabama and the qualities of its people.

In 1930 Gadsden was the fourth largest municipality in Alabama and was the county seat of Etowah County.⁶⁶ Its 24,000 residents and the kinds of industry for which Otto Agricola pioneered made it the fastest growing city in the state.⁶⁷ Coal and Iron ore were readily available to its capitalist entrepreneurs and a blast furnace was constructed as early as 1883. Its first of five open- hearth furnaces was built in 1903. As mentioned above it also had a textile mill established in 1895 and Goodyear Tire factory was located there in 1930. Historian Charles Martin explains that city leaders such as Otto assiduously lured outside businesses by emphasizing abundant natural resources, low tax rates, and most importantly, tractable labor.⁶⁸

Integral to the story of poor whites was the interplay between agricultural poverty and industrial employment opportunities emerging in the cities. Slightly better industrial wages became the siren call of the barefooted sharecropper. Inculcated in the culture of industry was a sense that employees were expendable. Though manufacturing and industrial jobs offered an alternative to the grinding poverty of farm labor, these jobs were still low wages and extremely labor intensive. Historian Wayne Flynt explains that these early years of deprivation for industrial workers resulted due to a period of capitalism when operators invested almost all their capital in plants and mines and had little

⁶⁵ (Ed.) Elbert Watson. *Etowah County Centennial Committee* (Birmingham: Roberts and Sons, 1968), 126

⁶⁶ Charles Martin. “Labor Relations in Transition: Gadsden, Alabama, 1930-1943” (Southern Historical Association), 546

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 546

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 546

remaining to spend on amenities for the labor force.⁶⁹ The people who left farms were often thought to be the poorest of the poor, because of how they were exchanging the independence of farm life for such low wages.⁷⁰ Flynt explains how rural values came under increasing assault from places such as Birmingham, Gadsden, Anniston, Dothan, and Tuscaloosa. It is noteworthy that the first three cities mentioned are found within the loose boundaries of Northeast Alabama.

New industrial laborers, or converted farm folk, chafed under close supervision, long hours, and cramped working conditions. Wages were slightly better but the trade off was hard to stomach for many. Some of the issues were health problems, the competition of convict labor, and the way the poll tax politically disfranchised them. Brown lung was a serious issue for those working in the textile industries, and accidents in the mines and steel mills were all too common.

The competition of convict labor was ended after James Knox, a Mobile native, mysteriously died in the Flat Top Mines of Birmingham, Alabama.⁷¹ After passing a bad check worth thirty dollars he was sentenced to two years, and after a short time he allegedly committed suicide. In 1925, a fellow inmate informed state attorney general Harwell Davis that Knox had died as a result of abuse from prison officials.⁷² An investigation revealed that warden Charles Davis had dunked him in a laundry vat of steaming hot water and he died from a heart attack. Charles Davis was acquitted of wrongdoing by a jury of his peers but he did not help his case when he attacked the state attorney general in the streets. This kind of violence was common in Northeast Alabama,

⁶⁹ Wayne Flynt. *Poor But Proud*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 161

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 170

⁷¹ Wayne Flynt. *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 48

⁷² *ibid*, 48

especially when someone such as an attorney general attempted to force social change. Violence is often committed in the interest of preserving the status quo. The case was so ugly that reporters from *New York World* and the *Washington Post* descended on the state to write about Alabama's corrupt penal system. This outside pressure would compel Governor Bibb Graves to force a bill through the legislature that would outlaw the system of convict leasing in 1927. Alabama would be the last state in the union to end this practice.⁷³

Gadsden native Jake York reflects on this incident in "Elegy for James Knox." He writes in a regionalist inspired verse:

Because a shackle is never enough/ to hold a man, but only his body,/ and because the body must be made/ to hold the man, to join with the chain/ until the grip is overwhelming,/ they took you from the prison/ and sold your labor, your body/ for five dollars a month, into the mine/ to dig coal for Birmingham's furnaces,/ the heat already pressing in on you/ like a hand, the coal dust/ in your lungs' own flexings/ lacerating breath right out of you/ little at a time, the hard pump of the arms/ speeding it up in the candle-lit dark/ that lay on your skin the way/ they already saw you, a density/ to be burned so iron could rain/ from rock, purified and bright./⁷⁴

Here labor exploitation is written in lyrical elegiac. The health problems inherent to the task of coal extraction has been poetically explicated.

York continues by turning to the murder of Knox, moving beyond the surface exploitation:

But to take you out, the hands/ sudden from the tight, dark heat,/ and beat you with a wire/ spun from the kind of steel/ you had begun to forge in the shaft,/ to return your muscles' work this way/ till you were red as ore, and then/ to tie and dip you in a laundry vat/ and boil the hair from your body/ as if it were any pig, and then/ call it *suicide*, as if you had done this/ to yourself, to say you drank/ biochloride of

⁷³ *ibid*, 49

⁷⁴ Jake York. *Murder Ballads* (Denver: Elixir Press, 2005), 4

mercury instead of sweat,/ instead of blood, instead of heat/ and coal
and *nigger*, to rule it/poison, to inject your dead body/ with corrosive
metal and call it/ another day at the office, ready/ to do it all again
should the sun rise,/God willing, to ship the coal out/ to charge the
ironworks so someone else/ could draw you from the hearth/ for
forging a thirty dollar check/ in Mobile, and burn you into textbooks,/
something dark to be turned/ like this chip of iron I finger/ as I think
of you,/ a small, hard strip of Alabama/ that's losing, that's turning
back/ red as the clay that buries it all—/ was it ever, will it ever be,
enough?/75

York has pointed up to the conspiracy of calling a murder a suicide, and his writing fuses images of the body with images of raw materials so prevalent in Northeast Alabama. In some ways his poem for Knox is a funereal dirge for all those past souls caught in a corrupt convict labor lease system. Knox was mining coal for the Birmingham Big Mules, and simultaneously his labor was used to discount the labor of free miners elsewhere in the state. It is important to remember that this system, up until the state abolished it in 1927, was implicated in keeping wages low for industrial workers.

Governor Bibb Graves was recognized for most of his career as a leader of progressive forces in Alabama. The case of James Knox is an instance where Graves' progressivism and alignment with labor is most visible. Graves became Governor on a platform of providing more government services to the citizens, which was something the bourbon planter class had always resisted as they favored small government.⁷⁶ In the election of 1926 he drew the bulk of his support from the rural parts of North Alabama, especially from the Ku Klux Klan, as he was a member of this 1920s incarnation of that secret society. He was also supported heavily by organized labor, World War veterans, and educational groups. His constituency can best be characterized as the "plain people" of

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 4-5

⁷⁶ William E. Gilbert. "Bibb Graves as a Progressive, 1927-1930" (*Alabama Review*, January 1957 number 1 Vol. X), 15

Alabama.⁷⁷ He worked wonders for the educational system establishing new schools and colleges, emphasizing better teacher training, and he did this by establishing teachers colleges in 1929.⁷⁸ His record on the educational and charitable fields made clear his position as one of Alabama's most liberal governors up until that time. Scholar William Gilbert avows, "One of the most important reforms of the Graves' administration was the abolition of the convict leasing system."⁷⁹ Though this seems to establish him as liberal Democrat in favor of labor rights, in later chapters we will examine Graves going to great lengths to manage the scope of conflict with respect to the labor war in Gadsden.

Aside from murderous convict labor practices, industrial accidents also imperiled workers' bodies.⁸⁰ In Rick Bragg's, *Prince of Frogtown*, he grapples with never really knowing his father and in this text he seeks to construct memories about the man who grew up in the textile mill village. The place he describes is in Jacksonville, near Anniston, which are both in Calhoun County. The place Bragg describes so vividly is only thirty minutes east of Gadsden on highway 431. In a description of the violent landscape, he writes of seeing a stranger in a mill store:

I was barefoot in town on a weekday, so it had to be payday, and it had to be summer. The linoleum was cold beneath my feet as I followed the man inside, curious and staring. He was thin, his pants billowing from his waist, his face gaunt and grooved and sad, so sad that one of us surely had to cry. He had on a long sleeved, checkered shirt with one sleeve hanging loose and empty, not pinned up and final but swinging ever so slightly with every step, as if that missing arm was something he expected to get back anytime now. But his face told me different, told me that lost is just lost. It was even beyond the power of miracles in which my people believed. No one ever prayed an arm back on—we would have heard about it if they had. I had been taught better than to stare and conditioned not to cry, by my older brother, by a

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 16

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 20

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 21

⁸⁰ Wayne Flynt. *Poor But Proud*, 243

dozen mean girl cousins. But there was something awful about that swaying, flat piece of cloth, and I just stood there, my eyes hot, my feet turning to ice in that unnatural cold. 'Was it the war?' I asked my mother, but she told me to hush, it wasn't our business. So I asked her again. She shook her head. 'The mill,' was all she said.⁸¹

The loss of fingers and other extremities says nothing of the brown lung that many suffered after years of exhaustive work in mill towns such as the one described here in Jacksonville, Alabama. The mill was likely located in Calhoun County's Jacksonville, and outside the county seat of Anniston, to avoid taxes and ensure greater control over mill village residents.⁸² Men and women of the mills were in constant contact with violent machines and their wages were only marginally better than they would have been if they had stayed on in places like Sand Mountain with all the independence inherent to a yeoman's life.

Race mattered more than class in most cases and so an effective protest tradition was late in developing.⁸³ Conservative whites typically used evidence of racial cooperation against strikers.⁸⁴ Conservative whites lodged other accusations of communism, socialism, and radicalism, at the union organizers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Race mixing was the most powerful argument because caste mattered so much in Alabama. During Gadsden's "reign of terror" city officials tried to restrict integrated public meetings to prohibit a protest movement from emerging. A city ordinance was passed in 1936 declaring it illegal for "three or more persons, some of whom are white and some Negroes to hold either public or secret meeting in which is advocated a movement looking toward

⁸¹ Rick Bragg. *Prince of Frogtown* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 2008), 39-40

⁸² Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 124

⁸³ Flynt, *Poor But Proud*, 244 and 260

⁸⁴ *ibid*, 261

the destruction of the governments of the United States, the state of Alabama or the city.”⁸⁵

This law effectively discouraged black workers from joining unions and this made it difficult for any union to organize a majority of employees in any plant.⁸⁶

The Progressive era and Populist movement of the 1890s often divided families over the issues of union membership, especially if it could mean losing one’s job, or being charged as a radical.⁸⁷ There was a deep-abiding fear of social change in the Northeast Alabama of the 1930s, and discourses about the dreaded outside agitator were pervasive in the Gadsden newspaper. This fear of the union organizer as radical has a very specific history that began as a conflict between the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the International Workers of the World (IWW). The AFL was geared towards the representation of skilled labor and its leaders largely ignored the interests of unskilled mass production fields. The AFL also condemned radical movements. The IWW was led by socialist intellectuals Daniel De Leon and Eugene Debs who worked for the ignored elements of labor.⁸⁸

The IWW advocated violent strikes and it is typically remembered for its militancy and revolutionary leadership. Its numbers shrank after 1914 for its opposition to World War I. The importance of the IWW is how the organization brought attention to the needs of unskilled workers, and its mission would be resurrected years later by the work of John L. Lewis in the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO).⁸⁹ This was the parent union that

⁸⁵ Charles Phillips, *A History of the United Rubber Workers in Gadsden, Alabama, 1936-1943*, (MA Thesis, UAB, 1974), 59

⁸⁶ *ibid*, 59

⁸⁷ Flynt, *Poor but Proud*, 277

⁸⁸ Charles Phillips, *A History of the United Rubber Workers in Gadsden, Alabama, 1936-1943*, (MA Thesis, UAB, 1974), 8

⁸⁹ *ibid*, 8

the United Rubber Workers (URW) were affiliated with, and their revolutionary heritage was not lost on the Gadsden public or the *Gadsden Times*.

In the twenties during the years of relative prosperity welfare capitalism and scientific management hurt union efforts, but most firms ended profit sharing and other benefits associated with welfare capitalism when the Depression hit. The CIO and the AFL gained significant ground thanks to the Roosevelt administration. New Deal liberalism was aimed at fixing the South, which Roosevelt had referred to as the “nation’s number one economic problem.” Flynt outlines what the New Deal did to provide relief for starving and tired industrial workers. First, came section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act (June 1933), which gave employees the right to organize and bargain collectively. The National Labor Relations Board enforced the act. When the CIO or AFL experienced resistance or company pressure on fledgling union organizations such as the URW, the NLRB would investigate.

In July 1935, Congress replaced 7(a) with National Labor Relations Act, typically referred to as the Wagner Act. The third change came in 1936 with the Walsh-Healy Act that established minimum labor standards for businesses receiving government contracts. Finally, the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 fixed minimum wages and maximum hours for companies involved in interstate commerce. Furthermore, federal courts became less tolerant of vigilantism.⁹⁰ These initiatives were challenged by southern conservatives in Congress who successfully lobbied Roosevelt for wage differentials that allowed lower wages for southern workers. Southern conservatives also branded CIO organizers as communists and integrationists. There was a handful of communists actually living in the

⁹⁰ Flynt, *Poor but Proud*, 321

United States, but because of the success the Bolsheviks had had with their revolution many believed that a handful of them could infiltrate the United States and foment trouble of a revolutionary nature. Phillips explains that “The large number of immigrants and foreigners from Eastern Europe in the labor movement added to popular fears that the movement was communist and un-American.”⁹¹

The keys to the South’s regional peculiarities with respect to labor and the North-South wage differential were extensive agricultural poverty, as this provided a cheap and tractable labor force; weak labor union tradition; individualism; and state policies that favored management and were hostile to labor.⁹² Flynt calls Gadsden “one of the most impenetrable anti-union towns,” and provides a brief synopsis of the struggles in the thirties to unionize the Republic Steel factory, the Dwight textile mill, and the Goodyear Tire factory. Flynt writes about business leaders view of workers, saying, “workers were the enemy to be ruthlessly exploited and, when they forgot their proper station in life, to be brutally repressed.”⁹³

As mentioned above, the protest tradition in Northeast Alabama was late in developing partially because of *The Gadsden Times’* complicity in the repression of labor organizing. Douglas Reichert Powell asserts that multiple definitions of place are interacting in any site of the landscape and from this a cultural history is produced.⁹⁴ Birmingham possesses a labor history too extensive to cover in the time constraints of this

⁹¹ Phillips, 11

⁹² Flynt, *Poor but Proud* 324

⁹³ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 114

⁹⁴ Douglas Reichert Powell. *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 5

chapter's long cultural history, but it is worth the time to treat the poetry of John Beecher, a Birmingham native.

Of abolitionist ancestry, he was the great-grand nephew of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. According to Studs Terkel his maternal grandfather was an Irish American coal miner and a member of the Molly Maguires, a terrorist mine organizer of the 1870s.⁹⁵ Beecher describes this grandfather in an interview with Terkel: "He was the principal subversive influence in my life."⁹⁶ John Beecher would later become an activist with Clifford and Virginia Durr from Montgomery in the Civil Rights Movement, but not before noticing what was happening in Gadsden in the 1930s and 1940s.

His father had been a steel executive for United States Steel before the crash of 1929. John Beecher worked in a Birmingham steel foundry, a fact that no doubt influenced his views on the rights of workers. About his life and his liberal position in Alabama he writes:

I fared somewhat better in free America. During the McCarthy era I was fired from my job as a professor of sociology and blacklisted for refusing to sign a 'loyalty' oath, subsequently found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. This took seventeen years. But I was lucky. I got off the blacklist in only nine years. During that period of what has been called 'internal exile' I reconverted myself from a sociologist into a poet again. Of course nobody dared to print what I wrote. So I taught myself to print and became my own publisher. My Russian friend was right. Poetry can save your life.⁹⁷

In Gadsden during the 1930s, Beecher would likely be viewed by many as an Un-American subversive, especially since *The Gadsden Times* was prone to red-baiting editorials.

