From Anti-Chinese Agitation to Reform Politics

The Legacy of the Knights of Labor in Washington and the Pacific Northwest

CARLOS A. SCHWANTES

Industry was not new to the Pacific Northwest before the 1880s, but during that decade, when for the first time railways linked the hitherto isolated region to the East and to California, industrial development along with urban growth proceeded at a far more rapid pace than ever recorded before in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. During the 1880s alone the federal census documented that the amount of capital invested in the region's expanding array of canneries, sawmills, and factories of various types increased by 662 percent, while the population of Seattle, for example, increased a thousandfold, to more than 42,000 residents. Strangers might be a better word to describe this newly assembled population.

Among newcomers to the swelling ranks of the region's work force was an organization that offered both a sense of camaraderie and a measure of protection during a time of rapid change. That was the Knights of Labor, wildly popular for a couple of years but leaving an ambiguous legacy that endured much longer. Because it organized some of the Pacific Northwest's first central labor councils and labor newspapers, it influenced the thinking of a generation of the region's labor leaders, and for a decade it nurtured interest in various reforms ignored by major parties until the turn of the century. Finally, the organization's rapid rise and fall highlight regional differences that sometimes undermined the ability of national labor unions to recruit members on the northern Pacific Coast.1

The Knights first gained widespread attention in the Northwest in the fall of 1885 when members led a popular protest against Chinese labor. Over the years the Pacific Northwest has experienced many an autumn of discontent: the free speech fight that began in Spokane in the fall of 1909, the bloody Everett massacre of November 1916, the Centralia massacre of November 1919, and, of course, the autumns of unemployment misery that followed the great stock market crash of October 1929. But the autumn of 1885 was especially troubling. Never before had residents of the region seen such worker unrest. Not even the industrial violence that convulsed the nation in 1877 had interrupted the simple rhythms of life in the nation's far corner.

Over the years many people have mistakenly thought that Bob Burke was my doctoral adviser. That sometimes thankless task I am always quick to credit to Sidney Fine. But it would certainly be accurate to call Bob my post-doctoral mentor. Both men have had an inordinately great influence in my life.

Although I can't remember all the details now, I recall traveling home by train from my doctoral defense at the University of Michigan in 1976. To return to Pasco (the station nearest Walla Walla College), I changed trains at the King Street Station in Seattle, which meant a layover of several hours. Almost on a whim I boarded a city bus and showed up at Bob Burke's office on the University of Washington campus. He was not in, but I left a copy of my dissertation; as much as anything, I was tired of carrying the heavy manuscript around. Later I thought that it was a presumptuous thing for a freshly minted Ph.D. to do. I really didn't know Bob then, and I was being brash in assuming he might have any interest in what I had written.

Bob served as my intermediary with the University of Washington Press. The only reason my dissertation was published—"Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington State and British Columbia, 1885-1917" (1977)—was because Bob took it upon himself to give the manuscript to the press. Later when I had assistance from the National Endowment for the Humanities to spend a year in Seattle, Bob provided every type of encouragement he could to the writing of "Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey" (1985). I tested many an idea on him first. That I have gone on to write other books is a direct response to all the mentoring he did over the years. In a way each book is a repeated expression of thanks for Bob's encouragement and support.

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In 1885, however, the streets of Seattle and Tacoma filled with the telltale sights and sounds of social conflict resulting from economic depression and unemployment. Knights of Labor fanned the flames of popular discontent by staging protest meetings and torchlight parades. Because this was the first mass movement of labor in the formerly isolated region, Knights would come to exert an inordinately great influence on early union activities in the Pacific Northwest. Moreover, these were no ordinary Knights: their willingness to embrace violence and a conspiratorial form of West Coast radicalism soon alienated them from their national leadership.

Was it true, members of the “better classes” in the Northwest asked one another, that the swelling ranks of the Knights of Labor foreshadowed revolution? Were Knights really amassing weapons and conducting secret military drills in their meeting halls? To find out, the wealthy hired spies. Still, they shuddered when they thought about the violent potential of drifters like Mike Ward, whose reputation as a fearsome agitator rested largely on his unchallenged ability to bite a chunk out of a whiskey glass. And what about Daniel Cronin, the Knights’ firebrand organizer in the Pacific Northwest?²

Cronin had at first appeared to be typical of the many workingmen lured to the region in the mid-1880s by the promises repeated in literally tons of promotional pamphlets issued by real estate speculators and railroad land offices. He claimed to have left his wife and five children temporarily in Eureka, California, while he journeyed north in the summer of 1885 to survey the employment opportunities that might await an ambitious 38-year-old carpenter in the rapidly growing communities on Puget Sound. But instead of the promised land, he discovered a land of broken promises, a land seething with bitterness and unrest that resulted when workers’ dreams of fortune and success were replaced by the nightmare of unemployment and near starvation.³

Northwesterners, long separated from the mainstream of American life, had confidently expected that completion of the Northern Pacific’s transcontinental railway line in 1883 would boost the spectacular new era of frenzied finance and American life, had confidently expected that completion of what about Daniel Cronin, the Knights’ firebrand organizer in the Pacific Northwest?²

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Daniel Cronin, like hundreds of others, was threatened by wage cuts and a rising tide of unemployment. For a short time after he arrived on Puget Sound, he had held a menial sawmill job that paid about nine dollars a month after deducting the cost of room, board, and laundry. He soon lost this job. Impoverished, frustrated, and angry, he and others came to the conclusion that Caucasian workers must now organize to change radically the hated social and economic system that encouraged powerful, monopolistic companies to import “cheap Chinese labor” while thousands of native-born white Americans suffered unemployment. Their main weapon would be the Order of the Knights of Labor, a reform-minded organization dedicated to the brotherhood of all workers—all except Chinese.⁵

