



*In December 1921 the coal camp women of southeastern Kansas—the wives, mothers, sisters, and friends of striking mine workers—organized a series of marches intended to intimidate mine bosses and “scabs.” The demonstrations swept area coalfields for three days and effectively crippled mine production for more than a month. They also made headlines across the country, including in the New York Times, which featured on December 25, 1921, the image above in a photo essay of the “Amazon Army” marching through Kansas.*

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# “LIKE A BRILLIANT THREAD”: Gender and Vigilante Democracy in the Kansas Coalfield, 1921–1922

*by Benjamin W. Goossen*

**O**n a winter day in late 1921, LaVaun Smith sat in her rural schoolhouse across the road from Mine No. 19 of the Kansas Sheridan Coal Company. She was in the second grade. The class recited its lessons as usual until the students heard a tremendous clamor of yells and bangs coming from the road outside. Dismissed by their teacher, LaVaun and the other students ran out the door, where they saw fifty enraged women storming down to the mine in “house dresses and aprons beating on dish pans, wash pans, [and] metal buckets” with sticks and household utensils. Students recognized their mothers among the women and watched as they dragged one operator from the mine tippie and beat him to the ground. LaVaun called it the “Mothers’ March.”<sup>1</sup>

As seen through the eyes of a young girl who grew up in the relatively impoverished coal camp culture of Crawford County in southeast Kansas, the march presented a radical departure from traditional gender roles. In the coal camps, men were the breadwinners of the family, while women packed lunch buckets, drew baths for their husbands, and looked after children. The mines themselves were beyond the geographic bounds of womanhood; wives usually entered the pit areas only to bring food to their husbands. Watching her mother stride confidently into traditionally male realms would have made a profound impression on LaVaun’s social and political consciousness.

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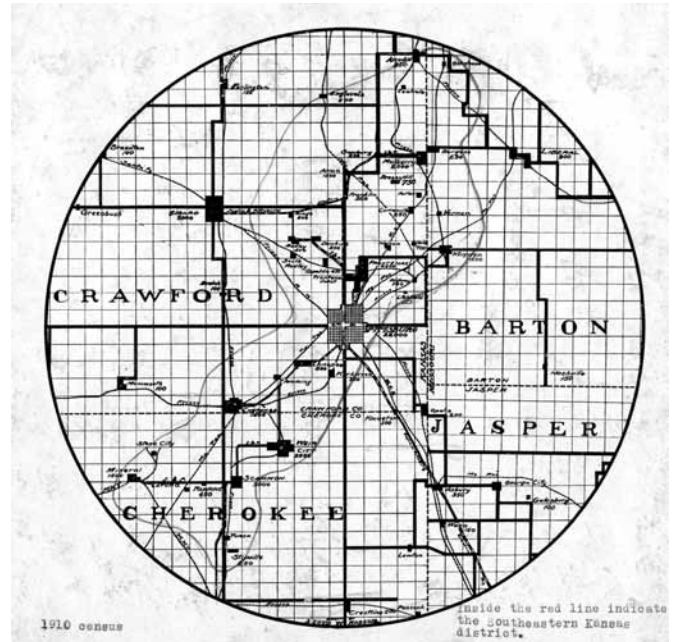
1. “Coal Mining Days,” *Pittsburg Morning Sun*, May 14, 2006.

The demonstration of fifty women at Mine No. 19 was just one manifestation of a much larger uprising in December 1921 that swept the coalfields of southeastern Kansas for three days and effectively crippled mine production for more than a month. Thousands of women—wives, mothers, sisters, and friends of male mine workers—marched to intimidate mine bosses and “scabs” who were keeping the coalfields open despite a three-month-old miners’ strike.

The historian Ann Schofield has suggested that participants in the protest used their traditional domestic roles as a mode of empowerment. Schofield asserted that while the women adhered to an ideology of American patriotism, they marched mainly in response to domestic privations. Other historians, who have explored the political dimensions of the women’s actions, have presented them as consistent with the activities of their striking husbands, sons, and brothers.<sup>2</sup> Using new sources and focusing on the political context and aftermath of the march, this article argues, first, that the women marchers, long steeped in the polarizing rhetoric of socialist and union politics, were already strongly politicized by December 1921; and, secondly, their actions followed a political model of democratic participation that, rather than conforming to the male-dominated culture of the local Kansas mining district, expressed their own vision of American citizenship.

The “Mothers’ March,” which impressed the image of strong, politically-driven women on LaVaun Smith, signified a larger reimagining by women in Kansas mining communities of their place within American political life. For the women, many of whom were Eastern and Southern European immigrants, Americanism offered a path to social inclusion. By forcefully claiming the American ideals of liberty, freedom, and democracy, they used the march to shed their outsider status. While many of the women had also adopted more traditional domestic methods of engaging American culture, such as learning to speak English and cooking American foods, the convergence of responsible motherhood and American patriotism provided a political means of becoming American.

2. Ann Schofield, “The Women’s March: Miners, Family, and Community in Pittsburg, Kansas, 1921–1922,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 7 (Summer 1984): 159–68; Schofield, “An ‘Army of Amazons’: The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921–1922,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Winter 1985): 686–701; James Gray Pope, “Labor’s Constitution of Freedom,” *Yale Law Journal* 106 (January 1997): 1007–10; Ronald Skaggs, “The Howat Strike,” *Papers in History* 14 (1983): 8; R. Alton Lee, *Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 161–63.



This 1910 map shows the Crawford and Cherokee County coalfields. Between December 12 and 14, 1921, several thousand women shut down over sixty mines throughout the district. Map courtesy of Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas.

The march captured national attention as major newspapers across the country chronicled the attack of an “Amazon Army” in the latest stage of the “Kansas Mine War.” In fact, the women’s demonstration was not a bizarre anomaly, but rather the culmination of a protracted, periodically violent, and bitterly tense coal strike that had been the focus of national labor news since September 1921. The mobilization of the coal camp women and the resulting militarization of the area, as Kansas Governor Henry J. Allen dispatched four companies of the Kansas National Guard to control the marchers, sparked a national debate about the role of women in American society.

The 1921 Kansas coal strike had brought mining in Crawford and Cherokee counties to a standstill when eight thousand Kansas miners, members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) 14th District, laid down their tools to protest the jailing of their district president, Alexander Howat.<sup>3</sup> A tempestuous and

3. For history of coal mining in Crawford and Cherokee counties and the 1921 strike, see Fred N. Howell, “Some Phases of the Industrial History of Pittsburg,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (Autumn 1932): 273–94; Joe Skubitz, “A History of the Development of Deep Mine Production in Crawford County and the Factors that Have Influenced It” (master’s thesis, Kansas State Teachers College, 1934); Skaggs, “The Howat Strike,” 1–12; Pope, “Labor’s Constitution of Freedom,” 941–1028; Lee, *Farmers vs. Wage Earners*, 138–75; “The Kansas Industrial

strong-willed union leader and prominent socialist, Howat was arrested for authorizing an illegal coal strike and found guilty by courts in both Crawford and Cherokee counties of violating a statewide strike injunction mandated by the recently established Kansas Court of Industrial Relations. A pet project of Governor Allen, the "Industrial Court," as it was known, had been authorized during a special legislative session in January 1920 after Howat's striking 14th District had halted coal production in the wintery months of late 1919. Under the Industrial Court Act, three judges, appointed by the governor, arbitrated labor disputes, issued binding work rules, punished unruly union leaders, and were even authorized to take full control of troubled industries. Unions could still use collective bargaining, but strikes were forbidden. Allen used his new court as a stick to force striking coal workers back into the mines and alleviate the statewide fuel shortage. At its beginning, many Kansans and outside observers hailed the court as a progressive and impartial arbiter, but Howat and the 14th UMWA District bitterly opposed it.<sup>4</sup>

Miners dubbed the new law the "Kansas Slave Act" and believed that it was a conspiracy between coal operators, Governor Allen, and national labor leaders to destroy their freedom and bind them to their work with the chains of law. Just two generations after the Civil War, the emancipation of African American slaves became a powerful metaphor for the Kansas miners. They saw the Industrial Court Act as a new Fugitive Slave Act and linked their own suffering under the "industrial slavery" of "Allenism" to the forced labor

on Southern plantations sixty years earlier.<sup>5</sup> The struggle for freedom of black slaves became their model for liberation. Miners hailed Alexander Howat as a new Abraham Lincoln or John Brown. The conjuring of Brown's image in particular, with all its implications of fiery temperament, divine justice, and uncompromising militancy, held relevance for Kansans. Just as Brown's radical methods had brought Kansas abolitionism to the forefront of national slavery debates in the 1850s, Howat's righteous leadership would spark a movement to liberate the laboring classes. In 1921 Howat himself proclaimed from behind the bars of the Cherokee County jail that the miners' fight against the industrial court would "stand as a beacon light, streaming its golden rays down the pathway of justice, shining the light in the road that leads to emancipation of the toiling masses of the nation." The illegality of opposing the court did not trouble the miners. They believed that the court was unconstitutional and that defying its rulings represented the purest form of American democratic expression.<sup>6</sup>

Kansas miners struck to defy the court, but also to test its power. In the early 1920s, the debate over Kansas's Industrial Court Act was at the heart of national labor policy discussions, and advocates of compulsory arbitration promoted the court as a new standard to be modeled throughout the United States. Governor Allen, the court's leading proponent and a possible 1924 presidential candidate, embarked on a national speaking tour, and his widely publicized debate with American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers in New York City's Carnegie Hall made headlines as "the most

Snag," *Literary Digest*, December 31, 1921; "Alexander McWhirter Howat," *Illustriana Kansas* (Hebron, Nebr.: Illustriana Incorporated, 1933), 559; James Cannon, "The Story of Alex Howat," *Liberator* 4 (April 1921): 25-26; Thomas Monniger, "The Fight of Alexander Howat for the Right to Strike" (master's thesis, Kansas State Teachers College, 1946).