⁹⁵ John Beecher. *One More River to Cross: The Selected Poetry of John Beecher* (Montgomery: New South Books, 2001), 14

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 14

⁹⁷ These remarks were spoken by John Beecher at the Worcester, Massachusetts, Poetry Festival in 1971. They are printed as a preface to *One More River to Cross*

When United Rubber Workers (URW) organizers began their attempts to unionize the Gadsden Goodyear plant in June of 1936 a “reign of terror” began that lasted until the beginning of World War II. Violent vigilantism was the strategy adopted by members of the flying squadron-- a group of strikebreakers employed by Goodyear-- to quash the Ohio based URW leaders who were descending on the town of Gadsden. As mentioned earlier, *the Gadsden Times* was complicit with the pro-business leaders of the town in tempering public opinion against the union men. If there were liberals such as John Beecher in the neighboring city of Birmingham residing within the Gadsden community, then they would be rooted out and targeted for violent suppression. An editorial posted on June 22, 1937 read:

Communitic and un-American doctrines do not belong in Gadsden and activities designed to encourage violence and other law violations must be stopped, the City Commission says in a resolution adopted and made public today... The resolution states that attention of the commission has been directed by word and deed that certain un-American doctrines are being spread and talked in the city of Gadsden; that violence, violations of the law, efforts to undermine and overthrow the government are being sponsored by those of communistic, foreign and un-American tendencies... Whereas meetings have been held within the corporate limits and police jurisdiction of this city, the designed and express purpose of which was the deliberate planning of a disruption of the peace and quiet of the people of this city and tearing down and trampling under foot the ideals of life, liberty, and government that we, as loyal American citizens hold dear.⁹⁸

This coercive language is characteristic of the kind of hegemonic power wielded by the industrial leaders. Concurrent to the publishing of this editorial was “industrial appreciation month,” a program run by Gadsden’s aldermanic government-- the city commission. During June of 1937 the city government sponsored a series of booster type

⁹⁸ *The Gadsden Times*, June 22, 1937

fairs to honor the industries in Gadsden, as well as employing their conservative newspaper to redbait and champion local industries.

John Beecher summarizes in poetic verse the tumultuous period of 1936-1941. He writes in "News Item":

I see in the paper this morning/ where a guy in Gadsden Alabama/ by the name of John House/ who was organizing rubber workers in a lawful union/ against the wishes of the Goodyear Rubber Company and the Sheriff/ of Etowah County/ was given a blood transfusion after being beaten with blackjacks/ by five parties unknown. /⁹⁹

It is significant that he writes that House was organizing against the wishes of both the Goodyear Rubber Company and the Sheriff. This was not the first time John House was attacked by a mob in Gadsden. In fact he took a beating five years earlier as well.

On June 25, 1936, the URW was employing a new strategy to take on the Gadsden power structure. Twelve men, including House, from the URW had come to Gadsden and rented offices in the Tolson Building. They were trying to convince an intractable people that unionization was the future. About six of these organizers were gathered in the Tolson building when John House received warnings that a mob was on its way to headquarters. As President of Local 2 in Akron, Ohio, House was the leader of the organizers and he attempted to contact the police to make arrangements for a police barricade. He could see Goodyear officials across the street watching the Tolson Building. By 1:00 pm, a mob of 300 men had surrounded the building on the corner of Fifth and Broad Street. A URW historian explains that "The sheriff, who left the scene when the mob approached, lounged casually in his office a hundred yards away, and two policemen directed traffic nearby,

⁹⁹ John Beecher, *One More River To Cross* (Montgomery: New South Books, 2001), 121

ignoring the pending trouble.”¹⁰⁰ In this case, the juridical power of Gadsden seems to turn a blind approving eye to impending disaster.

John House leaned out the window and tried to reason with the crowd about how they did not intend to do anything unlawful. He could not be heard over the jeers and threats. The URW history reports in the following passage:

The antiunion mob beat the organizers mercilessly and smashed the office furniture. The mob clubbed the men on the head and back with blackjacks, sticks, and brass knuckles, and when the victims fell to the floor they were kicked and stomped.¹⁰¹

House tried to work his way up the street towards the police station, but the crowd continued to pummel him. With this in mind Beecher’s assertion of Goodyear colluding with the Sheriff in the assault of John House seems well founded.

Beecher’s poem “News Item” continues its conspiratorial and accusatory tone, however well founded his assumptions may have been. He writes that “The Police Chief is ‘investigating’/ and I have a pretty good idea of what it will amount to.”¹⁰² After House’s first beating in Gadsden, Governor Bibb Graves ordered State troopers into Gadsden and he commanded Sheriff RA Leath to “preserve order in your county.”¹⁰³ Graves was unquestionably concerned about the national attention Gadsden had been getting for the last month since before the mob fight at the Tolson building a man named Sherman Dalrymple, who was the President of the URW, had been attacked in early June by a similar mob.

¹⁰⁰ *The History of the Rubber Workers in Gadsden, Alabama, 1933-1983* (East Gadsden: Union Label 1, 1983), 8

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 8

¹⁰² John Beecher, 121

¹⁰³ *The History of the Rubber Workers in Gadsden, Alabama, 1933-1983* (East Gadsden: Union Label 1, 1983), 8

About Dalrymple's beating Beecher writes, "A few years ago they took Sherman Dalrymple/ President of the United Rubber Workers of America/ out of a peaceable union meeting in Gadsden/ and right in front of the Etowah County court house/ before the eyes of hundreds including the Sheriff/ the deputies/ beat him almost to death."¹⁰⁴ I think it is significant that Beecher writes about "the Sheriff" and "the deputies" here. Sheriff RA Leath, after a federal investigation was conducted, claimed that his glasses were knocked off in the scum and that he couldn't see any of Dalrymple's assailants.¹⁰⁵ Leath reported, "three or four men seized me and my glasses were knocked off. Seven or eight men were attacking Dalrymple but I could not do anything."¹⁰⁶ It is worth noting that Leath was a former watchman at the Goodyear Tire Company before becoming Sheriff of Etowah County.

With respect to the "deputies," Beecher's use of the word itself suggests a possible interpretation being that Gadsden's City Commission government under the leadership of George Vann decided to deputize 250 special officers on June 19th, 1936, just days before the June 25th attack on the Tolson building. These police were empowered to make arrests without warrants for anyone suspected of contemplating disturbing the peace.¹⁰⁷ The deputies may have morphed and merged with Goodyear flying squadron members, who were released early from work on this day, and become the mob of angry men who attacked the Tolson.

It is no wonder that Beecher writes with incendiary force about democracy failing in the Northeast Alabama hills of Gadsden. He writes:

¹⁰⁴ John Beecher, 121

¹⁰⁵ *Birmingham Post*, June 12, 1936

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

¹⁰⁷ *Birmingham Post*, June 19, 1936

The Government of the United States/ should know about John House/ but maybe they won't notice the little item on the back pages of the Birmingham paper/ because the front pages are all filled up with Hitler/ and how he is threatening democracy/ so I am asking/ the Government of the United States/ to pay a little attention to this. / To defend democracy/ the Government of the United States / is building a lot of munitions plants around the country/ with the people's money/ because the people want democracy defended/ one of these plants is being built at Gadsden in Etowah County Alabama-- / twenty four million dollars of the people's money / going into a county/ which isn't even a part of the United States / Or is it?¹⁰⁸

From this the critical reader can assume that Beecher is suggesting that Gadsden is a Fascist island where American democracy is being encumbered by a system of repression fostered by the Gadsden industries, the local police, and I would add the local press, for creating an atmosphere of intolerance to union organizing. Beecher may be simultaneously taking an isolationist position to entering World War II, by stressing the importance of fixing local problems before meddling in European affairs.

Northeast Alabama is a violence prone region. We have seen violent machines tear employees apart, vile convict lease practices that resulted in a murder, and class rule in Gadsden that resulted in the domination of a counter hegemonic union leader named John House. The literature used to discursively construct the violence prone region of Northeast Alabama should be viewed as alternative hegemonic production. Both York and Bragg were writing decades after the events they describe, but John Beecher is an example of opposition to the dominant ideology or world-view. His writing is counter- hegemonic as Raymond Williams defines "alternatives" and "opposition."¹⁰⁹ Beecher's poetic verse is meant to question or threaten the dominance of the establishment in Gadsden. This

¹⁰⁸ Beecher, 122

¹⁰⁹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 108-135

literary-artistic production is an example of cultural emergence. Hegemony is a process of class domination and subordination, but it is important to remember that there is generally a countercultural pushback. We began to see how entrenched combinations of hegemonic political authority resisted social change in the case of John House. In the next few chapters we will see the Gadsden establishment or ruling class exert its influence to isolate “alternatives” and “opposition” to their open shop world-view. *Gadsden Times* discourses and the production of inflammatory ideas about outside agitators and radical communists effectively isolated opposition to the Gadsden hegemonic social order. Conflict between the dominant ruling class, their ideologies, and the subordinate classes of Sand Mountain hill people will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: BIG MULES AND OPEN SHOP

This chapter examines the transforming culture of a rural-agrarian Northeast Alabama that was rapidly transitioning to an urban industrial region at the turn of the twentieth century. The study of organized labor in this sub-region can provide many insights into the conflicts of economic history. Classical conflict theory, from a Marxist perspective, divides the world into haves and have-nots. Conflict theory is based on the assumption that resources in society are finite, and it stresses that competition is engendered over these limited resources. This sets up a power relationship, and for Marx, power is always about the means of production. Those in positions of power, or those who control the means of production, can use either brute force or coercive influence. Gadsden, Alabama became a primary industrial artery in the Northeast Alabama industrial bloc that includes the steel towns of Anniston, Bessemer, and the “Magic City” of Birmingham; Gadsden became a bastion of anti-union sentiments and its leaders and citizens deployed both brute force and coercive influences as mechanisms for proscribing the freedom and opportunities of poor white workers.

Northeast Alabama is a unique sub-region of the American South and the New South industrial revolution should be apprehended before examining Gadsden labor conflict of the 1920s. In the foothills of the Appalachians change came in the Bourbon decades of the post-Reconstruction era. This sub-region was ripe for change because planters and blacks were sparsely populated here. When coal and iron were discovered in rich deposits, North

Alabama developed an “aberrational society” to King Cotton in South Alabama.¹¹⁰ There are several essential ingredients for an industrial revolution, however small scale, to take shape: first an industrial region needs raw materials in adequate quality and quantity; next there must be sufficient capital to extract these materials as well as management to order the process of extraction; finally, arguably the most important part of the process is the existence of a pliable labor force. North Alabama could take capital infusions from the North when they lacked funds, they had ample raw materials, and they had labor in droves.

¹¹¹ Historians write, “Alabama became the South’s center for coal and iron production.”¹¹² In 1925, around the time this study concerns itself, Alabama ranked fourth in the South behind North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina in number of manufacturing jobs. That ranking belies how truly industrialized Alabama was becoming because the other three states were primarily textile mill industries, whereas Alabama was by far the most diversified Southern industrial state.¹¹³

When considering conflict theories about power relationships existing between labor and the managers of labor, or those who controlled the means of production, it is useful to consider the makeup of labor. By 1890 there was available capital in the South to finance industrial development, as well as an extensive rail system in the northern part of the state.¹¹⁴ Though Gadsden had a wide variety of industries established from the 1890s to the 1930s, ranging from textiles to steel to rubber, census data reveals the demographics

¹¹⁰ William Warren Rogers and Robert David Ward. *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 277

¹¹¹ *ibid*, 277

¹¹² *ibid*, 277

¹¹³ Wayne Flynt. *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 443

¹¹⁴ *ibid*, 277

of coal miners in Birmingham, and this may shed some light on who was working in Gadsden since at the dawn of the twentieth century these cities roughly mirrored one another in their manufacturing efforts. 34.9 per cent of coal miners were native born whites, and often former tenant farmers. The second group were foreign born immigrants, consisting of 18.7 per cent of the total miner population, and as can be expected there was significant tension between these first groups. The largest single group of coal miners were blacks that made up 46.2 per cent of the total population of miners. About this group historians explain, "While many black miners supported unionization and were the staunchest of allies, there was an inexhaustible supply of new black labor, which mine owners used as a club and a weapon. The large number of available workers made it hard to preach the doctrine of labor solidarity."¹¹⁵ The last group of miners came out of the convict labor system, and these men were largely black, because the system viciously discriminated against blacks during these years.¹¹⁶ Convict leasing gave operators a guaranteed labor force that was immune to union organization.

This chapter deals almost exclusively with the decade of the 1920s, because it was within this time frame that progressives began to challenge the hegemony of entrenched political and industrial leaders known as "Big Mules." This group represented the North Alabama power structure that aligned itself with the South Alabama, Black Belt, planter class, in order to suppress the Populist revolt of the 1890s. Big Mules consisted of bankers, railroad executives, and capitalist-industrialist entrepreneurs. With the Bourbon oligarchy of the South, urban Bourbons-- otherwise known as Big Mules-- conspired to extend white supremacy into the future by writ of law in the 1901 constitutional convention. But this

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 283

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, 284

convention was not only about politically disfranchising poor blacks with literacy tests and poll taxes; this convention's delegates saw the masses of poor whites as a threat to their class hegemony and white tenant farmers could be marginalized by stipulating that they own at least forty acres or three hundred dollars worth of personal property in order to vote.¹¹⁷

From 1900-1930 organized labor made very limited gains among Alabama workers. This was partially because workers were drawn from a highly individualistic yeoman class that were unaccustomed to industrialism and a tradition of unionism. When outside industries chose their sites they considered the location of Sand Mountain an advantage to gaining a tractable labor force, because the highly individualistic hill folk were so unaccustomed to traditions of unionism prevalent in neighboring Birmingham.¹¹⁸

Historian Wayne Flynt describes a pattern that existed between these early decades. He explains that an economic slowdown typically would occur that would trigger salary reductions. This would lead to strikes that governors sympathetic to Big Mule interests usually broke. These governors used the National Guard to protect company property, and these actions usually quashed the fledgling unions.¹¹⁹ Birmingham coal miners struck in 1907, 1919, 1920, and 1921, and the results were typically violent domination of the workers by groups such as the state militia.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University Of Alabama Press, 2004), 8-9

¹¹⁸ Charles Martin, "Southern Labor Relation in Transition: Gadsden, Alabama, 1930-1943", 548

¹¹⁹ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University Of Alabama Press, 2004), 39

¹²⁰ *ibid*, 39

This chapter treats a representative moment in Gadsden when labor and Big Mules appear highly polarized against one another, but in this case the class solidarity of patrician business leaders carried the day against the working classes. In the 1920s reformers divided themselves by ideology, cause, region, race, gender, racial, and religious prejudices, and though these identity politics splintered them, they attempted to confront a largely united patrician, business-oriented, conservative, Big Mule, Bourbon coalition.¹²¹ Flynt explains, “Though forced onto the defensive [the Big Mules] were armed with the 1901 constitution, traditionalism, racism, and contempt for the white masses.”¹²² Despite these odds laborers joined a broader protest in 1920 to oppose the Big Mules who controlled the Alabama power structure.¹²³

Early in the twentieth century the Birmingham district became a hotbed of union activity. The United Mine Workers were trying, unsuccessfully, to unionize the coal- fields of Northeast Alabama. In 1917, the miners went back to work, though they did not receive recognition by management of the UMW union. They did however engage in a 1919 nationwide coal strike. Unionism also spread into the steel and iron industries of this region. Companies were recalcitrant about accepting union demands, and as a result they broke strikes with relative ease. Birmingham only took a small part in the nationwide steel strike of 1919.¹²⁴

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) became during this period more active in Alabama politics. The AFL lobbied the legislature to endorse proposals favorable to

¹²¹ *ibid*, 57

¹²² *ibid*, 57

¹²³ Wayne Flynt, “Organized Labor, Reform, and Alabama Politics, 1920” (*The Alabama Review*, July 1970), 164

¹²⁴ *ibid*, 164

workingmen. In 1919 a National Labor Party was organized and praised by the typically conservative *Birmingham News*, because the editor believed it would bring workers' grievances into the open, would turn workers' attention from the strike to the ballot, and would prevent workers from falling into the perceived trap of socialism.¹²⁵

