

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CLASS WAR

THE COLORADO COALFIELD STRIKE OF 1913-1914

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UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO

2009

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## Why We Dig

*Archaeology, Ludlow, and the Public*

From its inception, the Colorado Coalfield War Archaeology Project was committed to developing a serious and focused public outreach component. We hoped we could go beyond the public lecture and other traditional forms of information sharing—important though these outlets are—to involving the public actively in our work and to a continuing conversation about its relevance to local and wider communities. We were fortunate to have archaeology as a medium to engage the public in a dialogue about Ludlow, labor wars, and class struggle. Archaeology is popular at many levels of society, as evidenced by the number of local amateur archaeological societies throughout the country and the frequency of archaeological programs on such television channels as the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, and others. In this chapter we first present the major messages we tried to convey to the public. Second, we examine the philosophies that underpinned our attempts to use the project as a means of public consciousness raising about the Colorado Coalfield War and the nature of archaeological knowledge production.

## MESSAGES OF THE COALFIELD WAR

The previous chapters have fully explicated the specifics of these messages, in particular Chapter 1 by McGuire and Larkin. In this section we explain why we felt these messages were so important in our public outreach. The main messages include:

- *The importance of the Colorado Coalfield Strike and War in American history.* As we note later in this chapter, we were confronted early on with an unfamiliarity among the public with the events of the war. Many visitors to Ludlow assumed it was the site of an Indian massacre rather than an episode in the history of American labor wars. We felt Ludlow could be used as a medium for educating schoolchildren and citizens about the role of industrialization and immigrant labor in the making of the American West.
- *The role of women in the camps and their importance to the conduct of the strike.* The work by Margaret Wood (2002) and others helped project members realize that women played a fundamentally important role in initiating and sustaining the strike. Given the traditional emphasis on male activities in analyses of working-class culture, this emphasis allowed a dialogue on an oft-neglected aspect of the strike and encouraged comparison with the status of women in contemporary American society.
- *The complications of ethnicity.* Crosscutting class membership is ethnicity, and in 1913–1914 this led to complicated and at times oppositional social relations among miners. The coal companies often exploited ethnic variation as a way to impede collective action by miners. Yet the miners proved fairly successful in overcoming ethnic divisions that could undermine class solidarity, as evidenced by the strike's long duration. The Colorado Coalfield War thus allows insight into the variety of identities that work together to shape human experience and complicate collective action, as well as how those identities can work together to achieve a common good.
- *The importance of historical memory to the local descendant community.* Several chapters in the volume, including this one (see later discussion), identify different communities for which Ludlow is a seminal event worth remembering. Ludlow is a living memorial to which working-class people return every summer to remember the events of 1914 and the people who died on what for many is sacred ground. We hoped that highlighting this commemorative tradition would resonate with the wider public and perhaps allow them to see why, for southern Colorado coal miners and many others in the labor movement, the past is still very much present.
- *The contributions of organized labor to winning workers' rights.* The labor movement in the United States continues to be maligned and misunderstood. The project gave us an opportunity to use archaeology as a means of

initiating a dialogue with the public on the labor movement's successes as a positive force in achieving the kind of workplace safety and dignity many of us take for granted today.

- *The relevance of coalfield history to contemporary American culture and society.* We were very concerned that the public not perceive Ludlow as something that happened in the bad old days. We used coalfield events as a means of reminding our audiences that for many citizens the struggle for workplace safety and dignity is a continuing one.

## DISCIPLINARY ISSUES

Archaeology has increasingly accepted its commitment to communicate its findings to the public, although many archaeologists still seem uncomfortable with the notion of drawing in the public as equal partners in the construction of the past, lest they lose control (cf. Russell 2006:25). The commitment to what might be termed "public archaeology" is predicated on the assumption that archaeologists serve as stewards of the archaeological record and that a disciplinary goal should be to preserve elements of that record for the public good. It has further been assumed that serving the public (cf. McManamon 1991 on the nuances of who exactly constitutes the public) could be accomplished without reference to any explicit ideological or political agenda. Subsequent federal and state legislation has been directed to protect what has commonly been called the "national heritage." It is not our intention to critique this movement, ostensibly laudable though it may be. We point out, however, that any form of commitment to public archaeology is not, in our opinion, politically or culturally value-free. The concept that archaeologists serve as stewards of the archaeological record is naive to say the least and politically dangerous at worst (Hamilakis 1999, 2003). Our choice of what is important, that is, what is worth saving, is determined by archaeologists operating within a contemporary political and cultural climate. The record is as much cultural production in the present as in the past.

