

# More stuff you missed in history class: The Everett Massacre



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Once proudly called the “City of Smokestacks” in the early 20th century, Everett, WA, was a growing industrial city located about 30 miles north of Seattle. It boasted shipbuilding yards, a smelter and two ironworks. However, its economy was mostly driven by dozens of saw mills and shingle mills run by a cadre of businessmen, who held enormous influence in town. Everett was also a union town, with trade unions forming almost as soon as the settlement began, becoming one of the strongest union towns in the Pacific Northwest.

Everett became a major exporter of red-cedar shingles, and mill workers around 1910 were considered well paid at \$4.50 a day, twice what was paid to workers in the logging camps.

Mill workers faced long hours and dangerous work. Accidents were so common that mill workers could be recognized by their missing fingers. In 1909, 15 percent of all deaths in the city were due to mill accidents. Many others fell victim to “cedar asthma,” which came from breathing in the clouds of cedar dust formed when cedar was cut. Similar to black lung disease in coal miners, cedar asthma often led to a slow and agonizing death.

In those days, there was a sharp divide in the labor movement between what were considered skilled or craft unions that were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the more radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), commonly known as Wobblies, who wanted to create a union that included “unskilled” laborers. The IWW believed greater strength came for uniting across all trades, all classes, all genders and across the world, thus they sought to form alliances with all unions.

Following a sharp recession in 1914, which allowed the mill owners to pay lower rates, mill workers were still not receiving their pre-recession wages as of 1916, so a strike was called. The IWW sought to support the striking mill workers by bringing in noted speaker James Rowan to address the crowd of strikers on July 31, 1916. However, the local sheriff, Donald McRae, who considered the IWW outside agitators, pulled Rowan down from the speaking platform and took him to the county jail, where he released him with a warning. Undeterred, Rowan returned to the platform, where he resumed his speech and was immediately rearrested and escorted out of town.

Tensions between the strikers and the owners escalated. On Aug. 19, mill owners brought in strike breakers, who attacked the striking workers with clubs as the local law enforcement officials did nothing to stop them. Three days later, Rowan held another rally in support of the strikers. This time, when he was dragged off to jail, another speaker

immediately took his place. And when that speaker was arrested, still another took his place. When Leticia Fye mounted the platform and began reading from the Declaration of Independence, she too was hauled away.

In September, in an effort to show they meant business, Everett authorities passed stricter laws governing public speech. As a result, many Everett citizens who had previously disagreed philosophically with the IWW began supporting their right of free speech and protesting the violent tactics of the sheriff and the mill owners.

On Oct. 31, a boatload of IWW members from Seattle arrived at the Everett dock with the intention of conducting another rally. They were met by Sheriff McRae and scores of deputized and armed vigilantes, who told them that they could only speak at a location away from the center of town. When they refused, they were beaten and then loaded into waiting trucks and cars and driven to a remote location southeast of town. In darkness and cold rain, McRae’s men formed two lines and forced the Wobblies to run a gauntlet, beating them with clubs, guns and rubber hoses filled with shot. Bloodied and beaten, they were left to find their own way back to Seattle.

Five days later, about 300 Wobblies boarded the steamers *Verona* and *Calista* in Seattle and headed back to Everett to try again to hold the rally. Rumors that the Wobblies planned to burn the town to the ground had reached Sheriff McRae, so he and 200-plus citizen deputies were waiting as the *Verona* approached the dock. As they attempted to disembark, McRae asked them, “Who is your leader?” When he was told “We are all leaders,” he announced to the passengers that they would not be allowed to land. A single shot rang out. As often is the case in these events, no one knows for sure which side it came from, but it was quickly followed by nearly 10 minutes of chaotic gunfire.

The mostly unarmed passengers aboard the *Verona* rushed to the far side of the ship, nearly capsizing the vessel. More than 175 bullets pieced the pilot house as the captain struggled to back the boat away from the dock. The *Calista* made no attempt to land.

Records are not clear, but it is believed that more than 15 passengers were killed and 27 wounded that day. On the dock, two deputies were killed and 20 others, including Sheriff McRae, were wounded. When the vessels arrived back in Seattle, 74 Wobblies were arrested. National Guard troops were sent to Everett as terror hung over the town for days. One of the Wobblies, a Teamster named Thomas Tracy, was charged with the murders of the two deputies but was acquitted at trial six months later when it was shown they were shot from behind and likely victims of friendly fire. Shortly thereafter, all charges against the remaining defendants were dropped and they were released.

What became known as the “Everett Massacre” is another story among many that took place as the labor movement struggled to gain a foothold in America. They are stories rich in drama with sacrifices to be remembered, lessons to be learned and heroes to be honored.