



Examining Narratives on the Homestead Strike

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Abstract

The Homestead Strike of 1892 is one of the most important moments in American labor history, highlighting the need for labor rights and better working conditions. Using the University of Pittsburgh Archives, this project looks at the experiences of the strikers of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW) and the Pinkerton detectives during the Strike, as well as what motivated strikers and management in the events leading up to the violent encounter.

Background

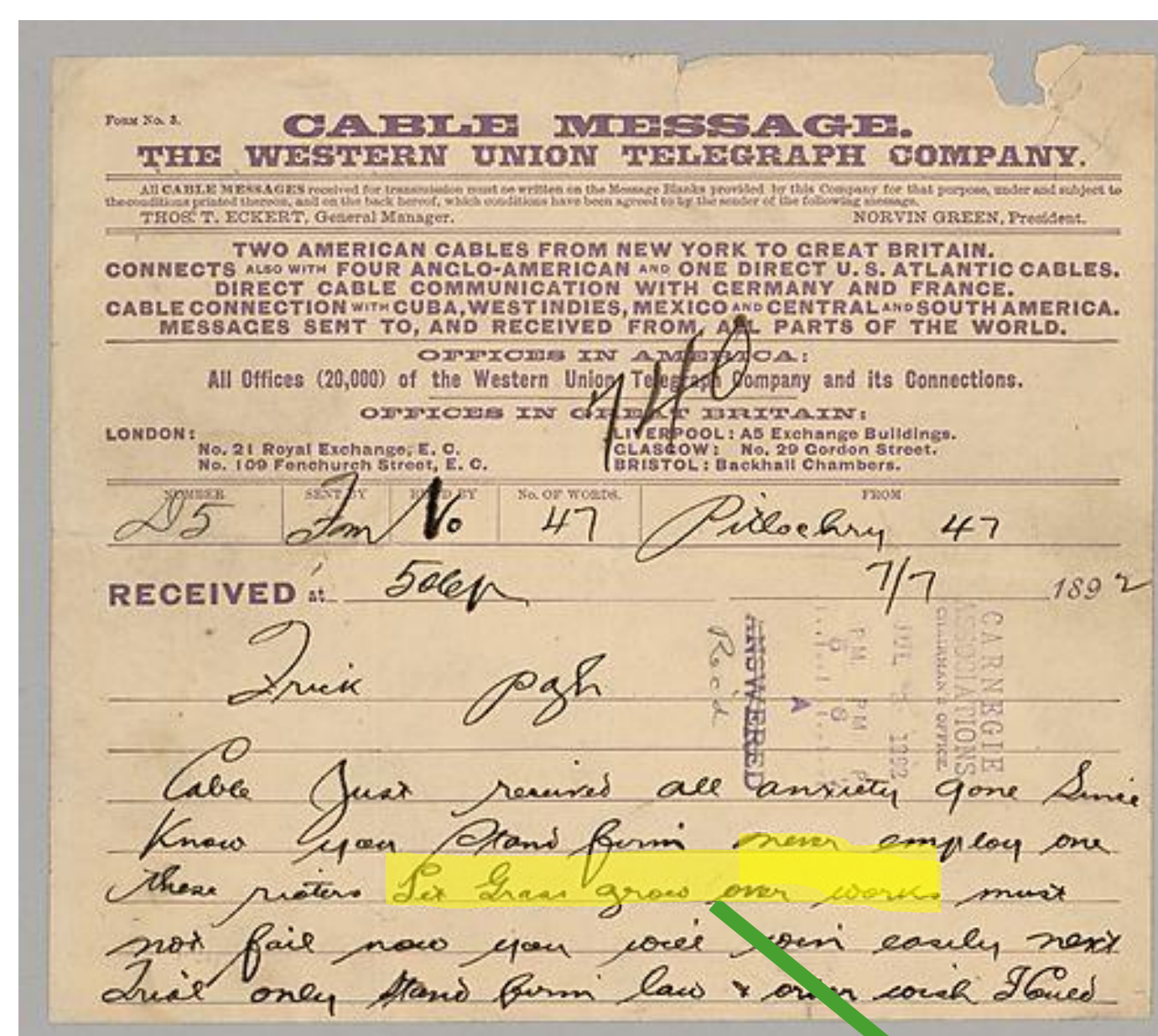
- With the contract renewal date approaching in 1892, industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, and manager, Henry Clay Frick presented a new contract with lowered wages.
- Failed negotiations with the AAISW led to a series of uprisings, leading to Frick's decision to lockdown the mills.
- On July 6th, Frick ordered 300 Pinkertons to guard Homestead. Violence broke out and Pinkertons surrendered to the strikers.
- Pennsylvania State militia arrives on July 12th. Operations at the mills resume and the labor conflicts disperse.

