

THE MESABA ORE

and THE HIBBING NEWS.

The Mesaba Ore—Fifteenth Year—Number 26

HIBBING, (Saint Louis County), MINNESOTA, SATURDAY MORNING, JUNE 24, 1916

The Hibbing News—Twenty-third Year—Number 26

WHEN THE OLD MAN HEREOF EATS NAILS.

WE SAT UP better than half of one night last week fixing up a story for this department that we thought would please a number of our little friends who had kindly invited us to attend an out-door meeting of the Camp Fire Girls. We viewed the result with great personal satisfaction, but we reckoned without the linotype man and the kid that makes what he believes is an honest stab at "correcting the galley's." Between them they knocked our florid effort into several kinds of a cocked hat, to say nothing of the dye-stuff that impregnated the circumlocution atmosphere immediately we saw what had happened.

Here is appended the opening paragraph of our endeavor, and if you can make any sense out of it we'll give you a "cut" of one Adolph Eberhart (which we haven't any use for and never had).

One night last week I sat with fourteen little Indians, riending about a glowing camp fire in the big woods north of town, and together with the sweet music of the insect thoughts above was threaded, "Mudjokeeweb" in the voice of the Indian maiden as she recounted to her princess the manner in which she "earned her beads."

Our first impulse upon trying to read the jumbled mess was to take a half holiday and do an artistic stroke of murder just for the fun of the thing. A better thought came. It was that linotype operators and kids are more or less human after all, and while the forgiving was profuse

IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL TO EVERY TRUST.

KELLOGG easily won the republican nomination for United States senator, and if elected we shall have a "log man for a big job."

Don Lawler, who is always with us, is the democratic candidate for the same high honor, and it is not a safe bet that Kellogg will get away with the election as easily as he did with the nomination.

It is, however, a safe bet that of the two men Lawler is the closest to the people, and that if sent to the American House of Lords he will ably and honestly represent Minnesota—something that is needed and has been needed, in these many years.

The primary election effectually eliminated Eberhart, who has expressed regret that his birth in a foreign country stood as the bar against his seeking the presidency of the nation. Eberhart was a political accident, and Minnesota cannot point with pride to anything he ever did.

Senator Clapp simply wore himself out, and Candidate Lindbergh never was.

A HEART THAT IS MELLOWING WITH AGE.

UNLESS the miners' strike being promoted at the mines of the Oliver Iron Mining company on the Mesaba range is called off within the next few days, the

SHOWED NEWS TRIBUNE WHERE TO HEAD IN.

SAY, but didn't we bust the little old Duluth News Tribune wide open? Some bust, some bust. It was the first opportunity Hibbing has had to pay its respects to the scurrilous outfit, and it paid with interest.

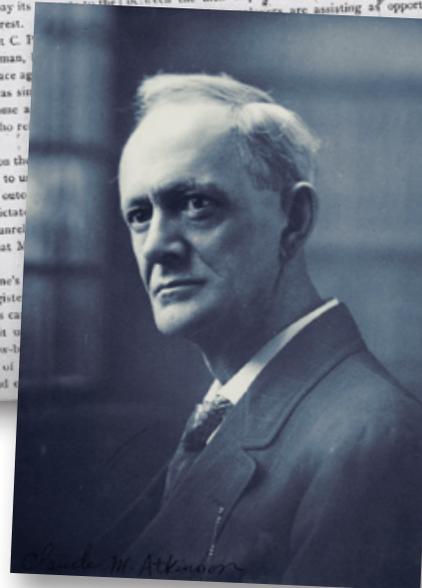
It was in no sense a vote against C. F. Miller, an able and highly honorable gentleman, whose interests that brought him into the race against man Miller. As The Ore stated, it was simply the desire of the News Tribune to become a member of the district in a parish official who received orders from that source.

That a good man was sacrificed on the chargeable to the News Tribune, not to us. The whole thing was the direct outcome of man Miller's positive refusal to be dictated to by the News Tribune, and thereupon that wholly unrequited hunt for a man to "beat" the result was just as we predicted.

We are glad of the News Tribune's giving Hibbing its opportunity to register its publication, which conducted its campaign just as it does everything it undertakes, bull-dozing and brow-beating. Congressman Miller went out of a party of close to one thousand, and a

A SURE CURE FOR THE STRIKE FEVER.

THE Industrial Workers of the World have invaded Hibbing and are doing their very best to foment trouble between the men employed in the mines and their employers. The I. W. O. are assisting at



A WAR OF WORDS

The Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News Takes on the "Big Fellows"

Andrea C. Allard

"State officials have prostituted their offices to gain favor from the Steel barons; federal officers sell their souls for a nod; county officers cringe to the buccaneers and village and city officials kiss the feet of the task-master."

THIS SWEEPING condemnation of all politicians who supported the United States Steel Corporation during the Mesabi Iron Range miners' strike of 1916 was issued by neither radical union organizers nor striking miners. Rather, the writers of this fiery diatribe were Claude M. Atkinson and his son, Marc, owner/editors of one small but highly vocal Iron Range newspaper, the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News*.¹

In the summer of 1916, the Mesabi Iron Range was the site of a bloody showdown between thousands of striking miners and U.S. Steel, the

vast organization that, through its subsidiaries—in particular, the Oliver Mining Company—owned and operated the mines. Described as "one of the largest and most violent labor strikes in Minnesota's history," the strike was given front-page coverage in many Iron Range newspapers, the majority of which sided with U.S. Steel against the miners' claims. Long before the strike began, the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News* was unique in expressing condemnation and outright loathing of the "Big Fellows"—the mining companies and those who supported them. As such, the father-

and-son editors were instrumental in courageously presenting alternative, and often unpopular, viewpoints.²

The Atkinsons used the platform of the newspaper they owned to print what suited them. Their articles frequently took a high moral tone, with editorializing replacing objective reportage, a common practice in journalism of that era. By covering the strike the way they did, the *Mesaba*

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ABOVE: Claude M. Atkinson, copublisher and editor of the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News*.

