

# THE COLORADO COAL FIELD WAR ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT

## The Ludlow Collective

*The Ludlow Collective for 2001 included Karin Burd (University of Colorado), Bonnie Clark (Berkeley), Phil Duke (Fort Lewis College), Amie Gray (University of Denver), Michael Jacobson (Binghamton University), Randall McGuire (Binghamton University), Paul Reckner (Binghamton University), Dean Saitta (University of Denver), Mark Walker (Binghamton University), and Margaret Wood (Syracuse University).*

On the morning of April 20, 1914, Colorado National Guard troops opened fire on a tent colony of 1,200 striking coal miners at Ludlow, Colorado. The miners returned fire. The shooting continued until nightfall, when the National Guard swept through the camp looting and setting it aflame. When the smoke cleared, four of the attackers and 20 of the camp's inhabitants were dead, including two women and 11 children. The Ludlow Massacre was the most violent and best-known episode of the 1913–1914 Colorado Coal Field Strike. The Colorado Coal Field War Archaeology Project is a long-term project sponsored by Binghamton University, The University of Denver, and Fort Lewis College to research the Ludlow camp and the 1913–1914 strike. Our ultimate goal is to integrate archaeological data with archival information to better understand the day-to-day lives of the Colorado miners and their families. These people chose to strike because of the deprivation of their everyday lived experience, and the strike was ultimately broken not by the violence of the National Guard, but by the increased deprivation of the strike.

The Ludlow Massacre was a seminal event in U.S. labor history. The killing of women and children by National Guard troops shocked the nation and helped turn management policies away from direct confrontation with strikers to strategies of co-optation of workers demands. It spurred John D. Rockefeller Jr. to start the country's first important company union and the first large-scale corporate public relations campaign. The strike involved many significant personages in labor history, including Mary "Mother" Jones, Upton Sinclair, and John Reed, and it created others, such as Louis Tikas. Today, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) maintains the Ludlow site as a shrine to the struggle of labor in this country.

The major historical works on the strike have mined the rich archival record of documents and photos on the events of 1913–1914. These studies have focused on the events, strike leaders, and organizational work of the UMWA in the strike. They all agree that the families who went out on strike did so because the conditions of their day-to-day lives had become intolerable. Yet none of these studies provide us with more than an anecdotal understanding of what these conditions were before, during, and after the strike.

Archaeological research provides one means to gain a richer and more systematic understanding of the everyday lived experience of the Colorado miners and their families. The strikers unknowingly left a record of this experience in the ground. Linking this information with the archival sources gives us a useful way to reconstruct that experience. By applying these methods to company towns occupied before the strike, the strikers' tent camps, and the company towns re-opened after the strike, we can talk about the key differences in that experience that led to the strike and to its failure.

### Ludlow and the Colorado Coal Field Strike of 1913–1914

In 1913, Colorado was the eighth-largest coal-producing state in the United States. Most of this produc-

tion centered on the bituminous coal field around Trinidad, Colorado. The largest company mining coal in this region was the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I). The company employed approximately 14,000 workers, 70% of whom were foreign born. The conditions of the mines and of miners' lives were appalling; in 1912, the accident rate for Colorado mines was double the national average. Miners lived in rude, isolated mountain towns owned by the company, which controlled the workers through the company store and by using mine guards as their private police force.

Unhappiness with the conditions came to a head in 1913, and the UMWA launched a massive campaign to unionize the coal miners. At the same time, the company brought in the Baldwin Felts Detective Agency to violently suppress the organizing efforts. The strike began on September 23, 1913, with 90–95% of the miners leaving the shafts and the company forcing all of the strikers from the company towns. The strikers streamed into UMWA tent camps, of which Ludlow was the largest (Figure 1).

On two occasions, one at Ludlow and the other at Forbes, company guards fired into the camps, and on October 28, 1913, the governor of Colorado called out the National Guard. The Guard employed company police and increasingly became more antagonistic to the strikers. On April 20, 1914, the Guard attacked the Ludlow camp. Enraged by the attack, the strikers took up arms, isolated the Guard at Ludlow and Walsenberg, attacked mines and company towns, and seized control of most of the mining district. Finally, after 10 days of war, President Wilson sent federal troops into the region to restore order. The strike continued until December 1914, when UMWA called it off because the strike fund was exhausted.

### Archaeological Research at Ludlow

We have conducted excavations at the site of Ludlow every summer since 1997 and in 1998 to 1999 at the CF&I town of Berwind. The Colorado Historical Society–State Historical Fund has supported our research through the University of Denver and provided funds in 1998 for the construction of a permanent interpretive display at the Ludlow site.

