



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

September 2011

HSGL Blog

In early August the Historical Society of Greater Lansing launched its own blog! The blog will feature updates of HSGL events, as well as historic photos of Lansing, and modern photos of historic city sites. If you'd like to contribute an image, please send a digital copy to info@lansinghistory.org. To read the blog, visit <http://lansinghistory.blogspot.com>. We hope you'll drop by soon!

Cemetery Tour 2011

Thanks to everyone who turned out for our cemetery tour at St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery! We had over 85 people attend the event. If you missed it, check our website in the coming months for a self-guided tour you can print and take yourself.

The Civil War Letters of Michigan Women

Mark your calendars to hear Professor Emerita Marilyn Culpepper speak about the Civil War Letters of Michigan Women on Thursday evening, September 15, at 7 pm. She will speak at the downtown Capitol Area District Library, located at 401 S. Capitol Ave. Like most of HSGL's events, the talk is free and open to the public. We hope to see you there!

E-mail Newsletters

Historical Society of Greater Lansing is now offering its members the option of receiving *The History Explorer* via e-mail. By e-mailing our newsletter the society will be able to save a considerable amount of money spent on postage and printing. If you would like to receive your newsletter via e-mail, please send an e-mail to info@lansinghistory.org. Thank you!

HSGL Fall Fundraiser Tickets!

Tickets are now available for the Historical Society of Greater Lansing's Fall Museum Fundraiser! All money raised will go towards the future establishment of a Lansing area historical museum. Over 75 items will be available for bidding during our silent auction, which will take place on Saturday October 8, 2011 from 4-7 pm at Comerica Bank in downtown Lansing. The bank is located at 101 N. Washington Square. Tickets for the event are \$15 for an individual, \$25 for a couple. The evening will also include tours of the bank building and light hors d'oeuvres. Please purchase your tickets soon! You'll find an order form in the newsletter, and also on our webpage. Please send your order form in with a check or cash to our P.O. Box, found on the ticket order form. We'll send you the tickets as soon as we get your order. If you have any questions, please call Valerie Marvin at 517-282-0671.

Some of the many items available for bidding and purchase at the auction include:

- A week condo rental on Kiawah Island, near Charleston, S.C.
- An elegant man's watch
- Several party packages
- A new bathroom sink and counter with installation
- Website hosting and consulting
- A \$100 gift certificate for MSU Evening College Classes
- An early 20th century framed Oldsmobile advertisement
- Michigan State Capitol Victorian souvenir china
- Gift certificates to local antique stores
- A set of 16 Civil War history books
- Two tickets to the Michigan History Foundation's Jingle Ball
- A set of 7 books about George Armstrong Custer
- A family membership to the R.E. Olds Museum
- A walking tour of Lansing's historic architecture
- Six hours of genealogy research assistance
- Michigan Historic Preservation Network membership

The City Shut Down: Lansing's Labor Holiday

by Richard J. Hathaway

The May 5, 1937 United Auto Workers' (UAW) Local 182 paper, The Lansing Auto Worker, printed a short article protesting the firing of seven workers at Capitol City Wrecking Company. All but a few of Capital City's nineteen workers had voted on April 25 to join the UAW. J.W Hoffman, owner of the company, which had just finished demolishing the Board of Water and Light Building on East Ottawa, responded by laying off seven union members and refusing to bargain. The article signaled the beginning of a momentous few weeks for the city, its working people, businesses, industries, and politicians.

The year 1937 had already seen a startling few months of labor protest, strikes, negotiations, and labor-industry agreements throughout the nation and Michigan. The settlement of the Flint Sit-Down Strike on February 11, the Detroit Chrysler Strike shortly thereafter, and the March 30 agreement ending the REO Sit-Down Strike in Lansing showed that labor could force the auto companies to negotiate wages and working conditions, and to recognize the UAW as the bargaining agent. The successful outcome of the REO strike encouraged Lansing's UAW local, under the leadership of Lester Washburn, to organize workers at smaller companies. Capital City Wrecking was one of their targets.

