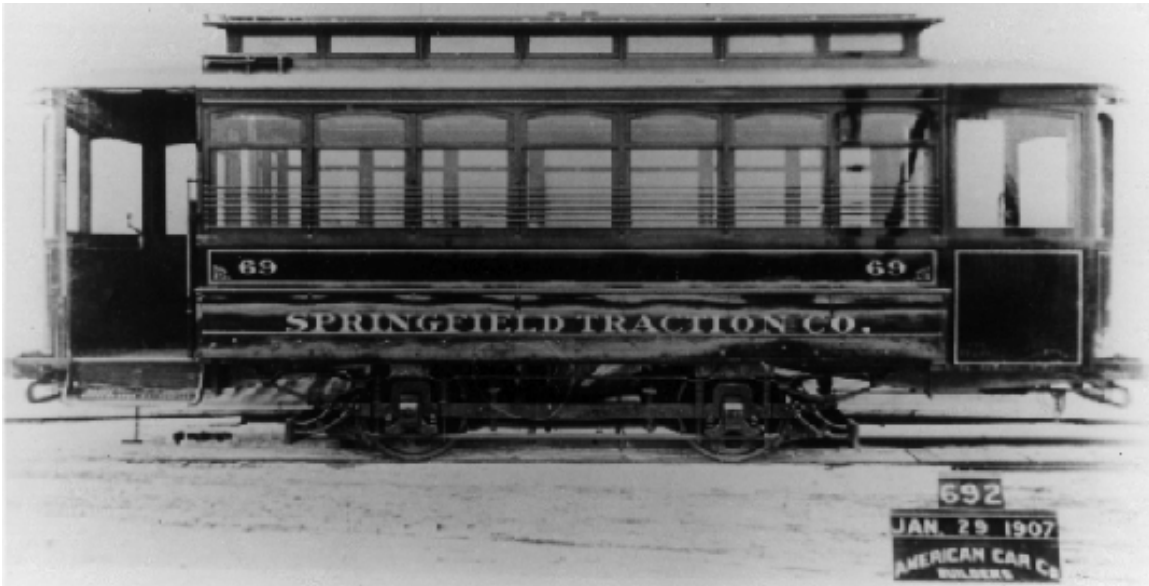


Greene County Archives  
Bulletin Number Sixty-Seven

# The Streetcar Strike of 1916-17: “*Scabs,*’ Conspiracies, and Lawlessness in Springfield, Missouri”



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## I. Forming the Local

On January 14, 1916, Reuben Wood, president of the Missouri State Federation of Labor, and Orville Jennings, president of the Springfield Central Trades and Labor Assembly, entered an office of the Springfield Traction Company expecting to meet with its General Manager and Superintendent of Transportation to discuss the company's attitude towards organizing a union for its streetcar operators. General Manager Anton Van Diense missed the appointment, but Superintendent Frank Gallagher, speaking for the company, promised not to fire employees who organized a union. Additionally, Gallagher allowed Wood and Jennings to post bulletins in the company's car barns announcing a meeting for persons interested in forming a union.<sup>1</sup>

During a preliminary meeting held January 21, 52 carmen endorsed a proposal to unionize. Five days later, a second meeting claimed 31 more signers. By the week's end, 89 men joined the rank and file of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees, Division No. 691.<sup>2</sup>

Amalgamated first appeared in 1892, considerably behind other nationally recognized unions like the cigar-makers. In spite of its late blooming, however, Amalgamated seeded hundreds of strikes in a plethora of localities. In his revealing study of Rhode Island streetcar strikes in 1902, Scott Molloy suggests that these "car wars" adhered to a larger pattern, involving:

"...a battle for control of city streets and city government – a struggle that was at times waged in courts, voting booths, town councils, state legislatures, and in the streets themselves... notable for widespread violence and the active

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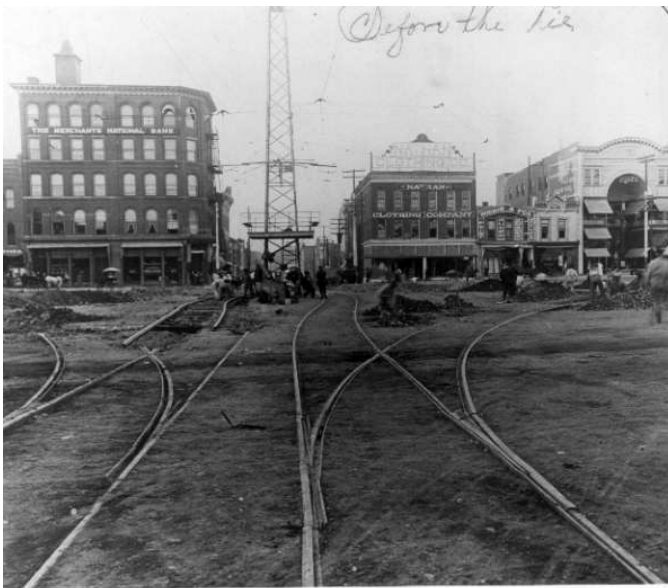
<sup>1</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 20, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

participation by passengers, organized labor, much of the middle class, and many small businesses on the side of motormen and conductors.”<sup>3</sup>

As Molloy’s remarks imply, a successful strike required more-than-overwhelming local support if a union hoped to neutralize the financial advantages of a streetcar company. Of that support, the keystone was a labor-friendly municipal government. With the Springfield labor movement already in full swing, the streetcar strike of 1916-17 is a splendid parallel of Molloy’s Rhode Island case study.

