

BEFORE STEEL, THERE WAS COTTON....

# THE COTTON MILL RIOTS



PRIOR TO THE CIVIL WAR, WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA'S INDUSTRIAL BASE AND STEAMBOAT ACCESS TO SOUTHERN COTTONFIELDS MADE THE REGION A PRIME TEXTILE CENTER. PITTSBURGH FABRICS WERE DISPLAYED - AND IMITATED - IN BRITAIN. AT PEAK IN MID-CENTURY, ABOUT 1500 WORKERS - MOSTLY YOUNG WOMEN - WERE EMPLOYED IN SEVEN FACTORIES IN ALLEGHENY CITY. (NOW THE NORTH SIDE AREA OF PITTSBURGH) AT LEAST 5000 PEOPLE WERE SUPPORTED BY COTTON INCOME, MEN MADE \$7.50 TO 12.00 IN A 72 HOUR WEEK: BOYS, \$3 TO 4.50, WOMEN \$2.50 TO 6.00!

## 1843: OWNERS WANT WAGE CUTS

FEMALE WORKERS SHOCKED THE PUBLIC BY MARCHING IN PROTEST... "PROPER" WOMEN DID NOT BEHAVE IN THIS WAY, AND THE MILLS WERE CONSIDERED TO BE "WHOLESOME". THE MARCHERS FLEW A BANNER WITH THE 1840 CAMPAIGN SLOGAN OF THE WHIG POLITICAL PARTY..

"TWO DOLLARS A DAY, AND ROAST BEEF"



## 1845: THE BATTLE OF BLACKSTOCK'S MILL



IN 1845, ANOTHER WAGE CUT BROUGHT ANOTHER STRIKE - BUT THE REAL ISSUE WAS THE 10 HOUR DAY. WITH SCANT RESOURCES, SOME WORKERS RETURNED TO WORK. STRIKERS BROKE INTO THE MILLS AND PULLED THEM AWAY FROM THE LOOMS.

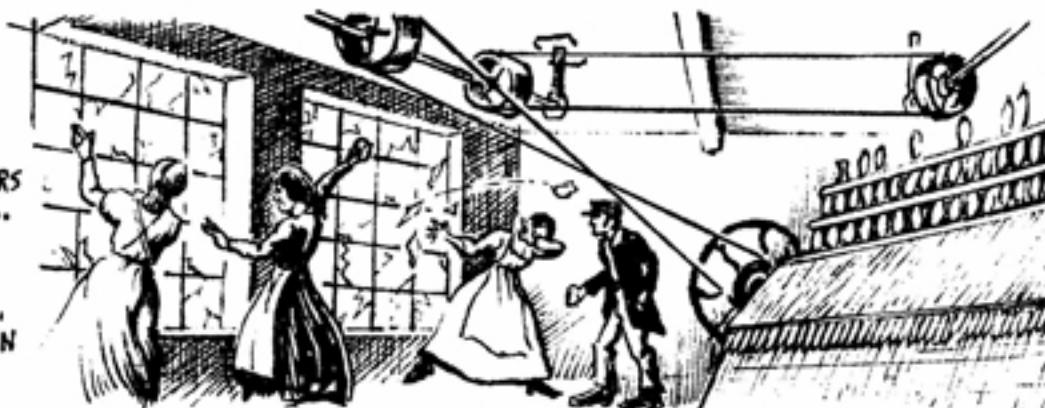
AT BLACKSTOCK'S, THE LARGEST MILL, A MALE "AUXILIARY" THREATENED THE POLICE. AGAIN, THE PUBLIC WAS APPALLED, THE OWNERS PROMISED A 10 HOUR DAY, ONLY IF OUT-OF-STATE COMPETITORS COMPLIED. THE STRIKE FAILED.

# 1848: THE 10 HOUR DAY BECOMES LAW...

...BUT...

WORKERS COULD BE EXEMPTED BY INDIVIDUAL CONTRACTS. A REFUSAL RISKED BLACKLISTING, AND THE OWNERS THREATENED TO LEAVE PENNSYLVANIA.

AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS, THE PENN FACTORY ON RIVER AVE RE-OPENED, ABOUT 45 GIRLS RETURNED TO WORK. OUTSIDE, A GROWING CROWD BEGAN TO PELT THE MILL WINDOWS WITH EGGS, POTATOES, AND ROCKS!



..INSIDE, THE GIRLS RETURNED FIRE, ADDING BOBBINS AND SPINDLES!