The Union called a strike May 21. Picket lines were set up in front of the Company at 719 East St. Joseph Street. Capital City Wrecking appealed to the courts. On June 1, an injunction prohibiting pickets from interfering with the operations of the Company was issued by Ingham County Circuit Court Judge Leland Carr. The injunction was served June 3 on Washburn and 25 pickets at the company gates. The injunction, viewed by workers as collusion between business and government to violate their rights, was ignored by the

pickets. Arrest warrants were issued for violation of the injunction.

For a few days Ingham County Sheriff Alan A. MacDonald, evidently not wanting to inflame a volatile situation, made no effort to execute the arrest warrants. But, under pressure from local business and political leaders he was forced to action. To avoid a violent encounter he chose the middle of the night to move against Washburn and the others. At 2:00 a.m. Monday June 7, the sheriff cut the phone lines to Washburn's house and raided the homes of Washburn and several other union families. Probably to the sheriff's dismay, Washburn was not home. He compensated by hauling in eight people, including Washburn's wife and another woman. Washburn's three children were left with a maid. The sheriff later said the arrests were made in a gentlemanly manner and every effort was made to prevent a demonstration. Five of those arrested faced charges of interfering with a laborer issued by Ingham County Prosecuting Attorney Thomas J. Bailey, Jr. Three were arrested on contempt warrants issued by Judge Carr. Lansing Chief of Police, Alfred J. Seymour, a fervent supporter of local political and business interests, assisted the Sheriff by housing the prisoners in the city jail in City Hall at the corner Ottawa and Capitol.

Washburn missed being arrested since he was on union business in Detroit. Arriving home at 2:30 a.m., he found his wife missing and his three children with a maid. He soon learned of the arrests and jailing of his wife and others. From a public phone he called other area union representatives to meet at Union Hall, only a half block from City Hall. A sense of outrage and opportunity prompted the union to call local union plant chairmen and ask all auto workers to take a one day holiday. At 5:00 a.m., Washburn called UAW International president Homer Martin and told him of the events and their plans. Washburn said he received Martin's authorization to call the holiday. About 5:30 a.m., company officials of Olds, REO, Fisher Body, Motor Wheel, and Lansing Stamping were called and told of the walkouts. Each local plant chairman arranged a committee to meet night and day shift workers, tell them of the arrests, and plans for the day's Labor Holiday.

Within three hours workers had massed at points throughout the city. At 8:30 a.m., Police Chief Seymour received a call from Capital City Wrecking saying a large mob was threatening to wreck the plant and demanding that Seymour release the prisoners. The chief refused,

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replying that only the prosecuting attorney could authorize the release. Prosecutor Bailey remained unavailable for most of the day. He later explained that if he had known he was needed, he would have stayed in touch. Chief Seymour, however, did send several officers to Capital City Wrecking. But, within a few minutes workers arrived in front of City Hall making their demands in person to the Mayor and Police Chief. Sheriff MacDonald also called Chief Seymour excitedly requesting that the prisoners be released. The Sheriff feared a mob would come to Mason and attack him and wreck the county jail. Mayor Max Templeton and Chief Seymour insisted that they did not have the authority to release the prisoners. The Mayor soon closed all City offices for the day.

Workers continued to stream into downtown Lansing. By late morning six to twelve thousand strikers and their supporters crowded in front of City Hall, across the way at the State Capitol, and the surrounding streets. Lansing workers were aided by “flying squads” of union men from Flint and Detroit. Loud speakers were set up and union leaders, including Homer Martin, urged release of the prisoners, a union contract with Capital City Wrecking, union recognition at all auto plants, and non-violence. Downtown streets were blocked with parked cars and trucks. Union members wearing bright blue capes were stationed at intersections directing traffic away from the inner city. Washburn announced emergency vehicles would be allowed to pass.

Men and women workers paraded city streets forcefully urging all businesses to close for the day. By 10:30 a.m., Lansing had no bus or taxi service. Around 11:00 a.m., 200 women pickets blockaded Knapp's department store and forced it's closing. About 11:30 a.m., the Lansing State Journal shut down for a few

hours. The State Senate adjourned for the day. Out on East Michigan Avenue, Cap Sheesley's Circus was setting up for an evening show. The circus roustabouts fended off the strikers and the show went on. A floating crap game developed at the corner of Michigan and Washington. The police wisely closed Lansing's bars and prohibited the sale of liquor. Despite the serious nature of the issues, in many cases a holiday spirit prevailed. No incidents of violence were reported, although the

trampling of flowers on the Capitol lawn did distress several speakers. As the day wore on with the Union members still locked up the situation became more tense and dangerous.