Despite these gains the gulf between labor and the Alabama business community was widened when the AFL tried to organize schoolteachers in Jefferson County (Birmingham).¹²⁶ On September 27, 1919, the Alabama legislature enacted an anti-strike law. Concurrently, walkouts were taking place all over the country, a fact that alienated much of the middle class about unions.¹²⁷ Then the Esch Cummins Bill was introduced in the United States Congress. This bill proposed putting the railroads back in private hands since World War I was over, and the government's control was no longer required. Alabama Senator Oscar Underwood also added an anti-strike clause to the bill's language. Organized labor promised to wage political warfare on those congressmen who supported the bill. All ten of Alabama's congressman voted against the Esch Cummins Bill because many had been supported by labor in the past. Senator Oscar Underwood was the exception to this, and it may have been because he was in the midst of running for President that he took a bold stand, but regardless of his reason he was up for re-election in 1920 and his position would prove costly.¹²⁸ The AFL announced in February that Underwood was one of six senators with the worst labor records in the nation, and they promised to oppose his re-election.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ *ibid*, 164-5

¹²⁶ *ibid*, 165

¹²⁷ *ibid*, 165

¹²⁸ *ibid*, 165

¹²⁹ *ibid*, 166

There were a number of anti-Underwood rallies in 1920. W.L. Harrison, president of the Federation of Labor and member of Alabama legislature, argued that union men must vote as a bloc, and the delegates reacted to his call by nominating L.B. Musgrove, a Walker County mine owner and friend of organized labor. Seventy-Five Birmingham labor unions joined in support of Musgrove.¹³⁰ Even more impressive was how a progressive coalition was formed out of the Farmers Union and the industrial unions in support of Musgrove. Labor reform became fused to the Social Gospel movement that sought social reform in the areas of prohibition, a fact reflecting the agrarian base of southern society. Flynt explains that “a typical Musgrove assembly in 1920 was part union rally and part tent revival, with clerics assailing ‘demon rum’ as fiercely as organizers damned Wall Street exploiters.”¹³¹ Harry Ayers, the progressive editor of the Anniston *Star*, claimed that if Underwood were re-elected it would be an endorsement for “booze and business.” The charismatic and iconoclastic, William Jennings Bryan, even stumped North Alabama for Musgrove appearing in Albany, Huntsville, Montgomery, Anniston, Gadsden, and Attalla.¹³²

Underwood’s political agents attacked Musgrove as a demagogue; after all, he was a wealthy coal baron from Walker County championing the rights of workers. In the end Underwood barely edged him out 69,000 to 61,000 votes, but Underwood did lose Jefferson, his home county. Underwood lost nearly all of North Alabama because of the

¹³⁰ *ibid*, 167

¹³¹ *ibid*, 169

¹³² *ibid*, 171

effectiveness of the farmer-labor coalition.¹³³ In Etowah County, Musgrove defeated Underwood by a count of 1,444 to 1,090.¹³⁴

Hopefully this brief contextualization of labor conflict in the early decades of the twentieth century is enough to set the stage for a representative moment in Gadsden that occurred in 1923, just three years after the Underwood-Musgrove senatorial race. If the poll numbers are any indication of a farmer-labor coalition against Big Mule interests then the incident at the Elliott Car Works plant was a literal and figurative powder keg for labor unrest. At the base of Noccallula Falls was a forested area full of yellow pine, oak, ash, gum, poplar, chestnuts, and cedar trees. This gently sloping mountain's base is the site in which this investigation is concerned, because it is the locus for intense changes that would sweep across the Gadsden landscape in the form of open shop policies extended to include most of the town's industries. The social history of this space will be explored as will the history of its later built environment. The imaginative space for which this study concerns itself is the history of labor in Gadsden. If this plot of land could speak it would bear witness to a rapidly transforming landscape-- the shift of the city from agricultural to industrial production, and later, see the first glimpses of the violent labor struggles that accompany that transition.

The roaring twenties was a time period of relative prosperity, but the union movement failed to extend itself into mass production industries. The representative moment occurring in 1923 represents well the nature of employer hostility towards organized labor in the form of the American Plan of open-shop employment. Many mass

¹³³ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, (Tuscaloosa: The university of Alabama Press, 2004), 54

¹³⁴ Wayne Flynt, "Organized Labor, Reform, and Alabama Politics, 1920" (*The Alabama Review*, July 1970), 177

production industries created and controlled the labor movement with company unions. These company unions replaced the independent unions which had developed during World War I.¹³⁵ The scientific management theories of Frederick Taylor began to circulate in the discursive commons, as well as ideas about welfare capitalism. These ideas contributed to alienating the worker from organized labor. Labor historian Philip Taft writes about this period: “Employers promised permanent jobs and everlasting prosperity, but economic storm signals began to appear by the end of the decade.”¹³⁶ The representative moment for which this chapter concerns itself is suggestive of that storm signal in the form of arson at a railroad Car Works plant, and a shooting at the gates of a furnace manufactory that occurred three years after the Car Works plant burned.

Before examining the storm signals it might be helpful to approach the study of this representative moment with some biographical history of the original owner of the land adjacent to the Car Works. The discourses of open shop are stirred by the conflict of a particular space’s history. The person inhabiting that space before it burned was a planter named Ira Foster who in 1874 moved to Gadsden for health reasons.¹³⁷ He came to purchase the land described above. Foster was born in Spartanburg, S.C., in 1813. He was from humble origins, but he worked diligently at school in the study of medicine.¹³⁸ While still a young man he moved to Forsyth, Georgia and practiced medicine before he was pulled into the Florida War against the Seminoles. Though he began as a captain he was

¹³⁵ Philip Taft. *Organizing Dixie: Alabama Workers in the Industrial Era* (Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press, 1981), 62

¹³⁶ *ibid*, 62

¹³⁷ Thomas McAdory, *History of Alabama and dictionary of Alabama Biography*, (Chicago: The S.J Clarke Publishing Company, 1921), 603

¹³⁸ *Northern Alabama: Historical and Biographical*, (Birmingham: Smith and Deland, 1888), 769

quickly promoted to the rank of colonel, and led his regiment valiantly in a series of skirmishes. He returned to Georgia to practice medicine, but soon became a student of the law. His career was ascendant as a lawyer.¹³⁹ He married Millie Crooks on October 9, 1842.¹⁴⁰ He practiced law in Atlanta where he grew into the political leanings of a rabid secessionist. When the Civil War began, Governor Joseph Brown appointed him Quartermaster-General. He was a devoted soldier in the South's cause. After the war he continued to practice law for a brief time in Georgia, but due to failing health he eventually decided to relocate to Alabama.¹⁴¹ Presumably, he believed that the western air might due a respiratory illness good.

He first moved to Marshall County and was instrumental in pioneering the "uninhabited wilderness" near the Tennessee River. Historian Katherine Duncan writes that "it was largely through the efforts of Foster that the new community survived."¹⁴² In 1874 the Foster family left the area they had founded in Marshall County and moved to Gadsden. On November 4th of that year his son, Marcus Lucullus Foster married Gadsden Mayor Robert Kyle's daughter, Mary A. Kyle.¹⁴³ This merged two prominent Alabama families and while their marriage was but a decade old, the patriarch of the family, Ira Foster, was elected an Alabama State Senator.

The marriage of M.L Foster to Mary Kyle can be read in a close examination of an 1887 map of the city of Gadsden. M.L. Foster owned land on the Coosa River that the Kyle

¹³⁹ *ibid*, 769

¹⁴⁰ Katherine Duncan and Larry Smith, *The History of Marshall County Volume One*, (Albertville: Thompson Printing, 1969), 47

¹⁴¹ *Northern Alabama: Historical and Biographical*, (Birmingham: Smith and Deland, 1888), 769

¹⁴² Duncan and Smith, 47

¹⁴³ *ibid*, 47

Lumber Company Mill was located on. The Tennessee and Coosa Railroad cut around the edges of downtown Gadsden and ran to the banks of this industry. Though Kyle and Foster owned property all over the early town of Gadsden, the site for which this investigation concerns itself is located at the city center's periphery.

At the base of Noccallula Falls Senator Ira Foster, a Bourbon oligarch, purchased a large farm estate. This land is bisected by Wills Valley Road and the Tennessee and Coosa Railroad mentioned earlier. To the west of the Foster estate is Black Creek, and across Black Creek is R.B. Kyle's property. North of the Foster farmland and running up the Noccallula Mountain is the Rome and Decatur Railroad. To the east of Wills Valley Road is the easternmost corner of Foster's land and to the south is Steamboat Captain Elliot's Car Works plant. It was one of many railroad and car shops in the state of Alabama during the early 1920s. In fact, car works plants employed 8,500 people in the state of Alabama during these years, but this operation would become a flashpoint in the history of labor conflict in Gadsden, sparking a fight that would be waged between Big Mules and members of the Central Labor Union.¹⁴⁴

Elliot's Car Works was an early manufacturing concern in this burgeoning town, located in between the two railroads.¹⁴⁵ The timber and steel foundry in the area made this location an ideal spot for the production of railroad cars, but it also should be viewed as a symbolic site for the intersection of the old ways of agrarian life embodied by the Foster farm, and the New South industrial imperatives typified by the Elliott Car Works. More aptly, the intersection of the Foster farm represented the Bourbon alliance to Big Mules that had been an important coalition in politically disenfranchising poor whites who hailed

¹⁴⁴ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State*, 443

¹⁴⁵ Pope's 1887 Map of the City of Gadsden

from areas such as Sand Mountain. Many workers of Elliott Car Works would have come from Sand Mountain, but these would have been extremely poor tenant farmers, because most of the middling farmers on Sand Mountain rejected work in mills and factories in towns such as Anniston and Gadsden.¹⁴⁶ The people who left the mountain for work in cotton, steel, or later, rubber plants represented the area's poorest families.¹⁴⁷ In an interview, Mary Wigley Harper, a resident of Sand Mountain, attributed the reluctance to leave the mountain to self-esteem and independence.¹⁴⁸ Poverty took a heavy toll on this resilience and independence, but the qualities would persist in the individuals sometimes making them reluctant to join unions.

Captain Elliott built the Car Works plant in 1887. It was then purchased and expanded by the Southern Railway Company.¹⁴⁹ At this plant Gadsden experienced the first stirrings of a tumultuous conflict between town business leaders and workers. Historian Charles Martin writes about this in the following passage:

The community's first major labor relations dispute erupted in 1923 when member's of the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen unsuccessfully struck the Southern Railroad's Gadsden Car Works, which provided maintenance and repairs for railroad equipment.¹⁵⁰

The "car-knockers" union was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and they amassed a membership of about 500 workers in the Gadsden area. This was the biggest single union ever assembled in Etowah County up until that point. In 1923 the "car-knockers" union engaged in a bitter strike against the Southern Railroad. It resulted in the

¹⁴⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 170

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*, 170

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*, 170

¹⁴⁹ *Gadsden Times*, "Fire at the Car Works Causes 250,000 loss," October 11, 1923

¹⁵⁰ Charles Martin, "Labor Relations in Transition: Gadsden, Alabama, 1930-1943" *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. XLVII, NO. 4 (The Southern Historical Association, November 1981), 546

first incidence of labor violence in a long history of discord between business leaders and workers.¹⁵¹ This is significant at this early date because joining a union of any kind might cost a worker a job or subject him to charges of communism or anarchism.¹⁵²

After a long protracted dispute with the “car-knockers” union the plant burned. The origin of this fire was difficult to determine, but business scholar Oliver Barksdale reported from ethnographies conducted in the 1950s that “some residents remember that the plant was dynamited during the strike[...].”¹⁵³ He heard this from a woman in her seventies who was initially very talkative about the car works plant, but she reportedly backpedaled when she learned that the interview was for union history. Barksdale was compelled to abruptly conclude the interview.¹⁵⁴ The fire consuming the car works plant burned so intensely that it jumped across the street, destroying several dwellings, stores, and a gristmill that had been built up on the former Foster farm.¹⁵⁵ At the time of the fire the main car works shed was 600 feet long and 200 feet wide. This main erecting shed was destroyed along with a tin shop, an airbrake department, and sixty-six freight cars.¹⁵⁶ A night watchman discovered the blaze, and the *Gadsden Times* originally cited defective electric wires or a spark from a locomotive. Initially the superintendent of the Car Works plant stated that the building tracks and equipment would probably be replaced at once,

¹⁵¹ Oliver Barksdale, “Organized Labor in Etowah County,” MA Thesis, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1956), 48

¹⁵² Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 277

¹⁵³ Oliver Barksdale, “Organized Labor in Etowah County,” MA Thesis, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1956), 45

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*, 45

¹⁵⁵ *Gadsden Times*, “Fire at Car Works Causes 250,000 Loss,” October 11, 1923

¹⁵⁶ *Gadsden Times*, October 12, 1923

but no word would officially come from the Southern Railroad's Washington D.C. office until days later.¹⁵⁷

The company's decision to relocate the materials from the plant to the neighboring cities of Knoxville, Chattanooga, Sheffield, Lenoir City, and Birmingham was no doubt related to earlier union unrest.¹⁵⁸ It is difficult to substantiate Barksdale's assertion that the plant was "dynamited," but Gadsden's Mayor Christopher did claim that the fire appeared to be of an "incendiary" nature, implying foul play.¹⁵⁹ Possible arson culprits include wildcat strikers or Southern Railroad officials who may have desired a less turbulent location for the plant. The Southern Railroad determined that they would keep on the payrolls about 200 of the workers from the original plant in new locations in Alabama and Tennessee. The Gadsden Chamber of Commerce worried about the plant's departure from the local area, and they sent a delegation to D.C. to lobby the executives of the Southern Railroad.¹⁶⁰ Turned away fairly promptly, Vice President F.S. Wynn of the Southern told the group that the decision to move the plant was final.¹⁶¹

A week later on November 2, 1923, the business community incensed about the turn of events that had seen one of their early industries disappear from the Gadsden landscape held a mass meeting where they took a stand for the "open shop" policy.¹⁶² In theory, the open shop gave an employer the freedom to hire whomever he chose regardless of union affiliation or absence of it. In actual practice it was a means of employers attacking the process of collective bargaining. Local chambers of commerce contributed to the

¹⁵⁷ *Gadsden Times*, October 11, 1923

¹⁵⁸ *Gadsden Times*, October 18, 1923

¹⁵⁹ *Gadsden Times*, November 2, 1923

¹⁶⁰ *Gadsden Times*, October 19, 1923.

¹⁶¹ *Gadsden Times*, October 25, 1923.

¹⁶² *Gadsden Times*, November 2, 1923

development of a very effective propaganda machine for the open shop policy. Charles Phillips explains, "Such propaganda depicted labor unrest as a struggle between the traditional values of rugged individualism and subversive, foreign ideas of collectivism."¹⁶³

The open shop meeting was organized because the general feeling about the discontinuance of the car shops was so universally indignant. At this meeting the city's most influential and civic-minded persons took a stand for the open shop. Future mayor George S. Vann told of "a dark period" in Gadsden history when the Central Foundry was re-located. He also described the coming of Gulf States Steel Company and claimed, "co-operation among the citizens was responsible."¹⁶⁴ Colonel O.R. Hood, representing the Rotary Club, discussed the troubles and claimed, "Unless matters were changed that, 'we cannot keep the industries we now have, much less getting new ones.'" The paper reported that Hood went on to discuss "co-operation" and asserted that "as soon as word goes out there is a spirit of protective interest for invested capital as well as for labor Gadsden will grow as it has never grown before and there will be no way to stop it."¹⁶⁵ Mayor Christopher towed the line, arguing, "Both the members of the unions and the business interests should work together for the collective interests of both, rather than each for himself." He would set a precedent that future Mayors would follow by vowing to use the city administration for the "up-building" of Gadsden.¹⁶⁶ The meaning of this expression is manifold and is later expressed in future actions taken to repress labor disputes by the use of police force. C.A. Moffet, representing Gulf States Steel, expressed a feeling that if their plant had been treated as the Car Works plant was treated that he would choose to relocate

¹⁶³ Charles Phillips, 10

¹⁶⁴ *Gadsden Times*, November 2, 1923

¹⁶⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*

to neighboring Birmingham too. This may have been issued as a warning to his employees. Moffet's plant operated as an open shop, and he reiterated the sentiments of the other business professionals that this was the way for Gadsden to continue to grow as an industrial center.¹⁶⁷ Captain W.P. Lay, founder of Alabama Power Company, and described sometimes as "Gadsden's most distinguished citizen" for harnessing the hydrological might of the Coosa, was for the open shop as well.¹⁶⁸

The last business leader to take a stand against unionists was the A&J Manufactory Company President, Otto Agricola. Significantly, Agricola would in a few years purchase the car works site for \$25,000. At the November mass meeting he rose and clarified for the audience the way he interpreted the resolution for the open shop. He said:

The open shop does not mean opposition to the union, but simply guarantees equal rights to all and special privileges to none. Every man is free to organize as he pleases but he has no right to use that organization for purposes of intimidation.¹⁶⁹

Mr Agricola's language is suggestive of a real fear of union intervention. In the discursive commons unions were often associated with corruption and organized crime. In the 1920s there was plenty of graft and corruption within the organized labor movement.