For five years after 1878, when the order first officially proclaimed itself a national labor union, its eastern leadership virtually ignored workers in the isolated outposts of the Pacific Northwest. Only after several local assemblies appeared in San Francisco did the Knights make an effort to recruit workers on Puget Sound. Because a north-south railway link was not completed until 1887, the order initially confined its organizing activities to the towns that dotted the coastal shipping lanes from San Francisco to the coal-mining regions of western Washington and British Columbia’s Vancouver Island. Beginning in 1883, local assemblies formed in such frontier entrepôts as Portland, Seattle, and Victoria as well as in the coal towns of Nanaimo, British Columbia, and Newcastle, Renton, and Carbonado, Washington Territory. But faced with the widespread indifference of workers enjoying an economic boom or, worse, with the antiunion arrogance of some of the region’s early industrial autocrats, the Knights lacked standing power. Not until the events of 1885 loosed the winds of racial and economic conflict did the union attract widespread support.⁶

On paper the Knights of Labor was a highly centralized organization.⁷ But after its surprising victory over the railroad baron Jay Gould during the spring and summer of 1885, when thousands of workers from all over the United States and Canada flocked to join, the national leadership was much too preoccupied with organizational problems to pay close attention to activity in the Pacific Northwest, where the order quickly evolved into a kind of indigenous labor union. Especially noted for its pronounced lean to the left, it bore the highly personal stamp of Daniel Cronin, an
eloquent speaker and tireless agitator who began to attract notice in September 1885 when he sparked the formation of several local assemblies on Puget Sound.8

Although prominent as a labor organizer, Cronin remained a man of mystery—even to many of his fellow Knights. In the fall of 1885, when worried conservatives feared that the Knights plotted revolution, probably only a handful of Cronin’s close associates knew that he was member M-8331 of a secret revolutionary body called the International Workingmen’s Association (IWA). He had joined the IWA during its phenomenally successful membership drive in the tall timber country around Eureka in the fall of 1883.9

Describing itself as a “secret, mysterious world-wide” organization that was “quietly honey-combing society,” the IWA claimed to be a branch of the Marxist First International.10 In fact, the IWA to which Cronin belonged was a product of the feverish imagination of a young San Francisco attorney, Burnette G. Haskell. As a reporter for a Republican newspaper, the Truth, financed by a politically ambitious uncle, he had covered meetings of the San Francisco Trades Assembly. Then, in the early 1880s, suddenly seized by his own powerful ambitions, Haskell reoriented his thinking and transformed the Truth into a mouthpiece for his new radical faith, a strange and confused blend of anarchism and socialism. He organized several secret groups under the names Invisible Republic and The Illuminati before claiming the mantle of Marx’s defunct First International. He publicly fantasized about how a well-placed charge of dynamite could result in long-sought social and economic change. He even claimed to have made the explosive at home and offered his readers the formula.11

Every member of the IWA was supposedly required to take an oath to kill if the organization so ordered. Equally sinister was the IWA’s attempt to cloak its radical activities in the garb of legitimate labor groups. Haskell and IWA members were, in fact, responsible for formation of the Coast Seamen’s Union, subsequently the influential (and conservative) Sailors’ Union of the Pacific. It is possible—even probable—that Cronin left Eureka, the most important center of IWA influence outside San Francisco, fully intending to organize unemployed Pacific Northwest workers for the IWA. Although no conclusive evidence exists that he was acting according to a preconceived plan, he and other IWA members quickly gained prominence in the region’s Knights of Labor. The IWA also infiltrated Tacoma’s municipal government. The Tacoma meetings of an apparent IWA front organization, the New Era Brotherhood, were presided over by Mayor Jacob Weisbach, the Sinophobic champion of marginal shopkeepers and unemployed workers. Unfortunately, the clandestine nature of the IWA makes it impossible to assess accurately the full extent of its influence. One point is clear, however: both supporters and opponents portrayed the IWA as having unusually great power—for good or evil, depending on one’s point of view—and that image enabled the organization to figure prominently in the rise and subsequent decline of the Knights in the Pacific Northwest.12

Cronin unquestionably intended the Knights of Labor to ride to power on the crest of the seemingly irresistible wave of popular anti-Chinese, antimonopoly sentiment that began building in early 1885. It was an unstable, highly precarious perch, but for a time it seemed to make the Knights invincible. The obvious emotional appeal of a crusade against Chinese workers and the businesses that employed them served as the union’s primary organizational ploy. It elicited enthusiastic support from both the lower and middle classes.13

Unemployed white workers and their middle-class allies used the potent combination of cultural prejudice, racism, and economic survival to thwart attempts by Washington’s influential railroad and coal-mining companies to import a potentially unlimited supply of cheap and dependable Chinese labor. Dismayed whites asked whether they had “all but annihilated” the “native red men” in order to hand the country over to “imported yellow men.”14 The Chinese are “treacherous, almond-eyed sons of Confucius,”15 “chattering round-mouthed lepers,” and “yellow heathen,”16 fumed the Seattle Daily Call, a paper popular among workers. Because so many Chinese were smuggled into Washington and Oregon after passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Call claimed that their ways “are so dark and furtive that their tricks cannot be detected and unearthed. They come here like an army of rats to gnaw—of grasshoppers to consume.” Warning that “self-preservation is the first law of nature,” the paper pointedly reminded workers that the Chinese were in the United States in defiance of the law and thus had “forfeited the protection of our laws.”17