4. Howat ordered the 1919 strike despite a national injunction dating to the WWI-era War Industry Policies Board. Governor Allen called the strike an assault on American democracy and wrote a book attacking labor for placing their own interests over the good of the "party of the third part," the public. Allen, *Party of the Third Part: The Story of the Kansas Industrial Court* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1921), 48-61, 208-20; "They Dug Trenches in France and Coal in Kansas," *Literary Digest* 63 (1919): 44; Domenico Gagliardo, *The Kansas Industrial Court* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1941); Gagliardo, "The Gompers-Allen Debate on the Kansas Industrial Court," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 3 (November 1934): 385-95; James Riordan, "Industrial Conflict and the Public Good: The Creation, Operation, and Decline of the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations, 1920-1925" (master's thesis, Pittsburg State University, 2000). Governor Allen's book, *Party of the Third Part*, apparently prompted Howat to write his own book condemning the court, but the manuscript may never have been published, as there are no known copies.

5. James Gray Pope has linked the Kansas strikers' rhetoric of industrial slavery to what he terms a "constitutional insurgency" against the industrial court, on the grounds that it violated the involuntary servitude clause of the Thirteenth Amendment. Using a Foucauldian framework, Pope argues that in a process of "jurisgenesis," the District 14 miners developed their own understanding of democracy and constitutionality external to contemporary legal norms. See Pope, "Labor's Constitution of Freedom," 941-1031; James Gray Pope, "The Thirteenth Amendment Versus the Commerce Clause: Labor and the Shaping of American Constitutional Law, 1921-1957," *Columbia Law Review* 102 (January 2002): 1-122; for the broader context of Thirteenth Amendment debates, see Alexander Tsesis, *The Promises of Liberty: The History and Contemporary Relevance of the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); for a discussion on the social marginalization of "slave" groups, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

6. Alexander Howat, "President Howat Answers Lewis," *Workers Chronicle*, November 11, 1921; the *Workers Chronicle*, the Howat administration's Pittsburg-based paper, printed weekly condemnations of the industrial court. For example, an April 22, 1921, article argued that to take away a miner's right to strike "is to destroy his faith in American ideals," and "no nation can be great that destroys ideals."



"He still thinks like a coal digger," remarked one contemporary critic of District 14 President Alexander Howat. The uncompromising and local-oriented tactics of the "czar of the Kansas coalfields" routinely put Kansas miners at odds with the International Board of the United Mine Workers of America. Eight thousand District 14 miners laid down their tools to protest Howat's jailing in 1921, after he was found guilty by courts in Crawford and Cherokee counties of violating a statewide strike injunction mandated by the recently established Kansas Court of Industrial Relations.

momentous clash since the historic meeting between Lincoln and Douglas."<sup>7</sup>

The controversy literally ripped apart the United Mine Workers of America. Appalled by the development of unauthorized strikes in Kansas, a majority of UMWA districts, led by rising labor leader John L. Lewis, voted to expel Howat and his supporters from the organization.

7. Gagliardo, "The Gompers-Allen Debate." President Warren G. Harding recommended the establishment of a federal court of industrial relations in 1921, and proponents of the Kansas Industrial Act hoped that it would be the prototype for legislation in all fifty states. See John Hugh Bowers, *The Kansas Court of Industrial Relations:*

Lewis and the UMWA International Board suspended the entire Kansas district and established a "provisional government" under the direction of Lewis supporter Van A. Bittner. Four districts, however, including the powerful Illinois voting bloc, headed by Lewis's shrewd political rival Frank Farrington, sympathized with the Kansas strikers. The Illinois mining district voted to collect a monthly dollar-per-miner fee to purchase and ship food supplies to the Kansas miners and their families.<sup>8</sup>

By December 1921, the UMWA suspension had gravely weakened the strike. One frustrated miner vented: "The International is against us, and that is the hardest thing we have to contend with."<sup>9</sup> Miners felt betrayed by the union that was supposed to be defending their interests. Nearly one third of the strikers had returned to work, and in order to boost production and break the strike, the Kansas coal industry began importing colliers from surrounding districts to work the idle mines.

With the onset of winter and the arrival of an early December blizzard, the women of the coal camps reached their limit. Maintaining the strike placed extreme stress on families, which were no longer able to draw strike benefits from the national union treasury. Most families had been without a steady income since early autumn, and parents could scarcely afford food, let alone adequate clothing for their children. As Governor Allen had written in his 1921 book, *Party of the Third Part*, "the wives of workmen were taking a keener interest in the [Industrial Court] law than the men themselves."<sup>10</sup> Allen thought the women's interest in family and domestic issues would lead them to support the court as a way of keeping their husbands employed, but after months of deprivation, the women of the coal camps did not see

*The Philosophy and History of the Court* (Chicago, Ill.: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1922); Henry J. Allen, "Liberty and Law in Kansas," *Review of Reviews* 61 (June 1920): 597-602.

8. Bittner and the "provisional government" encountered opposition from the moment of their arrival in the district. The *Appeal to Reason* commented that Bittner was the "worst possible choice" because he had represented the UMWA during a similar coal strike in Alabama, which had resolved badly for striking miners. See John Gunn, "Kansas Coal Miners, With Leader in Jail, Are Striking Against the Industrial Court," *Appeal to Reason*, December 10, 1921; "Why Van Bittner Resigned Presidency of District No. 5," *Workers Chronicle*, December 16, 1921; see also Pope, "Labor's Constitution of Freedom"; also Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (n.p.: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 88; Robert Zieger, *John L. Lewis: Labor Leader* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 11-38.

9. Cannon, "The Story of Alex Howat," 28.

10. Allen, *Party of the Third Part*, 5.

the industrial court as a savior in their plight, but rather its cause.

On December 11 several prominent women from the District 14 mining towns called a general assembly of miners' wives at the local union hall in Franklin. With the apparent exception of one of the speakers, a Dr. P. L. "Doc" Howe, the meeting was closed to men.<sup>11</sup> Several hundred women crowded into the packed hall, where they listened to speeches about the evils of the industrial court and the International Board of the UMWA, and drafted a resolution to "stand shoulder to shoulder with our husbands in this struggle." The women adopted the rhetoric of slavery and emancipation that Howat supporters had been using since the establishment of the Kansas Industrial Court. They identified the "Allen Industrial Slavery Law," which they believed was intended "to enslave our children," as the primary reason for their action.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the striking men, however, the women did not consider mine workers to be the primary victims of the legislation. Rather, their language turned to the protection of their families and the freedom of their children. They believed that while Alexander Howat and the District 14 men correctly opposed the industrial court, the pressing demands of family life in a time of scarcity also required prompt and decisive action by the coal camp women.

At the Franklin meeting, the women declared their right to engage in the politics of the strike. They viewed the meeting as a democratic struggle on the part of all the camp women to fight on behalf of their families. Their declaration echoed a resolution passed by Howat's supporters three months earlier on the eve of the strike, when the colliers pledged that "not one member of the Mine Workers of District 14 will dig another pound of coal until the doors of the Bastille . . . shall be opened."<sup>13</sup> But in contrast to the passive action of the strike, which the miners jokingly referred to as their "vacation," the women chose fierce and immediate confrontation. After departing from Franklin, they spread word throughout the camps of a coming march to shut down all operating mines.

11. One marcher later asserted that Dr. Howe was not present inside the union hall, but spoke to the women outside, after the meeting had adjourned. "Women Assert Fear Cause of Marching," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 30, 1921.

12. "Women March On J-W No. 17," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 12, 1921.

13. "Not to Dig Coal," *Workers Chronicle*, October 2, 1921.