Misconduct was rampant in the cities of New York, Chicago and San Francisco. Phillips writes, "In some instances, gangsters gained control of unions and used force and violence to extort money from both employees and employers."¹⁷⁰ Otto may have meant that he would not be intimidated by gangster tactics of organized labor or he could have meant he would not be intimidated by outsiders to his company in general.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*

¹⁶⁸ *WPA writer's guide to Alabama*, 192 and *Gadsden Times*, November 2, 1923.

¹⁶⁹ *Gadsden Times*, November 2, 1923

¹⁷⁰ Phillips, 10

The Central Labor Union was an organization that claimed to represent all the labor unions in the district, and they responded to the open shop meeting of Gadsden business leaders by holding their own meeting. It was this group's contention that the Car Works plant was not removed because of labor conditions.¹⁷¹ The Central Labor Union cited the AFL's presence in Birmingham as one justification for the Car Works not really being closed for union activity. They questioned why the Car Works would have relocated to a city where unions were gaining a foothold. Part of their logic ran that recent Presidential platforms from both parties had been for collective bargaining and therefore opposed to the open shop policy.¹⁷² The speaker of the Central Labor Union proudly proclaimed not a single arrest of any of their one thousand members. This meeting took a stand against the open shoppers by expressing resentment that their policy was class based. They also used biblical understanding of "the golden rule" to cement the claim that workers and leaders should be working in cooperation with one another. There were over 250 present at the Central Labor Union meeting, and many members of the craft unions were in attendance. A.C. Colvin articulated the point that the discontinuance of the car-works plant precipitated the differences between business leaders and craft union members. This point is foundational to my earlier assessment of the site of the car works as the locus for a rapidly transforming cultural landscape.

Colvin believed and stressed at this meeting that the Chamber of Commerce committee that went to D.C. had failed the community. Furthermore he declared, "the members of that committee came back to Gadsden with their feelings hurt and had to take

¹⁷¹ *Gadsden Times*, November 6, 1923

¹⁷² *ibid*

their spite out on somebody and they picked organized labor.”¹⁷³ This resistance to the will of Big Mules is characteristic of two classes struggling over finite resources as is articulated by conflict theory. Colvin continued his diatribe against the business leaders from the open-shop talk by explaining, “You know what that [the open shop] stands for. They say it means nothing. It means the destruction of organized labor. We will pay you what you are worth and tell you what hours to work... have we not some right to say what we will work for?”¹⁷⁴ Colvin then describes open shoppers canvassing Broad Street for signatures for their resolution, but when the signers were later asked why they signed it, they generally responded that they did not know what they were signing, or that they thought it was for a “bigger” and “better” Gadsden. Booster language such as “for the up-building” of a “bigger” and “better” Gadsden, especially when found in petition format, can be considered coercive influence used by Big Mules as a mechanism for maintaining their hegemony over the working class.

A mythic story surrounds the formation of the Agricola Furnace Company, built on the remains of the Car Works plant. Gadsden Newspaperman Will I. Martin published a book entitled, *If Memory Serves*, in the late 1940s. On August 19, 1949 Martin describes the “ugly strike” and “fire” that resulted in the closing of the Gadsden Car Works in 1923. Officials and businessmen organized a meeting in 1924 to plan for replacing the plant. These business leaders packed the courthouse auditorium and devised a plan to raise \$25,000 to buy the old site and gift it to Otto, who Martin describes as “the great industrial leader.” In a seemingly magnanimous gesture Agricola told the committee that he could not accept such a gift from friends and neighbors. Martin explains that Otto had some

¹⁷³ *Gadsden Times*. November 9, 1923

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*

trepidation about how fickle people could be.¹⁷⁵ If he built the furnace factory he might be a hero for only the time being, but as time went on he could become vilified by the labor unions. He also no doubt wanted autonomy and did not desire to have a board of investors telling him what to do. After some rumination Otto decided he would purchase the site of the old Car Works on Twelfth Street out of his own pocket. He then induced his friend, Henry Wetter, to build a pipe plant on the same site. On Monday May 3, 1926 the site was reported to have shipped its first trainload of 210 furnaces.¹⁷⁶ By mid century the Wetter pipe and the Agricola furnace factory each had separate payrolls and both payrolls were larger than that of the old car works plant.

At Agricola's other business interest, the A&J Manufacturing plant, his fears about union activity proved to be well founded. In early June 1926, Otto Agricola decided to close the A&J because of attempts to unionize the workers at the plant. A *Gadsden Times* reporter writes, "The A & J Manufacturing Company has resumed operations in a small way, after having been closed down completely for several weeks, following an attempt on the part of the union to organize workers at the plant."¹⁷⁷ On June 17th workers began to migrate back to their jobs on the lines, but they did so under the stipulation that the A&J was open shop. The *Gadsden Times* reported that "it would remain closed indefinitely unless the men would retain their unorganized status [...]," which was a statement Otto Agricola reiterated.¹⁷⁸ The very next day, a group of about twenty men tried to bar the gates of the A&J to prevent "scabs", or open shoppers, from entering.¹⁷⁹ Otto was re-

¹⁷⁵ Martin, Will I. *If Memory Serves*, 37

¹⁷⁶ *Gadsden Times*, May 3, 1926

¹⁷⁷ *Gadsden Times*, June 17, 1926

¹⁷⁸ *Gadsden Times*, June 17, 1926

¹⁷⁹ *Gadsden Times*, June 18, 1926

opening in a limited way when strikers caused a disturbance at the gates. Otto's aim was to re-open the A & J at first in a limited way and not bring the plant to full working capacity unless he could ensure that his employees were not involved with unions. On June 18th, 1926, L.W. Grigsby was fined for disorderly conduct and trespassing. Reportedly, someone from the crowd was heard to call out, "you can't take him to jail." The newspaper felt that union sympathizers inspired the disturbance at the gates, trying to prevent the plant from re-opening with unorganized workers.¹⁸⁰ In marked ways this represents the conservative bias of the *Gadsden Times* as well as the coercive influence of business leaders. The disturbance at the gates was just as much the fault of union sympathizers as it was the fault of Otto for being obdurate about the open shop policy.

A little less than a month later violence broke out on Forrest Avenue just in front of the A&J Company. The newspaper described the offenders as "union sympathizers" who were attempting to prevent the open shop employees of the A&J from going to work. There were many who were part of the molders' union who wished Otto would accept their union, and employ them. At 6 am on the morning of July 10, 1926, J.W. Godfrey, a twenty year old from East Gadsden, and allegedly on the side of the molders union, was shot in the back. A number of others were badly beaten. A pistol and a chisel were found on the streets after the brawl. *The Gadsden Times* reported, "20 men had congregated in and near the service station, and that when nine men came down Forrest Avenue on their way to work at the A&J Manufacturing Company, they were attacked and fighting began."¹⁸¹ This free-for-all battle was the latest in a sequence of disturbances in which union members tried to prevent employees from working. The plant had been recently closed in early June,

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*

¹⁸¹ *Gadsden Times*, July 10, 1926

but on the morning of the attack was running at near full capacity with non-union labor. This meant over one hundred employees, but from where the non-union workers hailed is a mystery. Some accused Otto Agricola of hiring men from other districts to fill the ranks of his employees. The City's leaders adopted an ordinance against picketing shortly after the disturbances at the A&J began.¹⁸² In this case we see how entrenched combinations of political authority conspired to proscribe the opportunities of workers. In terms of classical conflict theory, brute force and coercive influence has been deployed to dominate the weaker members of this society.

Feeling must have been polarized within the community between the union sympathizers and Otto Agricola, because the President of the A&J felt compelled to write an editorial setting the record straight. In a way he echoed the open shop comments he made at the 1923 mass meeting three years earlier, forcefully defending the position that business leaders and workers would not be intimidated by groups such as the Car Works Union or the International Molders Union. He writes in the following passage drawn from the *Gadsden Times*:

The A & J Manufacturing Company is an open shop Foundry and will always remain so regardless of all threats, intimidations, or how long Nick Smith of the Iron Molders Union, continues to stay here. Good molders in our shop can earn \$6.00 to \$10.00 per day; this is all we can afford to pay and we believe this is better than the wages he pays, which is \$1.50. We are going along endeavoring to run and attend to our business and if we cannot get full protection for our men and property we will simply close down permanently. If some of the experts who are making asses, (of 57 varieties) of themselves, will tell the good people of Gadsden just how and what way they have shown the working people of this City that they are their friends, I as one, would like to hear it. How much money do they contribute to the support of the working man by giving him employment? Please tell us! I want to know it! According to my way of thinking the best friend

¹⁸² *ibid*

I have is the one who enables me to make a living and support my family, but it seems that those who are my critics do not think this way. According to them the best friend the laboring man has, is the big mouth, lying, sneaking hypocrite who can provide the most hot air and do a Hell of a lot of talking, but when it comes to shelling out the coin he is no where to be found. Now, my friends, I am guilty of trying to do something that will help everybody in this District and am also guilty of running and attending to my own business and not letting a hired Labor Agitator from Ohio come down here and meddle with my affairs and stick his nose into something he does not contribute a cent or care a Damn whether it prospers or not. Outside of that I suppose I am all right.¹⁸³

In this vitriolic statement Otto has drawn down the gauntlet for labor. He declares himself to be the working man's best friend because of his capital infusions in to the A&J and the Agricola Furnace plant on the former Car Works site. This passage represents a dominant southern narrative; the outside agitator persona becomes a trope in later labor struggles in the Gadsden area as well as the much later civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

Five days passed before L.W. Grigsby, the Secretary of the International Molder's Union who was mentioned above, decided to answer Otto's incendiary declaration. Though Otto did represent the rare case of a southerner who had and used accumulated capital to develop the Gadsden landscape, he may have overstated the importance of capital, when labor was so necessary for the production of his stoves and furnaces. Workers had to mine the manganese from the Gadsden red hills, and workers had to pour the hot steel into molds of the stoves and furnaces. Otto's wealth was a vital part of this process for he signed their checks, and if we believe him, he paid them fairly. Grigsby tells the story in his words as to what happened at the A&J. He writes in the following editorial:

Some 10 weeks ago, about 30 minutes before the men's work was done, a notice was posted in the foundry that the foundry would close down that evening because the men were joining the union. At the

¹⁸³ *Gadsden Times*, July 16, 1926

time the notice was posted there were 48 molders employed. Twelve of them belonged to the union, 7 of this 12 had belonged to this union for several years. Thirty-six were not members of the union, most of these having never attended a union meeting or expressed a desire to become a member and did not join the union for some ten days after the shop was closed down, joining at that time so they could secure the lockout benefits the union pays to members.¹⁸⁴

Grigsby goes on to say that Otto Agricola mischaracterized the working people as not being willing to work. He discredits Agricola's claim that he wants to help everyone in the district by asserting that there are 50 unemployed Gadsden citizens who he could help by giving employment. Instead they are fired and arrested for trying to secure their former jobs at the foundry.¹⁸⁵

Concurrent to the labor troubles at Agricola Furnace and the A&J Manufacturing Company was a move in the North for shipping industries South as Gulf States Steel and Dwight Textile Manufacturing had already done. In 1926, Paul Litchfield, the new President of Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company asked a factory manager named Clifford Slusser to find the best location for a Southern plant expansion. He narrowed his choices to Gadsden, Alabama or Atlanta, Georgia, because of electric power, fuel water supply, labor supply, and shipping facilities.¹⁸⁶ Gadsden sent a delegation of its business leaders-- O.R. Hood, A.P. Reich, Otto Agricola, W.P. Lay, A.W. Ralls, and Louis Herzberg—to Akron, Ohio to discuss the merits of Gadsden with Goodyear officials.¹⁸⁷ On December 15, 1926 Goodyear announced its plans to locate in Gadsden. Wild celebrations ensued all over the city. It would be the beginning of a new era when in June, 1929, Goodyear opened its doors.

¹⁸⁴ *Gadsden Times*, July 21, 1926

¹⁸⁵ *ibid*

¹⁸⁶ Elbert Watson ed. *Etowah County Centennial Committee* (Birmingham: Roberts and Sons: 1968), 126

¹⁸⁷ *ibid*, 126

The site of the Foster farm intersecting with Gadsden's industrial elements from late in the nineteenth century saw sweeping changes. The barefooted boys waiting at the gates of the car works plant for employment would be told that they were replaceable and that the rule of the day would be the open shop. Violence and a transforming, ever evolving, landscape accentuate this story's contours and much is told here that will be told again in the next decade of labor upheaval.

CHAPTER 4: THE CHAIN OF IDEAS

This chapter is an extension of my earlier examination of labor conflict in Gadsden, Alabama. It examines the turbulent years of the Great Depression and focuses on the “establishment violence” endemic to this district of the country.¹⁸⁸ In particular this study is a discourse analysis of how the writers of the *Gadsden Times*, a very conservative and pro-business publication, treated the violent episodes that occurred in June 1936 in print.

As has been shown in earlier chapters, the “agricultural alternative” was only marginally better than tenancy.¹⁸⁹ The close proximity of Sand Mountain, an agricultural Appalachian hill community, increased the value of Gadsden to Goodyear President Paul Litchfield. It meant an available workforce unaccustomed to industrialism and traditions of unionism that were evolving elsewhere in places such as Akron, Ohio, where Goodyear was headquartered.

Events such as wars, revolutions, and depressions often accelerate social change. An entrenched class of factory owners, business elite, city government officials, and newspaper writers chose to resist the forces of change by using their influence over the masses. Post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault provides a useful citing of Servan in the following passage:

When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and

¹⁸⁸ Wayne Flynt. *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 133

being their masters. A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas; it is at the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain; this link is all the stronger in that we do not know of what it is made and we believe it to be our own work; despair and time eat away the bonds of iron and steel, but they are powerless against the habitual union of ideas, they can only tighten it still more; and on the soft fibres of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of empires.¹⁹⁰

This is not to assert that the citizens of Gadsden, Alabama were as slaves to their industrial captains, but rather to suggest that they were made willing participants in their own repression and domination. This chapter explores the hegemonic and coercive influence that retarded the growth of unionism in Gadsden in the summer of 1936.

It is important to understand why Gadsden became the chosen battleground for labor organizing beginning in 1936. Between 1933 and 1938 the New Deal provided a supportive legal framework for unionization.¹⁹¹ First, Congress passed Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act in June of 1933. This legislation gave employees the right to organize and bargain collectively. The National Labor Relations Board enforced the act. Two years later in July of 1935 the Wagner Act replaced 7(a). This act forbid a number of unfair practices employers had been using to circumvent the National Labor Relations Act. The third change was the Walsh- Healy Act, which established minimum labor standards for companies receiving government contracts. The last New Deal labor legislation came in the form of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 and this fixed minimum wage and

¹⁹⁰ Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc., 1995), 103

¹⁹¹ Wayne Flynt. *Poor But Proud* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 321

maximum hours for firms involved with interstate commerce.¹⁹² This was the legislative milieu in which the events of this chapter unfold.