Ore editors revealed themselves to be a hometown force, one that eventually even U.S. Steel Corporation took seriously. The newspaper's support of miners' rights evolved over the course of the three-and-a-half-month strike. Eventually, their passionate stance on behalf of the miners placed the Atkinsons themselves in the line of fire. By the time the strike came to an end on September 17, rather than simply reporting the news, they had become the news.³

CLAUDE ATKINSON, an experienced and respected newspaperman, had worked on papers in Wisconsin, Michigan, Wyoming, and Montana before buying the *Mesaba Ore* in 1902, soon after the family moved to Minnesota. With son Marc, who was 27 years old in 1916, he published the paper once a week, on Saturday, from offices at 108 Third Avenue in Hibbing. Regular advertisers included the local drug store, dentist, jeweler, and hat shop. Claude's

25-year-old daughter, Beatrice, wrote the weekly social column. Church services and local events were regularly covered. In the summer of 1916, the local news was the strike.⁴

Far from being malcontents, the Atkinsons were first and foremost loyal citizens of Hibbing, which they proudly called "the richest village in the world." They enthusiastically endorsed as a possible contender for the governor's office Victor L. Power, who in 1916 was on the second of what would eventually be 10 terms as village president. As business people, the editors were aware of the need to keep readers and advertisers on their side. They were initially careful in expressing their views concerning the strike. In a tightrope act worthy of circus performers, on July 1, one month after the strike began, the Atkinsons wrote both in support of local businesses whom, they argued, "must put up with the bulk of the burden" during the strike, as well as the striking miners, whom they initially described as "deluded and easily-led"

but who, the Atkinsons suggested, should be allowed to "march the streets if they want" because, "[a]fter a few unmolested marches and a few meetings, the novelty of the thing will have passed—and there will be better feeling all around." Like many of the papers published on the Range and in Duluth, their initial belief that the strike would be short-lived and ineffective proved to be a serious misjudgment.⁵

The *Mesaba Ore* was happy to publicize the striking miners' demands, reprinting them on at least four occasions. The strikers' claims were straightforward, including demands for an eight-hour day that started from the time miners traveled down to the mine or into the open pits, a minimum wage of \$3.00 per day in the underground mines, or \$3.50 for those who worked in wet areas, abolishment of the contract system that required miners to buy their own tools and supplies, payday twice a month, and double pay for overtime. The miners had cause to believe that

In 1916, the Mesaba Ore was published at 108 Third Ave. in Hibbing, possibly in this building (exact address unknown) that Atkinson owned.





Miners ready to descend into an iron mine.

their demands were justified: with World War I into its third year in Europe, iron ore was a precious commodity, essential for the production of the steel required for munitions, tanks, and other war supplies. U.S. Steel Corporation, and in particular its subsidiary, Oliver Mining Company, were making incredible profits. Earnings in the first six months of

Far from being malcontents, the Atkinsons were first and foremost loyal citizens of Hibbing.

1916 for U.S. Steel were \$131 million, while the wages of the miners who produced the ore fell well below the local cost of living in the northern United States, and compared poorly to the minimum wages paid to other workers in the country.⁶

Initial battle lines were drawn on June 3, 1916, when miner Joe Greeni, angry at the money subtracted from his wages to cover the cost of his tools, walked off the job and took his fellow miners with him. The strike soon spread from Aurora and Biwabik at the eastern rim of the Mesabi Range to the mines on the western rim, including those near the major towns of Virginia and Hibbing.⁷

Into the battle came the Industrial Workers of the World. Regarded by many as “bizarre and outlandishly revolutionary,” the IWW was a radical labor organization founded in 1905. Historians have described the IWW as “first and foremost an organization which sought to organize unskilled and semi-skilled workers into industrial unions for higher wages, shorter

hours, and better working conditions.” Nonetheless, it was feared by many. Unlike the conservative, craft-based American Federation of Labor (AFL), the “One Big Union” was an industrial union committed to direct action and prepared to work not only with unskilled migrants, but also women and people of color.⁸

The IWW had a presence on the Iron Range dating to 1911 and maintained an office in Duluth. “Big” Bill Haywood, head of the IWW, sent organizers to the Iron Range in 1916 to offer support to the striking miners. The organizers were dedicated, and at times confrontational. Over the course of the strike, they offered

financial as well as moral support and guidance to the strikers and their families at great personal risk to themselves.⁹

Many St. Louis County citizens, including the Atkinsons, strongly disapproved of having representatives of such a radical organization on the Range. The IWW and, in particular, Bill Haywood (who 10 years earlier had been acquitted of the murder of a former governor of Colorado in a controversial trial that received national press coverage), had a reputation for anarchy and bloodshed. Many of the Range newspapers invoked Haywood’s reputation for using violence during industrial disputes as evidence of the mayhem and chaos associated with the IWW. Despite the fact that Haywood himself never appeared on the Range during the strike, the Atkinsons were among those who spoke out against him, criticizing him as “a strong arm worker of the most pronounced type.” They were prepared to add, on July 15, “That there are honest and well-meaning men as leaders of the strike movement on the Mesaba range there is no room for denial but whatever of good they may create it is promptly destroyed by the Haywood influence.”¹⁰

Yet, the Atkinsons did not view the IWW as the greatest villain. That honor went to the Oliver Mining Company. Long before the strike started, the Atkinsons used their paper to condemn the “Big Fellows” for trying to “wipe Hibbing off the map.” One sarcastic paragraph, in the June 24 edition of the paper, succinctly summarizes the reasons why they held U.S. Steel and William James Olcott, the president of Oliver Mining Company, in such contempt:

Less than four years ago, when the people of Hibbing secured an injunction restraining Mr. Olcott’s benevolent company

from blasting the daylight out of Hibbing, Mr. Olcott caused all of his company's mines within a radius of two miles of Hibbing to be closed down as a punishment to the people for daring to interfere with Mr. Olcott and his company. . . . Then, we recall that just a year ago Mr. Olcott's big hearted organization led a movement wherein the Oliver Iron Mining company and ten other mining concerns operating in this district refused to pay their taxes, in open violation of the law. . . . This effort . . . was to punish the people for having elected to office a man who conducted the affairs of the village in the interest of the people rather than in the interest of the mining companies.¹¹

The man was Victor Power. Because of Power's leadership, the Oliver Mining Company was forced to pay their long-overdue back taxes, saving Hibbing from financial ruin.

