

Fort Ludlow Massacre

by Dean Saitta



In April of 1914, striking coal miners, women and children — most of them recent immigrants to the United States from southern and eastern Europe — were killed by Colorado Militia and Colorado Fuel and Iron (CF & I) gunmen in what became known as the Ludlow Massacre.

Since 1997, I have been excavating, with the help of colleagues and students, archaeological sites related to the 1913-1914 Colorado Coal Field Strike, including the Ludlow Tent Colony north of Trinidad. With support from the Colorado Historical Society-State Historical Fund, we have been researching why Colorado miners went on strike, how they lived on strike, and how daily life in coal camps changed due to the strike.

Every now and then, I get to reflect on the scholarly value of the material we have collected and how it changes the knowledge of Colorado history. Rarely do I have a chance to reflect on what the research means to me in more personal terms.

My archaeological work on the Colorado Coal Field Strike has certainly given me a much deeper appreciation and respect for the struggles and sacrifices of America's working people. This is especially true of two evocative artifact types recovered at the Ludlow Massacre site: children's toys and spent ammunition. The eleven children who died at Ludlow — among them Lucy Costa, Rogerlo Pedragon, Joe Petrucci, and Mary Valdez — are memorialized forever on the site's stone monument. But it is far too easy for the casual site visitor to

treat their names as abstractions. Nothing drives home the extraordinary depth of human sacrifice at Ludlow than finding fragments of an immigrant child's doll in the same sifting screen as a militiaman's jacketed bullet. The fact that I'm a relatively new parent (my son Joe is soon to be three years old) undoubtedly heightens the emotional experience. Clearly, the men and women of the Colorado coalfields paid the ultimate price in their struggle to win the basic workplace rights that so many of us today take for granted.

Additional personal meaning is attached to our first breakthrough find at Ludlow, the wonderfully preserved remains of what had been the tent of an Italian Catholic family. This tent was associated with olive oil bottle fragments, crucifixes, and a suspender part bearing the inscription (in Italian) "Society of Tyrolean Alpinists." As a grandson of Italian Catholic immigrants, I've begun to wonder much more deeply about the Italian immigrant experience in America and, specifically, the West. I want to know more about where the Italians of the Colorado coalfields came from, why they came, and what their aspirations were for life in America. It dawns on me that these people, in at least a limited sense, were my people. That's a recognition I've never had before on an archaeological site.

It is important that we remember Ludlow and commemorate other landscapes of American industrial conflict. Although the southern coal mines are silent today,

many of the everyday realities that produced the Ludlow Massacre — workplace danger, tension between management and labor, anti-immigrant fervor — are still with us. Recent American mine disasters — including the one in Pennsylvania that, thankfully, ended happily — raise serious questions about workplace safety in the United States. Continuing revelations about American corporate greed recall the days when "King Coal" dominated the lives of working people in Colorado and elsewhere. Post-September 11 anti-immigrant hysteria, racial profiling, and intensified government surveillance have trampled the rights of many innocent people on the street and in the workplace. These developments suggest that we still have a long way to go to protect working Americans from the exploitative potential of corporate and state power. Today, as talk of waging war in a foreign land to preserve our freedom intensifies, it is perhaps important to recognize that there are other, arguably more important struggles for social and economic freedom occurring right here at home. Our research at Ludlow reminds us of these continuing homeland struggles. It also reminds us that the past is, in a profound way, always present.

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PHOTOS: TOP, GREEK LABOR LEADER; BOTTOM, MEN AND BOYS EATING BREAD AMONG RUINS OF LUDLOW MASSACRE.