With the passing of the 1935 Wagner Act, Historian Ira Katznelson explains, “Rubber workers took over the Goodyear plant in Akron, Ohio, in November 1935, in January 1936, and again, in February.”¹⁹³ Starting in the depressed economic year of 1931, Goodyear had been on six- hour days in Akron. On October 20, 1935, factory manager, Clifford Slusser announced that Goodyear would go to eight hours beginning on January 1, 1936.¹⁹⁴ This move would worsen unemployment and cause piece rates to be lowered so that men working eight hours a day would be paid the same as when they worked six hour days.¹⁹⁵ On January 19, 1936, John Lewis of the CIO staged a mass meeting at the Akron armory.¹⁹⁶ On February 1, 1936, a hundred pitmen at Goodyear staged a sit down strike over a pay cut; none were members of the URW. On February 17, 1936 almost 1500 Goodyear workers endeavored to strike encouraged by the Local 2 URW.¹⁹⁷ Rubber workers organized huge picket lines and armed themselves with clubs and sawed-off billiard cues to resist efforts by police to end their protest. In the end, they won a settlement for the United Rubber Workers Union on March 21, 1936.¹⁹⁸ Historian Irving Bernstein writes, “The picket lines were extremely effective; by Wednesday only 300

¹⁹² *ibid*, 321

¹⁹³ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 173

¹⁹⁴ Irving Bernstein. *Turbulent Years: The History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 590

¹⁹⁵ *ibid*, 591

¹⁹⁶ *ibid*, 592

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*, 593

¹⁹⁸ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 173

people remained at work... Fourteen thousand people were on strike.”¹⁹⁹ These were combined numbers of Goodyear, Firestone, and B.F. Goodrich employees.

Historian Charles Martin explains that anti-union president of Goodyear, Paul Litchfield, was stung by the loss in Akron and particularly the move from company support to union support; he plotted a counterattack. Litchfield sent vice-president Clifford Slusser to Gadsden, presumably because Slusser had a prior relationship with the town’s leaders as he had been responsible for choosing the site in 1926. Litchfield had lost the battle in Akron, but he could win the war by moving production to the Southern plant in Gadsden.²⁰⁰ Martin explains, “[Slusser] apparently received assurances that the city would strongly support the company and help crush the weak but growing URW local. In return, Goodyear agreed to shift additional production from Akron to Gadsden. When the company did begin to move production, Akron URW leaders stepped up aid to the Gadsden local.”²⁰¹ On May 6, 1936, Slusser told a URW committee in Akron that labor turmoil there necessitated moving production to plants that had “the protection of communities.”²⁰²

The violent upheaval in Akron contributed to the rubber industry becoming one of the most bitterly anti-union. The promise of the plant built in Gadsden in 1929 was that it was firmly against union organization. The plant organized a company union to keep organizations such as the CIO and its affiliates out. The Etowah Rubber Workers organization (ERW) was controlled by company men. The problem was that ERW’s representatives’ allegiance to the workers was always questionable. The other disparity

¹⁹⁹ Irving Bernstein. *Turbulent Years: The History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 594

²⁰⁰ *ibid*, 597

²⁰¹ Charles Martin, “Southern Labor Relations in Transition: Gadsden, Alabama, 1930-1943” (*The Journal of Southern History*, vol 47, no 4 (Nov. 1981)), 551

²⁰² Bernstein, 598

was that they had no real channel to air their grievances. They could not even elect their own leaders.²⁰³ Those who did not join the ERW were subject to being fired. The company accomplished this by the foremen assigning unfamiliar jobs to those who refused to join the ERW, and when they failed to perform the company fired them for incompetence.²⁰⁴

Some grew disillusioned by membership in the ERW and they joined the CIO affiliated URW. The URW knew it needed to expand into the South because the South could produce goods so much cheaper than could manufacturing firms in the north. If labor unions failed to expand the scope of conflict into the South then most production would relocate South, which would mean mass unemployment in the North.

In May and June of 1936 Goodyear intensified its anti-union activities.²⁰⁵ Labor historian Irving Bernstein explains:

Although Local 12 in Gadsden was extremely weak, the Goodyear management took no chances. In May the union's officers were fired; issues of the *United Rubber Worker* were confiscated; an espionage system was installed; the Flying Squadron was alerted. The local asked the international for help.²⁰⁶

The Flying Squadron was an organization developed by Paul Litchfield in 1913, who was at the time of the squadron's development a factory manager who had recently graduated from M.I.T. Squadron members were trained in all aspects of tire production because it was their role to prevent slowdowns. Described by Goodyear historian Hugh Allen, in 1943, as "handy men" whose job was to "take care of absenteeism, accident, or other interruption."²⁰⁷ These employees generally had managerial aspirations though they were usually only educated through high-school. There was a tremendous amount of pride in

²⁰³ Phillips, 17

²⁰⁴ *ibid*, 18

²⁰⁵ Charles Martin, 552

²⁰⁶ Bernstein, 598

²⁰⁷ Hugh Allen, *The House of Goodyear: A Story of Rubber and of Modern Business*, 315

membership because they participated in sports teams together, took classes in industrial productivity, and even had their own system of communication based on hand signals.²⁰⁸ If the flying squadron was “alerted” their role in keeping production running smoothly must have been in part about spying on URW activities.

The Gadsden community elite that Slusser consulted made promises that Gadsden would be a different battleground than Akron had been. Slusser must have felt pretty assured of Gadsden’s resistance to unionization because he made a bet with W.H. Ricketts, the URW chairman of the tire division, that if he tried to organize Gadsden that he would not be able to get off the train and that if he did he would likely leave on a stretcher.²⁰⁹ The URW bravely took on the challenge of the Gadsden community when its president, Sherman Dalrymple, drove with his wife to the Northeast Alabama industrial town, arriving on June 4, 1936.²¹⁰ The morning Dalrymple arrived, E.L. Gray, president of the local was jailed. Dalrymple went to Sheriff R.A. Leath, a former Goodyear watchman, to inquire about why the man had been imprisoned.²¹¹ The chief pulled out a copy of the union newspaper and said, “We are not going to have this kind of literature passed out in Gadsden.”²¹²

Gadsden was stacking up to be a fortress of antiquated individualist thinking and resistant to outside interferences such as New Deal government intervention and Ohio-based outside agitators. In the evening of June 4th, Dalrymple learned that he was being followed by members of the Flying Squadron. On the night of June 6th, 1936, he addressed a crowd at the Gadsden courthouse about unionization. The audience was made up of a third

²⁰⁸ *ibid*, 315-323

²⁰⁹ Bernstein, 598

²¹⁰ Bernstein, 598

²¹¹ *Birmingham Post*, June 12, 1936

²¹² Bernstein, 598

union members, one third thugs from the antiunion Gulf States Steel Company in Gadsden, and one third Flying Squadron members.²¹³ When he began speaking he was interrupted by someone who called out, “who in the hell sent for you?” Dalrymple replied he had been invited by the URW Local 12.²¹⁴ Then the crowd pelted him with eggs. The composition of the meeting’s attendees suggests a resistance to hearing about social change or its benefits, since only a third actually wanted to hear about unions and the other two thirds were there solely for the purpose of preventing Dalrymple from making his call to action.

What happened after Dalrymple was egged became the subject of a heated controversy that consumed the balmy month of June, 1936. Newspapers were busy writing about the heat wave, the Max Scmelling-Joe Louis fight, Hitler, and a terrorist-group known as the Black Legion, which was an offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan that had lynched a WPA worker under pretenses that the New Deal was socialist and therefore un-American.²¹⁵ These stories seemed much more compelling than a union organizer being egged, which the *Gadsden Times* reported on two days after the egg pelting on June 7th and it was found on the second page of the paper. The headline read: “One is arrested at Speaking Here Saturday Night--Disturbance at Courthouse is Quieted by Officers.”²¹⁶ All the *Gadsden Times* reported on June 7th, 1936 was that police arrested an unemployed man named J.L. Jenkins for carrying a concealed pistol, and that “it was reported that several threw eggs at the speaker. Dalrymple left the hall and is said to have left later for Birmingham. Jenkins

²¹³ *ibid*, 598

²¹⁴ Phillips, 19

²¹⁵ *Gadsden Times*, June5-June30, 1936

²¹⁶ *Gadsden Times*, June 7, 1936

said he had nothing to do with the disturbance, which was quieted by officers.”²¹⁷ This report could scarcely be more flawed.

It was more than eggs and tomatoes that Dalrymple was pelted with and the true events deserve some attention. The URW historian reports, “when the labor official [SH Dalrymple] tried to escape, the county sheriff [RA Leath] led him out the back door to even more savage reception.” Dalrymple’s wife witnessed the attack and described it in the following way:

There was a man on each side of him who took his wrists and pulled his hands clear up in the back of his neck, and I could just hear his shoulders give, and then two men got him by the hair and pulled his head back, and then they just held him there and let the men beat him on the head, face and in the eyes.²¹⁸

Irving Bernstein explains that the sheriff escorted him after his beating to the hotel. When Dalrymple asked to see a doctor sheriff Leath told him, “You are all right.” Dalrymple asked Leath for a police escort out of town. When he got to his car the police were searching it for contraband. They drove to Collinsville, Alabama, twenty miles away and got some first aid. When he arrived in Akron, Ohio, the doctor told him he had a concussion and hospitalized him for a week.²¹⁹

The controversy that ensued is suggestive of the outside agitator ideas floating around in the discursive commons. Goodyear’s attorneys argued that the URW’s reputation of violence and lawlessness had incited the attack on Dalrymple. Of course this was a reference to the sit down strikes in Akron months earlier. The Goodyear spokesman alleged that the citizens of Gadsden were fearful that the same tactics would be deployed in

²¹⁷ *ibid*

²¹⁸ *The History of the Rubber Workers In Gadsden Alabama, 1933-1983*, (110 Hoke Street East Gadsden, Alabama, Union Label 1), 6

²¹⁹ Bernstein, 599

their community. In a statement before the National Labor Relations Board, attorneys for Goodyear stated:

There were approximately 200 sit down strikes in Akron which were interspersed with incidents which included every available form of lawless disturbance, assaults, plant seizures, and interferences with production and labor, certain of these acts of violence being directed at non-union employees at Akron who had formerly lived at Gadsden and were known personally to and friends of the employees at Gadsden... The knowledge of Goodyear employees of these outrages could have no other effect upon them or upon any other citizen of fair character than to create an abiding hostility to and contempt for United and a determination that bullpen methods should not be permitted to terrorize the plant, destroy peace and constantly interrupt employment, production and wages at Gadsden.²²⁰

The company decided that the violence committed against Dalrymple was the result of URW violent tactics implemented in Akron.

The company denied charges that they had orchestrated the attack, but AFL leaders and members of the URW demanded an investigation into the Gadsden violence. Union Local officers claimed, "that the attack was 'a part of a well planned program instituted by the industrialists and their agencies to crush organized labor.'"²²¹ There is strong evidence of collusion between the sheriff, city commission, and Goodyear management. A group of concerned citizens came together in a citizens committee to give testimony to what was happening in Gadsden during this period. In an interview Bernice Cleveland reported: "My foreman in the plant came around and instructed me, along with several others, that he, Dalrymple, was to speak at this meeting, and that he had come to Gadsden to institute a strike.... He went around in the plant and instructed me and several others of the workmen in that department of the coming event at the courthouse and asked me and several others

²²⁰ National Labor Relations Board, *In the Matter of Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company of Alabama and United Rubber Workers of America* (Case no. c-11) (St Louis, 1940), 10-11

²²¹ Phillips, 20

to go down and help beat him up and throw him out and send him back to Akron.”²²² When Cleveland asked the foreman if the police would not intervene she was told that they had been “taken care of.”

Sheriff Leath may have in fact led Dalrymple along to be beaten by these attackers as the testimony of Officer M.S. Sanford reveals. Also testifying before the Citizens Committee, Sanford was an experienced officer having served the community for forty-five years. When Leath stood by while Dalrymple was kicked and punched Sanford reportedly asked him why he was not protecting him. Sheriff Leath replied that he did not have enough men. Sanford then asked for permission to intercede on behalf of Dalrymple. Leath refused to allow Sanford to step in. Sanford reported to the citizens committee that he felt three deputies and four policemen were an adequate number to provide protection to Dalrymple.²²³

In an effort to manage the scope of this conflict by minimizing the collusive nature of the attack the City Commission and Goodyear management denied all charges connecting them to the vigilantism that occurred at the courthouse on June 6th. The local *Gadsden Times* newspaper backed them up arguing that the incident was caused by provocative language used by Dalrymple. The language they referred to was when Dalrymple allegedly said, “if he could get thirty men to strike he could close down the plant.”²²⁴ Officer Sanford was asked by the Citizens Committee if the attack was planned or if it was the result of something Dalrymple said. He replied: “It was planned out before the speaker started.”²²⁵

²²² Phillips, 20

²²³ Phillips, 21

²²⁴ Phillips, 22

²²⁵ Phillips, 22

The *Gadsden Times* was vehemently anti-union throughout the so-called reign of terror that began with Dalrymple's beating and they contributed ideas to the discursive commons that resulted in the suppression of URW progress. They printed stories about an investigation proving that Goodyear workers were satisfied with conditions just as they were. The take-away message was always that outside interference was unwarranted.²²⁶ Charles Phillips explains, "The Gadsden Chamber of Commerce adopted a resolution asserting its opposition to disturbing the 'peaceful relationship' between employers and employees and equated unionization with a 'foreign invasion.'"²²⁷ The Chamber also affirmed that workers were satisfied with their working conditions. In reporting that the City Commission had passed an ordinance forbidding meetings by communists, the *Gadsden Times* asserted that communist agitators had been meeting in Gadsden under the guise of a labor movement.²²⁸

On the Monday that followed the attack on Dalrymple the small cadre of union members were driven out of their work at Goodyear by gangs of antiunion workers. This ended the URW presence at Goodyear.²²⁹ The attacks put Gadsden in the national spotlight, but Goodyear plant superintendent A.C. Michaels and city officials disclaimed any responsibility for the assault of Dalrymple. The URW was incensed and they raised 100,000 dollars for organizing efforts at the southern plant. The URW sent for E.L. Gray--

²²⁶ Phillips, 23

²²⁷ Phillips, 23

²²⁸ *Gadsden Times*, June 28, 1936

²²⁹ *The History of the Rubber Workers In Gadsden Alabama, 1933-1983*, (110 Hoke Street East Gadsden, Alabama, Union Label 1), 7

the Gadsden native arrested for passing out the URW newspaper-- to come to Akron. Gray went with several others to begin planning for the next unionization effort in Gadsden.²³⁰

Sheriff R.A. Leath denied the Associated Press report that he had “virtually delivered S.H. Dalrymple into the hands of the mob,” and the *Gadsden Times* gave him plenty of room to set the record straight. Leath claims to have been seized by the mob as well and that “I fought my way to the hotel door with Dalrymple.” Leath went on to proclaim, “I expect to continue to protect the property of our industries and the rights of our working people. That’s what I have always done.”²³¹

On this same day, the Associated Press reported from Akron that fourteen locals of the URW appealed to the labor department, the National Labor Relations Board, demanding an investigation into the attack on Dalrymple. The AP reported that “officers of the 14 locals adopted resolutions last night declaring ‘Dalrymple was slugged in the presence of the sheriff, who virtually delivered him to the mob,’ and that the attack was ‘a part of a well planned program instituted by the industrialists and their strike breaking agencies to crush organized labor.’”²³² The locals sent a delegation to Washington D.C. to see secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, and another delegation to Cleveland, Ohio, to see AFL leader William Green.²³³ Goodyear company officials made an official statement that the attack “did not occur on or near Goodyear property, and that employees of the company, as such, had no hand in it.”²³⁴ This is a ludicrous pronouncement since a third of the audience was made up of flying squadron members.