“War! War!” screamed an advertisement for Seattle’s Great IXL Clothing Store. “The Chinese must go! The IXL says so.”18 The opening battles in the race war demanded by the IXL in early 1886 had already been fought a few months earlier in neighboring Tacoma and in Rock Springs, Wyoming. Racial tension in the Rock Springs area had steadily increased as the Union Pacific Railroad successfully resisted efforts of the Knights of Labor to force Chinese workers out of its coal mines.19 Finally, on September 2, 1885, white miners attacked the Chinese, driving them out of town and in the process killing 28 and wounding 15. The Knights’ national leader, the general master workman Terence V. Powderly, deplored the violence but warned that it was “but the outcome of feeling caused by the indifference of our
lawmakers to the just demands of the people for relief.20

The workers of Washington were equally tired of waiting for legislators to redress their grievances. Less than a week after the Rock Springs massacre, a small group of whites and Indian allies murdered three Chinese hops pickers in the Squak valley east of Seattle. Four days later, on September 11, at the Newcastle mines of the Oregon Improvement Company, one of the largest and most powerful coal operations in the territory, a dozen masked men set fire to the quarters where 37 Chinese workers slept. The men escaped but lost their belongings in the blaze. The next day all Chinese residents fled the area. Throughout the Pacific Northwest, white workers were in a state of agitation. Wealthy property owners were tense; they wondered what was going to happen next.21

Cronin suggested the next step to the milling and disorganized anti-Chinese forces. At a mass meeting sponsored by Seattle's Liberal League, he introduced himself as a Knights of Labor organizer and boasted that he had a plan to rid the area of the Chinese in two weeks. “I was in Eureka, California, when the edict went forth that the Chinese must go,” he said, proposing to show Puget Sound workers how Eureka had successfully expelled its Chinese population the previous February. He correctly hinted that if Seattle did not remove the Chinese “there will be riot and bloodshed this winter.”22 At a special meeting held later in the evening, Cronin skillfully maneuvered members to begin formally the process of Chinese removal by planning a convention, the Territorial Anti-Chinese Congress, and inviting towns and labor organizations on Puget Sound to send delegates. When the congress met in Seattle on September 28, it included delegates from several coal camps, from Seattle, Tacoma, and Whatcom (now a part of Bellingham), and from such varied organizations as the Typographical Union, the Knights of Labor, and the IWA. Having done so much to set the process in motion, Cronin seemed temporarily to step aside.23

Delegates chose Tacoma's Mayor Weisbach to preside. Among the other officers elected were two Knights, Malcolm McMillan, a machinist who served as master workman of District Assembly 115 (western Washington), and Walter Walker, secretary of one of the Knights' Seattle assemblies. Whether the IWA controlled the convention is not clear, but it could claim a majority of congress officers—Weisbach, McMillan, and Walker—as members. The most important action of the congress was to call for mass meetings to be held in several communities on October 3 to establish the special committees that would coordinate Chinese removal on or before November 1.24

For the next month, citizens of Tacoma and Seattle were daily reminded of the growing power of the anti-Chinese forces. Special committees and subcommittees were formed, and rallies and “monster” parades led almost immediately to even more impressive shows of strength.25 On October 24, a procession of more than 2,500 people from the Puget Sound area marched through Seattle behind three brass bands. Among the banners were those that proclaimed, “Discharge Your Chinamen,” “Down with the Mongolian slave,” and “Elevate the masses.” One had a picture of an American eagle clutching Chinese men in its beak and talons, and on the reverse side was a caricature of a Chinese laborer carrying a load of rats. The legend, reflecting white workers’ belief that the Chinese ate rats, read: “Me worty cheapy; me livy cheapy.”26 Not to be upstaged, Tacoma held an even more impressive demonstration a week later. At a well-attended reception for Seattle visitors, Tacoma ladies served cakes daintily decorated with candy letters spelling out the words The Chinese Must Go! In the evening a half-mile-long procession marched under a sky filled with rockets and “fizz-pops” bursting forth in starry showers of red, white, and blue. Enormous bonfires blazed at intersections, and several prominent buildings were lit from top to bottom by candles flickering in every window. The glow was supposed to represent the “light of a dawning day” for free white labor.27 Addressing the crowd at the conclusion of the march were Mayor Weisbach and Judge James Wickersham of the territorial probate court.28

Fearing harm, the Chinese began leaving town in October. Many of the 700 Chinese merchants, gardeners, launderers, cooks, domestic servants, and day laborers—who composed about one-tenth of Tacoma’s population—fled to Seattle, Portland, or San Francisco. Finally, on the morning of November 3, the screech of a steam whistle signaled the final phase of a well-coordinated effort to rid the city of the Chinese. While the mayor and sheriff stood by as spectators, the Committee of Fifteen, a coordinating body, the Committee of Nine, a semisecret group probably allied with the IWA, and several hundred individuals invaded the Chinese quarter. Using intimidation rather than outright violence, they routed the remaining 200 residents. Bewildered men, their belongings piled high on carts, were escorted nine miles out of town to a little railroad station. A cold, pelting rain added to the misery of the dispossessed. After an overnight stay, during which two Chinese men died of exposure, the survivors were placed aboard a train for Portland. Fires of suspicious origin razed the empty Chinese quarter. When the news reached Seattle, workers excitedly discussed the possibilities of the “Tacoma Method,” as the expulsion was euphemistically labeled.29

