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The Denver Post

August 30, 1998 Sunday 2D EDITION

Artifacts of Violence Archaeologists dig into 1914 **Ludlow Massacre**

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SECTION: LFS; Pg. F-01

LENGTH: 2305 words

Archaeologist Dean Saitta thrusts his palm into a pile of precious trash and allows his fingers to pick gingerly through history, past a mud-caked "Wizard Oil" bottle, between some stray doll parts and under pieces of mangled cutlery.

When his hand finally finds the coffee pot, Saitta touches an American tragedy. The crumpled container - once the property of a Colorado coal miner, still splotted with some original blue and white enamel - has been cleanly pierced by a bullet.

Resting in a basement lab at the University of Denver and surrounded by an eerie mix of playground marbles and gun parts, the coffee pot is a rusty remnant of "the **Ludlow Massacre**," a swift civil war that killed eight adults and a dozen children one brutal day in 1914.

The dead were Coloradans. The killers were Americans. But the bloodbath between striking miners and state soldiers remains foreign to many people today, Saitta believes.

"It's an untold story and largely unwritten history," says Saitta, associate professor and chairman of the department of anthropology at the University of Denver. "It involves people who haven't figured prominently in the historic accounts of the West.

"And the tragedy that happened at Ludlow, it's got a powerful emotional as well as intellectual appeal for me."

Which explains why Saitta, along with a crew of eight other archaeologists and students, have spent parts of the past two summers scratching through sun-scorched soil at the mouth of several canyons near Trinidad.

They say they're digging for the truth.

The crisp nip of autumn had barely kissed the southern Colorado mountains in 1913 when tempers finally boiled over in the mines.

The hills were alive with some 11,000 men who were carving deeper and deeper into the earth to pull out lumps of coal. Their employer was the Colorado Fuel & Iron Corp., owned by the vastly rich Rockefeller family.

Wages were low, and working conditions were treacherous in the coal camps. The miners, paid for how much they dug, wanted coal scales checked daily. They demanded to be paid in money instead of scrip. They asked that safety rules be followed, and they pushed for union recognition.

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That September, after a union organizer was murdered, the miners walked off the job in protest. Bosses immediately evicted the men and their families from company-owned shacks in the mining towns.

The fight was on.

"When they called the strike, there was this one night when the miners all just came streaming out (of the hills)," says Mark Walker, field director of the Ludlow archaeology dig. "The strike was 40 miles long from Trinidad to Walsenburg. So in all these canyons, people were just pouring out of them."

The United Mine Workers rented nearby plots of land and supplied thousands of tents, setting up about 10 temporary colonies for the striking miners. The men continued picketing while their families made do - cooking in the dirt and playing under the stars.

It got ugly fast.

The Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency - hired guns brought in by Rockefeller interests - periodically sprayed the tent colony with bullets. They would drive through the area in an armored car mounted with a machine gun. In the camps, people called it "The Death Special."

Some miners died from the gunfire. Many families dug cellars under their tents to protect women and children from the deadly raids. But the mining companies even invaded the strikers' sleep, training huge spotlights over the tents at night.

The strikers hung on; the mines were unable to operate. Finally, Colorado Gov. Elias Ammons dispatched the National Guard. The Rockefellers supplied the soldiers' wages, according to Howard Zinn's book, "A People's History of the United States."

"The miners at first thought the Guard was sent to protect them, and greeted its arrival with flags and cheers. They soon found out the Guard was there to destroy the strike," Zinn wrote. "Guardsmen beat miners, arrested them by the hundreds. And still the miners refused to give in.

"When they lasted through the cold winter of 1913-14, it became clear that extraordinary measures would be needed to break the strike."

By April 1914, two National Guard companies were positioned in the hills looking down on the largest colony, Ludlow, where about 1,200 people huddled in 200 neatly rowed tents.

On the morning of April 20, the miners and their families were celebrating Greek Easter. By 10 a.m., hundreds of soldiers had ringed the small camp. About then, their commander, Lt. Karl Lindenfelter, signaled his men to open fire.

Dean Saitta brings something more than a trowel and shovel to the Ludlow archaeology project. He brings an agenda.