## II. Seeking Traction Company Endorsement



Traction companies created a plethora of job opportunities, often making them the largest employers in a city. These men are removing old horse car tracks and replacing them with streetcar tracks near the turn of the century. Construction projects of this magnitude would have been an inconvenience to commercial activity in the early 1900’s just as it is today. This photo was taken from the square looking north along Boonville Ave.; the structure left of center is the notorious Gottfried Tower, which remained until 1907, helping to date the photo.

In early February, Division No. 691 elected representatives to start vying for company recognition. A union committee quickly drafted a charter and submitted it to the company for consideration. Traction company management claimed out of town business required their immediate attention, and they postponed reviewing the union proposal until after returning to Springfield on the sixteenth. Come February 17,

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Molloy, *Trolley Wars: Streetcar Workers on the Line* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 1-3.

Manager Van Diense recommended a conference with company attorney, Thomas J. Delaney, for revising the charter according to company preferences. Van Diense hinted that Delaney already understood the necessary changes. So without delay, the contract committee went to the office of attorney Thomas Delaney. Curiously, Delaney proved uncooperative, stating that Van Diense never consulted him regarding the matter.<sup>4</sup>

According to the company's press release the next day, union representatives "tried diligently all day Friday to locate Mr. Van Diense, both by phone and visiting his office, but was unable to reach him until after 5 o'clock p.m. and then only by phone," conveniently after business hours. Growing tired of the runaround, the committee presented Van Diense with an ultimatum. "Unless the contract... be signed by 12 o'clock Friday night, or the [company] officials... give definite assurance of signing same Saturday... there would probably be a cession of work Saturday morning."<sup>5</sup>

In the minds of labor leaders, the traction company intended to resist unionization by ignoring the division's proposal. The company certainly opposed any urgency of endorsement, for the ultimatum triggered no concessions from Manager Van Diense.

### **III. A Short Strike**

Following the Friday ultimatum, a unanimous vote of conductors and motormen launched the first of two consecutive strikes - a short, four-day strike beginning at 5:30 Saturday morning.<sup>6</sup>

The *Springfield Republican* contained a description of the first day's developments. Motormen and conductors agreed not to return to duty until the company

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<sup>4</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 20, 1916.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

recognized their union as a collective bargaining agent. Central Trades and Labor President, Orville Jennings, called a mass meeting of local labor groups to rally behind the streetcar boys. Furthermore, labor sympathizers planned a “monster parade” for Tuesday morning, expecting more than 2500 union men to demonstrate Springfield labor’s support of the striking division. The strike campaign included an impressive boycott of traction company services. More than 100 jitneys - antiquated, horse drawn carriages - and taxis hit the streets in a concentrated effort to offer commuters alternative transit. Jitneys matched rates with streetcars, charging five cents. Springfield residents could show their support for the union by avoiding trolleys and riding jitneys.<sup>7</sup>

The second day Mayor Thomas K. Bowman tried to make the peace by inviting company officials and labor leaders to meet in his office at 3 p.m. Union representatives responded; company representatives did not. A proactive Bowman telephoned Manager Van Diense, but the latter made excuses and said he could not attend. Bowman’s reaction appeared in print on day three:

“The company has brought more than one document before me affecting every man, woman, and child in the city, and demanding that I sign it. They expect me to do this and they want time for this plain agreement. This shows their inconsistency.”

Mayor Bowman went on to speculate that ninety per cent of Springfield citizens backed the striking streetcar operators. Bowman’s statistic was emotionally loaded, but that Tuesday over 3,000 various union men paraded two abreast through the heart of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 19, 1916.

<sup>7</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 20, 1916.

commercial Springfield - an impressive number when considering fewer than 5,800 would vote in the approaching mayoral election.<sup>8</sup>

By striking, the union hoped to gain the company's formal endorsement and, perhaps more importantly, the right to request third-party arbitration of disputes. Many Springfield residents were eager to support these modest goals, which ignored the popularized demands for wage increases, reduced hours, and/or improved working conditions that inspired most work stoppages.