²³⁰ *ibid*

²³¹ *Gadsden Times*, June 9, 1936

²³² *ibid*

²³³ *ibid*

²³⁴ *ibid*

On June 10th, 1936, *The Birmingham Post* published a statement made by Leath that alters perceptions of his neutrality. The sub-heading of this article read, “Workers Declare Chief was Attacked in Alabama; Denied by Mill.” It seems that even in neighboring Birmingham the facts of this case were apocryphal. Leath seems dubious when he disavows previous statements about the Dalrymple street fight and reports the union chief did not receive bruises “‘at the hands of any organized group’ and that others were as badly bruised as the union official.”²³⁵ This back-pedaling may have been a function of the federal investigation that was on the horizon for Leath. The next day, representatives of the National Labor Relations Board and the Alabama Department of Labor arrived in Gadsden to investigate the charges of “coercion” and “intimidation” through acts of physical violence. There were a number of individuals responsible for conducting the investigation, among them was Birmingham’s Charles Fiedelson. Fiedelson wired the chairman of the NLRB a report about Dalrymple’s beating and about other incidents of anti-union intimidation. Also Governor Bibb Graves ordered Captain Potter Smith of the State Highway Patrol to investigate wrongdoing and report back to the Governor.²³⁶

The Dalrymple beating largely overshadowed what happened on Monday in the Gadsden Goodyear plant when union men were terrorized by anti-union men for attending the Dalrymple speech. S.W. Caudle was one of these victims, and he reported that he was beaten and kicked out of work just ten minutes after arriving on plant grounds. F.H. Deberry corroborated the story asserting that anti-union thugs drove him from plant grounds as well. A.C. Michaels, plant superintendent, claims the disturbances on Monday occurred before plant officials arrived. The URW at this moment began pressing for

²³⁵ *Birmingham Post*, June 10, 1936

²³⁶ *Birmingham Post*, June 11, 1936

passage in the U.S. Senate of the LaFollette resolution calling for an investigation of strike breaking and anti-union espionage.²³⁷

Charles Fiedelson, agent of the National Labor Relations Board, told Sheriff Leath that he was headed for an investigation, and Leath responded defiantly that he welcomed any investigation. Leath told the *Gadsden Times*:

I told Judge Fiedelson that I do not intend for outsiders to come in here and attempt to shut down any of our manufacturing plants when more than 90 per cent of the employees want to work and do not want interference from the outside... I told him that I intend to enforce the law and to give protection to our factories and our laboring men insofar as I am able to do so, and I think I will be able to give adequate protection.²³⁸

Leath has drawn the outside agitator idea from the discursive commons in order to vilify Fiedelson and his organization. Leath must have been grandstanding a bit for the *Gadsden Times* with a fair amount of chest pounding, but the *Birmingham Post* reported a different account. *Post* writers reported that Leath told Fiedelson that his glasses had been knocked off his head and that he couldn't see any of Dalrymple's assailants.²³⁹

Despite some conflicting and late details in Leath's story, both the *Gadsden Times* and the *Birmingham Post* reported that employees in Gadsden were happy and prosperous, and that "It is the desire of the management, of the employees and the people of Gadsden that conditions remain as they are."²⁴⁰ The *Gadsden Times* was a coercive influence in its own right when, on June 12, 1936, it published an editorial entitled "Peace—Don't Disturb It." The facts of the investigation were hardly known just seven days after Dalrymple's assault, but the writer of this editorial claimed to know what the community of Gadsden

²³⁷ *ibid*

²³⁸ *Gadsden Times*, June 11, 1936

²³⁹ *Birmingham Post*, June 12, 1936

²⁴⁰ *Birmingham Post*, June 12, 1936

wanted with utter clarity and affirmed with certainty about the people's anti-union solidarity. He or she writes:

Industrial peace prevails in Gadsden and this condition must be maintained in the interest of Gadsden workers and all other elements of the citizenship. The fact that differences exist in some other community is no excuse for attempting to disturb peaceful relations in this city.²⁴¹

This view is one of a homogenous community devoid of labor grievances as were experienced a few months ago back in Akron. The idea of protecting the status quo is apparent in the discursive commons.

The editorial goes to extoll Gadsden's harmonious industrial relations in the following way:

Payrolls here are as large as they ever were. There is no strife and no semblance of strife among Gadsden people, and a condition so satisfactory should be maintained. Certainly there should be no sympathy whatever for any attempt to bring to this community troubles that exist elsewhere. It is both shortsighted and wholly unjust to attempt to involve this community and disturb relations that are pleasant and satisfactory.²⁴²

There is a clear narrative constructed here to order the chaos of labor conflict with sentiments that what was happening in Akron was an Akron problem. There is an unwillingness to see how the community may be a piece in a chess game that President Paul Litchfield is playing against labor organizers. And the recurrent theme of the outside agitator begins to work its way into the discursive commons. This point is made all the more clear when the editorial continues: "The threat by out-of-town persons to disturb the peaceful situation existing here creates a condition under which a special responsibility is placed upon those agencies charged with maintaining peace, and it is gratifying that

²⁴¹ *Gadsden Times*, June 12, 1936

²⁴² *Gadsden Times*, June 12, 1936

officials have committed themselves unreservedly to maintain peace.”²⁴³ This statement clearly reads in support of local sheriff Leath against outside agitators.

The propagandist editorial continued to report of the community’s solidarity and stability, but with directives to the people added. It reads:

The peace of Gadsden must not be disturbed upon the mere excuse that differences exist at some other point. Such a move is an attempt to penalize an innocent community and will not be sustained by public opinion here or elsewhere. The workers of Gadsden ask only that they be permitted to continue unmolested at their jobs. In this attitude they have the wholehearted support of the officials of the law and this entire community.²⁴⁴

This statement essentially advocates the open shop policies of the twenties, and workers reading the paper understood by this statement that unionization would not be tolerated within the Gadsden community.

The *Birmingham Post* seemed to refrain from picking sides as the *Gadsden Times* did. On June 15th, 1936, the *Birmingham Post* reported two national officers of the URW flew to Birmingham from Akron to begin planning for a union drive to enlist the 1100 workers at the Goodyear plant. With the federal investigation still ongoing the URW leaders were emboldened by the investigation, but said, “they were letting the present investigations take their course.”²⁴⁵ The *Post* also reported that no one seemed to know the exact number of union members at the Gadsden plant, but that the number does not exceed 200.²⁴⁶ The *Birmingham Post* was more detached in their reporting of the ongoing struggle to unionize Gadsden’s Goodyear plant.

²⁴³ *ibid*

²⁴⁴ *ibid*

²⁴⁵ *The Birmingham Post*, June 15, 1936

²⁴⁶ *The Birmingham Post*, June 15, 1936

So far we have seen possible wrongdoing by the police and a deliberate plot by industrial leaders to ship production to Gadsden, but there is still a question about what role Gadsden's government, the city commission, was playing. How did they view the non-action of Sheriff Leath in Dalrymple's assault? In order for this to be truly "establishment violence," as some have asserted, we need to apprehend their role through *Gadsden Times'* discursive formations. On June 16, 1936, the *Gadsden Times* announced a big statewide mass meeting, and a sub-heading read: "Law officials of City, County Take Stand for Protection."²⁴⁷ The article read:

Informed that a labor demonstration will be held here Saturday afternoon and that the city would be invaded by a number of outsiders, the city commission today announced that it will not permit unlawful assemblies, picketing of plants, intimidation of workers or factories, the bearing of firearms on the streets or on the property of others and that all suspicious characters will be searched for arms... Sheriff Leath announced he was backing that program 100 per cent.²⁴⁸

RA Leath received a message from Akron, Ohio that a number of Akron men would be in Gadsden on Saturday to prepare for a labor showdown. It is unclear who sent him the message, but it might have been the result of flying squadron espionage back in Akron. Birmingham also announced that the international rubber workers union had called a "labor showdown." The Gadsden City Commission led by Mayor Dr. George S. Vann, and secretaries R.A. Burns, and JH Meighan, announced that they were ready for the showdown, and that they would enforce all laws.²⁴⁹ The city commission was firm in their positions to prevent "intimidation" of workers, or the "molestation" of any firm. Sheriff RA Leath added

²⁴⁷ *Gadsden Times*, June 16, 1936

²⁴⁸ *Gadsden Times*, June 16, 1936

²⁴⁹ *ibid*

a final comment to the June 16th article: “He [Leath] said that he would not interfere with any lawful acts but that gunmen and mobsters will not be tolerated.”²⁵⁰

To further evidence the *Gadsden Times* as a mouthpiece for Gadsden’s big three industries, Goodyear, Gulf States Steel, and Dwight Textile Manufactory, together issued a joint statement on June 17, 1936.²⁵¹ The three industries together came out in support of the “Peace—Don’t Disturb It” editorial mentioned earlier on June 12, 1936. Their speakers wrote: “From our close and friendly contact with the people of this district, we are satisfied that this editorial expresses the almost unanimous view of all classes of citizens.”²⁵² Their statement coincided with the arrival of five organizers for the URW in Birmingham who came from Akron, Ohio. William Mitch, President of the Alabama Federation of Labor, stated that the purpose of the mass meeting “is to see that the workers of Gadsden are permitted to exercise their lawful right to organize and bargain collectively, and we expect to do this in an orderly way.”²⁵³ While the *Post* was reproducing statements made by AFL leaders the conservative *Gadsden Times* seems hamstrung by the town’s industrial interests. They report on stability in Gadsden’s local scene, but events that follow suggest a very turbulent climate indeed.

At the end of the June 17th, 1936 article Gadsden newspaper writers reiterated that no labor disorders would be permitted and that all workers would be protected from “intimidation” and “molestation.” Furthermore the article reported, “members of the city commission declared they are amply prepared to cope with any situation that may arise.” Their next move belied this statement. The City Commission secretary of safety, RA Burns,

²⁵⁰ *ibid*

²⁵¹ *Gadsden Times*, June 17, 1936

²⁵² *Gadsden Times*, June 17, 1936

²⁵³ *Birmingham Post*, June 17, 1936

swore in 250 special policemen to control the crowds that were expected to coalesce around Akron URW organizers. About this move the *Gadsden Times* writes:

Officials said they were preparing to go the limit to maintain order. 'Remember you are now working for Gadsden and are its representatives,' said commissioner of public safety R.A. Burns to the men after they had taken their oath. 'We are all in the same boat; we are going to rise or fall with Gadsden. It is a fight for Gadsden and Gadsden people.'²⁵⁴

The other members of the City Commission concurred with Vann's ideological assessment of the situation in Gadsden.²⁵⁵

The *Birmingham Post* and the more progressive *Anniston Star* viewed this recruitment of 250 special policemen as overkill. About the special precaution taken in Gadsden the *Anniston Star* reported:

Elaborate precautions taken by Gadsden, Ala., civil authorities in advance of the district wide labor rally there tomorrow were termed 'absolutely unnecessary' today by W.O. Hare, secretary of the Alabama Federation of Labor.²⁵⁶

It is noteworthy that this neighboring industrial community called the action taken by Commissioner Vann as "elaborate," and that the writer cited Hare who called the action "unnecessary." The *Birmingham Post* echoed the same view as the *Star* calling the move "elaborate," and "unnecessary."²⁵⁷ The *Post* went on in the June 19th article to quote Mr. Hare as saying, "Those sponsoring the meeting are planning a peaceful assembly and are as desirous as anyone of maintaining law and order."²⁵⁸ They would not be brandishing weapons as they had done in Akron in the earlier February strike.

²⁵⁴ *Gadsden Times*, June 18, 1936

²⁵⁵ *ibid*

²⁵⁶ *Anniston Star*, June 19, 1936

²⁵⁷ *Birmingham Post*, June 19, 1936

²⁵⁸ *ibid*

The City Commission ensured the town's safety by adopting an ordinance that made it "the duty of all policemen to arrest without warrant any person whom he has probable cause to believe guilty of violation of any city ordinance, any person found drunk on the public streets or any public place, any person disturbing the peace or inciting a disturbance of the peace and any person found under suspicious circumstances who fails to give a satisfactory account of himself."²⁵⁹ *The Gadsden Times* printed the ordinance itself perhaps as a caveat to those who might be less than contented with the labor situation in Gadsden. The *Times* submitted the ordinance as follows:

Said officers shall have authority to enter any house, enclosure or other place in which they have reason to believe that any person is committing or about to commit a violation of the city laws. ... The commission also adopted an ordinance making it unlawful for any person, without first obtaining a permit from the city of Gadsden to speak through any horn, megaphone, sound box or amplifier or play any other mechanical or electrical device where the sound is amplified on the streets of the city or within police jurisdiction.²⁶⁰

From this passage we glean the steps entrenched political authority took to maintain their positions in Gadsden society. They must have felt compelled to support the businesses over the workers, because their power hinged on an industrial Gadsden not unionizing. Why else would they pass such unconstitutional ordinances?

City Commissioner Meighan allowed himself to make a public declaration against the labor organizers. In an interview with a *Gadsden Times* reporter he declared:

We are not going to tolerate racketeering methods by people sent here from Akron, Ohio, to cause trouble among the citizens of this city and county who are employees of the Goodyear company. We know that the employees here are satisfied and that they do not want any outside interference. We do not propose to pull Akron's chestnuts out of the fire.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ *Gadsden Times*, June 19, 1936

²⁶⁰ *ibid*

²⁶¹ *ibid*

Though this was an official on the record statement it is relevant that Meighan is inclined to keep up the outside agitator discursive line of logic that had become a trope for Gadsden political and business leaders. It is also significant that the political authorities find it as part of their job to gauge the structure of feeling amongst the public; not only are they gauging it, they are establishing it through demagogic methods.

Despite the unconstitutional ordinances the URW was not intimidated. John House, president of the Goodyear local in Akron came to Gadsden on June 21.²⁶² When House and the other organizers arrived they stressed to the public that they had been invited by local union members, and that “unionization brought prosperity, not economic stagnation, to communities.”²⁶³ They were harassed and threatened with violence if they did not leave town.

On June 25, the URW workers headquartered at the Tolson building on Broad Street, received a tip that an attack on the building was planned for later that day.²⁶⁴ John House attempted to contact the police to ensure the organizers’ protection. House could see several Goodyear officials watching the Tolson building from an open window at a pool hall next door.²⁶⁵ An eyewitness named Matt Sheffield who testified before the Citizens Committee implicated Sheriff Leath directly in the attack on the Tolson Building. Sheffield reported:

I saw Bob Leath talking to some of the men in the mob and then he walked over to another bunch of them that were on the grass by the First Methodist Church and talked to them... I heard Bob Leath tell those men then and there not to tear down the fence that runs from the Tolson Building (which the union men were in) back of the church. Bob Leath stated, ‘Boys don’t tear down the fence, you can find plenty

²⁶² Bernstein, 599

²⁶³ Martin, 552

²⁶⁴ Martin, 552

²⁶⁵ *URW history*, 8

other stuff to fight with without that.' This was about ten minutes before the mob broke the door into the room where the union men were.²⁶⁶

By 1:00 pm a crowd of more than 300 surrounded the building. Sheriff Leath left the scene when the mob approached, and reportedly "lounged casually in his office a hundred yards away."²⁶⁷ Two policemen directed traffic on Broad Street.²⁶⁸ The URW historian reports that more than 150 of the mob were deputized by RA Burns days earlier, and that they were also Goodyear employees.²⁶⁹

John House yelled from the window to dissuade the mob from attacking, but he could not be heard over the jeers and threats.²⁷⁰ George Roberts called the police station imploring them to help.²⁷¹ A few minutes later the mob broke in through the outside door and rushed up the staircase to get to the organizers. When the mob seized House, E.L. Gray swung a claw hammer, but House told him not to fight back because it would only make matters worse.²⁷² The antiunion mob beat the union organizers without mercy. They used blackjacks, sticks, and brass knuckles to inflict punishment on the organizers. When the men fell to the floor they were kicked and stomped. Typewriters and furniture was lobbed from the second story of the building.²⁷³ House tried to work his way up the street to the police station but the crowd continued to pummel him.