The triumph of Tacoma's anti-Chinese movement was brief, however, for it elicited a storm of outside criticism accompanied by legal action to punish the ringleaders. On
November 7, a federal grand jury in Vancouver indicted Mayor Weisbach, Judge Wickersham, two councilmen—the Knights of Labor leader Dolphus B. Hannah and E. G. Bacon—and 23 other Tacoma residents. They were charged with conspiracy and insurrection in violation of the Ku Klux Klan Act (passed by Congress on April 20, 1871, to protect Southern blacks from similar white intimidation). In Seattle, local and federal officials used 350 soldiers from the U.S. Army installation in Vancouver and the Ku Klux Klan Act to jail briefly Cronin, McMillan, Walker, and 14 other prominent members of the local anti-Chinese movement. This action prevented trouble, but it also martyred those arrested.

When the 27 Tacoma agitators returned on November 12 from Vancouver, where they had been taken to have indictments read and bail fixed, they were given a homecoming befitting heroes and popularly hailed as community benefactors. Seattle’s anti-Chinese agitators got similar praise from many quarters. One of those arrested, George Venable Smith, attempted to dignify the crusade by skillfully linking Sinophobia and free speech. A lawyer and chairman of Seattle’s Committee of Ten (and a member of the IWA), Smith argued that he had been indicted because he dared to defend the rights of laboring men.

During the last three months of 1885, white Americans drove the Chinese from Whatcom and several Cascade coal camps. In most cases the method used was the boycott rather than violence. In Seattle, however, the movement faltered. Unlike the mining camps or Tacoma, where an estimated seven-eighths of the Caucasians approved Chinese expulsion, Seattle was divided into a law and order group (the Opera House party) and the Liberal League, composed of the Knights and their allies. Knights themselves were divided: all of them deplored the presence of the Chinese, but they disagreed about how to proceed. Many a firebrand had been sobered when he saw how quickly federal law and federal troops quelled agitators in Tacoma and Seattle. One group identified with George Venable Smith now proposed to abandon established society and create a new utopia on some remote part of Puget Sound. Its members directed a special appeal to Knights and other disaffected reformers to join them. Another faction preferred to remain in Seattle and promote legislation designed to harass Chinese workers out of the area.

Seattle’s city council responded to the agitation with a “cubic air” ordinance ostensibly designed to protect the public health of all citizens but in reality aimed at the Chinese. Beginning in early December, every resident of the city was required to have a sleeping space not less than eight feet square. Few Chinese workers did. The council also passed a series of discriminatory measures to harass Chinese launderers and peddlers.

January 1886 was a period of calm that preceded renewed violence and disorder. The lower house of the territorial legislature passed several popularly demanded pieces of Sinophobic legislation, including a bill barring Chinese labor in private industry, but the upper house aroused old passions when it killed the measures. At the same time, the two-week trial of Seattle’s leading anti-Chinese agitators ended. Despite evidence that several Knights were involved, the jury was not convinced that they constituted a conspiracy in violation of the Ku Klux Klan Act. It took less than 10 minutes to find Daniel Cronin and his codefendants innocent. Radicals, angered by what they regarded as legislative arrogance and emboldened by the outcome of the conspiracy trial, were ready to make a final effort to remove the Chinese.

An early February mass meeting presided over by officers of the Knights of Labor reminded Seattle that the anti-Chinese movement was still very much alive. Though its purpose was to demonstrate support for Tacoma’s indicted citizens, the meeting really set in motion the forces that soon had Seattle in turmoil. Following several popular speakers, Matthew P. Bulger, an IWA member prominent in the Tacoma expulsion, took the platform. He punctuated his address with the taunting reminder that “I come from a country where we don’t have any Chinamen. By boycotting we got rid of them.” He added, somewhat disingenuously, that he opposed the use of violence, but a reporter caught the true tenor of the meeting when he wrote that “a man with half an eye could see that ere another day rolled by we would hear something drop.”

A few hours later the noise of alarm bells and the shouts of angry men shattered Seattle’s Sunday morning calm. Groups of whites swept noisily through the Chinese quarter, pounding on doors, breaking windows, and warning the Chinese to prepare immediately for the afternoon departure of the Queen of the Pacific. As the mob marched the Chinese to the dock, city police refused to act. The sheriff and armed deputies, however, maneuvered nervously to contain lawlessness. Last-minute legal action instituted by a Chinese merchant to halt the expulsion caused an overnight delay. A skeleton guard of Knights maintained a vigilant watch while deputies protected the sleeping Chinese in a nearby warehouse. Tensions increased the next morning when Knights learned that eight Sinophobic agitators had been arrested, including their own district master workman, Malcolm McMillan. The Queen finally sailed, taking as many Chinese passengers as she safely could. That afternoon, however, a mob of workers clashed with citizen deputies, or Home Guards, who at-
tempted to escort the remaining Chinese back to their residences. Five people were wounded in the melee, one man fatally. Shocked and sobered, the anti-Chinese crowd retreated and milled around while its leaders desperately tried to prevent further violence.

After a few hours the mob finally dispersed, but the territorial governor Watson C. Squire moved swiftly to proclaim a state of insurrection, invoke martial law, and suspend the writ of habeas corpus. President Grover Cleveland, responding to urgent telegrams, declared a state of emergency in Seattle and dispatched eight companies of federal troops to prevent further bloodshed. Thoroughly alarmed by the unexpected turn of events, leaders of the Knights of Labor on Puget Sound called for peace and calm. Not all members listened. A Knight in Olympia attempted to lead a mob against the Chinese but was arrested by sheriff’s deputies; local Knights disavowed the whole affair. In other parts of the region, mysterious explosions destroyed Chinese laundries, and fires seemed to break out almost spontaneously in Chinese communities.

