

Tragedy in July: The Rail Strike-Riot of 1877

By CARLETON JONES

IN late July of 1877, the mid-summer heat clamped down on Baltimore mercilessly.

Pollution from the sugar refineries and other raw wastes bobbed listlessly across the harbor, staining and smelling up the bright, white hulls of steamships, to the fury of passengers, captains and ships agents. Newspapers were already howling about what they called in headlines "the basin stink," apparently a by-product of waste from the sugar mills.

Most of the well-to-do had fled from Baltimore's 91-degree torpor to Cape May, N.J., or the mountain houses west of the city. The really rich, as *The Sun* noted, were enjoying European flings in Sorrento or Baden-Baden.

Civil War Gen. Benjamin (Beast) Butler, of Massachusetts, bone of the southern social quality of the town, was a celebrity guest at Barnum's City Hotel, here to testify in a patent case. Sixteen years earlier his Union Army cannons had secured Federal Hill as Baltimore tottered on the brink of secession.

From his windows he could see the harbor hill again, off to the south, and no doubt took a look, watching with a glass as the sharply colored merchant shipping flags flapped on their signal tower, announcing arrivals into port. To the west, the general could see the triple towers of

the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad's Camden terminal. Butler was to leave the city before the excitement got going, but before the month was out, there would be plenty of it.

Eleven "Molly Maguires," terrorists of Irish descent, were the big news of the summer, going resolutely to their deaths

for a series of strike-related murders in the mining industry of Pottsville, Mauch Chunk and other Pennsylvania towns. "I ain't sorry a bit," said one of the condemned as he kissed an attending priest and watched as the hangman tightened the

straitjacket. In July, the 15th day of the month fell on a Friday. Down in the roasting southern and eastern sections of town, tin-can makers, box-makers and sawyers were muttering about low pay and unemployment. To the west, around elegant Union Square, a quarter with many B. & O. Railroad employees in residence, there were also sour looks and threatening phrases.

John W. Garrett, B. & O. president and no stranger to Beast Butler, had sliced the wages of all employees making more than \$1 a day by 10 per cent, big shots included. Firemen and brakemen were hit hardest, reduced from \$1.75 to \$1.58 a day, easily the difference of a meal or so a day for a family. The cuts were to go into effect on Monday. The railroadmen were also chafing under a cutback to only two or three days work a week in the face of a national recession. They had been reading how the C. & O. Canal workers on the Potomac had struck for \$1 a ton in loading pay, a 40-cent pay raise in a battle the canalmen seemed to be winning.

Everything in the air contributed to grumbling. It was hot, ominous and depressing.

IN 1877, almost nothing in American commerce had recovered fully from the "Panic of '73," a world-wide financial collapse that brought down banks across the nation. Railroads had been hard hit and

try. President Garrett, bluff, decisive and pudgy, was the undisputed ruler of the B. & O. The road was already a sacred institution, 50 years old, a vast age for enterprises of its day and, because of charter rules, a contributor to the state's income. By far the largest industry in the South, the line was already encrusted with tradition, debt and second-generation employees.

Northern railroads started cutting salaries and wages during the late spring with only one major uproar, a strike on the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, quickly broken by the hiring of armies of unemployed workers. The fate of the Molly Maguires was linked to this battle. In the 1870's there was no such thing as contract job security. By making the same cuts for the B. & O., executives included, Garrett probably thought he was on relatively safe ground where there was an element of risk.

B. & O. men were the elite of Baltimore's laboring force, lightly unionized in to what were largely fraternal organizations but well paid by the local standards of the day, if not by the somewhat higher wages of northeastern lines. Management was "paternalistic," but it ignored some tremendous employee headaches. One of the worst was the marooning of its own men, sometimes for days at a time, along the line when freight traffic failed to produce a free ride back to their home base, be it Baltimore or Martinsburg, W. Va.

Hotelmen and saloon-keepers in isolated parts of Ohio, West Virginia and Western Maryland ripped off such stranded trainmen unmercifully for meals and lodging, according to contemporary accounts. After all, they were "B. & O." weren't they? Tradesmen, farmers and

some manufacturers also had a built-up resentment against the mighty railroad force for its own high-handed practices.

In a larger framework, the American people were simply fed up with the railroads—the honeymoon was over and New York corporate scandals involving rail companies had rocked the nation politically. Every industrial town had its web of company-owned villages surrounding stations and mechanical shops, places where company stores charged high prices for goods, company spies circulated and high rents were extracted from low-income families.

None of this seemed like a clear warning to B. & O. management. On Monday, July 16, they found out otherwise. About 40 firemen at Camden Junction, a rail point about 2 miles west of Mount Clare, linking traffic from Camden Station and Locust Point, simply walked off the job after a minor scuffle.

Mayor Ferdinand Latrobe called out the police. Several strikers were arrested for "threatening a riot," at that point, clearly an overstatement of the situation. The city also extended police lines southward to Relay and (probably illegally) into Howard county, deputizing men of its own force, posse-style, to serve at taxpayer's expense as railroad guards and accommodate the supposed threat to the B. & O.