Carnegie Steel Company and Wage Cuts

Average Wages

Shop	Rate	Rate	Rate	Rate	Average
per day	per day	per day	per day	per day	per day
Melter	3.00	2.50			
1 st Helper	2.75	2.94	2.76	2.26	2.94
2 nd on	3.15	2.22	3.06	2.66	2.22
3 rd on	2.31	2.12			
Putman	2.97	2.29	2.76	2.26	2.28
1 st Helper	2.94	1.79	3.06	2.66	1.79
2 nd on	2.73	1.69	2.89	2.45	1.68
Kademan	3.07	2.82	3.76	3.26	2.52
on Helper	2.94	1.67	3.06	2.66	1.67
Kadecrane	2.94	1.81			
Sargent on	2.94	1.31			
Charging	3.20	1.50	3.29	2.95	1.50
Stocking	2.62	1.72			
Inside Blm	1.68	1.29			
Average	2.174	2.127	2.324	2.884	2.074

Above: One of many competitor wage comparisons by William Martin, the Chief of the Bureau of Labor at the Homestead Mills. His elaborate compilations of wage and steel outputs helped Carnegie Steel execute wage cuts.



Above: A telegram sent by Carnegie to Frick on July 7th, 1892, in which he was willing to "let grass grow over works" than continue to employ the strikers. Private exchanges between Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick often revealed they were not willing to negotiate wage cuts with the union from the very start.

Let Grass grow over works

Economic Motives of the Strikers

Mr. Boatner—how do the wages in your structural mill compare with the wages paid in competitive mills?

"In the American iron-works, Carnegie's principal competitor, a roller is paid 22 cents per ton, while at Homestead he is only paid 22 or 23 cents."

"Is there any difference in the output?"

"The difference is in favor of Jones & Laughlin's men. A platform roller at Homestead receives 14 cents per ton while at Jones & Laughlin's he is paid 70 cents. The product is similar, it goes into the same market and is used for the same purposes."

Above: Excerpt of an interview with William Roberts, a striker describing how rollers at the American Iron Works, Carnegie's competitor, are paid more, despite similarities in products. The archives reveal strikers' motives lean more towards economic incentives rather than of power struggles, since strikers' wives and their children were also participants in the violent strike.