*A pet project of Governor Henry Allen, the Kansas Industrial Court was authorized during a special legislative session in January 1920 in response to strikes in District 14. Under the Industrial Court Act, three judges, appointed by the governor, arbitrated labor disputes, issued binding work rules, punished unruly union leaders, and were even authorized to take full control of troubled industries. Allen used his new court as a stick to force striking coal workers back into the mines and hoped it would make Kansas a "Mecca" of compulsory arbitration. Pictured is what the Topeka Daily Capital, February 3, 1920, called the court's "first session." Conferring with the governor, far right, are newly appointed judges, from left to right, Clyde M. Reed of Parsons, Senator George H. Wark of Caney, and W. L. Huggins of Emporia.*

Before dawn the next morning, the women arose and wrapped themselves in warm woolen scarves, coats, and shawls. They pulled neighbors and friends from their beds, compelling them to dress and join the march. Many brought their children. An air of anticipation spread through downtown Franklin as women, arriving by car and on foot, assembled for the demonstration. Their target was the nearby Jackson-Walker Mine No. 17. Four or five women led the marchers, who sang hymns of patriotism and clutched American flags, down the road to intercept working miners reporting for duty. Several hundred men followed at a distance.<sup>14</sup>

After initial success at the Jackson-Walker mine, the main column divided into smaller groups that fanned out to coal pits throughout Crawford and Cherokee counties. For three days the women stormed area mines, obstructed traffic, and assaulted workers. When met with resistance, they threw red pepper at "scab" workers and overturned their lunch buckets, showering the miners with coffee and what had been intended as their midday meals. The crusading bands were gripped with a vigilante fervor that inspired participants and terrorized those they opposed. As one marcher recorded in her diary, the incensed women "rolled down to the

14. "Women March On J-W No. 17," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 12, 1921.



*Three months into the strike, and with the onset of winter and the arrival of an early December blizzard, the women of the coal camps had reached their limit. Most families had been without a steady income since early autumn, and parents could scarcely afford food or adequate clothing for their children. Before dawn on December 12, 1921, the women of the coal camp arose and wrapped themselves in warm woolen scarves, coats, and shawls. They pulled neighbors and friends from their beds, compelling them to dress and join the march. Many, such as those pictured here in the New York Times on December 25, 1921, brought their children.*

pits like balls and the men ran like deers. . . . There was absolutely no fear in these women's hearts."<sup>15</sup>

For immigrant women who marched, the protest represented an embrace of American political identity. Their families had traveled to the coalfields in answer to fliers and advertisements from coal company agents, who billed Kansas as a land of opportunity where immigrants could find plentiful work and build better lives.<sup>16</sup> These women had been sorely disappointed in the reality of coal camp life, and for them the march

15. Mary Skubitz, journal of the march, December 12 and 15, 1921, Leonard H. Axe Library Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas (hereafter cited as "Skubitz journal").

16. William Powell, "Former Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Summer 1972): 187-99; William Powell, "European Settlement in the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Summer 1975): 150-55; D. Lane Hartsock, "The Impact of the Railroads on Coal Mining in Osage County, 1869-1910," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Winter 1971): 429-40; William Powell, "The Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas: A Study in Sequent Occupance," *Midwest Quarterly* 22 (1981): 113-25; on daily

was not so much a demand for upward mobility as a leveling of the playing field between the "free" American housewife and the seemingly powerless miner's wife. The marchers claimed by force what they felt they had been denied by the industrial court, and, more broadly, by American society.<sup>17</sup>

Not all women in the march were immigrants. Native-born American women, along with their immigrant neighbors, marched to claim a place in American political life. Ultimately, the march represented a

camp life see also, Daniel Fitzgerald, "We Are All In This Together: Immigrants in the Oil and Mining Towns of Southern Kansas, 1890-1920," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 10 (Spring 1987): 17-28; Grace Dobler, "Oil Field Camp Wives and Mothers," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 10 (Spring 1987): 29-42; Schofield, "An 'Army of Amazons'"; Schofield, "The Women's March."

17. Kansas miners exhibited a general disillusionment with the American legal system, believing that if there was going to be any change in mine wages and working conditions, it would be brought about by the miners themselves, not by the government or the courts. See Cannon, "The Story of Alex Howat," 25.





*For immigrant women who marched, the protest represented an embrace of American political identity. Their families had traveled to the coalfields in answer to advertisements from coal company agents, who billed Kansas as a land of opportunity. Native-born American women, too, marched to claim a place in American political life and to effect meaningful change. The women exercised their vision of popular sovereignty at the mines, where they forced pit bosses to “surrender” and “kiss the flag,” as pictured in the New York Times, December 25, 1921. The women demanded fealty to a vision of patriotism in which colliers and their families, not coal companies, were the most important subjects of democracy.*

move not from “foreign” to “native,” but rather from “enslaved” to “free.” For the women who marched, the ability to effect meaningful change most immediately defined Americanness, while legal, citizenship-based understandings of Americanism were only secondary. The women exercised their vision of popular sovereignty at the mines, where they forced pit bosses to “surrender” and “kiss the flag,” swearing fealty to a vision of patriotism in which colliers and their families, not coal companies, were the most important subjects of democracy. One reporter commented that it was wholly mysterious why one mine operator, a Mr. Bob Murray, was forced to press his lips to the stars and stripes, as he was a “thoroughly patriotic American.” In fact, the women were asserting a new interpretation of patriotism, in which striking against the Industrial Court Act represented the utmost democratic ideal, while supporting the coal industry

was un-American. In one instance, the women stretched a large American flag across the road to a mine and “dared any man to drive over it.”<sup>18</sup> By holding the flag between themselves and the physical manifestation of industrial slavery—a mine operated with “scab” labor—the women physically demarcated the boundaries of their version of Americanism.

The women’s political involvement did not develop suddenly as a result of the strike; they were already both politically conscious and socially active. Some interpreters have suggested that for immigrant women, the 1921 march may have been modeled on European bread riots. More likely, marchers drew on American traditions. While miners and their families did bring

18. “Marchers Use More Violence,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 13, 1921.



stories, collective memories, and political histories across the Atlantic, by 1921 they had largely adopted American democratic models and ideals. The multicultural nature of the camps meant that Italians would have had very different political histories than their Slovene neighbors, and for this reason, Kansas mining communities drew on their common experiences in the United States—and most importantly the American example of emancipation from slavery—to guide and frame their actions. In Kansas, which boasted a long tradition of progressive politics including early abolitionism, temperance societies, and suffrage movements, women won equal voting rights in 1912, nearly a decade before passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.<sup>19</sup> At the local level, many of the marching women played important community roles as schoolteachers and club leaders. They took night classes to learn English, a requirement for naturalization, and helped organize boycotts of antiunion businesses.

**A**t the heart of camp political life was the strongly democratic mine workers' union. Members voted in the general election of board members, and as many as 140 local unions elected their own officials to oversee employment and safety issues. Unionized miners were on good terms with other organized industries in the area; when Alexander Howat was arrested for defying the Kansas Industrial Court, all of the labor organizations in Pittsburg—including women's unions such as the switchboard operators—showed solidarity with UMWA members during a one-day protest strike. But the UMWA had not always had a secure foothold in southeast Kansas. Miners and their families had suffered through years of bitter strikes and harsh opposition to win the right to organize, and they did not take the union for granted.<sup>20</sup>

UMWA politics in Kansas were closely tied to socialism. Alexander Howat and other district officials

19. The marching women would not have participated in all of these movements—it is unlikely that many would have belonged to temperance societies, for instance—but a culture of women's political participation informed their understandings of women's roles in Kansas society. For women's activism in Kansas, see Carol K. Coburn, "Women and Gender in Kansas History: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 26 (Summer 2003): 124–49; Nicole Etcheson, "'Labouring for the Freedom of This Territory': Free-State Kansas Women in the 1850s," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 21 (Summer 1998): 68–87; Marilyn S. Blackwell, "'Nobody Out Here Knows Anything About Wimin's Rights': Clarina Howard Nichols, Woman's Rights, and Abolitionism in Kansas Territory," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 33 (Autumn 2010): 146–63; Rebecca Edwards, "Marsh Murdock and the Wily Women of Wichita: Domesticity Disputed in the Gilded Age," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Spring 2002): 2–13.