The DU professor has picked a side in the Ludlow conflict, admitting a long-standing interest in "labor history and workers' struggles." A colleague on the dig, Phillip Duke, from the Center of Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis State College in Durango, shares that same passion for working men and women.

"This ties into our politics, certainly," Saitta says. "We're sympathetic to those sorts of things."

No matter which side of the aisle you call home, Ludlow represents one of the darkest moments in the fractious history of the hard hats vs. the suits. To call it a nasty conflict is like saying India and Pakistan have some issues.

But peering into the 14-month-long strike and its violence is like getting an intimate look at the American labor

movement, the archaeologists say.

It's all right there in the dirt.

"This is the big question for us: How were the strikers living day to day?" Saitta says. "What were the material conditions of life like? And that's something you don't really read a lot about in the history books.

"So we think that archaeology can make a unique and distinctive contribution to the story by telling us about everyday lives through ordinary domestic garbage."

By reconstructing the daily grind in Ludlow - as well as in the nearby coal camps later occupied by strike breakers and mine guards - the archaeologists hope to piece together whether things got better for the miners and their families during and after the strike.

The dig is expected to be a 10-year project if funding from the Colorado Historical Society and other sources holds up.

Working in shallow one-meter squares, Walker, Saitta and the rest of the crew plan to scrape into much of the Ludlow tent colony, its latrines, dumps and cellars.

After a surface walk to pick up any glass shards or rusty tin cans lying about, the researchers get down and dirty. They begin by shoveling off a "root mat" of wild scrub grass and sifting it for important debris. Next, using trowels, the crew delves several inches into the undisturbed soil looking for any evidence of man: ashes, nails, junk.

"Pretty much everything that's there dates that 14-month period," Walker says. "Whereas normally (in archaeology) you've got hundreds of years of occupation and mixing at a site, we have this perfect little slice."

When their thin trenches have turned up human-made "stains" in the ground - perhaps from fires or decayed wood - they've kept digging to see where the trail would lead. The goal is to pick out some clear tent sites.

"We had to be really careful and patient and clever in the way we followed out these dark stains," Saitta says. "It took us most of this summer to identify with a fairly high degree of certainty one good tent location."

But the archaeologists knew they had found one when they detected two parallel ditches, perhaps used to drain water away from the tent. Between those ditches, the area was virtually clean of artifacts. And there were charcoal stains nearby. That tent was somewhere in the middle of the colony.

Yet talk about scratching the surface: That's one tent down and 199 to go. In all, the team has now excavated 150 of those square meters - including a 6-foot-deep garbage pit. The size of the entire camp was 32,000 square meters.

So far, it's been fruitful. The workers have pulled 20 large boxes of artifacts out of the ground. The list of finds includes a frying pan, ceramics, a miner's lamp, a "Mutt" (from the "Mutt and Jeff" comic strip) tie clip, a toy gun, a shattered sugar bowl and a variety of bottles and cans.

For some scientific purists, a site like Ludlow "is not old enough" to be taken seriously, Saitta says. Some turn their noses up at this kind of "tin can archaeology."

"It's not Pompeii," Walker acknowledges.

"That's the difference," Saitta adds, "between this and the prehistoric stuff I've spent most of my career doing - the Anasazi stuff. You don't find that many Mutt tie clasps" in ancient Indian ruins.

"But when you dig up tie clasps or doll parts, you see they were people and you can relate a little more to them and

their struggles."

And some of the artifacts brought back to Walker and Saitta's lab at DU stray far from garden-variety trash. Some things are tinged with violence.

On one of the tables now strewn with crusty items, there's a revolver chamber and a small collection of slugs.

Bullets rained down on Ludlow and the strikers from the soldiers' guns that morning of April 20, 1914.

Some of the miners fired back as their wives and children ducked into foxholes dug beneath the tents. No ground was taken or lost.

But as dusk fell, the National Guard approached the camp with torches and set fire to the tents, according to "A People's History of the United States." An investigation later found that kerosene had been poured onto the tents. Some families ran into the hills while a small group of women and children remained hidden in one of the cellars.