Unfortunately, the emergence of cultural resource management as both a direct product of public archaeology's commitment to the preservation of heritage and the largest single employer of archaeologists today has created a climate in which archaeologists play the roles of professionals who are paid to get projects through the legal hurdles of archaeological preservation, in much the same way an architect is paid to put up a building. This tends to remove archaeologists' power to intercede in the construction of the past in an ethical way that extends behind the rote code of ethics professional organizations such as the RPA (Register of Professional Archaeologists) have adopted in the past few years (cf. Cumberpatch and Blinkhorn 2001; Kintz 2001). An important first commitment of the Colorado Coalfield War Archaeology Project, then, was to acknowl-

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edge the explicit political ideologies each of us has as citizens and the ways these ideologies were manifested in our work at Ludlow. A second commitment was to engage the public in the political nature of all archaeological study.

In this endeavor, we are supported by parallel trends in history and archaeology that overtly recognize that statements about the past are potentially political statements about the present. For instance, the emergence of New Western history (Limerick 1991) and emerging trends in historical archaeology, with its emphasis on the nexus between local events and the wider structures of global capitalism, provide a sympathetic context for our work at Ludlow (Saitta 2005). The issue of the nexus between archaeology and politics crystallized in the emergence in the 1980s of the so-called postprocessual school of archaeological theory. Three broad constituencies have been served—in theory if not always in practice—by postprocessualism's advocacy of greater political awareness in how the past was created and its impact on the present: women, indigenous communities, and working people. Of course, all three groups are interrelated; studies by David Kojan and Dante Angelo (2005) in Bolivia, Nick Shepherd (2003) in South Africa, and Margaret Wood (2002, this volume) at the Berwind site are but three examples of this interconnectedness. However, although early authors such as Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1987) made explicit their commitment to a working-class voice in the brave new world of archaeology they advocated, one could soon discern that class was losing the potency of the other two issues, a point we made in an *Assemblage* article (Duke and Saitta 1998). The near, if not total, absence of class as an analytical focus in the work of many leading archaeological theoreticians (e.g., Conker 2005; Hodder 1991) reinforces the conviction that class, at least within Anglo-American archaeology, is not that important (but see numerous papers in Hamilakis and Duke 2007 for counter-examples of this trend).

A tension exists, again at the disciplinary level, in terms of who owns the past and who has the right to create it. The concern exists over how the past is best communicated to the public and to what extent the public is encouraged or discouraged from becoming active participants in the creation of a particular past. The debate has played out in archaeology in the arenas of gender and indigenous archaeologies in particular, but we are encouraged by parallel trends in history toward recognition of the often profound differences between official and vernacular history, to use John Bodnar's (1992) phrase. An official history of Ludlow is national, progressive, and triumphal. It sees the coalfield wars as the product of a less enlightened past, an "angry splotch" (Zinn 1970:100) that is fading rapidly as America moves ever upward toward fuller equality for its citizens. In contrast, vernacular history is local and personal, recited around the dinner table by community members. It gives a different spin to past events, a different context, a darker, more insidious, and more contemporary resonance.

A further concern that stimulated our approach to public involvement in the project was the relationship between the academy and the public. First, the academy is not—and never has been—an institution committed solely to the creation of objective knowledge. Since their origin in the Medieval period, universities have been willing and active promoters of the status quo (Austin 2001). Universities gain their funding, both public and private, by carefully parsing their supposed commitment to greater social, economic, and political equality. Second, the academy does not reward scholars for producing publicly accessible material at the same level as it rewards the production of material intended solely for the consumption of other members of the academy. The academic hierarchy leads to elite universities, many privately funded, where scholarship is privileged and where the use of the classroom—indeed, the use of knowledge itself—to reach out to constituencies that have been overlooked is of secondary importance. Articles in K. Anne Pyburn and Nick Shepard (2005) indicate opportunities for such outreach, but the fact that Pyburn and Shepherd's volume, a special edition of *Archaeologies* (the journal of the World Archaeological Congress), needed to be devoted to this problem is indicative of the challenges still to be overcome. Our "problem," therefore, is that we, the participants in the project, are of the academy yet strive to escape at least some of its constraints. This was particularly manifest in the ways we communicated with the public about the project. It was not simply a matter of minimizing academic-speak so vocabulary became less jargon, a decision that itself is not politically value-free (Duke and Saitta 1998; Watkins 2006). Rather, we sought innovative ways in which we could engage with the public. Some of these were successful, others less so—the topic of the next section.