20. Pope, "Labor's Constitution of Freedom," 982; Cannon, "The Story of Alex Howat," 25–26.

were party cardholders, and as one commentator wrote in 1911, "in this locality to be a union miner is to be a Socialist."<sup>21</sup> Socialist agitators frequented the coalfields, and many Kansans considered the area, known as the "Little Balkans" for its diverse immigrant population or the "Bad Lands" for its instability, to be a communist "Red Zone." Girard, Kansas, was home to the prominent socialist weekly *Appeal to Reason*, and in earlier years a socialist women's journal, the *Progressive Woman*, had printed speeches from America's leading female activists as well as controversial articles on women's suffrage, child labor, and the "white slave" trade. Miners' families also received the District 14 paper, the *Workers Chronicle*, which, alongside tracts of socialist propaganda, featured labor news from around the country.<sup>22</sup>

But by 1921, American socialism was on the way out, and District 14 women began adapting to the ultra-patriotism gripping post-World War Kansas. Attempting to buck the un-Americanism associated with their "Red" past, marching women drew on collective memories of wartime patriotism, which had politicized American women in the name of democracy just half a decade earlier. Across the country, women had responded to the European threat by joining the Red Cross, participating in volunteer rationing, planting gardens, and buying war bonds. The Kansas marchers saw their action as an extension of American women's role in protecting democracy through the war effort, defining their struggle as "the fight for our democracy that we was to receive after the World War."<sup>23</sup> Just as the Civil War had been the

21. May Wood-Simons, "Mining Coal and Maiming Men," *Coming Nation* (Girard, Kans.), November 11, 1911.

22. James Green, *Grass Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Kathleen Endres and Therese Lueck, *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Social and Political Issues* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 308–25; the *Progressive Woman*, originally the *Socialist Woman*, was published in Girard, Kansas, from 1908 until 1911. Labor papers also helped mining families conceptualize their fight as part of a broader struggle against industrial slavery throughout the nation. In 1921 Kansas colliers most closely followed events in West Virginia, where non-unionized miners battled a private army financed by the coal industry. Other mining communities' struggles served as models and inspiration for the Kansas women, but they also provided a sobering caution not to incite the violence that had put whole mining camps to the torch just a few months earlier in West Virginia. One marcher clarified in a letter to the *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, "we don't want any bloodshed here in Kansas like there was in the Ludlow strike and in Alabama and Mingo County, W. Va. What we want is our industrial freedom and liberty." "A Mob Member is Defiant, Miss Fannie Wimler of Franklin Tells Why Women Acted," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 15, 1921.

23. "Women March On J-W No. 17," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 12, 1921. The women's patriotism also reflected a longstanding effort by local officials and educators to Americanize the "foreign element" in the coalfields. The school superintendent of one

turning point for enslaved African Americans, the World War should have freed the laborers who served their country so faithfully. As one marcher proclaimed, "Our boys that didn't enter service stayed over here, worked day and night in the coal mines to supply coal for our battleships, etc., and they done without sufficient food to win democracy in Europe. And now we are going to fight for our rights here in Kansas."<sup>24</sup> Kansas had become the new battlefield for democracy in America.

Tuesday, December 13, 1921, was the date set for a District 14 union election in which the jailed Howat ran as the incumbent presidential candidate. The election gave miners an opportunity to prove that they still stood solidly behind their district leadership and against the industrial court. Only men, members of the union, were allowed to vote, however, and the women of the strike, unable to participate in an election that they saw as a rejection of UMWA President John Lewis's "tyrannical monarchism," decided to assert their own democratic voice on the day of the vote. While their men engaged in electoral democracy by marking ballots, the marching women simultaneously adopted a more radical model of democratic action.<sup>25</sup>

Among the leaders of the Kansas march, previous political experience and education appear to have played significant roles. Theorists have long noted the importance of leaders within social movements, as both local organizers and spokespersons to negotiate with outside interests. Sociologists Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg have identified "educational capital" as a key element in the emergence and success of grassroots leaders.<sup>26</sup> The case of Mary Skubitz, one of a number of



*Among the leaders of the Kansas march, previous political experience and education appear to have played significant roles. Mary Skubitz, a prominent organizer of the women's march, provides an instructive example. Skubitz, who would have been in her early thirties in 1921, emigrated from Slovenia in 1890 and was an ardent socialist with a history of activism in the coal camps. Skubitz's command of five languages, including German, Italian, and Slovene, allowed her to communicate with most of the camp women, and her fluent English gave her power to parley with pit bosses and obdurate strikebreakers. Photograph of Mary Skubitz from the 1940s courtesy of the Skubitz family.*

prominent organizers of the women's march, provides an instructive example. Skubitz, who had emigrated from Slovenia in 1890, was an ardent socialist and had a history of activism in the coal camps. At the December 11 Franklin meeting, she addressed the assembled women, rousing them to march, and, over the following days, headed groups of protesters as they stormed from mine to mine. Skubitz's command of five languages, including German, Italian, and Slovene, allowed her to communicate with most of the camp women, and her fluent English gave her power to parley with pit bosses and obdurate strikebreakers. Other leaders also exhibited the "educational capital" possessed by Skubitz.

Kansas mining town wrote a teachers' handbook intended to eradicate the "menace to the country" posed by unpatriotic immigrants. Loren Minckley, *Americanization Through Education* ([Girard, Kans.: Girard job shop], 1917).

24. "A Mob Member is Defiant," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 15, 1921.

25. John Gunn, "Jails and Threats are Used in Kansas Strike," *Appeal to Reason*, December 31, 1921. The *Workers Chronicle* distributed official election ballots to be completed and filled out by subscribing union members. The final result, 6,961 votes for Howat, was apparently the "largest vote ever cast for any candidate in the history of the district." Admittedly, Howat was unopposed on the ballot, and as John Lewis had suspended the district in November 1921, the election was not recognized by the UMWA. Members of Bittner's "provisional government" were appointed, not elected—further convincing Kansas mining families that Lewis's leadership was antidemocratic.

26. Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Leadership in Social Movements," *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow *et al.* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 175; also Joseph Gusfield, "Functional Areas of Leadership in Social Movements," *Sociological Quarterly* 7 (Spring 1966): 137–56; Henry Veltmeyer and James Petras, "The Social Dynamics of Brazil's

Rural Landless Workers' Movement: Ten Hypotheses on Successful Leadership," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 39 (February 2002): 79–96; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

On December 13, Dr. P. L. Howe, another speaker at the meeting in Franklin, led a group of men to halt work at Central Mine No. 51.<sup>27</sup> Charismatic, educated leaders like Skubitz and Howe were able to advance their cause on two fronts, using multilingual and political backgrounds to organize supporters, and writing editorials and debating with opponents to engage the intellectual community and wider public.

Of course, not all participants in the march shared the same agenda. In the weeks following the demonstration, some of the women denied that they had any idea what the march was about at all. One woman claimed neighbors had coerced her to join, and that “ignorance alone” explained her participation. Another marcher noted that there was so much confusion in the meeting at Franklin and that Dr. Howe was so “high falooting [*sic*]” that she could not understand what he said.<sup>28</sup>

**E**specially intriguing is the conspicuous absence from the march of African American women. While black miners lived around the Pittsburg area, their wives did not participate in the December demonstrations. After Reconstruction, southern blacks had traveled north to Kansas to work in the coal mines, and for decades coal camps had been segregated along racial lines, but by the 1920s these barriers had begun to break down. Black miners in the district were members of the UMWA and found particular power in the colliers’ ubiquitous rhetoric of industrial slavery. As one black unionist, G. W. Van Hook, explained after Howat’s arrest, “I hadn’t ever enjoyed my work digging coal, until I came to this state twenty years ago. And now, the industrial court law has made slaves of the Kansas miners.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the black women of the coal camps did not identify strongly with their non-black neighbors, or feared that if they participated in the march, they would be targeted for discrimination by antistrike sympathizers. It is also possible that the majority of black miners had returned to work by the time of the march. During a 1922 railroad strike, black workers in southeastern Kansas were significantly less likely to strike than non-blacks, exacerbating interracial

tensions.<sup>30</sup> A similar situation in 1921 may explain why few black women seem to have been sympathetic to the cause of the marchers.

When the women encountered black miners, they met mixed responses. At one mine, a black man fired a gun “into the crowd of women” before leaving the scene. Pro-strike officials cited the incident as an example of disorderly behavior among working miners. At Mine No. 21 of the Weir Coal Company, marchers confronted three African Americans who had recently been brought to the region as strikebreakers. As Mary Skubitz recorded in her journal, after the women had explained the situation, the men “recognized their wrong,” shook hands, and departed, shouting back, “we are with you women, go after them.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike most other organized labor in the 1920s, the UMWA was an integrated union with both white and black members. The black replacement workers whom Skubitz and her fellow marchers encountered could easily have been union members, yet their willingness to throw down their tools and join in solidarity with protesting women suggests that they had more empathy with local strikers than with the UMWA International Board.

While the UMWA theoretically claimed to treat blacks and whites equally, union politics were nonetheless steeped in the general racism of the American labor movement. Gaining membership was extremely difficult for black mine workers. Even if they did succeed in becoming cardholders, non-black miners usually treated them poorly or refused to work alongside them, while mine operators would discriminate or hire blacks for lower wages. As in the case of the 1921 Kansas strike, coal companies often used black miners as strikebreakers, a tactic that further infuriated already prejudiced whites and drove a wedge between non-union blacks and the UMWA. The 1921 case is especially difficult to read because participants on both sides of the strike considered themselves union members; even temporary workers who were given jobs in the mines were compelled to pay a \$25 initiation fee to gain union membership.<sup>32</sup>

27. “Violence Marks Second Attack,” *Pittsburg Sun*, December 14, 1921.