"The following day, a telephone lineman going through the ruins of the Ludlow tent colony lifted an iron cot covering a pit in one of the tents and found the charred, twisted bodies of 11 children and two women," Howard Zinn writes in his book. "This became known as the **Ludlow Massacre**."

At least seven others in the camp were shot and killed. Word of the deaths spread fast.

Nearby, 300 armed strikers marched in from other tent colonies and sliced telephone and telegraph lines. Railroad workers refused to take more soldiers from Trinidad to Ludlow, Zinn writes. And in Colorado Springs, about 300 other miners picked up guns and headed for Ludlow.

Mine shafts were blown up and mine guards were killed. What became known as "the war in Colorado" escalated.

In Denver, about 5,000 people rallied in the rain on the lawn in front of the state Capitol, according to historical accounts. Many demanded that the National Guard officers be brought up on murder charges. Many accused the governor of having a hand in the deaths. No soldiers involved in the raid ever were punished.

Back East, New York City pickets marched in front of the Rockefeller office on Broadway. From Washington, D.C., President Woodrow Wilson sent federal troops to restore order in the Colorado hills. The strike - and the violence - finally ended.

What did the strikers gain? Little.

According to the United Mine Workers, scores of miners and their leaders were arrested and ultimately blackballed from the coal industry.

Just above the old cellar where the telephone lineman found those 13 burned bodies, a monument stands today.

Every summer, a memorial service is held on that spot by the United Mine Workers. Last June, Saitta and the crew stopped digging and joined the somber one-day ceremony.

And this time, some present-day strikers dropped by. Ironically, they were steelworkers from the Pueblo Colorado Fuel & Iron plant, now called Rocky Mountain Steel Mills.

"That was a moving experience for all of us," Saitta says. "It brought you in touch with working people's struggles."

To the UMW, Ludlow is truly sacred ground. What happened there 84 years ago is compared by the union with the greatest human atrocities of all time.

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"It's like the Holocaust," says Bob Butero, head of the UMW's Denver office, which represents miners in the western United States and western Canada. "It's something we don't ever want to forget either. It's something that happened that brings us back to a time when it wasn't pleasurable to be a working-class person in the United States.

"These (archaeologists), they want to expose that."

Butero, who also compares Ludlow to the National Guard shootings of students at Kent State in Ohio, says the union is "looking at" using the artifacts to start a museum at the site.

For now, though, the relics remain in sealed plastic bags. Each bag contains the debris taken from an individual one-meter square. The clear plastic pouches are marked to correspond with a gridded map of the dig.

Some of the items, like the ceramic or glass pieces, will be washed. Many others, like the fragile cans, will be brushed to remove as much dried mud as possible. Everything is stored in tissue paper.

Much of the analysis now by Walker and Saitta centers on learning what was in those cans and bottles. Size and shape tells them a lot.

"The way the cans have been opened (is interesting)," Walker says. "A lot of these have been opened with a church key, so it's evaporated milk. Or there are sardine cans. All that will give us their diet.

"We also look at the inscriptions on the bottles," Walker adds, picking up a square glass container. "Here's a bottle from Trinidad. It says that right here. It tells us where they were doing their shopping. It gives us information on things they were drinking, what they were using to treat their wounds."

Walker and Saitta did leave one artifact back in Trinidad because it was just too delicate to bring north.

It's just a bundle of wire now. But as soon as the archaeologists plucked it from a buried trash pit, they instantly knew what it was - a wreath once hung at Ludlow to remember the dead.

LOAD-DATE: August 28, 1998

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Striking miners pick through debris at the Forbes tent colony near Ludlow after an attack by the National Guard. The Forbes colony was one of a dozen or so striker camps near Trinidad. **PHOTOS:** The Denver Post/Craig F. Walker This bullet-punctured coffeepot and, in photo at top left, a doll's arm and a bullet are among items found recently at the site of the massacre. Artifacts found at Ludlow include silverware, left, a scrip coin once worth 25 cents and a stickpin Mutt of the Mutt & Jeff comic strip. The Denver Post Digging for clues Ludlow, Colorado (map)

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