Another eyewitness who wanted to remain anonymous reported that the mob violence was committed by both employees of Goodyear as well as by those deputized by

²⁶⁶ Phillips, 28

²⁶⁷ *URW history*, 8

²⁶⁸ *ibid*

²⁶⁹ *ibid*

²⁷⁰ *ibid*

²⁷¹ *Birmingham Post*, June 25, 1936

²⁷² *URW history*, 8

²⁷³ *ibid*

the City Commission. He reported in the following excerpt taken from the Citizens Committee report:

The fellows deputized were the ones who were doing the fighting. The boss, Raymond Hundley, a deputy and a foreman of Goodyear, stood across from me. He kept telling them to 'get them.' Ralph Chalfant, foreman, Carl Dilliard, foreman, were encouraging the men to fight... They wouldn't have done it if the police had been there. The ones who were deputized of the squad boys were doing the main fighting.²⁷⁴

Grady Cleere was a former employee of Goodyear hired to spy on the URW. He was also one of the fifty Goodyear employees deputized by the City Commission to harass union organizers, or as they put it, keep the peace. He described Goodyear "gang" meetings being held and stated that it was decided to break up the URW office on June 25th, 1936.²⁷⁵

After some time the police slowly began to chide the mob, urging them to disperse, but not before they beat on Cecil Holmes and Gray in the middle of Broad Street. The only unionized industry in the city were the pipe shops, and so members of the molders union rushed to the scene to help scatter the mob.²⁷⁶ The *Birmingham Post* explained that "Feeling was running high in the Gadsden Central Labor Union, and reports were current that protest strikes would be called today at the Agricola Furnace Co. and the A & J manufacturing Company, two Gadsden plants employing about 600 workers."²⁷⁷ These firms had been unionized earlier in the twenties and were clearly on the side of the labor organizers at the Tolson Building. Some of these Central Labor Union men drove the battered organizers to the Reich Hotel where they were staying, and then out of town to

²⁷⁴ Phillips, 28

²⁷⁵ Phillips, 28

²⁷⁶ *URW history*, 8

²⁷⁷ Birmingham Post, June 26, 1936

Birmingham.²⁷⁸ There is no way to know how Otto Agricola viewed the actions of his employees who left work to help the victims of the mob brutality.

The mob assault of the six organizers at the Tolson building drew national attention to Gadsden. Governor Bibb Graves wired a telegraph to Sheriff Robert Leath “preserve order in your county,” and he sent in the highway patrol to investigate.²⁷⁹ The Alabama State Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the National Labor Relations Board all three sent investigators back into Gadsden for the second time in a month.²⁸⁰ CIO leader John Lewis demanded from President Franklin Roosevelt and Governor Bibb Graves: “restore the American bill of rights at Gadsden.”²⁸¹ The chairman of the Goodyear employees committee, T.L. Bottoms, a personnel office employee later accused of masterminding the attack on the Tolson organizers, released a statement that was supposedly signed by nearly everyone at Goodyear, expressing contentment with working conditions.²⁸² One voice of dissent rang out from the pulpit of Rev. W.S. Hullett’s Methodist church. He was one man in a sea of rabble who dared to criticize the attacks in a sermon entitled, “The Black Shadow of Terrorism or Gadsden’s Sorrow.”²⁸³ Hullett was threatened and required protection from the state highway patrol.²⁸⁴

July, 1936 witnessed a calmer mood among the Gadsden people. The fight seemed to be over as no further incidents of violence resulted. However the Gadsden City Commission did make one more anti-labor move when they adopted an anti-communist

²⁷⁸ *URW history*, 8

²⁷⁹ *URW history*, 8

²⁸⁰ *ibid*, 8

²⁸¹ *ibid*, 8

²⁸² Martin, 553

²⁸³ *URW history*, 9

²⁸⁴ Martin, 553

ordinance that banned any interracial assemblies of three or more persons whose purpose was to advocate revolution or the destruction of property.²⁸⁵ About this ordinance Martin explained, “ostensibly aimed at so-called ‘Communist’ activity in the city, the ordinance was really designed to squelch interracial union activity.”²⁸⁶ Race would have been a bugaboo in any southern community during this time period because caste mattered more than class, but this move is highly suggestive of an entrenched political authority conspiring to proscribe the freedom and opportunities of society’s weakest people.

As a result of the violent episodes of June 1936 URW membership declined. It appeared the civil authorities had won the day. The City Commission responded to accusations of labor riots with righteous indignation. The *Gadsden Times* published an editorial that called the press attention to the labor troubles a “misrepresentation of Gadsden.” The statement called it “utter absurdity in picturing this city as the scene of a ‘labor war.’”²⁸⁷ This was the beginning of a very difficult transitional period in the life of Gadsden. There would be more growing pains to come.

²⁸⁵ Martin, 553

²⁸⁶ *ibid*, 553

²⁸⁷ *URW history*, 9

CHAPTER 5: MANAGING THE SCOPE OF CONFLICT

The scope of conflict in Gadsden was widened when on March 17th and 18th of 1937, Senator Robert Marion LaFollette Jr held hearings on the misconduct of local officials and the Goodyear company in the June 1936 violent attacks on Dalrymple and the mob attack on the Tolson building.²⁸⁸ At these hearings Grady Cleere testified that he had been recruited to spy on union activities, and T.L. Bottoms was accused of organizing the violence against the URW organizers.²⁸⁹ The LaFollette investigation also revealed that the Goodyear employees who attacked the Tolson building were kept on the pay clock when the collective violence occurred.

There was a brief interval when authorities discontinued violence in Gadsden, but when the Supreme Court upheld the Wagner Act's constitutionality on April 12, 1937, a new wave of violence began fresh across the Etowah County landscape.²⁹⁰ In April of 1937 a company union called the Etowah Rubber Workers union formed not at the grass roots level, but upon the encouragement of Goodyear management. Its role was to provide an alternative to the outsider and CIO affiliated United Rubber Workers (URW).²⁹¹ The ERWO claimed about 1200 workers.²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Martin, 554

²⁸⁹ Martin, 554

²⁹⁰ *Gadsden Times*, April 12, 1937

²⁹¹ Martin, 554

²⁹² *URW History*, 10

The company recalled the workers who had been terminated in June of 1936 upon the directive of the National Labor Relations Board, and those men and women re-entered the plant with the hope that group solidarity would protect them. The board accused Goodyear of being complicit in the attacks the men and women suffered and it demanded the workers be re-hired and given back pay.²⁹³ Historian Charles Martin explains, “Their concern for their safety was warranted, for May and June witnessed what many union members and sympathizers termed a ‘reign of terror’ in Gadsden, during which union members were assaulted almost daily and threats were commonplace.”²⁹⁴ Governor Graves sent twelve state troopers to the plant to make certain there were no more outbreaks of violence. The troopers stayed on at the plant for several days to protect the re-hired workers.

From this moment we glean how the conflict had been nationalized or in the words of E. E. Schattschneider, “socialized.” During the twenties it had been a fight between employee and employer. Then the outside URW came to Gadsden as a pressure group and expanded the scope of conflict. The reign of terror perpetrated by the flying squadron and members of the ERWO are attempts to contract the scope of conflict. A close examination of the discursive commons and rhetoric found in the *Gadsden Times* reveals other political strategies to contract this story. As we shall see the scope of conflict pulses outward and inward based on the players who have enough social capital to move the narrative.

Fights and beatings continued to occur after the troopers were removed from their post of protecting the plant workers. Women were not safe from the anti-union vigilante violence either. Roughly a week after the ten workers were reinstated a woman named

²⁹³ Phillips, 35

²⁹⁴ Martin, 555

Gertrude Yaikow, a member of the URW, was beaten by two other women on her route home from work.²⁹⁵ Yaikow claimed her attackers were members of the ERWO.

Bernice Cleveland reported that strong-arm tactics continued and that she was beaten senseless in the parking lot of the plant. Company coercion was so pervasive that she could not return to her job.²⁹⁶ E.K. Bowers claimed, “Every day or so they’d run somebody out of the plant. A big bunch of thugs would come down the aisle akickin’ his ass as fast as his feet hit the floor.”²⁹⁷

Jimmy Karam, a former Auburn football player, and chairman of the bargaining committee of the ERWO, is largely viewed as the ring-leader of Goodyear’s “company thugs.”²⁹⁸ Much of the blame for the labor turmoil has been laid at his feet. It is not surprising then that URW members targeted him in an attempted murder plot.

The resistance to ERWO violence began with a march on the streets of Gadsden. On May 30, 1937, over a hundred members of the URW carried weapons ranging from guns to blackjacks as they paraded into the streets.²⁹⁹ These parades were becoming commonplace in East Gadsden by June 1937. City Commission officials such as George Vann were committed to stopping what they termed as acts of “lawlessness” and he went on to say, “the mob spirit could not prevail in Gadsden.”³⁰⁰ This seems an ironic proclamation since on June 25, 1936 it was Vann’s deputized citizens who perpetrated mob violence at the Tolson. Another member of the City Commission, RA Burns, supported Vann by writing in the *Gadsden Times* in a June 15, 1937 editorial that the people of Gadsden should assert

²⁹⁵ Phillips, 35-6

²⁹⁶ *URW History*, 10

²⁹⁷ *URW history*, 10

²⁹⁸ Martin, 555

²⁹⁹ Phillips, 36

³⁰⁰ Phillips, 36

themselves and support city authorities by stopping such acts of lawlessness.³⁰¹ Union officials disturbed by such local government pronouncements encouraged Governor Bibb Graves to send in more state troopers to protect the URW workers. Graves complied on the side of caution.

The discursive commons produced many ideas that did much to contract the scope of conflict during the month of June 1937. On June 13, 1937 the *Gadsden Times* reported as front-page news that “Industrial Appreciation Week Opens.”³⁰² This was done because the Gadsden City Commission issued a proclamation setting aside this particular week for honoring industries big and small that contributed to making Gadsden the second largest manufacturing city in the state at that time. Under an emboldened heading which read “wide observance” the editor of the *Gadsden Times*, BH Mooney, published an article that read:

During the week, the civic and luncheon clubs will so arrange their programs as to include this novel plan of placing this entire city behind its industrial interests in such a way as to let the employers and employees know just how important they are to Gadsden and how much they mean to the community. It is expected that resolutions emphasizing this spirit of appreciation and cooperation will be adopted by the civic bodies. It is planned to carry out this spirit in such a way that there can be no mistaking the attitude of this city toward its manufacturing plants and those who man them.³⁰³

The editors devoted pages of this newspaper to praising the Goodyear Company and its workers, Republic Steel, and Dwight Textile. Another article called the Agricola and Jones Stove Company “an important factor in local industry.”³⁰⁴ Another headline read: “Agricola

³⁰¹ Phillips, 37

³⁰² *Gadsden Times*, June 13, 1937

³⁰³ *ibid*

³⁰⁴ *ibid*

Furnace Company One of Outstanding Industries.”³⁰⁵ This promotion of local industries was the sunnier side of the rhetoric being promoted in the discursive commons.

The existence of an industrial appreciation week so close to the violent labor upheaval known as the “reign of terror” should be viewed as an attempt made by the City Commission and editor BH Mooney to constrict the scope of conflict. On the same day in which industrial appreciation week was laid out, an editorial with religious overtones appeared entitled, “The Fundamental Importance of Work: The Times Three Minute Sermon.” It conflates religious colloquialism of idle hands being the devil’s play-thing and lawless vigilantism. It read: “Idleness when self-imposed, if freely described is not only wrong but is a breeder of lawlessness, discontent, and poverty.”³⁰⁶ The discussion of “idleness” was an attack on the URW sit down strikes that had occurred in Akron in 1936.

Industrial Appreciation week was declared just days after the June 8th assassination attempt on ERWO leader Jimmy Karam while he was in his car. The bullets barely missed his head and arm.³⁰⁷ This reactionary violence was to be expected. People can only take so much before they defend themselves and Jimmy Karam was leading a campaign against URW sympathizers that looked much like earlier white capping raids, or Klan based night riding.

June 19th, 1937, a theater was bombed just outside Gadsden’s city limits in neighboring Attalla. This Etowah County theater became a flash point in the labor war, because the “communistic and Radical program” was blamed, and writers for the *Gadsden Times* anticipated that they would begin to foment more trouble. The *Gadsden Times*

³⁰⁵ *ibid*

³⁰⁶ *ibid*

³⁰⁷ Phillips, 37

writers implied that the URW were the culprits without a stitch of evidence against them. The article read, "Only by violence and fanning prejudice, by preaching hatred and ill will, can the lawless campaign be advanced. People who use their God-given capacity to think are not fuel for the radical machine."³⁰⁸ The bomb blast occurred, according to the *Gadsden Times*, at dawn and the only people there to witness it were policemen. Since earlier police corruption has been established this is fairly suspicious. Could the police have created acts of violence to enhance the veracity of discourses about outsiders being dangerous radicals? The report reads:

That there were no human casualties is not to the credit of the bombers. Two policemen escaped only because it was their good fortune to be far enough away at the moment of the blast to be out of range of the flying glass, wood plaster. The crude explosive device might easily have been delayed in doing its work. Men, women and children are in and out of that theater lobby at all times of the day. To think what might have happened had that blast not occurred in the quiet hours before dawn adds to the abhorrence in which the loyal, law abiding American citizens of this district hold such despicable methods. The disciples of violence and preachers of communistic defiance of the laws of our country would do well to go slow in launching any ambitious campaign here. Those who would try to achieve their ends by use of bombs and other forms of lawlessness and intimidation will realize that the people of these North Alabama hills will not tolerate foreign and lawless acts that violate the principles of the American form of law and order!³⁰⁹

Maybe it was a coincidence that the police were on the scene when the dynamite blew up. It is fairly clear that the bomber did not want to hurt innocent citizens. The issue framing tactics expressed here in the *Gadsden Times* makes this a clear case of red baiting a crime that is really a mystery. This is not objective reporting of the facts. It is strikingly paradoxical that the writer of this excerpt claims that people in North Alabama will not

³⁰⁸ *Gadsden Times*, June 19th, 1937

³⁰⁹ *ibid*

tolerate acts of lawlessness, because many had been taking part in lawless violence over this labor issue for years.

Not long after the Attalla theater bombing police apprehended suspects. On June 21, 1937, local Gadsden police found two men to have dynamite in their possession. Aubrey Rutledge and HC Adams were in their early twenties and after being found to have two sticks of dynamite and a pistol they confessed to Sergeant GW Burke and patrolman Joe Smelley and patrolman Milton Chestnut that they intended to kill Jimmy Karam. Both men had connections to the CIO rubber workers union.³¹⁰

A closer examination of the red-baiting rhetoric published in the *Gadsden Times* during “Industrial Appreciation Week” reveals how discourse constructed the trope of the outside agitator. A June 18th, 1937 headline that read, “Back to Work Movements Held Up,” was supported by sub-headings that read, “Communists in Drive on City Lindsey Avers.” The article itself made scurrilous accusations reporting in the following passage:

Dr. Lindsey lashed out at the forces of communism in vigorous language... The young liberal denounced those ‘who come under the cover of darkness to plan against this city, well supplied with gold from Moscow’ as being ‘real imposters.’³¹¹

The force of this citizen’s sentiments simmered for a few days and drew to a boil by June 22, 1937.