### LOCAL ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

Within this overall context we were faced with specific issues, peculiar to the project although not necessarily unique. We needed to recognize that Ludlow was significant to a number of different constituencies. First, most obviously, was the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), the institution that owns the land and for whom the site is sacred. In an early meeting with UMWA officials, that very word was used to describe how the union felt about the site. It was made very clear that we had to proceed carefully and sensitively if we were to gain the union's respect.

Second, two distinct communities claim ties to the Ludlow ground. The descendants of the Ludlow Colony who visit the memorial each year are mainly middle-class Anglos. Few of them are miners or even members of the working class. Their parents or they themselves took part in the processes of social mobility that marked the 1950s and 1960s, with the result that many of them

now hold “professional” employment. They do not form a community; rather, their connection to the Colorado Coalfield War is personal and familial. We have helped these descendants by locating graves so they can raise markers to family members who died in the massacre and by correcting errors in documentation or labels on photographs in historical archives. The descendant community is not in the main related by family ties to the strikers, although some do have this connection. This community instead comprises the unionized working people of southern Colorado. The majority of this community is composed of Chicanos, with a small minority of ethnic whites (Italians or Eastern Europeans). This descendant community has an active stake in Ludlow and the events of the coalfield wars. They maintain the monument, organize the annual Ludlow commemoration, and make the events of the Colorado Coalfield War part of their broader struggle for dignity and human rights. We join them each year at the commemoration and share with them the results of our findings and our knowledge of how labor’s rights were won—literally—with blood.

We discovered very early that our proposed activities might be greeted with suspicion (Duke and Saitta 1998). As one rank-and-filer bluntly stated at a 1997 union hall meeting where we were seeking permission to excavate at coalfield sites: “I can tell you everything you need to know about Ludlow in three words—they got fucked.” This was a wakeup call about how the academy in general and archaeology in particular are held in suspicion by many members of our society. However, we also discovered as the project continued that members of the descendant community were profoundly grateful to us for initiating the project and wanting to involve them in it as much as possible. After viewing excavated artifacts, Yolanda Romero, president of UMWA Local 9856 Women’s Auxiliary, commented, “Until now, we’ve only known what we’ve seen in photographs. But to see a real thing, an item that a person actually handled, really brings those people and that time to life. . . . [W]orkers today are still fighting for some of the same protections the Ludlow miners wanted. People should know how far we’ve come and how far we still have to go” (cited in UMWJ 1999:13). As a result of these and other epiphanies, union leaders now routinely announce that because of our efforts to publicize the story of Ludlow, we are now seen as “brothers and sisters” in the struggle for workplace justice (Butero 2005).

Third, beyond the immediate communities of southern Colorado, we identified that the citizens of Colorado are also stakeholders in Ludlow and the events of nearly a hundred years ago. However, the Colorado Coalfield War and even Ludlow are not especially well-known among Colorado residents. In two popular Colorado history books pulled at random from the shelves of the Durango Public Library, Ludlow is described in one page of text with an accompanying photograph in one of the books (Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith 2001); it is not even mentioned in the other (Ubbelohde, Benson, and Smith 1982). By

way of comparison, Ludlow rates three pages in the left-leaning *People’s History of the United States* (Zinn 2003). Anecdotally, Duke has found in informal surveys of freshman students at his college, most of whom graduated from Colorado high schools, that very few have heard of Ludlow. This is not entirely unexpected because Colorado history is not a state-mandated social science course in Colorado. If it is taught, it is only as an elective, so teachers are allowed to choose whichever texts they wish and to concentrate on whatever events interest them (Shane Voss, personal comm., 2007). Voss, a high school teacher in Durango, teaches about Ludlow as part of the wider issue of union-company conflict in late-nineteenth-century Colorado and uses Ubbelohde and colleagues (2001) as his text. We suspect, however, that this emphasis is not widespread.