Martial law was lifted after 10 days, but some federal troops remained in Seattle until August. Life did not immediately return to normal. Fresh vegetables, typically raised by Chinese gardeners, remained scarce. In many a household, “men of the best training and culture” swallowed their pride, rolled up their sleeves, and went to the washtubs and kitchens with their wives to do chores once reserved for Chinese servants.

With federal troops patrolling the streets of Seattle, the focus of the anti-Chinese movement shifted south to Portland, where rumor had it that almost one-quarter of the population was Chinese. In fact, more Chinese lived in Portland than in all of Washington Territory. Some of that city’s white workers had begun as early as September 1885 to take the same organizational steps that culminated in violence and martial law on Puget Sound.

And once again Daniel Cronin offered guidance to the nascent movement. When he arrived in Portland in late January 1886, Knights and members of the “anticoolie clubs” gave him a tumultuous reception and hailed him as a hero. Although he may not have possessed valid credentials to organize in Oregon for the Knights of Labor, he helped to start up several local assemblies anyway. His role in promoting the rapid growth of the order in Portland signaled a new and more radical phase of the local anti-Chinese movement.

Joining Cronin in Portland was the head of the IWA on the Pacific Coast, Burnette Haskell. At Cronin’s urging, radicals in the Portland assemblies had invited Haskell to lead the crusade to rid the area of Chinese workers, the Knights having only recently accepted lawyers as bona fide members of the organization. In an even more controversial move that ultimately split the local Knights, radicals used union funds to pay for his transportation from San Francisco. Haskell arrived in Portland on February 9, the day after martial law had been declared in Seattle. Together with Cronin and Knights from Salem and Tacoma, Haskell staged an anti-Chinese congress in Portland on the eve of Washington’s birthday. The meeting passed resolutions calling for the impeachment of Governor Squire of Washington, the removal of Portland’s Chinese population within 30 days, and a boycott of the Portland Oregonian, the only prominent paper in the Pacific Northwest to defend the Chinese.

Chinese people fled or were driven out of some of the surrounding communities, but in Portland itself the racist campaign sputtered and eventually stalled in the face of determined opposition. Those Knights who naively believed that Haskell’s presence would somehow guarantee Chinese removal were disappointed: the IWA leader quietly sailed back to San Francisco after spending less than two weeks in the Pacific Northwest. Meanwhile, a Portland grand jury charged Cronin with conspiring to deprive the Chinese of their rights. Portland was clearly not another Tacoma or Seattle. It was the self-assured commercial center of the region, a city of shopkeepers and brokers made wealthy by 40 years of slow but impressive growth. Portland was a conservative eastern city transplanted to the northwestern frontier. An important source of stability was its long-standing social and economic elite. Even its labor movement was dominated by cautious, homeowning craftsmen whose conservative outlook was well established years before the arrival of the Knights of Labor.

In the upstart communities of Washington Territory, the Knights constituted the first real labor movement. But lacking the firm, steady guidance of experienced leaders, the order became little more than a working-class social club, a vehicle for popular protest, and a tool for IWA radicals. Its leaders too often mistook the solidarity resulting from racial chauvinism for the much-sought ideal of solidarity based on class consciousness. But not until they plunged headlong into politics did they learn just how tenuous were bonds of working-class unity forged from little more than a common opposition to Chinese labor.

As long as anti-Chinese passions ran high, political candidates who were allied with the Knights appeared to fare well with voters. In Portland, in mid-March 1886, an astute politician could easily see that, although the efforts to rid the city of Chinese in 30 days had failed, a sizable number of people still supported lawful removal. Sylvester Pennoyer, a cultured, Harvard-educated lawyer, was one of those who clearly recognized a political opportunity. Though he had little in common with people like Daniel Cronin, he was a...
Pennoyer went on to win statewide office in Oregon’s June election, and as governor he did not forget the workers who voted for him. The Order of the Knights of Labor, generally given much credit for his victory, was also pleased with the result of the legislative races. Supported by the governor, legislators enacted into law a number of measures sought by labor, including one that made Oregon the first state officially to recognize Labor Day as a holiday.

Knights were equally pleased with the results of the midyear municipal elections in Tacoma and Seattle. In Seattle, they and their anti-Chinese allies launched the People’s party to battle the corrupt “political ring” that dominated city government. The People’s platform contained a number of reform planks sought by labor, including, of course, a call for Chinese removal.

The differences between the People’s party and its conservative Loyal League opponents were sharpened after Chicago’s infamous Haymarket riot in early May raised the specter of labor anarchism. A month later, a Seattle grand jury issued a “sensational” report blaming the Seattle riot on IWA efforts to foment anarchy and revolution. Among those indicted for conspiring to deprive the Chinese of their rights were two Knights, McMillan and Louis R. Kidd (also a member of the Committee of Ten), and Matthew Bulger of Tacoma—all IWA members. The main campaign issue for the Loyal League was nothing less than “loyalty versus disloyalty,” while for the People’s party it was “the people versus a self-constituted aristocracy.” The People’s party, sometimes labeled the labor ticket, won. Its candidate for mayor, a small-time merchant named William H. Shoudy, narrowly defeated the Seattle pioneer A. A. Denny.