Governor Frank Murphy returned from Detroit around noon. When he heard of the demonstrations he made his way to his Capitol office, avoiding the crowds by entering through the back west

entrance. A New Deal liberal and confidant of President Franklin Roosevelt, Murphy was a friend to labor and intensely disliked by business interests and conservative politicians. As Governor he had already negotiated peaceful union-friendly strike settlements this year. But, the site of the capital city under siege raised his ire. He summoned Washburn to his office demanding that Washburn clear the streets. Washburn told Murphy the UAW was educating the public. The irate Governor responded that the “public will educate you”. However, Murphy soon realized that clearing the streets by force without bloodshed was impossible.

The Governor stepped out on the Capitol steps at 2:30p.m. and spoke to the crowd. He called for an investigation into the conditions leading to the holiday, cautioned against the use of violence, and assured the strikers of their right to peacefully assemble and protest. He promised to immediately call a meeting of local authorities, strikers, and the prosecuting attorney.



Lansing workers crowd 100 block of West Ottawa during the Labor Holiday. Photo Courtesy of Forest Parke Library and Archives, Capital Area District Library

Murphy had the confidence of workers, they believed him, and the mounting tension dissolved. Across Capitol Avenue Chief Seymour concluded that the city had been surrendered to the strikers with the support of State Government. Nearly two years later he recalled that he heard the communist anthem, *The Internationale*, sung both before and after Murphy spoke.

The Governor returned to his office and a series of meetings. He soon announced an agreement on the prisoners release and the beginning of negotiations to resolve the Capital City Wrecking strike. In the early afternoon, on orders from Judge Carr, three of the prisoners were released under bond of \$200 each. At about 4:30 p.m., Police Chief Seymour received a call from the Governor's Office requesting the release of the five remaining prisoners, including Washburn's wife. He refused until authorized by Justice of the Peace William Seeley and Prosecutor Bailey. Not long after 5:00 p.m., the prisoners were arraigned before the judge and prosecutor in the chief's office. Bail was furnished and they were released on their own recognizance pending a trial on Wednesday. The crowds in the streets dispersed. A violent confrontation was avoided.

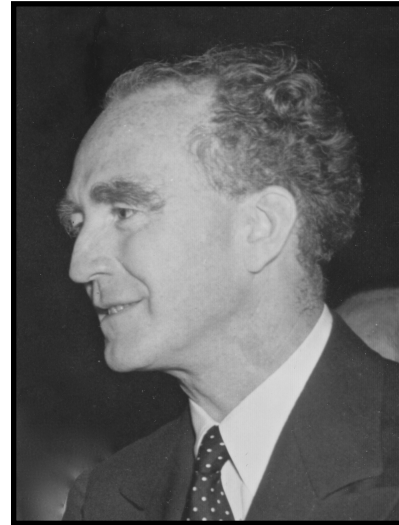
A final foray around 5:00 p.m. by some strikers into East Lansing was rebuffed by Michigan State College (now Michigan State University) students. Union members twice invaded East Lansing and tried to close stores along Grand River Avenue. Store owners generally complied until a large group of students confronted the workers. Students cleared the streets of strikers cars and several union members were thrown into the Red Cedar River. Chief Seymour later said that he heard Washburn order strikers to East Lansing to reinforce beleaguered workers. Washburn denied having given such an order. Governor Murphy, who lived in Cowles House on campus, rode out to monitor the "Battle of East Lansing" and was asked by students if they should mount horses and ride down the union men. He answered, "No boys, that would be too Cossack-like". The strikers retreated down Michigan and Grand River Avenues back to Lansing. Only minor injuries were reported.

Monday evening on the Capitol lawn several thousand workers listened to union leader Renaldo Cappellini urge a higher standard of living for laborers and assail Ford Motor Company for refusal to negotiate with the UAW. He also reached out to Michigan State College students hoping they would understand the

Union stance. Cappellini, an Italian immigrant who had lost an arm in a Pennsylvania coal mine accident, was a chief aide to Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) President John L. Lewis. Following the speech, workers staged a parade through the city streets accompanied by the blasts of car horns. The next morning auto workers

returned to the plants and stores welcomed shoppers. Lansing's Labor Holiday was over.