The early predictions that the strike would be short-lived were nullified when, on June 22, a striking miner, John Alar of Virginia, was shot and killed by sheriff's "deputies"—gunmen whose salaries were paid by the mining company. Alar's funeral served as a rallying point. Over 4,000 miners from across the Range gathered at the Socialist Hall in Virginia and marched behind Alar's casket. Led by IWW organizer Carlo Tresca, under a banner that read "Murdered by Oliver Gunmen," the march was followed by impassioned speeches where Tresca demanded "an eye for an eye or a life for a life." Oddly, the weekly *Mesaba Ore* gave almost no coverage to Alar's murder, which occurred on the Thursday before its Saturday, June 24, edition, nor did the July 1 issue cover his funeral, which occurred on Monday, June 26.¹²

Now the battle had turned bloody,



The "Big Fellows." L to r, Horace Johnson, president of the Duluth & Iron Range Railroad; William James Olcott, president of the Oliver Iron Mining Company; W. J. Filbert, comptroller of U.S. Steel Corporation; and William A. McGonagle, president, Duluth, Missabe Railroad.

and the Atkinsons were clear about whom to blame: the "Oliver gunmen." On the front page of the July 8 edition, they announced "Every killing that has taken place on the range during the present labor trouble has been the direct result of interference by the hired thugs of the mining company." They asserted that "[i]t has become the general practice of the Oliver Iron Mining company's private policemen to abuse the strikers at every opportunity and wholly without cause, and the miners don't like that sort of thing any better than any other human being."¹³

While the hired "thugs" became the local face of the hated mining company, the other organization that the Atkinsons took exception to was the *Duluth News Tribune*, a daily newspaper they described as "a nobody, toad-eater that cringes at the heels of the Steel Corporation" and "a confirmed liar that nothing on earth can move . . . in the right direction." The editors appeared to relish taking on the much larger daily

paper and laying accusations that verged on libelous.¹⁴ The Atkinsons also weren't averse to accusing other papers of libel. When the editor of the *Tower News* printed that the *Mesaba Ore* was "championing the cause" of the IWW, the Atkinsons responded by declaiming:

That's a base libel, Dad, and if we didn't know you for being the good old scout you are, we'd be inclined to take a whack at that old bald dome of yours. The *Ore* is not championing the I.W.W. or any red flag outfit because we don't believe in that sort of stuff. What we are trying to do is to enter our humble protest against the many abuses practiced by the mining companies—abuses that give the I.W.W. and the socialists their footholds on the range. Get us right next time, old chap.¹⁵

This conversational style and engagement with the editorials of other newspapers was a common

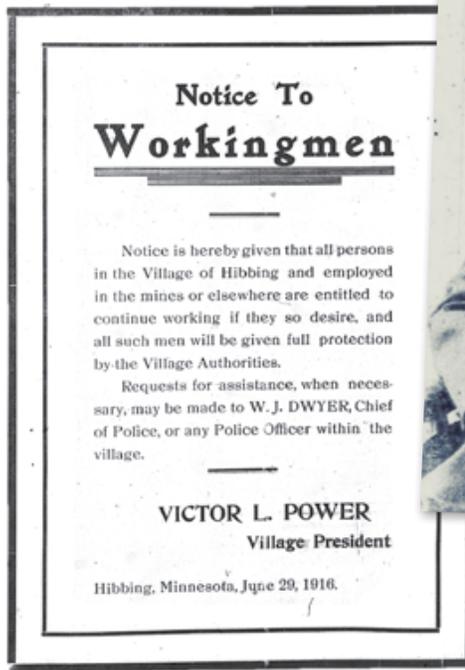


Image of Victor L. Power, Hibbing village president, and a "Notice to Workingmen" signed by Power in the midst of the strike, from the pages of the Mesaba Ore.

feature of the *Mesaba Ore*. As more of their fellow editors attacked the Atkinsons' outspoken support for the miners, they reprinted and responded to the accusations in the *Mesaba Ore*.¹⁶

In their repeated condemnations of the *Duluth News Tribune* as the mouthpiece of U.S. Steel and the "un-American" private police force of the mining company, the Atkinsons came dangerously close to being in complete agreement with the IWW organizers, despite their declared dislike and disapproval of "that grafting, cut-throat outfit." While the *Mesaba Ore*, for example, referred to the *Duluth News Tribune* as a "toad-eating" newspaper and "a liar," the *Strikers' News*, an occasional paper produced by IWW organizers, which claimed to be the "Official Strike Bulletin of the Striking Iron Ore Miners of the Mesaba Range," frequently referred to the *News Tribune* as "the Duluth Spittoon." Like the Atkinsons, the producers of the *Strikers' News* were scathing about the "hired thugs" of the mining companies, whom they viewed as agent provocateurs.¹⁷

As locals, the Atkinsons were able to put current events into historical

context. In the July 2 edition they wrote:

The men on strike are the men imported nine years ago [during the strike of 1907] to take the place of the Finns, and in those long and grinding years they have become imbued with a touch of American independence—they have seen the cost of living advance about two hundred per cent in the nine years since they came to work in the mines of the Mesaba range, while their wages have not been increased to exceed fifty per cent. Is it, therefore, any wonder they listen to the labor agitator?¹⁸