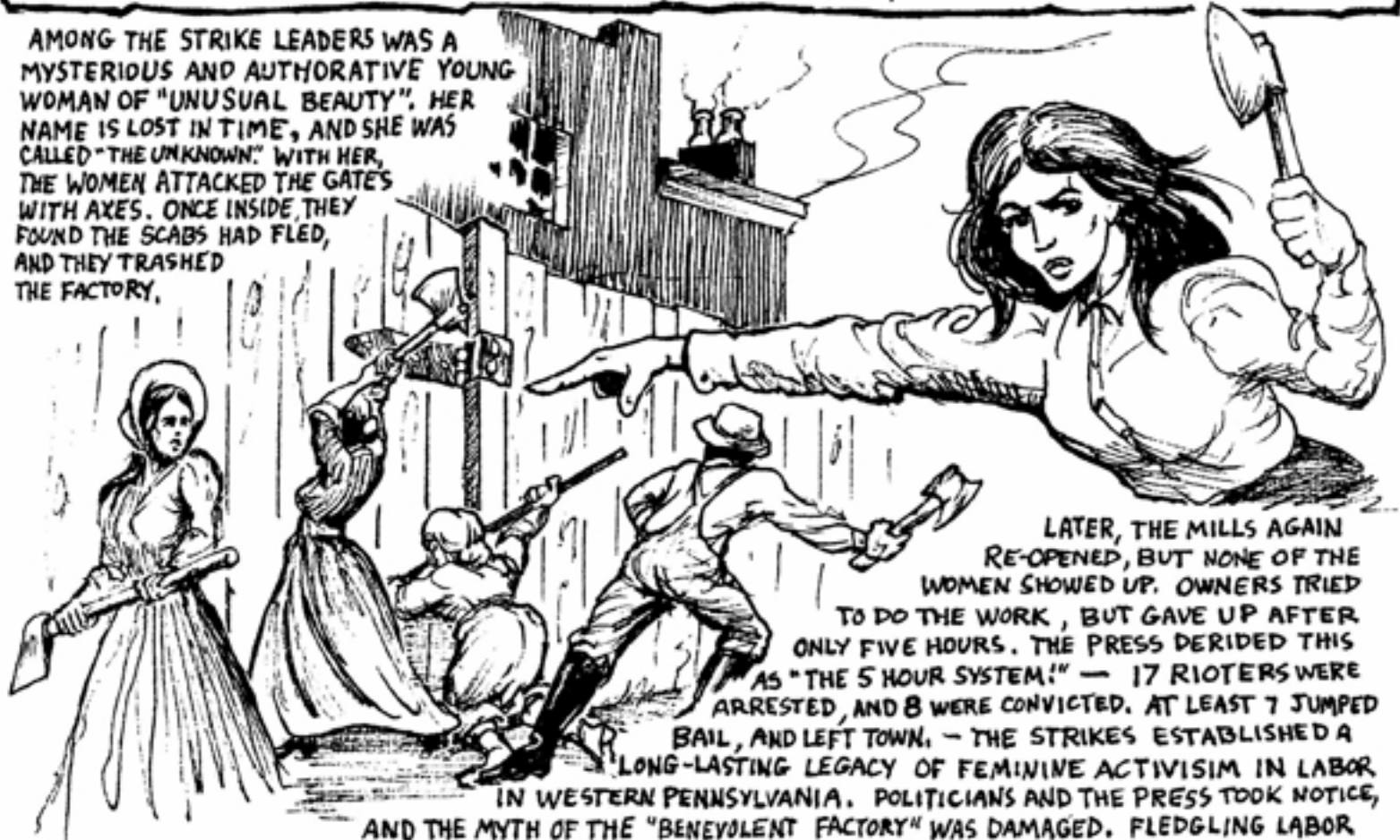
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## HOSTILITY GROWS!



ALLEGHENY POLICE WERE FORGIVING OF NEIGHBOR GIRLS, SO DESPISED IMMIGRANT IRISH POLICE CAME FROM PITTSBURGH, NOTHING WORKED. MANAGEMENT OPENED A STEAM VALVE, SCALDING SOME PROTESTERS.

AMONG THE STRIKE LEADERS WAS A MYSTERIOUS AND AUTHORATIVE YOUNG WOMAN OF "UNUSUAL BEAUTY". HER NAME IS LOST IN TIME, AND SHE WAS CALLED "THE UNKNOWN." WITH HER, THE WOMEN ATTACKED THE GATES WITH AXES. ONCE INSIDE, THEY FOUND THE SCABS HAD FLED, AND THEY TRASHED THE FACTORY.



LATER, THE MILLS AGAIN RE-OPENED, BUT NONE OF THE WOMEN SHOWED UP. OWNERS TRIED TO DO THE WORK, BUT GAVE UP AFTER ONLY FIVE HOURS. THE PRESS DERIDED THIS AS "THE 5 HOUR SYSTEM!" — 17 RIOTERS WERE ARRESTED, AND 8 WERE CONVICTED. AT LEAST 7 JUMPED BAIL, AND LEFT TOWN. — THE STRIKES ESTABLISHED A LONG-LASTING LEGACY OF FEMININE ACTIVISM IN LABOR

IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA. POLITICIANS AND THE PRESS TOOK NOTICE, AND THE MYTH OF THE "BENEVOLENT FACTORY" WAS DAMAGED. FLEDGLING LABOR GROUPS TOOK LESSONS. THE WOMEN ALSO FOUND IRONIC EQUALITY: THE COURT SAID THEIR VIOLENCE FORFEITED CONSIDERATION OF SEX, AND TREATED THEM EQUALLY AS DEFENDENTS.