



university of denver magazine — winter 2003

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The work of a DU archaeologist is illuminating one of the darkest episodes in the history of U.S. organized labor.

Massacre at Ludlow

Dean Saitta



On April 20, 1914, 27-year-old Fedelina Costa huddled in a cellar with another woman and 11 children as Colorado National Guard troops opened fire on a tent city of striking coal miners and their families. The soldiers doused the tents with kerosene and set fire to the colony; Costa and the others in the cellar — including infants Elvira Valdez and Frank Petrucci — died in the conflagration. They were among 20 victims of what became known as the Ludlow Massacre.

Located just north of Trinidad in southeastern Colorado, Ludlow sits on a griddle of baked prairie in the shadow of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The tent colony, once home to 1,200, is now nothing more than a parched field littered with poignant reminders of everyday life — broken bottles, tin cans, china and the occasional doll part.

The field also is littered with reminders of tragedy.

An enamelware kettle cleanly pierced by a bullet hole is one such reminder. Since 1997, DU anthropology Chair and Assoc. Prof. Dean Saitta has led an archaeological investigation of the Ludlow site, turning up thousands of similar household artifacts in a quest to shed light on the everyday lives of mining families in southeastern Colorado. Archaeologists Phil Duke of Ft. Lewis College in Durango, Colo., and Randy McGuire of SUNY-Binghamton are collaborating with Saitta on the Colorado Coal Field War Project, which has been funded by more than \$500,000 in grants from the Colorado Historical Society State Historical

FEATURE

Text

Chelsey Baker-Hauck

Photography

Mike Richmond

"You can't mine coal without machine guns."

— Industrialist Richard B. Mellon in congressional testimony quoted in Time, June 14, 1937

Visit the [Colorado Coal Field War Project Web site](#)

for more information. Phone 303.871.2680 for additional information about the trunk.

Fund.

"We're hoping to supplement the written history, which focuses on key events and important people, by talking about the everyday lives of the strikers," Saitta says. Through examination of household belongings and trash, the team is trying to gain a better understanding of why the miners went on strike, what life was like for them while they were on strike and to what extent life improved for the strikers once they went back to work. To answer these questions, Saitta's team is conducting excavations both at the Ludlow tent colony site and in the company coal camps, noting the differences between artifact assemblages found at the locations.

Saitta has specialized in the study of Pre-Columbian (Anasazi) populations in the American Southwest, so it may seem surprising to find him excavating a site that's less than 100 years old. "I've always been interested in labor history, and Ludlow is one of the country's most famous sites of industrial labor struggle," Saitta explains. "The Pre-Columbian work and the historical archaeology work are united by a common theme, which is an interest in social archaeology and the politics and economics of everyday life."

Much is known about the Ludlow Massacre and the coal-field war, but archaeology is helping to fill in the gaps. For instance, history books primarily focus on the male miners and ignore the roles of women and children, Saitta says. "If there was one strike anywhere in the United States during this period that involved women and children as important players, it was the one in southeastern Colorado."

Women and children outnumbered men at the Ludlow tent colony, notes master's degree student Amie Gray, who works full time on the project. Gray is particularly interested in understanding the ways women contributed to household economics. "If you think about how hard it was to feed a family and take care of things in that environment — most of that fell to the women."

That environment included 200 tents with dirt streets running between the rows. Sanitation consisted of communal privies. The tents were erected on wooden platforms, and each had a cast-iron stove for heat and cooking. Water was hauled from a nearby well. In addition to cooking, homemaking and tending the children, "the largest role women played was trying to keep this volatile

group of men under control," Gray adds.

Take yourself back to 1913.

If you were in Ludlow on Sept. 23 of that year, you would have seen a massive flood disgorging from nearby canyons where the coal mines were located. The flood was not of water; it was human — thousands of striking miners and their families, hauling whatever belongings they could carry after being evicted from company housing.

More than 11,000 mostly immigrant miners worked the southeastern Colorado coal fields. Colorado's mines were the second most dangerous in the nation, and living conditions in the company towns were harsh. Although the mining towns were ethnically segregated, the mine shafts were not. Twenty-four different languages were spoken by the miners, and the company purposefully mixed miners who didn't speak each other's language so they wouldn't be able to communicate and organize. Miners were forced to live in company housing and pay inflated prices at company stores. Even doctors and clergy were on the company payroll.

The miners had been trying for years to join the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) but were met by opposition by mine operators, most notably the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I).