28. “Women Now Regret That They Marched,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 29, 1921.

29. “Miners Vote to Stop Work,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, October 3, 1921. Multiple sources comment on the absence of black marchers, and a visual scan of newspaper photographs of the march yields no indication of their presence. For example, see “Female Mob Stages Riot,” *Wichita Beacon*, December 12, 1921.

30. Charles William Sloan, Jr., “Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire: The Legal Ouster of the KKK From Kansas, 1922–1927,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Fall 1974): 393–409.

31. Skubitz journal.

32. See Gunn, “Jails and Threats are used in Kansas Strike,” *Appeal to Reason*, December 31, 1921; for race relations in the UMWA, see Herbert Hill, “Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (Winter 1988): 132–200.

Although supportive newspapers such as the *Appeal to Reason* deemed the march “remarkably peaceful,” it was in fact marked by violence. Along with throwing red pepper and emptying dinner buckets, some marchers beat working miners, destroyed mine equipment, and damaged automobiles. From the beginning of the strike, men had committed acts of violence in the context of the labor battle, and the women’s demonstration only further polarized the district. On the first day of the march, the crowd of men following the women’s procession kept a low profile, but over the following weeks they left their place in the back. The *Pittsburg Sun* reported that “men took a hand in the affair and went about the place discharging firearms.” Fistfights broke out between protesters and workers, saboteurs dynamited operating mines, and striking colliers “fired shots” into the homes of disloyal miners, hoping to scare them out of the camps.<sup>33</sup>

As the violence escalated, fear of a popular uprising in southeastern Kansas prompted militarization of the entire region. In an effort to fight vigilantism with vigilantism, the Crawford County sheriff deputized a small army of World War veterans and stockpiled rifles in a Pittsburg hotel. Working miners, fearing that “a firebrand will be put to our homes,” appealed to Governor Allen for state intervention. By December 13 it was clear that local law enforcement would not be able to control the situation, and Allen dispatched four companies of the Kansas National Guard, including a machine gun division, to restore order. In an action not often seen in the history of the labor movement, the UMWA actually supported the use of the National Guard. The Kansas strikers, argued John Lewis, were in violation of legal and negotiated labor contracts, and their troublesome women were obstructing union policies.<sup>34</sup>

The troops arrived on December 15, and although they curtailed the women’s marching, they were unable to break the strike. The presence of the National Guard did produce a calming and rallying effect. A crowd of coal



As the violence escalated, fear of a popular uprising in southeastern Kansas prompted militarization of the entire region. In an effort to fight vigilantism with vigilantism, the Crawford County sheriff deputized a small army of World War veterans and stockpiled rifles in a Pittsburg hotel. By December 13, it was clear that local law enforcement would not be able to control the situation, and Allen dispatched four companies of the Kansas National Guard, including a machine gun division, to restore order. This was not the first time state troops had been called out to subdue protesting miners. In November and December 1919 Governor Allen ordered troops into southeast Kansas, some of whom are pictured here, to keep order and man the mines.

camp men and women assembled peacefully to watch the troops detrain, and while some members of the crowd jeered the unwelcome soldiers, others challenged them to a friendly game of football, as they had nothing else to do during their “vacation.”<sup>35</sup> *Il Lavoratore Italiano*, a pro-strike Italian labor paper published in Pittsburg, referred to the soldiers as hapless “Don Quixotes” and mocked their task “to protect men against Howat’s women and children.” A group of Italian miners threatened the governor: “If you don’t discontinue sending strike-breakers to the coalfields and scab soldiers at once we are going to get you if it takes ‘til 1930.”<sup>36</sup> Howat himself

35. On December 17 the state mine inspector reported that only 702 miners were working, as compared to nearly 3,000 before the women’s march: John H. Walker to Thomas Myerscough, December 17, 1921, John H. Walker Papers, Illinois Historical Survey, Urbana, Illinois, as cited in Pope, “Labor’s Constitution of Freedom,” 1009; “Troops’ Arrival Paves Way For Resumption Of Work,” *Pittsburg Sun*, December 16, 1921.

36. “Le Donne Dei Minatori Sono Intervenute Nella Lotta,” *Il Lavoratore Italiano* (Pittsburg, Kans.), December 15, 1921; “Gov. Allen Threatened,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1921. Edoardo Caffaro, editor of *Il Lavoratore Italiano*, was a Howat supporter and a socialist, as well as a pacifist. He chastised the women marchers for their violence, but was otherwise supportive—a noteworthy position given the patriarchal structure of most immigrant Italian families. On Caffaro and his paper, see *Il Lavoratore Italiano: Mirror of Society, Agent of Change: A History of the Italian-American Community of Southeast Kansas*, videocassette, directed by Sandra Rainero (Merriam, Kans.: Pro Video, 2000).

33. See “Violence Marks Second Attack,” for “firearms” quotation; a number of anti-Howat families, fearing for their safety, fled the camps to the more pro-business town of Pittsburg. “Numerous Mine Raids Feature Activities of Militant Women,” *Pittsburg Sun*, December 15, 1921; “Attempt to Kill Anti-Howat Man Fails,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 7, 1921; “Local News,” *Mulberry News*, December 16, 1921; “A Mysterious Fire,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 22, 1921.

34. “Kansas Miners Demand State Protect Them,” *Wichita Daily Eagle*, December 14, 1921; “Women Raid Many Mines,” *Pittsburg Sun*, December 14, 1921; “State’s Guardsmen and Women’s Army in Race for Coal Field Control,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, December 14, 1921; “To Arrest Women for Mine Raids,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1921.

declared that the arrival of the state troops was “the final and conclusive admission of Governor Allen . . . that the industrial court law . . . has miserably failed.” When four boxcars of provisions from Farrington’s Illinois district arrived on Christmas Eve, the strikers felt that their prospects looked “brighter.”<sup>37</sup>

Soon, however, local, state, and federal officials organized a crackdown on “radicals” and “undesirables” in the coalfield. The state attorney general, arguing that striking miners were in violation of the industrial court’s strike injunction and thus illegally unemployed, sought to prosecute the entire mining district under Kansas vagrancy statutes. Surrounding towns passed ordinances requiring pool halls to close early, and Sheriff Milt Gould placed a ban on public dances. Mining families lived in fear of Prohibition officers, who under the guise of daily liquor raids, terrorized immigrants in their homes. Armed troops patrolled the district on horseback, and a feeling of martial law reigned in the camps. United States District Attorney Al F. Williams, who had ordered the deportation of non-citizens arrested in connection with the march, noted with satisfaction that hundreds of “aliens of the more radical type” had fled the region.<sup>38</sup>

While antistrike papers published articles in which bootleggers and “Amazons” appeared equally as the villains of the recent disturbances, the *Appeal to Reason* condemned the raids. It maintained that “few of the bona fide miners are engaged in the illicit traffic in booze; as a rule, those who sell booze do little else.” In reality, both sides may have been correct. While one woman arrested in a liquor raid claimed to have been coerced by her neighbor to store a jar of mash, bootlegging was nevertheless common in the camps. Especially among Italian families, which maintained a long tradition of social drinking, alcohol production was considered women’s work.<sup>39</sup>

37. “Howat Says the Sending of Troops is Allen’s Admission of Defeat,” *Pittsburg Sun*, December 17, 1921; John Steele, acting District 14 Secretary-Treasurer, as cited in Pope, “Labor’s Constitution of Freedom,” 1009.

38. John Gunn, “Use a ‘Vagrancy’ Law to Break Kansas Strike,” *Appeal to Reason*, January 14, 1922; “Sheriff Puts Ban on Dances,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 29, 1921; “Asserts many Aliens Leave Mining Field, More than 250 Have Fled,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 29, 1921.