A buoyant People’s party confidently made plans to capture King County government in the November elections. But in early September, party extremists made a drastic mistake. Pointedly ignoring the advice of moderates to cooperate with Democrats in November to reelect the reformer Charles S. Voorhees as delegate to Congress, extremists met in Tacoma to establish a territorial People’s party. For the position of congressional delegate they nominated the former governor William Newell of Olympia, who gladly accepted. Among their platform’s 26 planks were calls for increasing the money supply, a graduated income tax, abolition of convict labor, factory and mine inspection, direct election of U.S. senators, elimination of free railway passes and discriminatory rates, a mechanics lien law, and suppression of “the use of intoxicating liquors.” One plank loftily proclaimed that “we believe that equal duties and equal responsibilities should receive equal remuneration regardless of race, color, creed or sex, and we will oppose all efforts to disfranchise the women of Washington Territory,” but another plank denounced the Chinese as “a standing menace to our laboring classes and a disgrace to a civilized nation.” The many-faceted platform became a kind of touchstone for a generation of Washington’s reformers.

Conservatives, who just weeks before had denounced members of the People’s party as “socialists,” “dynamiters,” “villains,” and “fools,” must have watched with smug satisfaction as party moderates hurled many of the same epithets at former allies. The IWA, a convenient bugbear, was accused of plotting to seize party machinery for its own evil ends. Although the Democrats reelected Voorhees in November and the People’s party won several King County offices, the days of the badly factionalized movement were numbered. Defeat followed defeat in territorial and local elections. The general rout of reformers was completed in the fall election of 1888 when the Republican John B. Allen, a staunch defender of the Northern Pacific, defeated the railroad’s longtime nemesis, Voorhees. Reformers were also handicapped by the loss of working-class support. Increasingly convinced that neither Chinese removal nor idealistic reform demands could cure the economic woes besetting Northwest labor, a number of skilled workers had ceased living “in the land of dreams and faced realities”—a task made easier by the return of prosperity in late 1886.

The new prosperity brought jobs to many of yesterday’s protesters, but the Knights of Labor did not benefit from any renewed interest workers may have had in labor unions. Between 1886 and 1888, Knights membership in Portland fell from more than 1,000 to a little over 500. The number in western Washington fell from more than 2,000 to approximately 600. The organization in the Northwest suffered primarily from the decline of the order nationally and from its own failure to steer clear of the twin shoals of political factionalism and IWA radicalism.

The IWA once claimed more than 2,000 members in the Pacific Northwest, or about one-third the total number in its Pacific Coast Division. Because its recruitment program worked the way a revolving door does, the organization
may well have carried several thousand names on its secret rosters. But regardless of the actual number of IWA members, many people suspected—no doubt correctly—that an unholy alliance existed between the IWA, the Northwest Knights of Labor, and prominent anti-Chinese crusaders. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer noted in May 1886 that the moderate views espoused by Terence Powderly, the Knights' national leader, were

not exactly in harmony with those of his local disciples, or speaking more accurately, with those of the little ring of socialist plotters and shallow knaves who belie the principles of the Knights of Labor in this community and who have by their treasonous utterances discredited the Society in the eyes of good citizens.69

The paper, which maintained that Seattle assemblies were dominated by anarchists, wondered whether local Knights were really followers of Powderly. So too did Powderly.

In early May 1887 Burnette Haskell publicly accused Powderly of contributing to the decline of the Knights in the Pacific Northwest by working surreptitiously to undercut the radicals. Among the 50 accusatorial questions that he directed to Powderly in the Denver Labor Enquirer was, “Did not Daniel Cronin organize Oregon and Washington Territory into the Knights of Labor and make them solid? And did you not down him and by secret letters falsely label him as an ‘anarchist’ and do your best to break up a strong, pure and great labor movement in the Pacific Northwest?” Powderly responded by labeling Haskell’s questions “impertinent, rascally and prompted by malice or revenge.”65

Norman Ware, writing in the late 1920s, called Haskell’s long list of charges “ridiculous” and noted that “Powderly went to Denver in May and answered Haskell’s nonsense, but the Enquirer continued to malign him.” Unknown to Ware, however, Powderly had indeed been working against Cronin.62

Not long after Cronin arranged for Portland Knights to fund Haskell’s 1886 trip to the Pacific Northwest, several disgruntled Knights in Oregon sent Powderly letters charging that Cronin used the union as a tool for the IWA and that he denounced every member of the order’s executive board as an avowed socialist. One of these letters, sent by John W. Gilson, master workman of the only assembly in Oregon and Washington Territory devoted to the Knights of Labor, and prominent anti-Chinese crusaders. The other was a confidential cover letter in which Powderly explained that the accompanying note was to be made public in order to put the radicals on the defensive. His intent was to shield Gilson by allowing him to “pretend to feel injured and demand that you be vindicated.”64

Powderly waited in vain for Cronin to respond. Finally, on May 7, three days after the riot in Haymarket Square, he wrote again and tersely requested that Cronin return his organizer’s commission, saying that the Knights of Labor “was not intended to be used as a school for the spread of Anarchist ideas and I will not tolerate it in [the] future.”65

In an autobiographical account that appeared three years later, Powderly maintained that through the actions of the anarchists, the Knights of Labor were well-nigh destroyed on the Pacific Coast. They lost no opportunity to introduce some new element of discord at every meeting, until the members who were not connected with the International Workingmen’s Association withdrew in disgust, and severed all connection with the Knights of Labor.66