There was no violence, as such, or even any evidence that a union played any official role in the work stoppage. But "far beyond the narrow ambit of the unions, discontent ran wider and deeper than the complacent realized," says Clifton K. Yearley, Jr., who wrote a masterful summary of the confused strike for a 1956 issue of *The Maryland Historical Magazine*.

That night, the first day of the pay cut, news arrived that the walkout had spread to Martinsburg, W. Va., one of the line's major relay stations. Firemen had walked off the job, hearing of the trouble at Camden Junction. In retaliation, the B. & O. had telegraphed for help and the governor of West Virginia had called out state militia. At this stage, and usually throughout the strike-riots, rail employees made no attempt to molest or halt passenger traffic. All the effort was devoted to blockading the lucrative freight traffic on the main, westbound stem.

Just enough happened at Martinsburg—a striker was shot and killed by a trooper and a militiaman was injured during a battle over a block switch—to fan the flames of the Baltimore situation, and cause similar walkouts at B. & O. points in Grafton and Keyser, W. Va.

Loyal trainmen met in downtown Baltimore at Sharp and Montgomery streets near the Camden yards and warned the company that there was trouble ahead, but negotiations with existing strikers on the western stem broke down.

On the whole, the city was calm. Many trains, except at Martinsburg, where nobody could find the firemen, were running and there was a chance that the trouble would resolve itself into minor frontier

scuffling and street-corner shoving contests. Militia and the strikers were laughing and joking together at the West Virginia switch points. But both sides in the contest reckoned without the fiery spirit of Gen. Thomas H. Sharp, an ex-Confederate who used to steal whole B. & O. trains for rebel troops during the Civil War and whom Garrett had hired as his "master of transportation." They also didn't count on the frightened numbskullery of West Virginia's Gov. Henry Mathews.

On Sharp's prodding and with no evidence at all of a major disturbance, Governor Mathews telegraphed the shaky and illegally elected President Hayes for federal help from Washington in quelling the "insurrection at Martinsburg."

By mid-week, federal troops, eight companies, were pouring into the West Virginia town to search in vain for a smoking and turbulent "insurrection." It was a national sensation, triggering up-roar in Pittsburgh and scaring even some railroad presidents, who felt that the B. & O. and its governmental allies were moving too fast.

In Baltimore, the line was making conciliatory gestures, promising to put loyal employees at the top of the promotion list and present them with a "medal." Alan Pinkerton, famed Civil War detective and security adviser to President Garrett, warned urgently of the "communistic madness" that was afoot.

Pinkerton was right that unrest was spreading along the western line, despite the calm at Martinsburg. Boxcars loaded with fruit and vegetables had been pilaged by rioters at Cumberland where canalmen as well as recalcitrant railroaders joined in the fray. There were no injuries, but by Friday the 20th, the telegraph lines were alive with reports of the start of vicious strike violence at Pittsburgh.

They also announced the use of the federal troops along the line to coerce the strikers, a thing that made many Baltimoreans angry.

In downtown Baltimore on Friday afternoon, where rough-and-tumble types were crowding the saloons and guffawing over the offer of a loyalty medal (announced that morning by Garrett in the *Baltimore American* newspaper), a conference started in Barnum's hotel at 3 P.M. Included were officials of the line and patrician Gov. John Lee Carroll of Maryland, master of Howard county's Doughoregan Manor estate and one of Maryland's wealthier citizens.

"Thousands of dollars are being lost every hour . . . call out the troops!" the railroad directors begged him, reporting that cattle and sheep were dying of thirst from the sizzling heat in the stalled, strikebound freight cars. They also warned that mills and refineries along the harbor would shut down if Western Maryland coal supplies were cut off. "Cumberland's situation is desperate!" they added, calling for an immediate shipment of troops there through Camden Station.

The governor, grandson of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, one of the B. & O.'s

founders, assented.

MARYLAND'S militia forces in Baltimore had two strong concentration points—the 5th Regiment's home at Howard street's Richmond Armory on the western edge of the sleepy, stylish Mount Vernon district and the 6th Regiment, housed at Fayette and Front street near the Shot Tower in the city's raffish, turbulent Old Town district.

There were only two ways to marshal these troops and get them to Camden Station for a ride westward to guard the B. & O. One way was to summon the volunteers by messenger; another was to rally the troops by ringing the Baltimore City fire department alarm bells—a prearranged signal of 1-5-1 strokes signaling a general emergency. Couriers would have been relatively silent. Everybody in Baltimore could hear the fire bells, particularly at 6 P.M. on Friday. Rumors crackled through the downtown area that the troops were leaving town to coerce strikers.

Charles A. Malloy, a 20-year-old militia volunteer with the 5th Regiment, gave this eyewitness account of what happened:

"Our officers feared that ringing the old military call on the fire bells would precipitate the violence we were organizing to prevent . . . but not enough men could be found by the couriers. And the result was all that our officers feared."

Bells clanged all over Baltimore. The 5th made an orderly assembly at Richmond Market armory (now part of Maryland General Hospital), then marched down Eutaw street to the West Baltimore street intersection where "we met a mob which blocked the streets. They were armed with stones and as soon as we came within reach they began to throw at us," said the young trooper.