Springfield returned to normal that Wednesday when the traction company signed a slightly revised charter, formally recognizing Division No. 691. In the four days of that first strike, not a single trolley traversed company lines. Both the public and the striking employees, according to the *Springfield Republican*, found equal enjoyment in the settlement as the lack of commuter service inconvenienced many.<sup>9</sup>

The rhetoric of the contract left plenty of room for loose interpretation, and neither side emerged in a clear victory. Section 6 favored the traction company; it amounted to a loyalty pledge, requiring union men to "promote the interests of the company," and it included the provision that "any employee violating any of the rules and regulations of the company shall be subject to suspension or discharge." But to the union's pleasure, the contract outlined methods for arbitrating disputes and addressing unjust suspensions.<sup>10</sup> By mid-September, a major controversy would erupt over the interpretation of these parts.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 22, 23, 1916.

<sup>9</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 23, 24, 1916.

<sup>10</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, February 23, 1916.

#### IV. "Changing Horses Mid-Stream"

Springfield elected a new mayor, Judge J. J. Gideon, on April 5. He carried eleven of the city's fourteen precincts. In all, voters cast 5,734 ballots; a 746-vote majority favored Gideon, who collected 3240 votes in total. The victory made Gideon the city's first mayor under the commissioner form of city government.<sup>11</sup>

Mayor Gideon maintained his predecessor's pro-labor stance, risking title and reputation to advocate progressive labor interests. Gideon's first year as mayor involved juggling a high-profile strike, establishing methods for his office under the new commissioner government, retaining office to spite a recall campaign, and suffering permanent injury to his leg in an elevator accident. His tenure of office was arguably one of the most dramatic in Springfield's history. Meanwhile, the second, more severe 252-day walkout loomed little more than six months beyond the eve of his election.

The traction company probably initiated a contingency plan before the start of the second strike. Gary Fink, who studied Missouri labor patterns between 1890 and 1940, observed a pattern in the way streetcar corporations dealt with unionization. After a union organized, the company entered into a contract with the division, recognizing it. Rapid endorsement prevented an immediate walkout and consequential lost revenues. Furthermore, an appearance of accord favored the company by allowing it time-enough to prepare against potential strikes or sit-downs. Such preparations included securing federal injunctions to prohibit union interference with day-to-day business activity and organizing substitute labor to replace striking employees. Once ready to resist a union, the company dismissed union leaders and/or disregarded contract provisions, luring the union into striking. With advantages in timing and funding, a company could plan its

taunts and expect to weather a strike. Companies following this procedure hoped to rehire striking employees as their morale fell, discouraging further efforts to unionize.<sup>12</sup>

#### **V. Seeding Discontent**

A traction company order terminated the employment of Stanley Jones, Secretary for Division No. 691, on September 14. Union officers immediately contacted company officials vying for the reinstatement of Jones and adjustment of the company's decision. Manager Van Diense remained dauntless, refusing to submit to arbitration citing incompetence as the grounds for firing Jones. Traction company management claimed that five distinct violations of company policy led to Jones' dismissal, including failure to wear the regulation uniform and mismanagement of transfers and revenues on some routes. The company's position depended upon section 6 of the February contract, which explained that any worker violating any rule might face termination. In the eyes and minds of traction company officials, Jones' incompetence justified immediate dismissal without arbitration; therefore, they refused the union's proffer.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the contract guaranteed the union an opportunity to arbitrate "unjust suspensions."

The traction company challenged the union's legitimacy by defaulting on contracted terms. According to the February contract, either side forfeited its case after declining a request to arbitrate controversial matters. The union could not allow the company to disregard contract provisions if it existed simply to enforce those provisions. Over the next two weeks the company prepared for a lengthy strike.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, April 5, 1916.

<sup>12</sup> Gary M. Fink, *Labor's Search for Political Order: The Political Behavior of the Missouri Labor Movement, 1890-1940* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 64.

<sup>13</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, September 30, 1916.



The *Springfield Republican* reported that traction company attorney, Thomas Delaney, appeared before Judge Arba S. Van Valkenburg in Kansas City on September 29 to secure a temporary injunction against the union and its officers. Valkenburg sustained the order. The temporary injunction prevented traction company employees from striking until a proper hearing could consider a permanent injunction.<sup>14</sup> This action certainly handcuffed the union and aggravated its membership. In the meantime, while attorney Delaney distracted the press with high profile legal business in Kansas City, General Manager Van Diense worked under the table to guarantee a labor force in the event of a strike.