The City Commission government went on record as being against all “un-American activities.” The “Industrial Appreciation Week” began as a way of thanking workers and industry leaders but it morphed into a smear campaign against those who were involved

³¹⁰ *Gadsden Times*, June 21, 1937

³¹¹ *Gadsden Times*, June 18, 1937

with the URW. By June 22nd the red baiting reached a crescendo. The City Commission printed a resolution that read:

Communitistic and un-American doctrines do not belong in Gadsden and activities designed to encourage violence and other law violations must be stopped... We hereby go on record...as condemning all un-American activities in our city and by this resolution we call upon the citizenship of Gadsden and Etowah county to aid us in our efforts to preserve the rights, liberty and property of all our people. It is essential that we have the enthusiastic and determined cooperation of all our law abiding citizens if we are to successfully maintain and secure the rights of our people in their homes, their jobs and their property... Certain un-American doctrines are being spread and talked in the city of Gadsden; that violence, violations of the law, efforts to undermine and overthrow the government are being sponsored by those of communitistic, foreign and un-American tendencies, beliefs and designs, and that meetings have been held here with the specific purpose of undermining the peace of the community and tearing down the ideals of the people and their government.³¹²

In discussing the affective power of this discursive formation a relevant point is what Richard Maxwell Brown writes about the patterns of American violence. Brown explains, "Often perceiving a grave menace to social stability in the unsettled conditions of ... industrial unrest, solid citizens rallied to the cause of community order."³¹³ Brown writes about violence being socially conservative and that it deals broadly with challenges posed to the respectable community. In these cases law and order and the sanctity of property are of paramount importance. The established order had been the open shop, and the URW's challenge to this earlier paradigm was deemed "un-American" and "foreign." Violence was a natural response for a community where outsiders challenged the social order.

³¹² *Gadsden Times*, June 22, 1937

³¹³ Brown, 4

On July 2, 1937, Governor Bibb Graves attempted to constrict the scope of conflict by arguing that there was no real labor trouble in Gadsden. He asked Gadsden citizens to refrain from bearing arms. He asked the people to cooperate with local officials, and asked the local officials to not deputize citizens again as had happened prior to the Tolson Building mob attacks. He finished his statement by stressing that reports of vigilante violence were exaggerated and that these stories were not “founded in fact.” He affirmed his confidence in the City Commission government and its ability to maintain law and order in the city.³¹⁴

Labor leaders protested Graves’ conclusions. Despite his relative progressivism and previous defenses of organized labor something had turned Graves into a supporter of Gadsden local authorities. Charles Phillips explains, “W.O Hare, secretary of the state AFL, William Mitch, Southern Director of the CIO, and MC Mauney, president of the Gadsden Central Labor Union, issued a united protest against the governor’s conclusion.”³¹⁵ These men were flabbergasted by the Governor’s dismissal of the facts, and thereby his attempt to constrict the scope of the labor war in Gadsden. Mitch claimed that at least twenty-five to thirty men and women had been assaulted on the streets of Gadsden. He went on to say: “If the governor calls this a little thing, I am at a loss to understand what he would consider a big thing.”³¹⁶

The scope of conflict would expand when a group of concerned citizens, mostly outsiders, descended on the town of Gadsden to evaluate the community’s labor strife. MC Mauney, president of the Central Labor Union of Gadsden, invited this group of liberals to

³¹⁴ Phillips, 39

³¹⁵ Phillips, 39

³¹⁶ Phillips, 39-40

the town of Gadsden hoping to get the violent episodes documented before a concerned public.

This group of outsiders who surveyed the Etowah landscape were journalists, professors, and ministers. The eight members of the citizens' committee gathered in Gadsden on July 3rd, 1937. Their role was to "delve into a mass testimony which will be presented to them relating to the denial of fundamental American rights guaranteed by the constitution."³¹⁷ It was fitting that they should conduct this meeting on July 4th. There were several Alabamians invited, and several more from the rest of the nation. Among the Alabama natives were WC Irby, Hugo Black, and Walter McAdory. The rest of this July 4th delegation were viewed as outsiders. MC Mauney the President of the Central Labor Union asserted, "Organized labor in Gadsden has so far been unable to exercise its constitutional rights in the face of tactics of terrorism and thuggery employed by two great corporations, Goodyear Rubber and Republic Steel, backed by northern capital."³¹⁸ Public officials refused to appear before the committee because they purportedly felt that the group was trying to "besmirch" Gadsden's reputation.³¹⁹ City officials refused to participate for two reasons. They considered the committee to be a "sinister group, there to raise trouble," and equally compelling was how they drew on the discursive idea of the outsider. They decided they would not submit to the arbitration of a "bunch of outside intruders."³²⁰

The City Commission government denied that conflict existed in Gadsden at all, and tried to characterize the citizens committee as outside radicals. One of the city commissioners told Reverend Freeman that "... there was no trouble whatsoever in

³¹⁷*Gadsden Times*, June 20, 1937

³¹⁸ *ibid*

³¹⁹ Martin, 556

³²⁰ Phillips, 40

Gadsden, but added a moment later that he could not be responsible for the safety of the committee..."³²¹ Over forty witnesses appeared before the committee to document the repression labor had suffered at the hands of Goodyear thugs and police.³²² The committee's report, issued, by Reverend Freeman, declared that the testimony revealed collusion between Goodyear management and police and repressive tactics carried out by both. The report went on to say: "The companies have squads of men who deal with laborers on the assumption that it is a crime to join a union. They bully them, they threaten them. They trail them. They beat them up... All this complaint is pooh- poohed by official spokesmen for the enlarged Gadsden with her big industries."³²³ The committee strongly suggested that the discourses about "Red-Russian-Communist" peril was subterfuge to divert attention away from the conspiracy to limit the rights of workers as American citizens.³²⁴

Maxwell Stewart, one of the liberal journalists that came to Gadsden during this period when people fought to enlarge and constrict the scope of conflict, did his part in writing for *The Nation* to spread the word about what was happening in Gadsden's labor war. Stewart claimed in his article "Gadsden is Tough" that city leaders were doing their part in constructing a narrative about outside agitators upsetting the local harmony of the city. He writes, "Well-to-do members of the community will tell you that this is because Gadsden workers are satisfied and will not tolerate outside agitators telling them how to run their affairs. More realistic observers will suggest that Gadsden has developed a technique which makes it unhealthy for its workers to show signs of dissatisfaction with

³²¹ Martin, 556

³²² Martin, 556

³²³ Phillips, 41

³²⁴ Phillips, 41

wages or their working conditions.”³²⁵ Stewart makes this a class issue by suggesting that elites view the situation differently from the working poor, and that somehow the violence is attributable to the outside agitator bugaboo. In his article Stewart mentions how difficult it was for the citizens committee to even find a place to conduct their meetings. A local hotel withdrew its invitation because they did not have riot insurance, and the local bricklayers union in whose hall the first day of meetings were held also found it advisable not to get involved with the committee. Despite these early difficulties the committee did make a “fair” and “impartial” survey of the events concerning URW mistreatment. This was done despite the fact that local intimidators shadowed many committee members wherever they went.³²⁶

Stewart’s evaluation of the Gadsden labor war is that violence was redoubled in a systematic way after the Wagner Act was declared constitutional in April of 1937. The lull in violent attacks experienced after the Tolson mob incident and the beatings in the streets and at the plant occurring in the spring of 1937 presumably resulted from the local world feeling threatened, or insecure in their future, because of the nationalization of conflict. Stewart writes, “Practically all of the witnesses have agreed that validation of the Wagner Act was the signal for redoubled vigilance against unionism, particularly against the hated CIO.”³²⁷

Leane Zugsmith was another journalist who came to Gadsden in July of 1937 to bear witness to the citizen’s committee meeting. About the town of 40,000 residents she quoted one of the witnesses at the citizens committee meeting as saying, “In this town, when

³²⁵ Maxwell Stewart. “Gadsden is Tough.” *The Nation* Vol. CXLV (July 17, 1937), 69

³²⁶ Maxwell Stewart, 69

³²⁷ Maxwell Stewart, 70

there's a fight between the Smiths and the Joneses, they deputize the Smiths and keep the Joneses waiting in their backyards."³²⁸ She emphasized the bravery it took for the witnesses to testify before the Gadsden Central Labor Union's Law and Order Committee, otherwise known as the citizens' committee. She reported that these eyewitnesses saw savage beatings, deliberately planned manhunts directed against union members, manhunts with machine guns in the cars. Zugsmith reported that some were scared but not scared enough to drop out of the fight. Zugsmith said the hall in which the testimonials were given had been continuously watched by company gunmen.³²⁹ Zugsmith wrote, "Workers in Gadsden know these men, their names, their records and their Storm Trooper capacities; the workers know how easily these men become deputized; the workers know of their immunity to prosecution."³³⁰ It is revealing that city officials would not participate in the hearings. They may have felt emboldened by Governor Graves' statement of support, or perhaps they questioned whether the committee had any teeth. They may have not realized that this kind of national exposure was in fact widening the scope of conflict, despite their efforts to constrict the scope of conflict.

National awareness was amplified by the beginning of a long delayed National Labor Relations Board meeting that investigated acts of terrorism committed against URW workers. The hearing lasted from August to December of 1937. The URW witnesses testified to numerous occasions of firings, harassment, beatings, and threats. Goodyear foremen, ERWO members, and Sheriff Leath were implicated in the wrongdoing.³³¹ The Goodyear defensive strategy was two pronged: first, they claimed beatings were personal

³²⁸ Leane Zugsmith. "Terrorism in Gadsden." *The New Republic* XLI (July 21, 1937), 300

³²⁹ Zugsmith, 300

³³⁰ Zugsmith, 300

³³¹ Martin, 557

differences between individuals, and second, they claimed the URW had resorted to terrorism as in the case of the assassination attempt on Jimmy Karam's life. URW witnesses were able to cite actual personal injury whereas Goodyear could not produce evidence of any ERWO workers being assaulted.³³²

On January 5, 1938 Louis Allen was beaten badly at the Goodyear plant. Cecil Holmes, the URW local president, was also assaulted, but he managed to fight off his attackers with a knife. Both of these men testified before the National Labor Relations Board.³³³ Beyond the plant vigilantism continued and threats and attacks were commonplace. Under this pressure URW membership dwindled. On May 16, 1938 a walkout was staged by union members who demanded protection while at work. The fifty-eight men refused to return until their demands were met and they were fired.

This effectively crushed the URW in Gadsden for a time, despite the fact that the Supreme Court had recently upheld the Wagner Act. From 1939-1943 there was steady progress because a slow determined pressure on the Goodyear company through NLRB and the federal courts.³³⁴ The second factor involved the expanded federal power over the wartime economy and the government's inclusion of labor representatives on compliance boards. This put pressure on employers with anti-union attitudes to fall into line with the rest of the nation.

In March of 1940 Goodyear remained the only national rubber company that refused to sign a formal contract with the union. But it was in this month that the NLRB ruled against Goodyear on all major points, thus the URW decided to try and organize again

³³² Martin, 557

³³³ Martin, 558

³³⁴ Martin, 558

in Gadsden.³³⁵ Union leaders chose John House, who had been attacked in the Tolson building back in June of 1936, to spearhead this final push for URW recognition in Gadsden. House found that overcoming the fear of employees was his largest obstacle. He wrote in a journal entry that “they have nothing to fear from the old gang that used to rule the roost here in Gadsden.”³³⁶

House may have spoke too soon because on February 18, 1941 five unknown attackers entered his office and beat him with blackjacks. He received serious head injuries that resulted in eighty-six stiches into fifteen scalp wounds. Union leaders, Goodyear president Paul Litchfield, city commission government officials, and even the *Gadsden Times* condemned this act of terrorism. But the identity of House’s attackers was never discovered. Workers remained very fearful that the URW could not protect them.

Akron attempts at unionization were successful however and Litchfield was forced to concede defeat on October 28, 1941, when Goodyear signed agreements with URW locals in Akron, Los Angeles, and Cumberland, Maryland. They did not sign an agreement in Gadsden. Months later the NLRB filed a petition for the enforcement of its 1940 order concerning Goodyear’s Gadsden plant, the company and the ERWO filed an appeal to the federal courts. On June 6, 1942, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling which upheld most of the NLRB ruling. Finally, the company reinstated those fired back in 1936, and the ERWO disbanded. URW prestige was enhanced by the courts’ decision and community attitudes grew more amenable to union membership. This was likely related to city officials flipping their views as politicians are sometimes prone to do. Historian

³³⁵ Martin, 560

³³⁶ Daniel Nelson [ed.], “A CIO Organizer in Alabama, 1941,” *Labor History*, XVIII (Fall 1977), 575

Charles Martin believes this was likely the result of city leaders fearing an anti-labor reputation might prevent future wartime contracts.³³⁷

³³⁷ Martin, 56

CONCLUSION

The outside agitator and communist subversive ideas within the discursive commons were extremely effective tools in mobilizing support for the anti-union cause. Solid citizens and those fearing for their jobs joined the ERWO company union instead of the CIO affiliated URW with its radical heritage attached. Establishment violence prevailed for about six years, as entrenched combinations of political authority conspired to proscribe the freedom and opportunities of primarily Sand Mountain hill people.

In some ways the perpetrators of violent attacks can be viewed as individuals who were policing the perimeters of myth, the myth of rugged individualism. However, it is important to remember that they often were moving as a mob and their collective violent opposition to outsiders has a very specific historical genealogy in this violence prone sub-region. They were the descendants of white cappers, but they were also tricked by the upper class into committing violent acts against their own class interests.

Ideas like energy are never destroyed and they can be resurrected for different purposes. The discursive commons much like a reservoir, or bank, holds these ideas in the memories of citizens. The Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties brought a nationalized conflict back into the community of Gadsden, Alabama. When a Baltimore, Maryland native and Civil Rights activist named William Lewis Moore decided he was going to hand deliver a letter he wrote to Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, Moore endeavored

to walk alone from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to the Jackson, Mississippi Governor's mansion. He never made it because he was shot in the head by a 22- caliber rifle near the Attalla exit in Etowah County. Perhaps the outside agitator idea which first took shape with whites cappers in the 19th century, but which really gained a foothold in the discursive commons during the Gadsden labor war of the thirties, had re-emerged thirty years later as an idea which still held a great deal of meaning. Moore's murderer, Floyd Simpson, was a Klan member and Gadsden was known in these years for being a hotbed for Klan membership. Though it would be difficult to argue that Moore's death was establishment violence as had happened in Gadsden's labor war, Simpson was upholding the caste based creed of white supremacy for the protection of the status quo, just as Jimmy Karam and T.L Bottoms had done with their anti-union violence during the thirties.

Otto Agricola died in 1939 leaving behind a community that was in rapid transition. The URW outsider pressure group and the New Deal attempts to nationalize the unionization conflict in Gadsden must have been troublesome to this member of the open shop old guard of business leaders. Gadsden, Alabama ceased to grow much after the town was converted from an anti-union stronghold to a union town as it is known today. Today its reputation as a union stronghold has become like a force field that prevents industries from moving into town. On its periphery in neighboring St. Claire County a Honda plant was built, but since the URW's unionization, industry leaves and never comes back. Those beaten up would become martyrs to the union cause. Their pictures hang in union offices at the Goodyear plant.

Robin D.G. Kelley used the Gadsden case in her work, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. She explains that anti-communism and anti-

labor repression were inextricably linked, despite the fact that an actual communist presence in Gadsden was almost negligible. Kelley refuted that communism was ever actually at stake in the Gadsden labor war. She quoted A.M. Freeman, Chairman of the Citizen's Committee, who said that anti-CIO propaganda was "a red-herring, a subterfuge, to drive public attention from the methods being used by industry to strip the workers of their rights as American citizens."³³⁸ The vast majority of rubber workers in Gadsden were white at the time of the conflict and none of the organizers really seemed to be radicalized. Anti-communism was sometimes a veil for racism, but not in this case. In this case, it was a bludgeon for preserving the status quo and protecting the social order.

³³⁸ Robin D.G. Kelley. *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 141

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Maps:

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Oral History:

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VITA

John Agricola grew up in Gadsden, Alabama. He received his Bachelor of Arts at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where he majored in History and American Studies. After graduating, he presented a paper on regional art at the 2008 Southern American Studies Association Conference at George Mason University. In 2011, John received his Master of Arts in American Studies from the University of Wyoming. He was teaching assistant and prepared an exhibit on regionalist art at the University of Wyoming Art Museum. He joined the Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi in 2012, where he was a graduate assistant for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. John's work explores the history of visual culture in northeast Alabama during the Depression as well as the labor histories of that same space.