In their attempt to use the Knights of Labor as an instrument of revolution, Daniel Cronin and his IWA allies apparently misgauged the depth of worker radicalism on the Pacific Slope. Despite the rhetorical radicalism of the anti-Chinese crusade, a majority of the region’s workers saw themselves as simply fighting a continuation of the old Civil War struggle against slavery. Many believed immigrant Chinese labor to be another form of involuntary servitude. Their radical-sounding rhetoric was in most cases derived less from the writings of socialists than from the antebellum convictions of prominent Americans like Abraham Lincoln, who extolled the independence of workers.67

“Labor,” anti-Chinese orators fondly quoted Lincoln as saying in his first annual message to Congress, “is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could not have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”68

The IWA’s attempts to use an idealistic antebellum conception of labor to build a new “Cooperative Commonwealth” were in the end frustrated by another antebellum notion popularly held by American workers: the belief that the man with the pick and shovel today might become the boss to-
morrow, that the move from hovel to mansion was but a short, easy step. Nowhere was the clash between ideas about social mobility and about labor solidarity more revealing than at the polls. After the return of boom times, People's party candidates friendly to labor failed even to carry Seattle's working-class wards.69

Between 1883 and 1895 the Knights established more than 60 local assemblies in Washington and more than 50 in Oregon. The union published the Pacific Northwest's pioneer labor journals and organized every major central labor council in the region except Portland's.70 But under the influence of radicals, it notably failed to grasp several opportunities to lead the infant labor movement. Taking the solidarity of labor for granted, it spent its time pursuing political power and organizing mixed assemblies to discuss utopian reform schemes. While the Knights dreamed and debated, the new craft unions took up the workers' struggle for "economic necessities, the reduction of hours, increase of wages and other conditions of employment."71

After the great Seattle fire of mid-1889, the craft unions grew rapidly as they helped to rebuild the city, but Knights increasingly confined themselves to politics. A year later, craft unionists expelled the remaining Knights from the central labor council.72

The Knights left a somewhat contradictory legacy in the Pacific Northwest. The order introduced some of the region's early trade unionists to the labor movement. In the coal camps of the Cascades, where the organization most effectively combined its world-saving mission with a concern for the day-to-day needs of workers, it began the battles later continued by the United Mine Workers of America. And in Spokane it laid the foundation upon which the Industrial Workers of the World later built.73

The order's single most important contribution to Pacific Northwest history was probably its support of legislation that the major political parties originally dismissed as too radical. Providing the organizational continuity that kept alive the proposals of the People's party movement of the mid-1880s, Knights were among a vanguard of individuals and organizations responsible for launching Washington's Populist movement in 1891. The new party's platform was strikingly similar to the one originally proposed by the territorial People's party in 1886. Their numbers augmented by angry farmers and others distressed by hard times after the economic collapse of 1893, Populists and their allies captured the state's government in the 1896 election.

The reform journalist and former Kansas Knight John R. Rogers became governor. Elected state land commissioner was Robert Bridges, a coal miner and Knight who had often tried to convince the Republican-dominated legislature in the late 1880s and early 1890s to pass bills of interest to labor. Several firebrands of 1886 now mellowed by experience were also prominent in the new Populist party. Dolphus Hannah, the former Tacoma councilman and Knight, served as a member of the central committee during the party's formative years, and Matthew Bulger, the IWA member once famous for his anti-Chinese agitation, served as party chairman until just prior to its 1896 election triumph. As for Daniel Cronin, who simply dropped from sight after joining a utopian commune in Oregon, he might have thought it ironic that some of the proposals popularly regarded as quite radical when Knights introduced them during their discredited anti-Chinese, antimonopoly crusade would become for Populists and later reformers foundation stones of Washington's modern welfare state.74

Carlos Schwantes, professor of history at the University of Idaho, is the author of numerous books on the Pacific Northwest. His latest, Long Day's Journey: The Steamboat and Stagecoach Era in the Northern West, is forthcoming (1998), and he is presently at work on a history of the Phelps Dodge Corporation.

8. Two newspapers that specifically cite the victory over Gould in the Wabash strike as a primary cause of the Knights membership boom are the Tacoma Daily Ledger, Sept. 18, 1885, and the P-I, Aug. 30, 1885. Challenging that view is Donald L. Kettmerer and Edward D. Wickersham, "Reasons for the Growth of the Knights in Labor in 1885-1886," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 3 (1950), 213-20.

9. Burnette G. Haskell Diary, IWA Collection, Haskell Papers, Bancroft Library; Truth, Nov. 24, 1883. In official documents, Cronin's last name is also occasionally spelled "Cronen" or "Cronon." Alfred Cridge, a Knights organizer in Oregon, was also a member of the IWA. See Haskell Diary.

10. "What the IWA Is" (pamphlet), Haskell Papers.


14. John Swinton's Paper, Sept. 27, 1885.

15. Call, Sept. 17, 1885.


17. Call, Nov. 19, 1885.

18. Ibid., Jan. 12, 1886.


23. For attempts to institutionalize anti-Chinese agitation in Tacoma after February 1885, see Morgan, 222-26. There is some evidence that as early as June 1885 Cronin was organizing for the IWA on Puget Sound and planning the resolution that in September led to the calling of the anti-Chinese congress. See Press, Sept. 10, 14, 1886.