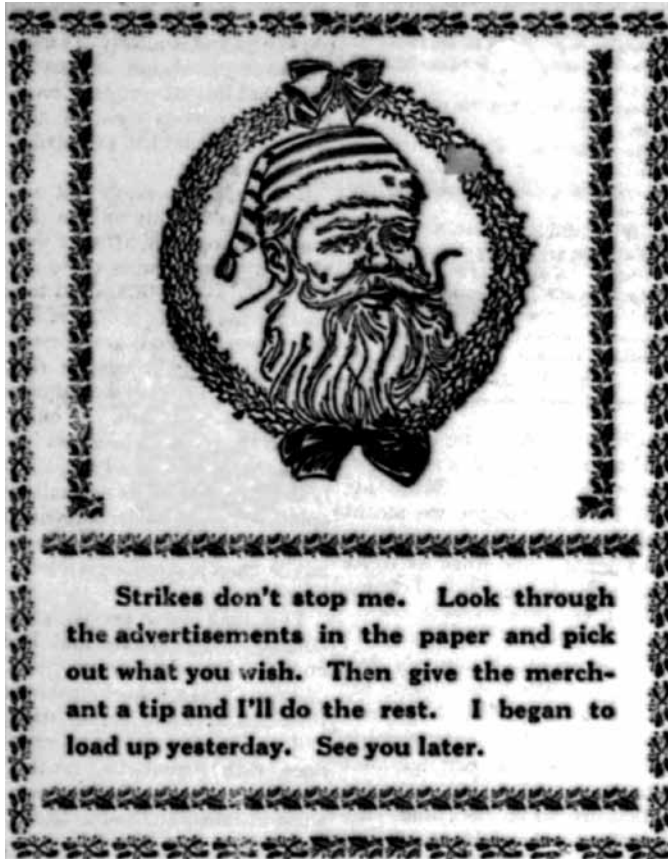
39. Gunn, “Jails and Threats are Used in Kansas Strike,” *Appeal to Reason*, December 31, 1921; “Arrest Ten in Liquor Raids: Deportation of Aliens Probable Is Implication: Raiders Confiscate and Destroy Much Booze: Alleged Leader of Amazon Army among Persons Arrested,” *Pittsburg Sun*, December 17, 1921; “Kept Mash Because of Fear,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 21, 1921. Alcohol consumption was common in Kansas mining communities despite statewide Prohibition since the

On December 16, 1921, authorities imprisoned four prominent leaders of the march, including Mary Skubitz, and set their bail at an unusually high \$750 dollars each. Over the following month, law enforcement officials apprehended more than fifty additional participants—both men and women. Sheriff Gould, who feared that the Crawford County jail was too small to accommodate all of the arrest warrants he procured, attempted to identify participants through newspaper photographs but was frustrated when he was able to collect only a fraction of the marchers’ names. Bystanders refused to identify participants for fear of retaliation, while women who had taken part could suddenly “recall none” of their fellow marchers. Of the dozens of women arrested, Crawford County District Judge Andrew Curran ultimately fined forty-nine for various crimes, including disturbing the peace, unlawful assembly, and assault.<sup>40</sup>

Competing visions of what constituted good Americanism defined the struggle between coal camp women and law enforcement. Local papers and opponents of the strike drew boundaries along ethnic lines: strikers were foreign, while all of the American miners had returned to the pits. They framed the march, like the strike in general, as an assault by radical un-American aliens upon honest and hardworking American citizens. Governor Allen assured the public that “the Kansas Government does not intend to surrender to foreigners and their women relatives,” while Judge Curran proclaimed, “It is a fact that there are anarchists, communists, and bolsheviki among the alien women in this community. . . . it was [their] lawlessness . . . which made necessary the stationing of the State Militia.” When

1880s. Drinking was not stigmatized in many immigrant families, and bootleggers profited from the ban by selling mash, wine, homebrew, or “deep shaft” whisky, distilled in abandoned mines. For a discussion of women and drinking culture in immigrant mining communities, see Mary Murphy, “Bootlegging Mothers and Drinking Daughters: Gender and Prohibition in Butte, Montana,” *American Quarterly* 46 (June 1994): 174–94.

40. One marcher, who had lived in Kansas coal towns for more than thirteen years, told interrogators that she did not know a single other woman who took part. Such uncooperativeness angered the authorities, and the *Pittsburg Daily Headlight* remarked ominously “a way has been found to refresh the memories of those concerned and obtain the necessary information.” See “Women Now Regret That They Marched,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 29, 1921. Another participant, Mrs. Dinky Smith, facetiously told investigators that she was not guilty of any crime because she had only responded to a local mine boss’s “invitation.” The operator had taunted Mrs. Smith’s friend when she told him that local women could shut down his mine. The friend accepted this “invitation” the next day, backed by no less than one thousand supporters. “Woman Says Marchers Received Invitation,” December 15, 1921; Schofield, “An ‘Army of Amazons,’” 686. For court proceedings and sentencing, see Journal of the Crawford County District Court, Sitting at Pittsburg, March 20, 1922, Leonard H. Axe Library Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg Kansas.



The approach of Christmas was a surprisingly divisive topic in December 1921. At a time when local newspapers were full of holiday advertisements for everything from picture frames to Southwestern Bell, the economics of the strike separated relatively poor coal camp families, many of whom were Catholic, from other more affluent, and predominantly Protestant, southeast Kansans. One columnist hoped that the Advent season would stimulate the regional economy by encouraging miners to return to the pits and earn money for Christmas gifts, while this cartoon from the *Arcadia Journal*, December 9, 1921, shows Santa Claus proclaiming “strikes don’t stop me,” in an attempt to drive up holiday sales despite the labor uncertainty.

it became apparent, however, that not only foreigners but also many American citizens were among those who had marched, opponents of the strike began circulating the term “outlaw Americans.” Citizens who had joined the march were cast as traitors to American ideals, subversives who had betrayed their country in favor of “anarchists and fanatics.”<sup>41</sup>

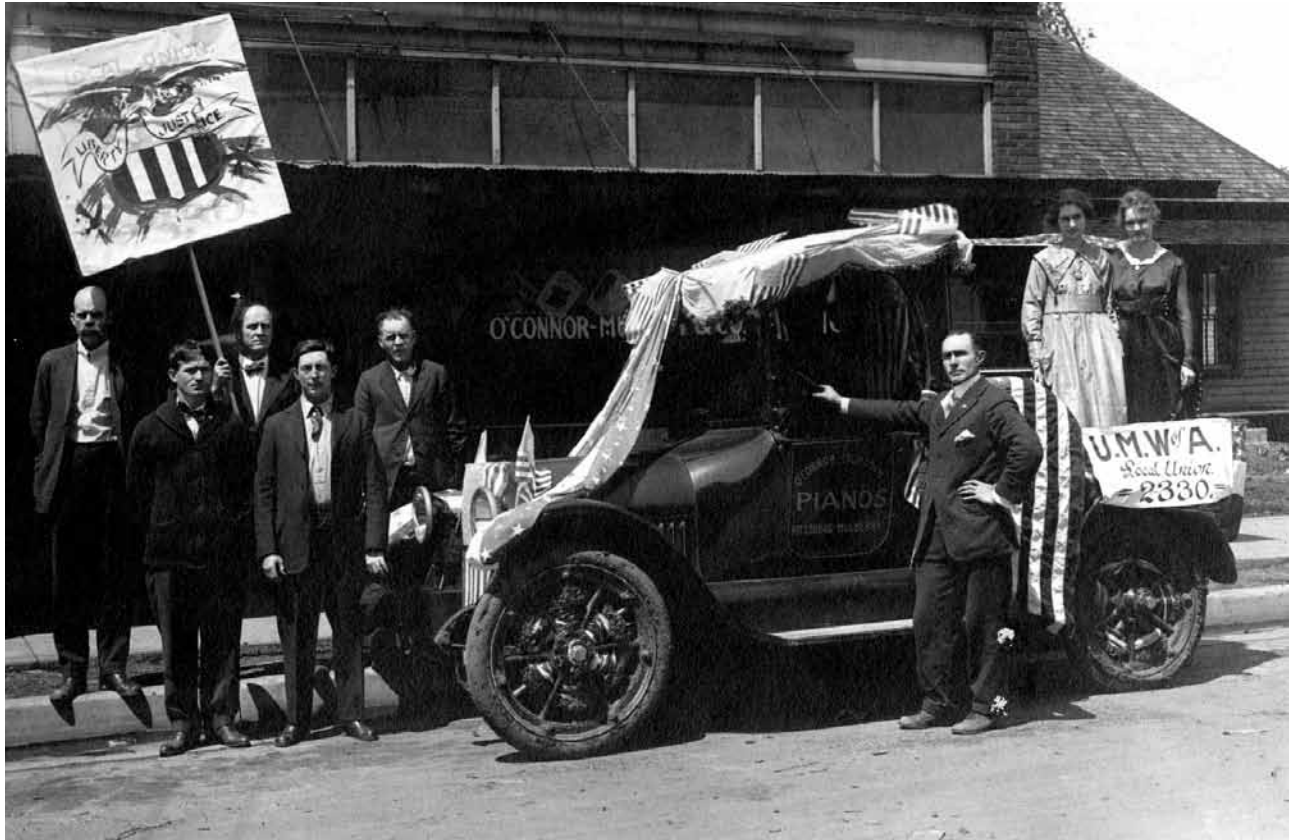
41. Henry Allen in “To Arrest Women for Mine Raids,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1921; A. J. Curran to Mrs. John Tracy, May 10, 1922, Folder 6, Judge Andrew Curran Collection, Leonard H. Axe Library Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas; Gunn, “Jails and Threats are Used in Kansas Strike,” *Appeal to Reason*, December 31, 1921; “Marchers Use More Violence,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 13, 1921.