Homestead, Pa. January 20 1893

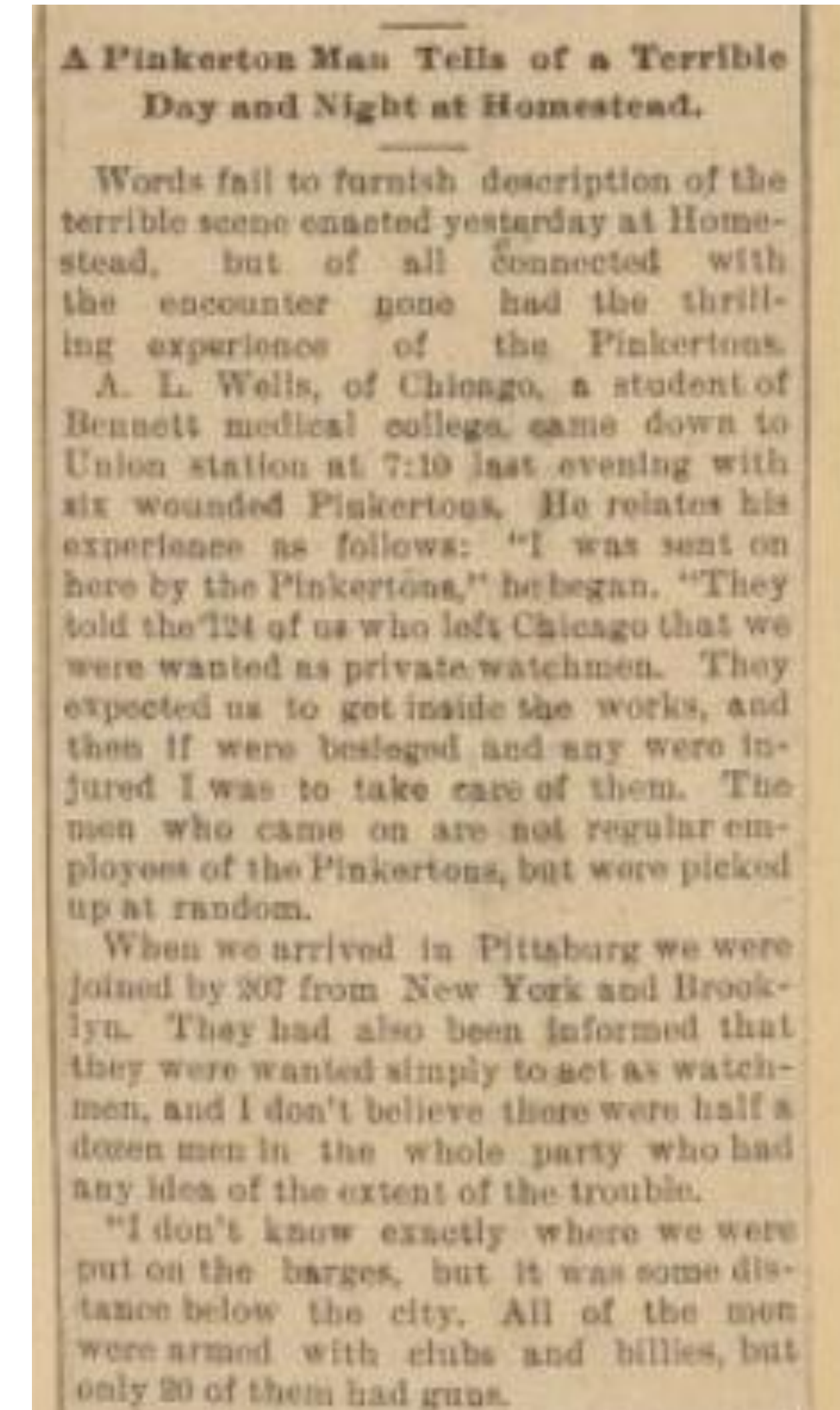
Mr. Wm Martin

Dear Sir

You may think it strange perhaps that I pen you a few lines, but I deem it my duty, as we have always been good friends, you know all about the trouble we had at Homestead, well through the trouble I got my position of course this is a large task to me but this is not all I am pleased for being on the advisory board, well I never passed one minute on the so-called advisory board, and through this the grand jury indicted me for conspiracy and treason, and through this I cannot get my work back I never took an active part in the strike, but I am a member of the firm, and the men will not come to town then I took a back seat and I am at a loss to know why I am put out the way I was always on friendly relations with the firm, and I think I have been the cause of settling many disputes which may have brought on trouble, well I think my record is good as far as I can learn as a workman I always tried to do the best I know how between employer and employee, well William what I want you to do is to see me back and

Above: Excerpt from a letter from John Miller to William Martin, asking for his and his son's job back, despite involvement in the strike.

Pinkerton Detectives During the Conflict



Right: Court testimony of John T. McCurry, who described being scouted and the chaos during the strike. He recalls being shocked when a man shoved a weapon into his arms after shots were fired. He and many others were unaware of the possibilities of violence and gun usage.