Manager Van Diense most likely held a private conference with Superintendent Gallagher and another man September 29. Van Diense, in testimony before the grand jury, recalled that he held a meeting with a Mr. Diehl of Chicago, associated with the International Bureau of Labor there. On separate occasions, Van Diense referred to the time of their meeting as “a few days prior to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October” and “several days before the strike.” Likely, the time of that meeting corresponded with Delaney’s trip to Kansas City. The men discussed a potential need for “substitute motormen,” and Diehl agreed to procure these men through his agency. Van Diense requested the rapid dispatch of these substitutes “in case needed.”<sup>15</sup>

The International Bureau of Labor in Chicago, and many similar organizations, contracted temporary, non-union employees to companies like the traction company so they could maintain services during a strike. These imported workers often assumed roles as armed guards, and labor sympathizers coined colorful, sometimes malicious

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

terms for such men – strikebreakers, scabs, thugs, and finks, just to name a few. One of these Chicago men, Mike Krona, sat before the grand jury and explained his circumstances. Krona said, “I came to Springfield on the fourth day of October, 1916. I signed a contract... to work here as a motorman for \$3 per day and expenses.”<sup>16</sup>



This photograph of the Springfield Traction Company car barns was taken looking northeast from Division St. near its intersection with Boonville Ave. Between 30 and 50 strikebreakers were housed at this location from October of 1916 to June of 1917. The image is dated August 4, 1912 (upper right). Notice the web of electric cables suspended above the street.

Obviously, the company never entertained plans to accommodate the union’s request for arbitration. After defaulting on the contract, company officials expected a union strike in retaliation. Thus, management’s decision to import strikebreakers prior to a strike call seems to validate the labor leaders’ original concern that the company planned to resist unionization.

The union committee might have made a case for the reinstatement of Stanley Jones by arguing that his dismissal was too harsh a penalty relative to the charges against him. But, at issue was the company’s refusal to arbitrate the decision – a direct and obvious violation of the charter. In order to demonstrate any legitimacy of contract, the

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<sup>15</sup> Missouri Grand Jury Record, Ses. 1916-17, testimonies of Mr. Van Diense (Greene County Archives), 268, 274.

<sup>16</sup> Missouri Grand Jury Records, Ses. 1916-17, testimony of Mike Krona (Greene County Archives), 199.

union had to respond with unity; the union had to strike. The traction company realized this, which is why it sought an injunction and made arrangements to hire strikebreakers. But, that original injunction, a temporary injunction, would soon expire leaving the division free to strike. Company attorney Delaney needed to secure a permanent injunction to suffocate the union's ambition. This time, however, he would have to convince a different judge.

After the hearing to consider a permanent injunction, Judge J. W. Woodrough remained unconvinced by the traction company's efforts to resolve the controversy according to the terms of the February contract. In a statement given to the *Springfield Republican*, Joseph Colgan, an international representative for Amalgamated, said, "the company did not go into court with clean hands by refusing to arbitrate when requested to do so by the association... the division was entitled to a review of the case." According to the article, Judge Woodrough intimated his desire for both sides to settle the matter per the methods established in the February contract.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, Woodrough's October 3 ruling vacated the temporary injunction and disallowed the permanent injunction. With the federal barrier averted, Division No. 691 could legally call a walkout.

In harmony with Judge Woodrough's decision, traction company officials agreed to meet the union committee at 10 a.m. the next day, October 4, for the purpose of settling the controversy. Union lawyers believed the company squandered its chance to compromise; they wanted Stanley Jones reinstated automatically, without talks. According to the union, the company originally forfeited its case by refusing arbitration. The final deadline to arbitrate, per the February charter, expired the previous Tuesday, September 26. Thus, the union remained determined to strike unless the company agreed

to rehire Jones with full pay from the date of his termination. As anticipated by the union, the company refused to meet their demand.<sup>18</sup>

#### VI. Two Hundred and Fifty-Two Days

Shortly after midnight on October 5, 1916, Division No. 691 held a meeting and passed a motion to strike by a vote of 65 to 2, effective at 5:40 that morning.

In a statement to the *Springfield Republican*, Manager Van Diense emphasized the company's duty to provide uninterrupted streetcar service as demanded by the company's contract with the city; he considered that enough employees might remain with the company to continue a percentage of services. Nevertheless, Van Diense clarified the company's top priority – the complete restoration of traction services - when he declared intentions “to procure men to take the places of those who... left the service of the company.” The words resonated effectively, but actions spoke the loudest; strikebreakers like Mike Krona started filtering into the city the day before. Obviously, the traction company resolved to operate its streetcars even if it required importing employees. Van Diense remarked with conviction, “we assure our patrons that normal service will be restored as soon as possible.”<sup>19</sup>

That day, the first day of the strike, the company succeeded in mobilizing two streetcars to operate along the Elm Street line. The first trolley left the car barns at 1:20 p.m.; a second car followed soon after. Three remaining employees operated the first trolley while “an old motorman and conductor” handled the second. Both cars carried “several men acting as protection.” Between the remaining non-union employees and the

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<sup>17</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 5, 1916.

<sup>18</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 4, 1916.