The women responded to such accusations by defending their own conception of Americanism. In an open letter to the *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, Fannie Wimler, a miner’s widow arrested as one of the leaders of the march, defended the strike and criticized Lewis supporters: “we want our men to be good, true loyal union men and 100 percent American citizens, not like you and your dirty bunch of strike breakers.” She labeled the striking miners as good American citizens, while the strike breakers and scabs were “darn poor” Americans. Just as opponents of the strike categorized striking citizens as “outlaw Americans,” the women of the march believed that those who opposed them had sacrificed the American ideals of democracy and liberty. While a few of the imprisoned women stated that they regretted marching or that they were forced to participate against their will, the majority of those arrested refused to compromise with the law. The “Amazons,” remarked *Il Lavoratore Italiano* proudly, could be heard singing in the jail “with the voice of conscience.”<sup>42</sup>

From the beginning of the march, the issue of womanhood proved just as contentious as the proper understanding of Americanism. Interpreters proposed two competing visions of the demonstration: either it was a laughable “Petticoat March” of witless and misguided domestics, or the attack of a ferocious “Amazon Army” that threatened to destroy traditional notions of women’s role in society. Proponents of the first view suggested that the march was a “deep laid scheme” by the strikers, designed to lure working miners into harming defenseless women. Van A. Bittner, head of the District 14 “provisional government,” congratulated the working colliers on being “too gentlemanly” to fall into such a trap, and vindicated the marchers, suggesting that they were “not responsible for their actions.” Condescending observers maintained that Howat’s men had “forced” the women to act, but that the Kansas National Guard had broken the strike leaders’ hold over the marchers, allowing them to return to their kitchens. The *Wichita Beacon*, an antistrike paper edited and owned by Governor Allen, triumphantly reported that when the state troops arrived, “a few women, peeking from behind windows, sometimes waving handkerchiefs and sometimes ‘making eyes’ at the soldiers, were the

42. “Di una cosa sola possiamo assicurare i lettori: le Amazzoni non cantano fuori di chiave, ma sotto chiave. Quelli che simpatizzano con loro dicono che la loro è la voce della coscienza francheggiata. Sotto l’usbergo di sentirsi pura,” in “Sine fine Dicentes,” *Il Lavoratore Italiano*, December 24, 1921; “A Mob Member is Defiant,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 15, 1921.





At the heart of coal camp political life was the strongly democratic mine workers' union. Unionized miners were on good terms with other organized industries in the area; when Alexander Howat was arrested for defying the Kansas Industrial Court, all of the labor organizations in Pittsburg—including women's unions such as the switchboard operators—showed solidarity with United Mine Workers Association members during a one-day protest strike. Pictured are union miners and their sympathizers outside a Pittsburg piano store, courtesy Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas.

only evidences that a feminous [sic] 'terror' . . . had ever existed."<sup>43</sup> Marchers contested such representations. "You may not take our actions seriously," railed Fannie Wimler in the *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, "but believe me your 'scabs' sure do. I'd like to know who is responsible for our actions if we aren't. . . . Husbands, sons, and brothers . . . haven't anything to do with our affairs. We are doing this on our own accord."<sup>44</sup>

Alexander Howat and the District 14 board quickly affirmed Fannie Wimler's assertion that the women acted on their own. Howat himself condemned the march, proclaiming that it "should have been stopped before it even started," and that miners who wanted to resume work "should not be stopped by force."<sup>45</sup> The *Workers*

43. Van Bittner in "Marchers Use More Violence," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 13, 1921; "Show of Force Enough to Stop Women Rioters," *Wichita Beacon*, December 15, 1921.

44. "A Mob Member is Defiant," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 15, 1921.

45. "Women March On J-W No. 17," *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 12, 1921.

*Chronicle*, the official paper of the Howat organization, carried far fewer stories about the march than other local publications; its coverage during the week of the march consisted only of a brief summary of events in addition to the women's Franklin resolution buried on the fourth page. It seems that the District 14 administrators had a difficult time fitting the march into their narrative about fighting industrial slavery; they did not believe it was appropriate for the miners' female relatives to enter the fight for the right to strike. In their eyes, it was a strictly male battle. Indeed, Howat's response resembled Bittner's male condescension. Howat hailed the strike as a "fight where it took real men to stand the test, men with manhood and courage and determination, men who could not be browbeaten and bulldozed and driven back to the mines like cowering slaves."<sup>46</sup> The heroism of striking miners, not the women's march, was praiseworthy in Howat's estimation.

46. "Howat Says the Sending of Troops is Allen's Admission of Defeat," *Pittsburg Sun*, December 17, 1921.

Those who interpreted the march as an attack of an “Amazon Army” cast the women as vicious, anti-American rebels. In marching, the women had shed any allegiance to the United States, as well as any claim to womanly propriety. The *Wichita Beacon* reported that the region was wracked by “spectacular rioting and guerilla warfare,” and “women terrorists,” according to the *Kansas City Kansan*, “clawed and used teeth” like “tigresses.” Crawford and Cherokee county locals expressed disgust at the apparent effort “to advertise Southeastern Kansas as a ‘hotbed of outlawry.’” The *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, which claimed that law enforcers were firmly in control, blamed out-of-town journalists for misrepresenting the situation, and quoted one reporter as admitting that he was “writing the lies for that yellow sheet.”<sup>47</sup> To be sure, some reporting of the situation was sensationalized to make the story a more exciting sell, but antistrike forces also consciously constructed the image of a dangerous and subversive “Amazon Army.” The perception of a Bolshevik threat in southeast Kansas helped legitimize Governor Allen’s use of force.

The march, which from the first day had generated headlines across the country, continued to breed national controversy about the proper role of women in politics. An editorial in Kentucky’s *Hartford Republican* considered the march an indication of how far women had come since before the World War, while a writer to the *New York Tribune* quipped that in order to “curb the playful antics of our modern Amazons,” they should be made to wear “a pink calico wrapper with a design of white chrysanthemums.” When eighty-four-year-old socialist Mary Harris “Mother” Jones visited the Kansas coal camps in January 1922, she praised the women for marching and urged them to continue: “Go out and raise hell. . . . Your agitation is awakening the nation!”<sup>48</sup>

Women in elected positions were not so eager to take to the trenches. United States Congresswoman Alice Robertson, a sixty-seven-year-old Oklahoma Republican, told the United Press that the spectacle was a disgrace “to be deplored by the womanhood of the nation.” The throwing of red pepper, she chastised, was “every bit as bad as the poison gas and submarines of real

warfare.” The second woman ever elected to Congress and an opponent of feminist organizations such as the National Woman’s Party, Robertson represented the mining state of Oklahoma, which, like Kansas, had been polarized by recent coal strikes and nativist prejudice against immigrant labor. That the country’s only congresswoman spoke out so vehemently against the women’s march demonstrates the power of industrial lobbies and the need to disavow “radical” elements in 1920s party politics.<sup>49</sup>

**B**y early 1922, the Kansas mining district had largely quieted down. The national guardsmen began leaving on January 4, and eight days later, stating that the credibility of the Kansas Industrial Court had been destroyed, Howat called an end to the strike.<sup>50</sup> Despite the strike’s official conclusion, the memory of the December march further galvanized political mobilization in the camps. Taking Mother Jones’s advice to “go out and raise hell,” small bands of women continued to march on mines employing “scab” workers even after the end of the strike, and during the 1922 Kansas election the women translated their brief successes into a broad political movement. Hundreds of women spent the fall campaigning to unseat candidates who favored the industrial court and who had opposed their march.<sup>51</sup> When journalist Mary Heaton Vorse visited the district in late 1922, she was amazed by people’s outspokenness and activism:

The memory of the Women’s March of last December is woven like a brilliant thread through all the talk. . . . From that march came that tingling sense of power which filled the air before election. That march is linked up with the reason why “Ma” left her home and went out electioneering. As I went around from one mining camp to another, I found among the women a freedom of expression, courage of thought, that I have not found in any other industrial district.<sup>52</sup>

47. “Show of Force Enough to Stop Women Rioters,” *Wichita Beacon*, December 15, 1921; “Women Terrorists Close Kansas Mines,” *Kansas City Kansan*, December 13, 1921; “State Guardsmen Fail to Find Foe,” *Wichita Beacon*, December 15, 1921; “Jails and Threats are Used in Kansas Strike,” *Appeal to Reason*, December 31, 1921; “Yellow Journalists Busy: Lurid Lies are Spread Daily about Crawford County,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, December 21, 1921.

48. “Washington Comment,” *Hartford (Ky.) Republican*, February 17, 1922; “The Passing of a Great Sex,” *New York Tribune*, May 2, 1922; “Mother Jones Urges Howat to Leave Jail,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, January 23, 1922.

49. “Woman Solon Condemns Attacks by Amazons,” *Kansas City Kansan*, December 16, 1921; see Nancy Cott’s discussion of the limitations of women on the national political scene after 1920 in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 100.

50. “Troops Quitting Kansas Coalfields,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1922; John Gunn, “Howat Calls Off Kansas Mine Strike,” *Appeal To Reason*, January 21, 1922.