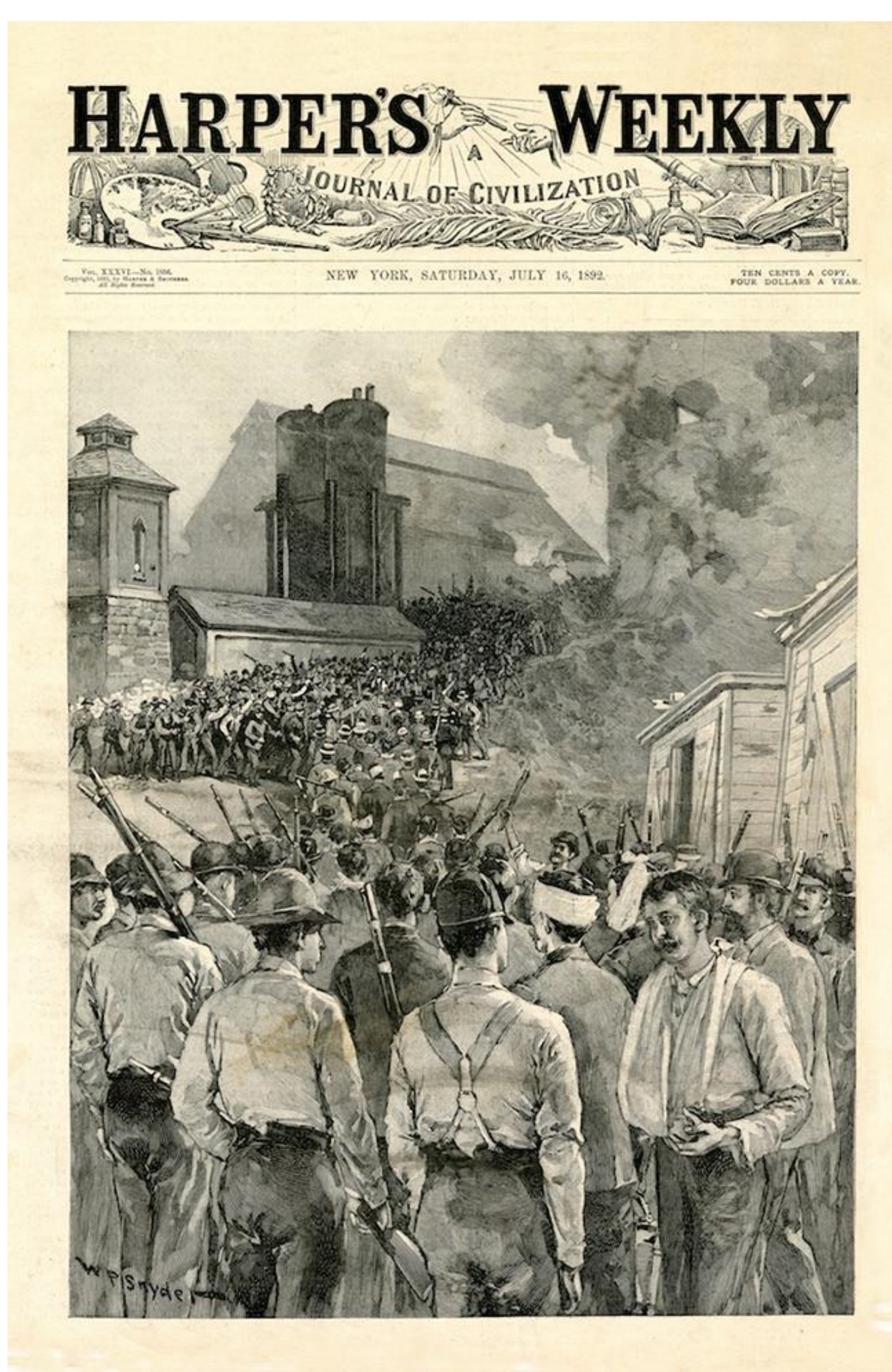
Left: An excerpt of an interview with A.L. Wells, a medical student, with the Boston News. He was hired by the Pinkertons and noted the lack of knowledge and secrecy of the operation. Like Wells, many men accepted the watchman position as a side job. Many knew they were sent to guard property, but the extent of their knowledge they had about the task often varied, such as the exact location and details of the task.

TESTIMONY

OF JOHN T. MCCURRY, TAKEN BEFORE CORONER HERB McDOWELL, AT THE ALLEGHENY GENERAL HOSPITAL, FRIDAY, JULY 8th, 1892, AT 5:39 O'CLOCK, P. M.