We have made two substantive and, by all indications, successful efforts to bring knowledge of the Colorado Coalfield War into both schools and the public consciousness. In collaboration with the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities (CEH), we developed two Summer Teacher Institutes dedicated to imagining ways Colorado’s rich labor history could be incorporated into the public schools’ American history curriculum. Given the differences between official and vernacular accounts of the past, the main challenge was to negotiate and explore synergies between these accounts. While this curriculum building is a work in progress, for participating teachers the institutes raised archaeology’s stock as a respectable and socially relevant complement to traditional history. We have also published an article about the project (Duke et al. 2005) in a reader on public history in the American West that, although intended for college audiences, could also serve as an accompanying text for the kind of high school curriculum imagined by CEH Summer Teacher Institute participants. A traveling exhibit and history trunk containing historical photographs and excavated artifacts have been widely used not only in Colorado schools and cultural institutions but also at educational sites around the country. The potential for using the Colorado Coalfield War as a means of educating undergraduates about such issues as class and conflict management is explored by Clark and Casella in Chapter 11 of this volume.

The second effort to disseminate knowledge is through onsite public interpretation. A survey of visitors to the Ludlow site conducted by Mark Walker in 1998 revealed that nearly 60 percent thought the sign “Ludlow Massacre Memorial” promised a memorial to American Indian wars, not to industrial labor wars (an interesting insight into American culture in its own right). Comments in the memorial’s visitors’ book are mostly sympathetic, although the occasional right-wing diatribe (e.g., “they should have been sent to Russia”; “thank goodness trade unions are on the decline”) sullies the overall tone of respect conveyed in the majority of comments. In response to this need, one of our first contributions was to build an interpretive kiosk for the site that described the history,

archaeology, and legacy of the events that transpired there (Manajek 1999). The UMWA Local Women's Auxiliary had heavy input into the kiosk's design and urged a stronger connection between the Ludlow Massacre and contemporary labor struggles in the area. In so doing, the group ensured that Ludlow was not consigned to a dead past, something archaeological research can often inadvertently suggest (Walker 2003:75). We followed this up with a smaller historical marker for the Berwind coal camp modeled on the Corazon de Trinidad (Heart of Trinidad) markers that celebrate Santa Fe Trail history in downtown Trinidad. The Berwind marker emphasizes the role Colorado's immigrants played in the making of the industrial West. We have recently completed and installed an interpretive trail for the Ludlow Massacre site to supplement the original kiosk, a twelve-panel installation that timelines the history, updates the story told by archaeology, and locates the Ludlow drama within a wider landscape. These interpretive materials do useful work in offering counter-classic narratives to balance the triumphal, mythic narratives that have long informed Western public history.

### CONCLUSION

The Colorado Coalfield War Archaeology Project is one working people can relate to both intellectually and emotionally. It is one of the few archaeological projects in the United States that speaks to the struggles of working-class people, past and present. It does so in a format and language to which citizens can relate. Through site interpretation, teacher education, and other outreach work, we have engaged an audience that has never heard of the Ludlow Massacre and that has missed (or misunderstood) the history of U.S. labor conflict and its powerful legacy. In so doing, our work has shown how archaeology can contribute to a better understanding of the American experience. Whether this wider audience will be convinced of Ludlow's significance in the human struggle for workplace freedom and dignity remains to be seen (see Matthews 2005 and Wood 2002 for critiques of the Ludlow Project's strategies of student and citizen engagement). For the moment, we content ourselves with the knowledge that we are politically engaged—that we are “in the game,” to quote Hall (2004)—and with the belief that our activities are cultivating new audiences for archaeological work while simultaneously justifying archaeology's existence as an enterprise that serves the wider public good.

Yet we must conclude with the recognition that much work still needs to be done. Archaeology still needs to prove its relevance to constituencies other than its traditional middle-class constituency. Archaeology can tell a compelling story about the past, but in so doing it can help direct the public to see the present differently. Other pasts can provide other futures. This has been the primary—

the one truly transcendent—goal of the Colorado Coalfield War Archaeology Project. If archaeology's goal is merely to tell a story about the past, then it does indeed deserve Grahame Clark's condemnation as merely “an intellectual game for the meritocracy” (1967:472). The past deserves more than that, and so does the present.

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