51. “Women Marchers in Field Again Today,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, January 30, 1922.

52. Mary Heaton Vorse, “Ma and Mr. Davis: The Story of Alexander Howat’s Fighting District,” *Survey*, December 15, 1922.



Banner headlines from coast to coast recorded the unrest in Kansas coal country. Some interpreted the march as an attack led by vicious anti-American rebels. The Wichita Beacon reported that the region was wracked by “spectacular rioting and guerilla warfare,” and according to the Kansas City Kansan, “women terrorists . . . clawed and used teeth” like “tigresses.” The December 14, 1921, edition of the Los Angeles Evening Herald dubbed the protesters “Amazons.” Newspaper courtesy Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas.

When Election Day arrived in November 1922, the women encountered real legislative success. Voters unseated both Sheriff Milt Gould, who had arrested dozens of marchers, and Judge Andrew Curran, who had sentenced them. The industrial court issue even decided the Kansas gubernatorial race. Jonathan Davis, the Democratic candidate, ran on a platform of abolishing the court, while his Republican opponent, W. Y. Morgan, defended Allen’s labor policy. By 1922 the pendulum of public opinion had swung in opposition to the court, and Davis won by a decisive margin.<sup>53</sup> Although Kansans as a whole did not support the 1921 coal strike or organized labor in general, they were opposed to the high financial cost incurred by the court, which, as the striking miners had proven, could not even enforce its own rulings.

But the triumph of the “electioneering” women was not the only outcome of the strike. Employment inequalities continued to breed animosity between pro- and anti-Howat factions, and they left a legacy of division and mistrust in the 14th District. After the strike, mine operators refused to employ returning workers, and the twenty-five hundred colliers who had been expelled from the UMWA received no backing from Lewis or the International. “Our district today is torn to pieces,” wrote a despairing Howat in October 1922, “turmoil and dissention exists as never before.”<sup>54</sup> Miners who had worked brawled with those who had struck, and teachers reported that children sometimes fought over the issue at recess. When one collier was shot and killed by a group of fellow miners, his wife lamented that “the

party that did the shooting . . . were my husband’s best friends up to last September when at the time the strike started here, my husband was for Howat . . . while the others seemed to be for the other side.”<sup>55</sup> Miners did not easily forget that their former friends had called them “scabs” or that neighbors had threatened the wellbeing of their families.

As historian Linda Gordon has written, “Whether histories have a happy ending or not depends on when the chronicler ends the tale.”<sup>56</sup> A month after ending the strike, Howat was released from the Crawford County jail, and over the next decade he continued as a major figure in UMWA politics, eventually resuming official presidency of the 14th District. As for the Kansas Industrial Court, rising popular opposition and two U.S. Supreme Court cases, one successfully argued by the Howat administration, destroyed its effectiveness. In 1925 the Kansas legislature abolished the court altogether. But Kansas colliers could not enjoy their success for long. By the arrival of the Great Depression the coalfields were in decline, and the departure of the mining industry turned once vibrant coal camps into ghost towns on the prairie. Even the mighty Howat, expelled from the UMWA for a second

53. “Kansas Voters Sounded Knell of Allen Court: Industrial Commission Issue Alone Elects Democratic Governor,” *Pittsburg Sun*, November 27, 1922; Charles Driscoll, “Kansas Cleans up Governor Allen’s Mess,” *Nation*, December 6, 1922.

54. Alexander Howat to William Green, October 6, 1922, Folder 2, Hearl Maxwell Collection, Leonard H. Axe Library Special Collections, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas.

55. Ellina Purgatorio, “Says Mining Dispute Caused Death Battle,” *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*, July 27, 1922. Tensions between miners and the wider Kansas society also grew in the years following the coal strike and women’s march. The Ku Klux Klan found a foothold in southeast Kansas; by 1924 there were 4,600 members in Crawford County alone. While Kansas Klansmen were comparatively less violent than their counterparts in the south, they promoted a dogma of racism, nativism, and religious intolerance. See Lila Lee Jones, “The Ku Klux Klan in Eastern Kansas during the 1920’s,” *Emporia State Research Studies* 23 (Winter 1975): 5–41; Patrick G. O’Brien, “‘I Want Everyone to Know the Shame of the State’: Henry J. Allen Confronts the Ku Klux Klan, 1921–1923,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 19 (Summer 1996): 98–111; Sloan, “Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire.”

56. Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 314.

and final time, spent his last years a street sweeper in the gutters of Pittsburg.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the memory of the women's march has survived. In recent decades, descendants of the marchers have adopted the title "Amazon Army" as a mark of pride and have remembered the 1921 event in plays and reenactments. A recent mural in the Pittsburg Public Library paints the women as patriotic mothers, triumphantly marching alongside the Statue of Liberty and carrying flags, as striking miners sit in the foreground. The central figure, however, is not a female leader or even Lady Liberty herself, but a baby cradled in the arms of a marching mother. The image of the child, symbolizing the succeeding generations whose identities have been colored by the women's march, dominates the depiction.<sup>58</sup>

Southeastern Kansans proudly commemorate the march as a unique declaration of patriotic motherhood, but just as important as the demonstration's exceptionalism is its very ordinariness. The miners and their families, if with different goals and under different circumstances, experienced the same needs and wants, the same pressures, hopes, and fears as those involved in other strikes across the country. As miners and marchers in Cherokee and Crawford counties dealt with the intolerance of local townspeople who opposed their heritage, way of life, and politics, so mine workers everywhere contended with prejudice and social barriers. In 1917 a miner's wife in Montana lamented, "We want at home the real democracy that our sons are fighting for in France."<sup>59</sup> Mining strikes have been traditionally considered male-dominated events, but, as in Kansas, miners' wives and families the nation over took active part in labor conflicts. On December 8, 1921, just four days before the women's march in Kansas, the wives of Polish strikers threw red pepper at police during a violent Chicago packers' strike, leading one authority to charge that "the whole trouble in this strike lies with the women."<sup>60</sup>

57. *Charles Wolff Packing Co. v. Court of Industrial Relations*, 262 U.S. 522 (1923); *Dorchy v. Kansas*, 264 U.S. 286 (1924); see Edward Berman, "The Supreme Court and Compulsory Arbitration: An Analysis based on the Kansas Cases," *American Economic Review* 18 (March 1928): 19–44; Joe Skubitz, "A History of the Development of Deep Mine Production," 45–46; Monniger, "The Fight of Alexander Howat," 10–11.

58. Wayne Wildcat, *Solidarity*, oil on canvas, 2000, Pittsburg Public Library, Pittsburg, Kansas; for a history and discussion of the mural, see Tolly Smith Wildcat, "Mining History for Art: Wayne Wildcat's 'Solidarity,'" *Journal of the West* 43 (Winter 2004): 52–66.

59. Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, Montana, 1914–1941* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 25.

60. Dominic Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side 1880–1922* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 251. For other examples of women's participation in labor

Competing views of Americanism and womanhood defined the Kansas march. While detractors demonized the women as a violent horde of foreign radicals or cast the march as a plot by striking miners, the most powerful image of the event is not the "Amazon Army" or "Petticoat March" of Kansas tabloids and politicians, but rather, as it was known to the children of the camps, the "Mothers' March." The demonstration at mine No. 19 that LaVaun Smith witnessed from her school steps would have significantly altered her understanding of women's role in camp politics. By the week of the march, girls in the camps were already well versed in the language of the strike. As Georgette Bulot, a twelve-year-old schoolgirl, wrote to a local newspaper in December 1921, "I do not believe in slavery, and to be driven like Uncle Tom."<sup>61</sup> From Georgette's perspective, just as her father was "like Lincoln" for "fighting against slavery," her mother would have taken on new stature as a result of the march.

The women of the Kansas coal camps, already strongly politicized by 1921, violently contested the "industrial slavery" that had maimed or killed their husbands, forced their men to work for little pay and scant benefits, put Alexander Howat behind bars, and taken away the only bargaining tool the miners had left: the right to strike. From their declaration at the Franklin meeting on December 11, 1921, the camp women marched beyond traditional gender and class constraints. By blocking mines with the American flag, clearly delineating the boundary between traitors and patriots, they asserted a vision of democracy which justified, like the violence of John Brown seventy years before, radical vigilantism against unconstitutional laws.

Severe privation during the strike and marginalization from wider Kansas society may have compelled the women to act, but their demonstration was not simply an outpouring of frustration. Rather than returning to their daily routines after the arrival of the state troops, the women remained vigilant and translated their victories at the mines into a successful political campaign during the 1922 election. "Like a brilliant thread," their march illuminated life in southeast Kansas and altered the dynamics of the coal camp communities for years afterward. [KH]

violence, see David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coalfields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880–1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 92–93; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *Journal of American History* 73 (September 1986): 354–82.

61. "Letter from a Little Girl," *Workers Chronicle*, December 30, 1921.