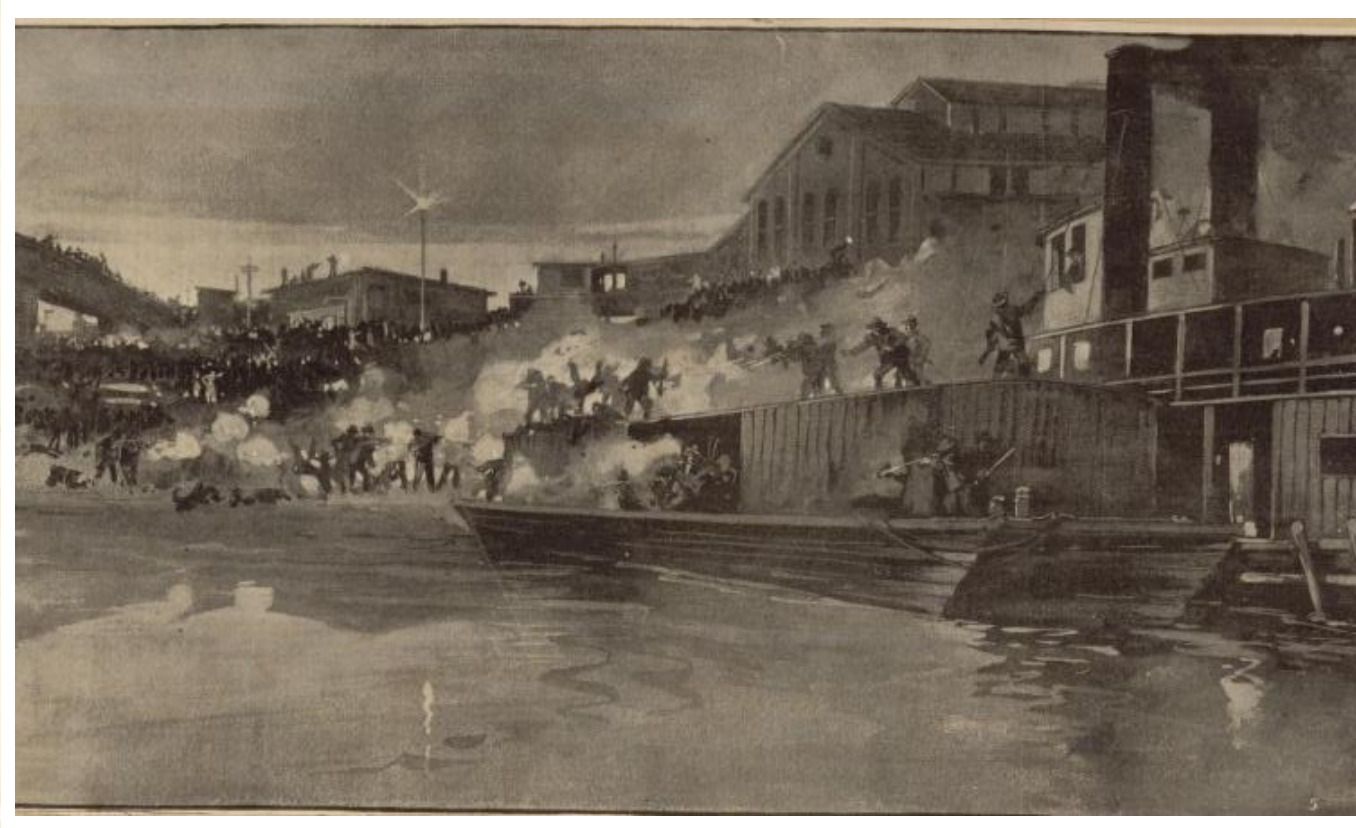
JOHN T. MCCURRY, being duly sworn by the Coroner, testified as follows in answer to questions by the Coroner:

I board at 141 James Street. I was formerly connected with the Police Department in the City of Allegheny for about 17 years. About a week ago I met Captain William Rodgers on Smithfield Street. He said, 'Are you doing anything, John?' I said 'Nothing, only down at the ball games; I turn the tables there.' 'Well', he said, 'I have got a good job for you, and I will give you three dollars a day and your board; but I ain't at liberty to tell you where I am going.' I said 'All right.' So I seen him again, and he told me to get some men for him if I could, and I got one. He wanted me to go to work on the 1st. I said 'Captain, I can't do it. I promised to go down to the ball game and stay there, and I am going to stay with Al. Scandrett.' I said 'I will be ready to work for you on Tuesday.' He said 'All right', so I got my satchel and went over to his office on Water Street, and he



Left: The cover of a newspaper from July 16, 1892, depicting wounded Pinkertons surrendering to the angry strikers. Media provided perspectives and coverage of the labor tensions and Homestead Strike. Interviews also allowed the voices of Pinkerton detectives and strikers to be heard all over the world.

Below: Image of burning barges in Leslie's Weekly from July 14, 1892.



Future Discussion

- To what extent did media equally cover the perspectives of the strikers and Pinkertons, on a local and national level?
- How did other corporations and labor unions respond to the Homestead Strike?

Archives Used: Allegheny County, Pa. Coroner's Office Records, Henry Clay Frick Business Records, and William Martin Papers.