The impact of the Labor Holiday reached into many areas. The day following, American Federation of Labor members employed on construction projects in Lansing walked off their jobs for the day. On June 10, Capitol City Wrecking signed



*Governor Frank Murphy
Photo Courtesy of David Marvin*

an agreement with the union recognizing the UAW as sole bargaining agent, an eight-hour day, 44-hour week, and time-and-a-half for overtime. The union built on this success and over the next few months increased their organizing activities. Local 182 sarcastically thanked Sheriff MacDonald for his "brave" throwing of women and men into a "filthy" jail, causing the holiday and furthering the cause of unionization.

Some charges against the eight people arrested the morning of June 7, including Mrs. Washburn's, were dismissed. Others resulted in convictions. Lester Washburn was arrested the morning of June 9 in downtown Lansing by Sheriff MacDonald for "unlawful interference with a workingman in pursuit of his vocation" on June 4 on the Capital City Wrecking picket line. He was convicted July 1 and assessed \$100 in costs. He took the case to the Michigan Supreme Court where his conviction was upheld. The United States Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal.

Conservative reaction in Lansing to the Labor Holiday soon surfaced. The day after, on June 8, a statewide convention of Knights Templar paraded the city streets. Speakers warned against mob rule, proclaimed the sanctity of property rights, and demanded law and order. By the end of June, Lansing had a

virulent anti-union Law and Order League formed by Eastern High School principal and local American Legion Post Commander Dwight Rich. Some moderate labor leaders committed to cooperative business/labor relations also condemned the Holiday. Even though Washburn had gained his approval beforehand, on July 10, UAW President Homer Martin criticized the holiday as a mistake by a young and growing organization. The outcomes of the sit-down strikes of 1937 and the success of the Labor Holiday also contributed to the failure of the State Legislature and Governor Murphy to enact a Michigan Labor Relations Law that year. Excessive Union expectations and hardening conservative reaction doomed the bill.

The Labor Holiday played a major role in the career of Governor Frank Murphy. Murphy, friend of labor, free speech and civil liberties, was a target for Republican conservatives wrath. On July 2, Murphy stated that a small communist contingent had forced the State Journal and other businesses to close during the day. He also noted the formation in Michigan of militant anti-union vigilante groups. Murphy emphasized that he was not accusing the UAW of communism. The Union denied any communist involvement. Murphy's statement was odd since little radical activity occurred during the Holiday. A day later the ultra-conservative Chicago Daily Tribune reporting Murphy's words, branded several CIO and UAW leaders as communists but did not tie them to the Labor Holiday. Murphy, a conciliator, was probably frustrated with direct union action. At the same time he was also taking defensive political steps. He knew his role in the Flint Sit-Down Strike and Lansing Labor Holiday would be attacked in the following year's gubernatorial election campaign.

During the 1938 Michigan Governor's election campaign, Murphy was accused by the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities of encouraging and protecting militant radicals who took over Lansing during the Lansing Labor Holiday. Democrats, including President Roosevelt, accused Republican Committee Chairman Representative Martin Dies of attempting to influence the Michigan election. Murphy lost the election to his gubernatorial predecessor Frank Fitzgerald and left office January 1, 1939. One day later, Roosevelt appointed Murphy Attorney General of the United States. The Dies Committee again attacked Murphy. Calling the Lansing Labor Holiday disgraceful,

the Committee stated that a courageous stand by Murphy allowing police to disperse the demonstrators would have avoided the loss of millions of dollars to both labor and capital. A year later, on January 4, 1940, Roosevelt nominated Murphy to be an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Lester Washburn for many years continued to be a major force in the union's quest for labor rights and its internal struggles with socialists and communists intent on using unions as tools for social revolution. Washburn, in contrast, believed the union had but one aim, to better the everyday life of working people. The Lansing Labor Holiday reflected this goal. It was not a "general strike" in the sense of a wide area shutdown by the working class to challenge the economic structure. It was not class warfare. Rather it was a reaction to perceived injustices (wages and working conditions, worker firings, and the court injunction) and outrage at the early morning imprisonment of union men and women.

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Time Magazine



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