Chicago men, the company restored its workforce to capacity; although, most of the strikebreakers acted as guards since they did not possess the requisite training to operate the equipment.<sup>20</sup>

For the second time in 1916, jitneys and taxis saturated Springfield's avenues to support the striking division by offering commuters an alternative to the traction company. Strikers expected townspeople to support the traction company boycott by riding jitneys or taxis rather than trolleys. Jitneys advertised the popular sentiment with signs attached to their carriages: "Street cars run by strikebreakers. Avoid the pest."<sup>21</sup> The presence of strikebreakers kindled ire among labor sympathizers, and notices like these helped educate labor-friendly travelers and out-of-towners about the local situation; many of these people could be expected to show their support by riding jitneys if they understood the circumstances.

Compared to other large-scale strikes, the Springfield streetcar strike remained relatively tame. No deaths resulted from strike related violence. Yet, with feelings of ill will overflowing from private conversations on both sides, violence loomed ahead.

Both union and traction company officials projected optimistic wishes for a peaceful strike. Union statements publicized the first day condemned violence as a tactic and encouraged strikers and sympathizers to avoid lawlessness.<sup>22</sup> The next day, in spite of an unidentified assault upon motorman Robert Barr the previous afternoon, the traction company continued to express confidence that the union would make "every effort... to quell any disturbance that might arise." The traction company's statement seems in

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<sup>19</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 5, 1916.

<sup>20</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 6, 1916.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 5, 1916.

mockery of the union because someone affiliated with the strike most likely assaulted Barr, who could not identify his assailant. Barr, one of the few motormen working the first day of the strike, operated a trolley that collided with a horse-drawn wagon. The incident caused injury to a local farmer and extensive damage to the wagon.<sup>23</sup>



Some of the most crippling expenses endured by trolley companies were those of court costs and damages following increasingly frequent accidents as greater numbers of automobiles took to city streets. This truck received damage to its tire and forward axle after a collision with a streetcar.

Given the excitement of the first day, it is no coincidence that somebody attacked Barr following his error. Interestingly enough, Barr's assault sponsored a theme of unchecked hit-and-run among similar incidents.

The most significant disturbances arising out of the strike included gunplay on Halloween, a riot on November 1, a dynamiting Christmas evening, another dynamiting in February, a mob altercation in March, and a courtroom fistfight. Newspaper articles describing disorders and related violence, more often than not, referred to "unknown persons" and frequently reported "no arrests."<sup>24</sup> By mid-October, critics of Mayor Gideon and Police Chief Barney Rathbone charged them with neglecting their duty to maintain order in the community.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 6, 1916.

<sup>24</sup> While several minor incidences of violence were reported, these events drew significant attention in the press.

Traction company officials and like-minded business types scorned both Gideon and Rathbone for their reluctance to engage city police in the direct protection of streetcars. The original temporary injunction included an order for the mayor and police chief to provide protection for the streetcars. It never happened directly, with officers assigned to the trolleys, but through other means the men accommodated the ruling.<sup>25</sup> Immediately after the November 1 riot, Mayor Gideon facilitated the closing of downtown saloons hoping to reduce further excitement. Moreover, Gideon successfully orchestrated the routine closing of bars by 8 p.m. through the following weeks to avoid similar circumstances.<sup>26</sup>

Chief Rathbone addressed his responsibility by increasing the number of patrolmen on duty after dark and supplementing the force with eleven special officers. Eventually, five more special officers brought that total to sixteen. At its largest in May, the police force numbered forty-six men, which equaled nearly one officer for every 780 people.<sup>27</sup>

## VII. Whodunit?

One particular incident that merits attention is the Christmas night dynamiting of a Monroe Street trolley. Intrigue blossomed after allegations linked five strikebreakers, the company's own employees, to the bombing.

Shortly before 10 p.m. on Monday, December 25, 1916, a massive concussion resonated throughout southeast Springfield. The next morning, Springfield newspapers ran articles reporting the dynamiting of a streetcar on Monroe Street where it intersected

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<sup>25</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, October 11, 1916.

<sup>26</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, November 2, 3, 1916.

Good Children's Lane, a north/south alley slightly west of Jefferson Street. Nearby dwellers reported broken windows. Although passengers and employees avoided injury, the streetcar servicing Monroe Street suffered much in broken glass and received minor damage to its forward truck. The blast displaced the tracks somewhat, and a foot deep gash in the railbed marked the focus of destruction. Mechanical damage was slight compared to cosmetic damage, and with suspicious haste, traction company strikebreakers returned the trolley to the company's car barn under its own power. Police dispatched to the site of the explosion, including Police Chief Barney Rathbone, interviewed witnesses and examined the crime scene, minus the damaged streetcar; no arrests followed the investigation.<sup>28</sup>



A mixed fleet of retired streetcars patiently awaits its next service opportunity in this undated photo. Streetcar tracks, like the iron rails stacked in the foreground, were removed once they were no longer needed. Bone yards like this one might have dotted the nation's map before World War II. Now, wealthy collectors and entrepreneurs front substantial sums of money to convert the husks of old trolleys into guest houses, novelty eateries, and more.