Most of our excavations have taken place at the Ludlow site. We established a grid over the entire area of the camp (approximately 72,000 m<sup>2</sup>) and did surface counts of artifacts at 10-m intervals over this entire area to map surface artifact distributions. These distributions match the plan of the camp as shown in photographs. From photos of burned and demolished tents, we know that the tents were constructed over 2-in x 6-in joists laid directly on the ground to support a wooden platform and frame. Once covered with canvas, the strikers piled a ridge of dirt around the base of the tent, often to a height of 2–3 feet. Our excavations in 1998 uncovered one of these platforms, which was defined by stains in



Figure 1. The Ludlow UMWA camp before the massacre (Photo courtesy of Colorado Historical Society).

the earth, remains of the shallow excavation, and rows of nails that followed the joists (Figure 2). We have also excavated a trash-filled latrine and two of the cellars that the miners and their families dug beneath their tents.

Berwind was a CF&I town located in a canyon near Ludlow that was occupied before and after the strike. CF&I built the town in 1892 and abandoned it in 1931. The remains of houses and privies are clearly visible in Berwind. In 1998 and 1999, we made a detailed map of the community and conducted excavations in two discrete residential neighborhoods. One of these neighborhoods was occupied before the strike and the other after the strike.

### Public Programs

An important aspect of the project is public education. The events of Ludlow have considerable popular appeal for several reasons. They are of a recent past that people can relate to because it is in the time of their parents and grandparents. The violence of the events—the killing of women and children—holds people's attention and leads them to ask, "How could this have happened in America?" By excavating at Ludlow, we make these events news again, raise popular awareness of them, and expand people's knowledge and sense of archaeology.

The story of Ludlow brings the reality of class and class conflict in American history into sharp relief. This is in many ways a hidden history or at least a widely ignored conflict. Our project is a form of memory and remembrance that unearths that history, although this is a memory that we do not need to reveal for unionized workers. For them, Ludlow is a shrine and a powerful symbolic place that raises class-consciousness. From 1997 to 2001, for example, the steelworkers at the former CF&I plant in Pueblo, Colorado were on strike, and they embraced Ludlow as a symbol of their struggle. Our project actively seeks to educate the uninformed about what happened at Ludlow and to lend our expertise to assist unionized labor in maintaining this memory and consciousness.

The UMWA has maintained Ludlow as a shrine and a sacred place but has done little to interpret the site to a wider audience. We have undertaken a variety of efforts to inform and educate the general public about what happened at Ludlow. Key to these efforts has been a three-sided interpretive kiosk that we erected in the summer of 1999. This kiosk has the story of Ludlow on one side, the story of our excavations on a second, and the story of Ludlow's role in ongoing union struggles on the third. In the summers of 1999 and 2000, we conducted Summer Teachers Institutes sponsored by the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities. Public school teachers from around Colorado and other states in the west attended these institutes to learn about U.S. labor history, locate useful teaching materials, and frame the issues for students. To further aid teachers, we have also developed lesson plans for grades 4–12 and a traveling "history trunk" that tours Denver area schools.

We have worked in cooperation with the UMWA, which owns the site of Ludlow. Every June, the organization holds a memorial service at Ludlow. Our traveling exhibit on the massacre and tours of our excavations have become regular features of this service. The exhibit has traveled to various union halls in Colorado and other states. For us, one of the most exciting parts of the project has been our annual address to the memorial service. It is quite a change from the stuffy meeting rooms of our academic presentations. It is also an unusual audience as hundreds of coal miners, steelworkers, and other union members listen with rapt attention and respond with applause to an archaeology talk. For more information and a bibliography on the Colorado Coal Field War and our project, you can visit our website at <http://www.du.edu/~markwalk/ludlow98.html>. ☐

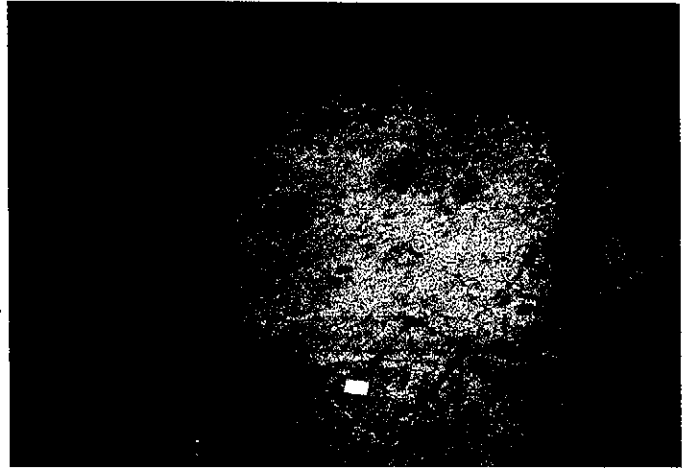


Figure 2: Excavated tent platform at the Ludlow Massacre Site.