The Atkinsons, as the self-declared voice "of the underdog . . . in a nation where two per cent of the population owns sixty per cent of the property," appeared to become more radicalized as the strike became more violent and abuses of power by the mining company more extreme. One such abuse was the arrest of three IWW organizers, Tresca, Sam Scarlett, and Joe Schmidt, along with five miners and one miner's wife, for the murder

of Deputy Sheriff James Myron and an innocent bystander, Tomi Ladvalla, on July 3, 1916, in Biwabik. This clearly offended the *Mesaba Ore* editors, who spoke out against the unfair treatment of the organizers "arrested for an alleged crime that was committed twenty-five miles away [from where they were]. They are taken without warrant, denied the constitutional right to a hearing within twenty-four hours, railroaded seventy five miles to Duluth in a special train over a Steel corporation railroad, and finally held to the grand jury on the charge of murder." This critique of the treatment of the IWW men put the Atkinsons in the minority of editors on the Range and was indicative of their changing attitudes.¹⁹

While many other Range papers continued to accuse the IWW of taking money from the strikers to benefit themselves, the Atkinsons, by mid-July, no longer endorsed this widespread belief. "Notwithstanding all of the noise that has been raised by the toad-eating press," they wrote on July 15, "the fact remains that the Industrial Workers of the World has not asked to be recognized by the mining companies and the only demands made so far have been for the direct benefit of the miners and laborers. Keep that in mind."²⁰

After the arrest of organizers Tresca, Scarlett, and Schmidt following the clash of July 3, the IWW sent Joseph Ettor and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to take their places. Flynn was no stranger to the Range, having worked there during the strike in 1907. Her arrival in mid-July marked a turning point, at least for the senior Atkinson, who proudly announced in the paper that "'the old man' got to shake her hand and was 'glad of it.'"²¹

Claude Atkinson used the occasion of Flynn's speech in late July to complain of how "the corporation newspapers portrayed her as a fiery

anarchist that preached bloodshed and murder throughout the land, as a means for adjusting the difference between capital and labor” and then quickly added, “but we have found her nothing of the kind, and the mining men and others who were at the meeting with us will verify the statement.” The elder Atkinson waxed poetic when declaring that Flynn’s speech was “a message of peace, and full of encouragement for those who need just such spirits as that of Miss Flynn to keep alive the hope within them.” The story was reprinted in the *Strikers’ News* of Aug. 11, 1916, under the headline “Elizabeth Gurley Flynn Makes Good Impression. Newspaper Man Finds Her Different from What She Has Been Painted.” That Claude Atkinson became a news item in the paper produced by the IWW became one more piece of evidence used against the editors of the *Mesaba Ore*.²²

In their eagerness to declare themselves as supporters of the underdog and to take a stand against U.S. Steel, the editors’ hyperbole occasionally made for inaccurate reportage. For example, their claim that the corporation newspapers portrayed Flynn as “a fiery anarchist” does not stand up to close examination. The *Duluth News Tribune*, unlike the *Mesaba Ore*, actually reprinted verbatim a large section of Flynn’s July 20 speech. In their coverage, she was described as “the personal representative” of Bill Haywood and as an “I.W.W. agitator.” She was then quoted as saying, “I am not here to tell you what to do. I am here to say that you should stand by the I.W.W. in making this strike a success. . . . The I.W.W. is your friend and I leave it to your own intelligence whether you should support it.” This, as well as other stories about Flynn in the *Duluth News Tribune*, hardly portrayed her as an advocate of bloodshed and murder, as the *Mesaba Ore* editors claimed.²³

As another indication of how their views became more radical as the strike progressed, by the end of the summer the Atkinsons were printing accusations that the giant U.S. Steel Corporation was stealing the resources that rightfully belonged to the people of Minnesota. This seems a radical version of resource ownership under capitalism, an interpretation more in keeping with the revolutionary ideals of the IWW, and a stance that goes much further than mere support of miners’ claims for improved wages and conditions.²⁴

The editors’ vilification of the Oliver Mining Company and the private army of gunmen employed by them became even more vociferous as the summer progressed. On August 5, the Atkinsons went so far as to state that one of the hired gunmen, Nick Dillon, accused of shooting Tomi Ladvala, had been promoted by the mining companies from being a “bouncer” at a brothel because “he is a killer. So long as the mining companies can employ killers that will kill, they want to keep such men as Dillon on their pay-roll.”²⁵

The editors’ vilification of the Oliver Mining Company and the private army of gunmen employed by them became even more vociferous as the summer progressed.

And the Atkinsons did not stop there. Also in their sights was Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist, who had ordered St. Louis County sheriff John R. Meining to “stop the rioting” on the Range, directing him to swear in a posse if necessary. The Atkinsons saw this as outside interference and uncalled-for criticism of Range authorities, and blamed the governor for bowing to pressure from the U.S. Steel Corporation. “Governor Burnquist is trying to make people believe he is possessed of a backbone, but we are willing to bet it is nothing

more than a desire to toady to the Big Fellows—a kind of Rooseveltian bluff.” Two weeks later, under the headline “Standing on the Neck of the Laborers,” they implied that Burnquist was looking to get himself reelected through his stance. “Obviously Governor Burnquist thought he saw an opportunity to make himself solid with the mining companies which he evidently believed still had the power to drive their men to the polls and make them vote according to orders, and he played politics—using his high office to aid the mining companies in their great effort to grind down the laboring men of the Mesaba range.”²⁶

Bold claims, indeed.

Retaliation finally came. In mid-August, the *Duluth News Tribune* claimed that the *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News*, like the feared IWW, was “anarchistic” in its principles. Being called out as an anarchist in a newspaper with the wide circulation of the *Duluth News Tribune* was dangerous and could have serious consequences. This was only eight months before the Minnesota Public Safety Commis-

sion was established to root out those deemed to be disloyal to the country, with subsequent raids on IWW headquarters in Minneapolis, Duluth, and Chicago, and only 12 months before the passage of the Federal Espionage Act, where those judged to be anarchists, radicals, or too left-wing by the U.S. government were arrested, jailed or deported.²⁷

The Atkinsons did not flinch, however. Instead, they used two front-page columns to refute the accusation. “The anarchy on the range and other parts of the country



Governor Joseph A.A. Burnquist.