As they fled the mines, the strikers headed to makeshift tent camps set up by the UMWA. Ludlow was the largest of the camps and far from safe. Company guards and private detectives constantly harassed the strikers, beaming searchlights over the colonies at night and patrolling their perimeters in a "Death Special" — an armored car mounted with a machine gun — spraying bullets at the tent camps. Strikers were kidnapped, beaten and murdered.

On the morning of April 20, 1914, the National Guard siege of the Ludlow colony culminated in an exchange of gunfire. By this time, the Guard had been transferred from a peacekeeping unit into a heavily armed strikebreaking force comprised of company gunmen and private detectives. The battle lasted all day, ending in a lethal conflagration. Later, the Red Cross cleared the site, dumping the charred debris into cellars that residents had dug beneath the wooden floors of tents to protect themselves and their possessions from company harassment and searches. The Ludlow camp was later rebuilt and reoccupied for several more months. By the

time the strike ended in December 1914, dozens of men, women and children were dead, and the union still was not recognized in the Colorado coal fields. Although the strike was a failure for the union, it did galvanize pro-worker sentiment across the nation and focus attention on labor conditions in Colorado and elsewhere.

Today, those debris-filled cellars are largely intact, looking much like they did in 1914. The property of thousands is there for examining — a sewing machine, Hamlin's Wizard Oil medicine bottles, sardine cans and a sewing kit tucked neatly into a tobacco tin. The "death pit" — the cellar where 13 died — is preserved in concrete. "The most poignant and evocative artifacts for me are the children's toys — the doll parts," Saitta says. "Lots of times we find them juxtaposed with ammunition — spent cartridges and bullets that had been fired into the tent colony."

It will be at least another year before archaeologists finish analyzing the artifacts they've uncovered at Ludlow, allowing them to draw some conclusions about the site. Preliminary analysis, however, suggests that the strikers made many attempts to support themselves rather than relying solely on the union, Saitta says. For example, faunal remains indicate the strikers were hunting.

"The archaeology suggests they were probably getting a lot of home-canned goods from sympathetic citizens as well as buying national name-brand goods, which may have been provided by the union," Saitta says. Items like Mason jars indicate likely local support, while PET condensed milk cans represent the use of commercial goods. "We're trying to figure out the balance between union support and the support they were creating for themselves by hunting, gardening, making deals with local merchants and so on."

The artifacts that most intrigue Saitta are those that indicate the ethnicity of tent dwellers — items like medallions from Italian fraternal orders, for instance. By studying the distribution of such artifacts, Saitta hopes eventually to determine how the different ethnic groups associated with one another, including whether they were intermingled spatially or segregated as they were in the company camps. He also wonders what role such old-world fraternal orders played in the union organizing effort.

For the first time since the Ludlow project began, the archaeologists will not be conducting summer excavations this year. Instead, they will analyze the thousands of

artifacts they've uncovered. Saitta has applied for another grant to support the analysis; he'll get word about the grant this spring. He eventually hopes to reopen excavations at the site, which in the past has attracted graduate students and volunteers from around the nation and the world. (Four DU graduate students, including Gray, have based master's theses on the project.)

Saitta also is pursuing another vital aspect of the project: public outreach. This effort has been the most gratifying part of the project, he says. Outreach has included two teacher institutes conducted in conjunction with the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities. The institutes instructed teachers on how to incorporate Colorado labor history into their curricula. Saitta's team constructed an informational kiosk at the massacre site and hopes to eventually add an interpretive trail around the site. Saitta lectures about Ludlow across the state, and a traveling exhibit has journeyed around the nation.

The researchers also have put together an informational trunk aimed at fourth through eighth graders. The trunk includes artifacts, a video, photographs, an audio tape of strike songs and a teacher's resource guide. The trunk has been test run with several school-age groups and has visited a number of public venues.

Saitta's outreach work is evidence of his passion for sharing Ludlow's history and its lessons, and that passion is appreciated by the UMWA, whose members consider the bit of windswept prairie to be sacred ground. The union erected a monument and holds a memorial service at the massacre site every year.

"People gave up their lives to set a better standard of living for all Americans. They laid the groundwork for the middle class," says Bob Butero, UMWA Region IV director. "The archaeological work has brought a lot of attention to the site and ended a lot of confusion by explaining the history.

"Understanding Ludlow and labor history is just as important as understanding the Revolutionary War," Butero adds. "A lot of people talk about freedom, but unless you're in an economic position to protect those freedoms, what real freedom do you have?"

"They were striking for the work benefits we enjoy today," Saitta adds. "Safe working conditions, the eight-hour workday — these are things that the strikers were lobbying

for. If we value those workplace benefits, it's good to remind ourselves every now and then that they were won with blood and gained through struggle."

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