On January 8, a Grand Jury resumed hearings considering witness testimony regarding illicit activity like the Christmas night dynamiting. Jurors twice questioned one Millard Rowden on the eighth and ninth. Rowden's second testimony led to the

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<sup>27</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, May 11, 1917.



indictment of several men including Frank Willey, a well-known local man working as a guard for the traction company. Rowden's testimony placed a conspicuous crew of men, led by Willey, at the location of the December 25 blast shortly before 10 p.m. The day after Rowden's second questioning, jurors voted on a true bill indicting Frank Willey, Thomas Fitzgibbons, and a casual host of their fellows, five in all, with malicious destruction of property.<sup>29</sup>

Within the next few days, a twenty-three year old Rowden quit his lifetime home of Springfield and moved to Kansas City. By February he worked for the Kansas City Street Railway. Ambiguous details surround his flight, but Rowden alleged that assistant prosecuting attorney of Springfield, Dan Nee, told him to "get out and don't say anything whatever about this."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Nee implored of Rowden to keep a low profile, but Rowden reacted as if ordered out of town before sundown. Consequently, Rowden was scarce on January 12 when Sheriff's Deputy Henry Tracey attempted to subpoena him for an appearance in the criminal court of Greene County on January 22 to support his Grand Jury testimony.<sup>31</sup>

Most of the men connected to the Monroe Street bombing testified before the Grand Jury by January 24. Their matching statements went uncontested by new witnesses, and only the absent Rowden, still on the lam, remained to link anyone to the incident.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, December 26, 1916; *The Springfield Daily Leader*, December 26, 1916.

<sup>29</sup> Missouri Grand Jury Records, Ses. 1916-17 (Greene County Archives), 237; State of Missouri vs. Millard Rowden, court record (Greene County Archives), 23; State of Missouri vs. Millard Rowden, court record, *State's Exhibit "F"* (Greene County Archives) 130-33.

<sup>30</sup> State of Missouri vs. Millard Rowden, court record, "*testimony of Millard Rowden*" (Greene County Archives), 158, 163.

<sup>31</sup> State of Missouri vs. Thomas Fitzgibbons et al., court record, "*subpoena of Millard Rowden*" (Greene County Archives).

<sup>32</sup> Missouri Grand Jury Records, Ses. 1916-17 (Greene County Archives), 250, 253, 259, 287-8, 295.

By the end of the day on January 24, with Rowden's dodgy departure in mind, the Grand Jury voted to issue a true bill charging Rowden with perjury.<sup>33</sup> Conveniently for the traction company, the court repeatedly delayed *State vs. Fitzgibbons et al* to allow for new developments.<sup>34</sup> Those developments, however, never surfaced. With the state's key witness, Rowden, indicted for perjury against his January 9 Grand Jury testimony - the only testimony positively tying suspects to the Monroe Street dynamiting - justice seemed unlikely.

After the indictment of "scab" employees Willey, Fitzgibbons, Hicks, "Richard Roe," and "John Doe" in connection with the bombing, the traction company let state's attorneys take their time developing prosecution's case. Witness testimony provided enough evidence to warrant an indictment and a trial, but the company conveyed no interest in prosecuting these men; no pressing ire encouraged further investigation. The case reappears in Greene County criminal court indexes several times in 1917, with most of those instances devoted to rescheduling or delaying the case. Thus, the degree of courtroom emphasis placed upon *State vs. Rowden* is alarming since it is a perjury case, whereas the former carries malicious destruction of property charges.

One thing is certain, though; the traction company was a proponent of, if not directly responsible for the incarceration of Millard Rowden on charges of perjury. In his direct examination of Rowden, defense attorney Oscar T. Hamlin brought attention to the circumstances of Rowden's March 9 arrest. Hamlin asked, "Who arrested you?" Rowden replied, "Four detectives ... and a fellow by the name of Henderson, connected with Mr. Bodell." The Mr. Bodell of reference presided over Guranty Trust, a New York

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<sup>33</sup> Missouri Grand Jury Records, Ses. 1916-17, Grand Jury vote to indict Millard Rowden with perjury (Greene County Archives), 295.

based holding company that owned the Springfield Traction Company.<sup>35</sup> The traction company's private investigator worked hand-in-hand with the Kansas City authorities instead of seeking Rowden independently. Because Henderson facilitated Rowden's discovery and arrest, it can be assumed that the traction company was more interested in Rowden standing trial for perjury than taking the stand as prosecution's key witness in *State vs. Fitzgibbons et al.*<sup>36</sup>

The company's handling of the case is suspicious. It employed its private detective not to solve the crime, but to help incarcerate the only eyewitness. In fact, the case remained unsolved after Rowden was sentenced to two years in prison for perjury. Investigation of the bombing never continued, and no other witnesses ever came forward. The case simply evaporated.