... is not practiced by the laboring men who are asking for a few cents increase in their pay—it is openly, wantonly and viciously practiced by the United States Steel Corporation and its hirelings which extend into every branch of the government,” they wrote on August 19. In another article on the same day, they proclaimed that “No great cause ever gained footing in this country or any other without revolt, and we sincerely hope that the people in this state are reaching in that direction—there is surely cause enough for revolt.” In near biblical prose—seemingly another indication of how their attitudes toward the IWW had clearly shifted as a result of the strike—they wrote, “It may be in time that the present activities of the Industrial Workers of the World will be looked upon as the spirit that brought forth the men that will lead us up out of the wilderness.”²⁸

The next major attack on the *Mesaba Ore* came in early September, led by sometime-friend and fellow editor E. A. Koen of the *Biwabik Times*, an attack that the Atkinsons republished and refuted in their newspaper. This time the *Times* used

the Atkinsons’ own words against them to present them as hypocrites. The *Times* reprinted previous *Mesaba Ore* articles written in support of the mining companies during the strike of 1907. In responding to the criticism, the Atkinsons wrote: “The *Times* exposé of our attitude during the former season of labor trouble on the Mesaba range only adds to the truth that is plainly to be seen . . . that we have learned a lot in the past nine years, a fact we are mighty glad the *Times* has taken the trouble to further advertise.” They again argued that while the U.S. Steel Corporation earnings for the year would be over \$300 million, “it refuses to give their range employees a wage advance of 15 cents a day.” They also happily took credit for their past editorials that helped the people of Hibbing to understand where “the Steel corporation left off and the Village of Hibbing began” and which, they asserted, was “part of the means that prepared the way for Victor L. Power’s election to the village presidency and thus was broken the power of the Steel corporation in the richest village in the world.” Making a link between backing Power for village president and holding the mining company to account for their back taxes was a success that the Atkinsons were proud to claim.²⁹

However, the newspaper’s close affiliation with Power also led the *Biwabik Times* to accuse the *Mesaba Ore* of being a “Vic Power organ” and an “I.W.W. organ.” Since Power had recently announced that he would be one of several defense lawyers representing the incarcerated miners and IWW organizers charged with first-degree murder, this association again raised suspicions about the editors of the *Mesaba Ore* and their seemingly too-close alliance with the radicals. The Atkinsons argued in rebuttal that accusations against them “would not cure the cause of the strike of Mesaba

range miners—that’s the vital point and the one that we are trying to adhere to and keep on friendly terms with our enemies.”³⁰

But their enemies were multiplying. The following week, a number of other Range papers revealed that the Atkinsons had allowed the *Strikers’ News*, produced by members of the IWW, to be printed on their presses. This was guilt by association and seemed to back up previous claims that the Atkinsons were closely allied with the IWW extremists. Again, the editors reprinted and addressed the accusations directly, pointing out that they ran a printing business and the *Strikers’ News*, to them, was just another printing job. Undaunted, they argued further that other businesses on the Range also accepted money from the IWW with no one accusing them of being in sympathy with the union. And then, in a back-handed compliment, indicative of their own changed attitudes toward the IWW, they also noted that “we believe [the *Strikers’ News*] to be more honest and truthful than some of the publications inspired and paid for by the United States Steel corporation.”³¹

BUT IT WAS IN mid-September, the same weekend that the strike itself came to an end, that the most serious blow was dealt, again by the Atkinsons’ nemesis, the *Duluth News Tribune*. This time, the editors of the Duluth paper charged both Power and the Atkinsons with graft. Specifically, the editors of the *Mesaba Ore* were accused in a report undertaken by the State Examiner on behalf of the governor of defrauding the village of Hibbing of \$13,000 over the previous five years. Once again, the Atkinsons went on the offensive, using three pages of the September 16 edition to refute the charges against them: “During the long years we have been engaged in

what we are pleased to call a fight for humanity, we have not received one five cent piece as payment for that effort we have made to expose and fasten upon the minds of the people of Minnesota, the nefarious operations of the Steel corporation.”³²

The Atkinsons argued that the claim that they had overcharged (and thus defrauded) the village of \$13,000 in printing charges was based on an incorrect assumption: namely, that the printing done for the village should have been charged at a lower “legal advertising” rate but was instead charged at the higher “display advertising” rate. Furthermore, they argued, the report was undertaken at the behest of U.S. Steel Corporation, which was looking for something to use against Power during his March 1916 reelection campaign, and once completed, was improperly leaked to the *Duluth News Tribune*. They defended Power, and also accused: “Will all the noise by the Steel corporation cover up the fact that it is not paying its employees a decent wage and that it is robbing Minnesota of its mineral wealth?”³³

The Atkinsons also gave Power a front-page column to refute the charges made by the *News Tribune* against him and other members of

the Hibbing council. Despite the seriousness of the charges, the Atkinsons’ sense of humor was still evident in one jocular statement that appeared on page 1 of the September 16 edition: “If we can only manage to keep out of jail until after the huntin’ season we’ll take chances on the rest.” Because most of the *Mesaba Ore’s* pages that Saturday were devoted to the editors defending themselves and Victor Power against the graft charges, the strike itself received little coverage. By forcing the Atkinsons to address accusations of fraud, the *Duluth News Tribune*, and indirectly the Oliver Mining Company, had found a way to silence their most strident critics.