24. Karlin, 106-107; Call, Jan. 8, 1886; Press, Sept. 10, 1886.

25. Call, Oct. 11, 12, 26 (qtn.), 1885.


27. Ibid., Nov. 2, 1885.

28. Ledger, Nov. 1, 1885.


32. Call, Dec. 5, 1885; Puget Sound Weekly Cooper (Seattle), Feb. 4, 1886. The law and order forces worried that the agitation jeopardized Washington's chances of becoming a state, drove capital from the region, and encouraged retaliation against Americans in China. Cooperator, Jan. 7, 13, 1886.


34. Call, Jan. 16, 1886. Karlin, "The Anti-Chinese Outbreaks in Seattle," 117-18. After the trial, a jubilant Cronin told a crowd of well-wishers, "There is not a workingman in Seattle who is getting his just desserts." He claimed that the typical worker gave "nine hours' labor to his employer and gets pay for one hour's work." Oregonian, Jan. 20, 1886.

35. Call, Feb. 8, 1886.

36. Details on the Seattle expulsion are derived from Karlin, "The Anti-Chinese Outbreaks in Seattle.


39. Call, Feb. 27, 1886. Also see Press, April 18, 1887. An estimated 100 to 200 Chinese remained in the city, but the Call noted that "the very sight of a Chinaman on the streets of Seattle is enough to make the blood of many of our citizens rise" (Feb. 27, 1886).


42. Oregonian, Sept. 30, 1885.


44. After the trial, a jubilant Cronin told a crowd of well-wishers, "There is not a workingman in Seattle who is getting his just desserts." He claimed that the typical worker gave "nine hours' labor to his employer and gets pay for one hour's work." Oregonian, Jan. 20, 1886.

45. Details of Pennoyer's life are available in...

47. Oregonian, Feb. 24, 1886.
48. Ibid., March 17 (qtn.), May 29, 1886.
49. Press, June 11, 1886; John Swinton’s Paper, July 4, 1886; Journal of United Labor, June 18, 1887. For additional information on Oregon’s Labor Day, see Oregonian, Sept. 4, 1972.
50. Press, May 6, 1886 (qtn.); Ledger, May 4, 5, 1886.
51. A bread riot in London and labor violence in the Pittsburgh area at about the same time as the Seattle riot made it easy for people to believe rumors of a worldwide radical conspiracy. Ledger, Feb. 9, 10, 1886.
52. Oregonian, June 7, 1886. Also P-I, June 6, 1886.
53. Press, July 9, 1886.
55. Voice of the People (Seattle), Sept. 13, 1886.
56. Press, July 9, 1886.
58. Knights Proceedings (1886), p. 327, and (1888), p. 8; John Swinton’s Paper, Aug. 29, 1886. One of the most ironic causes of the decline of the Knights in the Northwest was the rumor that the order had admitted Chinese workers to local assemblies in New York City. See John Swinton’s Paper, July 24, 1887; Labor Enquirer, June 25, July 9, 1887; Ledger, May 19, 1887.
59. Hillquit, 231; Washington State Labor News, Oct. 1, 1937; P-I, May 12, 1886. Another paper argued that the local assemblies of the Knights of Labor were being used “as a cloak for infamous ideas.” See Press, May 14, 1886.
60. Labor Enquirer, May 7, 1887.
61. Knights Proceedings (1887), pp. 1509, 1511 (qtn.).
63. John W. Gilson to Terence Powderly, March 25, 1886, Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (microfilm copies, University of California, Berkeley). Also [illegible] to Powderly, April 3, 1886, and anonymous to Powderly, April 17, 1886, ibid.
64. Powderly to Cronin, April 6, 1886, and to Gilson, April 6, 1886, ibid.
65. Powderly to Cronin, May 7, 1886, Powderly Papers.
66. Powderly, Thirty Years of Labor, 278. See also Powderly to Fred [Turner], May 7, 1886, Powderly Papers.
69. P-I, June 30, 1886; Press, May 26, July 30, 1886. Related to the notion that social mobility and labor solidarity were incompatible was the notion that a full stomach caused workers to reject the appeal of radicals. Oregonian, Feb. 14, 1886; Press, Nov. 28, 1887.
70. Statistics are derived from Garlock and Builder. Seattle Union Record, Dec. 30, 1919.
71. Official Year Book of Organized Labor, 1930, pp. 17, 18 (qtn.).
72. Journal of the Knights of Labor, March 13, April 30, 1890; Schwantes, Radical Heritage, 34-35. The Press, July 28, 1888, details how the retail clerks of Seattle wanted to join the Knights. Knights apparently showed little sustained interest in the request.
73. Alan Hynding, The Public Life of Eugene V. Debs: Promoter and Politician of the Pacific Northwest (Seattle, 1973), 89-113; Mark J. Stern, “To Bring Forth the Hidden Wealth: The Knights of Labor in the Coalfields of King County, Washington, 1885-1891,” B.A. thesis (Reed College, 1973), and Thorndale. For the Knights and the Industrial Workers of the World in Spokane, see Schwantes, Radical Heritage, 121-22, 133.
74. Journal of the Knights of Labor, June 4, 1891; Thomas Wayne Riddle, “The Old Radicalism in America: John Rogers and the Populist Movement in Washington, 1891-1900,” Ph.D. dissertation (Washington State University, 1976), 121-29; Turner’s Emancipator (Ellensburg), September 1891; Lucifer, March 9, 1898; People, April 5, 1891. See also Leon Fink, Workingmen’s Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics (Urbana, 1983), 18-37 passim.

Bob Burke as fisherman, with friends from the history and English departments and University Press. (Carol Thomas and Richard Johnson family albums)

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