Still, the court record suggests more intrigue. Detective Henderson escorted Rowden on the train between Kansas City and Springfield. Defense counsel Hamlin offered to show the court that, during their train ride, Henderson told Rowden:

“If he would sign a written statement admitting he had lied to the Grand Jury and that he himself had dynamited the car... he would not even be required to appear in court in Springfield.”

Of course, counsel was unable to produce a written statement bearing Rowden's signature, so the court excluded the offer. In any case, it survives for the interpretation of hindsight.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Circuit Court Records Vol. 22, Criminal Court Index Vol. 3 1913-1931 (Greene County Archives).

<sup>35</sup> State of Missouri vs. Millard Rowden, court record, “*testimony of Millard Rowden*” (Greene County Archives), 165.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> State of Missouri vs. Millard Rowden, court record, “*testimony of Millard Rowden*” (Greene County Archives), 167.

It might seem unbelievable that a company would plot to destroy its own streetcar, but the traction company stood to gain more than the union. With the mayor and chief of police already accused of partiality and failing to protect traction company property, a major concussion and a blasted streetcar could only strengthen the case against them. More importantly, the crime fostered an appearance of increasing militancy within the labor movement, rallying wealthy south side businessmen against the union. Regardless as to whom planted the charges, or why, the action favored the traction company.

#### **VIII. The Mayoral Recall**

Only three days after the Monroe Street dynamiting, rumors of a circulating recall petition landed in the office of the *Springfield Republican*. Coincidentally, on December 30, a Civic League of Springfield organized to “effect non-partisan and progressive administration of civic affairs;” league members appointed one Roscoe Stewart as secretary. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1917, attorney Roscoe Stewart submitted a petition bearing 2400 signatures advocating the recall of Mayor Gideon.<sup>38</sup>

The recall petition lost between 500 and 700 supporters over the next couple of weeks. Approximately fifty people acting under their own volition contacted the city clerk and removed their endorsement. Also, the city clerk discounted names of signers failing to meet certain voting criteria. Nevertheless, the recall petition received enough signatures to warrant a recall vote.

On May 16<sup>th</sup>, Mayor Gideon survived the recall by a 155-vote majority. In all, 6,629 votes were cast – over 15 per cent greater than the voter turnout for the April 1916 election a year before. Mayor Gideon’s retention of office was an “impressive victory,”

not only for the mayor, but also for the labor movement. Unable to roust Gideon, the recall committee submerged into the limelight and local support for the traction company began to dissolve.<sup>39</sup>

### **IX. An Infamous Association**

The May 30 kidnapping of baby Lloyd Keet, the son of a wealthy merchant, hammered a final nail into the traction company's coffin.

Taylor Adams, a strikebreaker, was the first man arrested in connection with the kidnapping and murder of baby Keet. In his confession, Adams explained how he got involved with the abduction plot:

“Some time in January, 1917, [Claud Piersol] got on a car I was running as a motorman... He said he had... a proposition to make some good money.”

Piersol disclosed some of the details of the job, which included abducting a wealthy Springfield man. When Adams asked how they would be paid, Piersol referred to a “Boss Man” whom Adams would “never see.”<sup>40</sup>

During the trial of Claud Piersol, agent of the Department of Justice, Oscar Schmidt, asked Piersol, “what do you know about this German plot?” Piersol turned the tables on Adams, stating “the first I ever heard about it was introduced to me by Taylor B. Adams.” According to Piersol, Adams worked in concert with another Chicago strikebreaker, a man named Reily (alias, Ted Gill), connected in some way to the German government. Reily might have been the organizer of a larger criminal element in

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<sup>38</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, December 28, 30 1916; *Ibid...* April 12, 1917.

<sup>39</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, April 16, 17, 19, 1917; *The Springfield Republican*, May 17, 1917; Gary M. Fink, *Labor's Search for Political Order: The Political Behavior of the Missouri Labor Movement, 1890-1940* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 67.

Chicago. He boasted involvement in mayhem, and he claimed responsibility for bombing the Welland Canal, presumably near Chicago. Piersol stated to the court, "I had known Reily before he came here on the strike last fall... He worked as a strikebreaker."<sup>41</sup>

It did not matter who invited whom to participate in the abduction. Also, it did not matter which of the men were closer to German malfeasance. What did matter was that German conspirators seemed to be operating in Springfield, and the traction company had a hand in their arrival.

Those involved in the German conspiracy ring corresponded with letters written in code. Piersol described his codebook to the authorities.

"I had a book, the edges of which were weighted with lead, to be destroyed in case we had war. It was weighted with lead so that it could be thrown in a pond or body of water and would sink. I destroyed my codebook within an hour after I got word from the Austrian consulate to destroy the book at once. My orders came to Reily in code... I burned my codebook; it was while we were living at 823 South Campbell. I buried the lead covering of the book in the back yard. It was given to me by Dr. Breitung, German consul."<sup>42</sup>

The Keet kidnapping cost all remaining local support for the traction company. Even such indirect involvement justified accusations against the company for importing men of low character to operate its streetcars and guard its property. As demonstrated by the recall vote, most of the company's advocates hailed from the south side of town. But

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<sup>40</sup> William L. Barde and Harry T. Brundidge, *The Inside Story of the Kidnapping and Murder of Baby Lloyd Keet*, (Greene County Archives, 1918), 30-33.