By mid-September, the battle was over. A day after the Atkinsons published their response to the charges of graft, the miners voted to end the strike; within a month, miners’ wages were increased and conditions improved; and within three months the charges of first-degree murder against IWW organizers were dropped and they were released from jail. As part of the agreement, three immigrant miners accepted prison sentences.³⁴

While U.S. Steel’s refusal to enter into negotiations with the miners was blamed on the presence of the

IWW, in hindsight, the Atkinsons were far more astute than many of their newspaper colleagues when they wrote, “The policy of the Mesaba range mining companies is to prevent their employees from organizing and the Industrial Workers of the World is used merely as a blind to hide their own lawlessness. The same conditions would have prevailed no matter what might have been the name of the labor organization.”³⁵

OVER THE COURSE of the strike, Claude and Marc Atkinson, father and son, used the power of their small local press to give voice to the concerns of those who lacked the power to make themselves heard. Their support of the miners’ rights, moderate to begin with, became stronger and more unequivocal as the violence against the strikers increased. Fearlessly, they refused to curtail their criticisms of the “Big Fellows.” Indeed, they became more strident in the face of U.S. Steel Corporation’s opposition. Their advocacy of the rights of citizens to have their say and to have their labor fairly rewarded drew widespread condemnation from a number of other editors and made the Atkinsons the targets of baseless and dangerous charges. “Anarchists” and “grafters”—the accusations against them—had come not only from the hated *Duluth News Tribune* but also from some of their colleagues in other Range newspapers. Yet the Atkinsons stood their ground to demand justice from the Oliver Mining Company and to hold government officials to account.

Nothing appeared to have come of the charges against the Atkinsons, despite the fact that their unremitting criticism of the mining corporation



Third Avenue, Hibbing, looking north from Oliver Hotel, around 1910.

continued in the following year. In the long term, their advocacy on behalf of the strikers and their stance against Oliver Mining appears to have earned them local respect and greater success, as measured by the fact that the weekly paper expanded to daily publication in 1920, renamed the *Hibbing Daily News and Mesaba Ore*. The daily paper continued under the auspices of the Atkinson duo until the end of 1927, when Claude retired.³⁶

Claude Atkinson died suddenly of influenza on January 1, 1929, in Litchfield, Illinois, while on a visit to son Marc, who had moved with his family from Hibbing to become editor of the *Litchfield Times*. Claude's death received banner headlines and front-page coverage in papers across the Range, with his friend and colleague Grove Wills, editor of the *Eveleth Clarion*, aptly noting, "No person ever had reason to guess for whom and for what he championed."³⁷

Revisiting this David and Goliath battle between a small weekly newspaper and the mighty U.S. Steel Corporation serves as a reminder of the importance of the free press in a democratic society. One hundred years on, the Atkinsons' words, published in the *Mesaba Ore* on September 9, 1916, near the strike's conclusion, are a testament to their abiding belief in the power of the fourth estate to advocate for social and economic change: "We shall continue the fight and glory in it." This serves as a fitting epitaph to the Atkinsons, and to the ordinary people of the Range, whose rights they argued for so passionately in the summer of 1916.³⁸ □

(Summer 1988): 63. Along with the *Mesaba Ore*, other Iron Range newspapers that covered the strike included the *Eveleth News*, *Hibbing Tribune*, *Mesaba Miner* (Chisholm), *Tribune-Herald* (Chisholm), *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, *Biwabik Times*, and *Tower News*. In *Beyond the Ore Docks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Richard Hudelson and Carl Ross note that, "Even the *Labor World*, though highly critical of the IWW, ran stories critical of the coverage of the strike by the local press, charging it with gross distortion and bias on behalf of the mining companies" (70). In *Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), Nunzio Pernicone stated, "Local newspapers and businessmen assisted the [Oliver Mining] company by demonizing the IWW and withholding credit and supplies from the strikers" (89).

3. Bylines were not used for most articles or for the Atkinsons' own responses in the *Mesaba Ore* to comments made about the strike or themselves by other Range newspaper editors. By implication, the views conveyed were shared by both editors.

4. For C. M. Atkinson's biography, see obituary in the *Hibbing Daily Tribune*, Jan. 2, 1929, 1-2, and 1905 *Minnesota State Census Index*, Atkinson, Claude, record 314888, <http://people.mnhs.org/finder/census/314888>.

5. "Armed Guards Constantly on Duty," *Mesaba Ore*, Jan. 15, 1916, 1; *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 27, 1913, 4; "Wherein the People Will Have a Say," *Mesaba Ore*, July 1, 1916, 1; "Refuse to Make Martyrs of Strikers," *Mesaba Ore*, June 24, 1916, 1. For the opinions of other papers, see, for example, "I.W.W. Agitators' Efforts to Call Strike Prove Futile," *Duluth News Tribune*, June 17, 1916, 9; "Agitators Prove Unpopular Throughout the District," *Duluth News Tribune*, June 18, 1916, 14; "Agitators Make No Headway," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 3, 1916, n.p.; "Back Bone of Strike is Broken: Sheriff Meining with Force of 800 Deputies Controls Situation," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 5, 1916, 1; "Strike Will End This Week. Miners Satisfied That They Can Safely Return to Work Since Worst Element Has Left Range," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 6, 1916, 1.

6. "Proceedings," *Strikers' News*, n.d., 1; "Make Known Demands," *Duluth News Tribune*, June 23, 1916, 9; "Mines Crippled by Strike of I.W.W. Followers," *Mesaba Ore*, July 1, 1916, n.p.; "Piling Millions for the Plutocrat," *Mesaba Ore*, July 8, 1916, 1; "Contract System Not a Square Deal," *Mesaba Ore*, July 15, 1916, 1; Douglas Ollila, Jr., "Ethnic Radicalism and the 1916 Mesabi Strike," *Range History* 3.4 (Dec. 1978): 1-4, 10.

7. Neil Betten, "Riot, Revolution, Repression in the Iron Range Strike of 1916," *Minnesota History* 41 (Summer 1968): 82-93; Michael G. Karni, "Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the Mesabi Strike of 1916," *Range History* 5 (Winter 1981): 1-5.

8. Ollila, "Ethnic Radicalism," 4; Philip S. Foner and Michael R. Johnson, "The I.W.W. Prior to America's Entry into World War 1," *Science & Society* 29 (Winter 1965): 91. For a full and infor-

mative discussion of why the AFL refused to engage with the miners of the Mesaba Range, see Donald G. Sofchalk, "Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota, 1907-1936," *Labor History* 2 (Spring 1971): 214-43. For more information about the campaigns organized by the IWW, see Pernicone, *Carlo Tresca*, and Lara Vapnek, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary* (New York: Westview Press, 2015).

9. Hudelson and Ross, *Beyond the Ore Docks*, 61; Foner and Johnson, "The I.W.W. Prior to America's Entry into World War 1," 92.

10. "Corporation Uses I.W.W. as a Blind," *Mesaba Ore*, July 15, 1916, 1. On the murder trial, see, for example *Mesaba Ore*, May 13, 1916, 1; *Mesaba Ore*, June 24, 1916, 1; *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 7, 1916, 3; *Duluth News Tribune*, June 17, 1916, 9; J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); Douglas Linder, "The Trial of William 'Big Bill' Haywood" (2007), doi: 10.2139/ssrn.1023972. The claim about Haywood's role was disputed in several pro-mining company reports. See, for example, Tyler Dennett, "The Mining Strike in Minnesota: The Other Side. Special Correspondence to the Outlook," *Outlook* 113 (May-Aug. 1916): 1046-48.

On Haywood's reputation, see, for example, "A Black Record," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 6, 1916, 1; "I.W.W. in Desperation Attempts Murder of Women and Children," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 8, 1916, 1; "Another Attempted Murder by I.W.W.," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 11, 1916, 1; "Great Northern Bridge Burned; Believed to be the Work of the Industrial Workers of the World," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 14, 1916, 1; "Agitators Prove Unpopular"; "Dynamite Placed on D. & I.R. Tracks. Hayward Is Directing I.W.W. Leaders. Notorious Agitator Sends Tresca Check for '2 Weeks' Work," *Duluth News Tribune*, July 3, 1916, 1.

In response, *Strikers' News* went on the defensive in their first edition (n.d.), with the headline "What the Miners Demand," writing, "Vials of poison have been poured into the well of public opinion, we have been branded as murderers, thieves, rioters, traitors, undesirable aliens—why? Because we are demanding more wages, shorter hours, a better standard of living and some measure of protection against a ruthless employer and their dishonest hirelings" (2).

11. "A Heart That Is Mellowing with Age," *Mesaba Ore*, June 24, 1916, 1. For the Atkinsons on Oliver Mining Company, see "Wherein the People Will Have a Say." For a full recap of how Hibbing as a village stood up to the Oliver Mining Company, see Edmund D. DeLestry, "editor and publisher of the *Western Magazine*, St. Paul, Minnesota," "The Romance of a Town," which was reprinted in full in *Mesaba Ore*, May 27, 1916, 1.

12. "Murdered by Oliver Gunmen in Red Leads Striker's Funeral," *Duluth News Tribune*, June 27, 1916, 5; Ollila, "Ethnic Radicalism," 3.

13. "Mesaba Range Mines Closed By I.W.W. Men," *Mesaba Ore*, June 24, 1916, 2. The

Notes

1. "Anarchy Throttling the State," *Mesaba Ore and Hibbing News* (hereafter cited as *Mesaba Ore*), Aug. 19, 1916, 1.

2. Robert Eleff, "The 1916 Minnesota Miners' Strike Against U.S. Steel," *Minnesota History* 51

Atkinsons had argued previously against the presence of such an armed force in "the pay of the Oliver Mining company." For example, in the Jan. 15, 1916, edition of the *Mesaba Ore*, they showed prescience when they wrote, "Supposing now, for instance, there comes trouble at the mines and the mining companies see fit to order out its private police force to shoot down those they deem need shooting down, then you can understand the nature of this prostitution of the laws of the state—wherein a private corporation is permitted to control and use the machinery of the sheriff's office to protect the mining companies in anything they may decide to undertake" (1). Much of this article was reprinted as "Why The UnAmerican Gunman System of the United States Steel Corporation Is Unpopular," *Mesaba Ore*, July 15, 1916, n.p.

14. *Mesaba Ore*, July 8, 1916, 2; "Range Municipal Officers Appeal to Government and the Steel Corporation Newspapers Appeal to Class Prejudice," *Mesaba Ore*, July 29, 1916, n.p.

15. *Mesaba Ore*, Aug. 5, 1916, n.p.

16. See, for example, the *Mesaba Ore*, July 16, 1916, n.p., where the editors summarize and respond to articles in other papers as diverse as the *Pine City Poker*, the *Owatonna Citizen*, the *Thief River Falls News Press*, the *Chisholm Tribune Herald*, and the *Fairmont Sentinel*. They often addressed the editors by name; not all of the items they commented on concerned the strike.

17. "Mesaba Range Mines Closed by I.W.W. Men"; "Trying to Cover Up the Main Issue," *Mesaba Ore*, July 8, 1916, 1. On the "Spittoon," see, for example, "Duluth Spittoon Has Another Spasm and Invents a 'Local Clergyman' to Whom They Credit Their Lies," *Strikers' News*, Aug. 18, 1916, 1; "Cuyuna Cockroaches Have Another Spasm," *Strikers' News*, Aug. 18, 1916, 2; "A Lie from Start to Finish: Mike Susterich Absolutely Denies Statements Credited to Him By Duluth Spittoon," *Strikers' News*, Sept. 1, 1916, 2.

18. "Striking Miner of Nine Years Ago," *Mesaba Ore*, July 8, 1916, 1.

19. "Honesty Is Too Deep for 'Em," *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 16, 1916, 1; "Different Laws for Different People," *Mesaba Ore*, Aug. 5, 1916, 1.