<sup>41</sup> William L. Barde and Harry T. Brundidge, *The Inside Story of the Kidnapping and Murder of Baby Lloyd Keet*, (Greene County Archives, 1918), 42-52.

<sup>42</sup> William L. Barde and Harry T. Brundidge, *The Inside Story of the Kidnapping and Murder of Baby Lloyd Keet*, (Greene County Archives, 1918), 43-44.

with strikebreakers in court for abducting and murdering the child of a wealthy south side resident, any lingering south side support for the traction company disappeared. The numbers who participated in a lynch mob and attended court proceedings indicated the public's disgust. Finally, without any vestiges of approval in the community, the company could no longer continue to resist the striking division.

### X. Conclusion

The 252-day strike was settled on Saturday, June 16, 1917. Divison No. 691 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America and the Springfield Traction Company entered into a three-year agreement mandating five provisions. (1) The company guaranteed arbitration of future conflicts. (2) Employees would return to work on June 25. (3) Open shop would be maintained. (4) Strikers employed by the company on October 4, excluding those under indictment, would be reinstated with seniority. (5) And a two-part wage adjustment increased first year wages from 17 ½ cents an hour to 19 cents an hour, with one-cent raises following yearly; the second part of the wage plan allowed for corresponding bonuses when average daily revenues were above \$28.50. The maximum wage increase, awarded at the \$46 mark, was a bonus of 4 cents an hour.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *The Springfield Republican*, June 17, 1917; Gary M. Fink, *Labor's Search for Political Order: The Political Behavior of the Missouri Labor Movement, 1890-1940* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 67.



The motormen and conductors belonging to Division No. 691 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees posed for this panoramic group photo on June 24, 1917, one day before returning to work after the June 16 settlement. Unfortunately, the men are not identified, but the photo provides a face for the victors. Nevertheless, the image bleeds nostalgia.

Stanley Jones, whose September 1916 firing began the controversy, was not reinstated with the other employees. The strike-ending agreement included rehiring the men employed on October 4, but Jones was not a traction company employee on October 4.<sup>44</sup> Evidence is limited concerning Jones' fate. He might have found employment elsewhere, he might have moved, or he might have been incarcerated. Although Jones did not return to work with the traction company, the union was victorious in its design. The men struck after their original contract was violated, and the strike ended favoring the men. The agreement reached after nine months sealed their triumph.

The Springfield Light and Traction Company certainly endeavored to defeat the union. If conspiring occurred, it was ineffective; legal dominance mattered little. In the end, the unity of the Springfield labor movement and its influence over municipal authorities was enough to overwhelm the traction company and set a precedent for electric railway employees in Missouri. Gary Fink notes that traction employees in Kansas City and St. Louis unionized not long after the success of their Springfield

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



counterparts. With this in mind, it would be worth continued study to determine any significant links between those instances and the Springfield streetcar strike.<sup>45</sup>



On February 14, 2004, in Fort Smith, Arkansas, I enjoyed an opportunity to ride trolley #224, which is operated and maintained by the Fort Smith Trolley Museum. While some mechanical similarities could be drawn between the “T” in Boston or the “L” in Chicago, it would be impossible to liken the nostalgia of riding in a restored streetcar to anything resembling modern transit – the heated passenger benches, the acrid smell of the car barn, the “ding” of a bell as the conductor announces the next stop. In America, the era of trolleys and streetcars lasted for nearly fifty years, and today these metropolitan artifacts are becoming fewer and farther in between. Their subtle, nearly transparent niche in history barely does justice to the splendor and romance of their era. As a long time railroad enthusiast, I am elated to offer this small interpretation of Springfield labor history to the Greene County Archives.

Enfin, and with the most respect, I am forever obligated to my professors, colleagues, and friends for their roles in the creation of this study. Special “thanks” go out to Bob Neumann, and Dr. Worth Miller for their understanding and unconditional assistance with the research. Also, it would be difficult to overestimate my esteem towards SMSU professor, Dr. William Piston, and Lynn Morrow with the Missouri Secretary of State’s Office for providing me with this golden opportunity as an intern at the Greene County Archives. I cannot imagine this contribution to Springfield history will ever eclipse the significance of my experiences interpreting it, and for that I am eternally grateful. ~ Elijah L. Robison, March 2004

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<sup>45</sup> Gary M. Fink, *Labor’s Search for Political Order: The Political Behavior of the Missouri Labor Movement, 1890-1940* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 67-68.

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