20. "Corporation Uses I.W.W. as A Blind." On other local newspapers, see, for example, "Contract System and Range Strike," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 7, 1916, 3; "Strikers Fail to Get Promised I.W.W. Money," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 13, 1916, 1; "The Present Situation," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 13, 1916, 2; "July 15, I.W.W. Pay Day Passes Without One Cent Being Distributed to Deluded Strikers. Promised Payment of Strike Benefits Fails to Materialize Today," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 15, 1916, 1; "Hibbing Committee Is Given All Funds," *Duluth News Tribune*, June 24, 1916, 9. This article notes that "The committee was appointed to dispel reports that the strike agitators were here for the sole purpose of enriching themselves and when they had secured sufficient funds would decamp and leave the miners to shift for themselves."

21. Eleff, "The 1916 Minnesota Miners' Strike," 72; "Why the Big Fellows Fear Miss Flynn," *Mesaba Ore*, July 29, 1916, 1. For a full discussion of how other Range papers viewed Flynn, see Karni, "Elizabeth Gurley Flynn," 1–6.

22. "Why the Big Fellows Fear Miss Flynn"; see also *Strikers' News*, Aug. 11, 1916, 2.

23. "Six Hundred I.W.W.'s Hear Elizabeth Flynn," *Duluth News Tribune*, July 21, 1916, 5; see also "I.W.W. Speaker Promises Peace," *Duluth News Tribune*, July 29, 1916, 14.

24. "Anarchy Throttling the State." Here the editors claim, "Hibbing has been the theatre where the lawlessness of the Steel corporation has been on constant show for the past several years and the end is not yet. The reason is greed, unalloyed greed that will be satisfied with nothing short of the earth and the fullness thereof—the exploitation of the state's mineral wealth to make a few favored ones richer at the expense of the poorer ones, and the robbery of a commonwealth." See also "Will All of This Noise by the Steel Corporation Cover Up the Fact This It Is Not Paying Its Employees a Decent Wage and This It Is Robbing Minnesota of Its Mineral Wealth?" *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 16, 1916, 1; and "The Steel Corporation and Other Mining Concerns Are Every Year Taking Millions of Dollars Out of the State That Belong to the People of Minnesota," *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 16, 1916, 7.

25. "Different Laws for Different People."

26. "Governor Says Rioting on Range Must Stop," *Duluth News Tribune*, July 1, 1916, 1; see also "Commend Act of Governor," *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, July 14, 1916, 1, which reports on support for the "effective action taken by Governor J. A. A. Burnquist [sic] towards suppressing the unlawful disturbances"; "Governor Insults the Range Courts," *Mesaba Ore*, July 8, 1916, 1; *Mesaba Ore*, July 22, 1916, 1.

27. For a full discussion of the impact of the Minnesota Public Safety Commission, see Carol Jensen, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 43.2 (Summer 1972): 43–57; Matt Reicher, "Minnesota Commission of Public Safety," MNopedia, <http://www.mnopedia.org/group/minnesota-commission-public-safety>; Sofchalk, "Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota," 231, 239; Michael R. Johnson, "The I.W.W. and Wilsonian Democracy," *Science & Society* 28 (Summer 1964): 257–74.

28. "Anarchy Throttling the State"; "Duluth Citizens Are Awakening," *Mesaba Ore*, Aug. 19, 1916, 1.

29. "Why the Ore Changed Front," *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 9, 1916, 1.

30. The accusations were reprinted in *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 9, 1916, 1; "Why The Ore Changed Front."

31. "Just Like Other Tradesmen," *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 9, 1916, 1; "Honesty Is Too Deep For 'Em."

32. "Frantic Effort to Destroy One Man Who Stands in the Way of the Steel Corporation," *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 16, 1916, 1.

33. *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 16, 1916, 1.

34. The assertion about altered conditions is contested, but there are a number of historians who argue wages were improved once the strike was called off. See, for example, Eleff, "The 1916 Minnesota Miners' Strike": "Within a month after the end of the strike, according to the report finally issued by Fairley and Davies in late October, both day wages and contract rates were increased by 15 to 20 percent" (74). See also Jeff Pilacinski, "We've Been Robbed Long Enough. It's Time to Strike": Remember the 1916 Strike on Minnesota's Iron Range," *Industrial Workers of the World*, 2006, <http://www.iww.org/pt/node/2556>. Other historians argue that overall the strike was a failure due to the negative consequences it generated, including the spy network subsequently instituted by U.S. Steel. See Frank L. Palmer, *Spies in Steel: An Expose of Industrial War* (Denver, CO: Labor Press, 1928). As another consequence of the strike, Sofchalk, in "Organized Labor and the Iron Ore Miners of Northern Minnesota," points to the fact that the miners did not become unionized until the mid-1930s. Betten, "Riot, Revolution, Repression," writes that, "In the end, the strike was defeated not through arrests or violence, or by importation of strikebreakers, but simply because the resources of the miners, always meager, were finally exhausted" (93).

35. *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 2, 1916, n.p.

36. On continuing criticism, see, for example, "We're Not Bullying Brutes," *Mesaba Ore*, Feb. 24, 1917, 1, where the Atkinsons wrote, "Notwithstanding all the noise made by the Steel corporation and its subsidized newspaper, the [IWW] is gaining a following, in membership and sympathizers, that is fairly carrying the Big Fellows off their feet."

The new daily paper was reported on in the *Skillsings' Mining Review* 8.39, "an international mining trade publication" published in Duluth. The *Review* noted that, "As was to be expected, the *Daily* is full of action, breezy and newsy. Pep will inevitably be a chief characteristic of the new daily newspaper" (7).

37. On banner headlines, see, for example, "C. M. Atkinson Dies at Litchfield, Illinois Yesterday," *Hibbing Daily Tribune*, Jan. 2, 1929, 1–2.

38. "Why the Ore Changed Front." *Mesaba Ore*, Sept. 9, 1916, 1.

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