The 5th worked its way through the mob to the station, with a few injuries, and took up a position guarding the Camden tracks.

Angry citizens, pouring out of the saloons, hotels, factories and offices, were roaming Baltimore street looking for trouble.

"The hardest element in town" gathered at Front and Fayette street, according to Malloy, and began an assault on the armory there. "When they [the 6th Regiment] flung open the doors and marched out 200 strong, fully armed and with bayonets fixed, the rioters gave way a little, but the rain of stones increased. They held them for as long as possible." Firing began in front of a laundry near the Front street armory with one killed and at least one injured, and by the time the 6th Regiment reached Camden Station, "the command as an entity had disappeared," says the young soldier.

By this hour, as many as 15,000 rioters were roaming the downtown area at dusk, say estimates. About 4,000 alone were milling around the shattered Front street armory, and an even larger mob was assembling in Camden.

The small detachment of the Sixth,

pummeled with stones and assaulted with curses, broke up into even smaller groups, walking, running and halting to "fire at will." Between the Jones Falls bridge at Baltimore and Light streets in the center of town, the troopers shot and killed at least 9 more people and injured about 34 others as they plunged through the Baltimore street mob. A barefoot newsboy in shirtsleeves, William Haurand, was killed with a bullet through the head. (His funeral that weekend was to be attended by all the newsboys of the city.)

John Reinhardt, 16, a photography student, was shot through the back and killed while walking home. A 19-year-old baker, James C. Williams, emerged from behind fruit and candy stall at Gay and Baltimore streets, and was shot through the stomach.

There were no deaths among the troopers, although dozens were injured. Once inside the relative safety of the station, they stood their duty with bandages around their faces and on their arms and legs.

At the Camden station hub, the 6th Regiment also found pandemonium. As night came on, rioters, enraged by the downtown shootings, fired a switching station at the foot of Lee street, burned a passenger car and ran a locomotive full steam into the rear of freight cars on the Montgomery street siding. The mob outside the lines of troopers slashed the hoses of fire rigs sent to combat the flames.

Holed up in an elaborate "Governor's room" at the new City Hall, Governor Carroll, after a conference with Mayor Latrobe, was himself stampeded into calling on Washington for help a second time, not to save the Cumberland yards, but for Baltimore's B. & O. headquarters itself. He reported to President Hayes that rioters had "taken possession of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad depot," a dramatic call for help, but simply not so, according to the best evidence.

The mob had not seized the station, they had surrounded it. Things were quieting by midnight at the Camden siege, but it was not the state militia, but the Baltimore city police force, augmented by part of some 500 deputies sworn in, who had saved the day.

Malloy's account says that the state regiments stood to arms throughout the trouble "virtually beleaguered" all that night and through Saturday. But he adds that disciplinary action by the police calmed the riot during the uproar Friday night. The 5th Regiment formed at Camden and Eutaw streets into dressed lines. Policemen then

stepped through the lines and "fired one pistol valley into the air." Then each policeman charged the mob, seizing the first man his hands came to and hauled him into the station waiting room. As soon as one rioter was seized, that policeman returned for another until the station was packed with them, the trooper related.

At one point several rioters, one reportedly armed with a pistol, broke into the station and attempted to break apart iron settees in the waiting room, to use the pieces for assaulting the troops but this foray was quickly fought off.

According to most accounts, none arrested here and elsewhere during the uproar, were union agitators, were armed or even B. & O. employees. Of about 100 men seized, "some had the appearance of tramps and nearly all were under the influence of liquor" one account read. Rioters were held in \$1,000 bail and by dawn on Saturday more than 160 of them reached the southern district police station for incarceration. The fact that not one soldier was killed, or injured by gunfire, indicates that the mobs were unarmed, or almost unarmed, agitated rowdies rather than well-organized union militants.

By 1:30 A. M. on Saturday, the mob had dispersed, and by Sunday more than 1,000 Federal troopers had secured the city. A revenue cutter whose guns had been shotted with grape and cannister was anchored offshore at the Locust Point bonded warehouses to protect millions in property, while similar measures were taken to secure the U. S. Sub-treasury branch and the Custom House at Gay and Lombard streets.

A coroner's jury toured the central police district station where one dead riot victim was laid out in a casket full of ice and eight others were stretched out in rows in the scorching heat, giving forth "a great stench which necessitated immediate removal." The Sun reported

The B. & O. strike breathed its last by August 1, 1877, just two weeks after the first walkout. The railroad hired "scabs" in droves and, protected by police and army picket lines, restored full service. Vice President John King of the line met with strikers and refused to yield on the 10 per cent pay cut but

promised fuller employment workingmen against low prices of labor which have not been accompanied with correspondingly low prices of food, clothing and house rent," said one prominent Baltimore merchant, quoted in the press.

Nationally it was another story. The uproar continued, spreading with electrical speed across the nation and accelerating as it moved. Roundhouses were besieged on a dozen lines between Philadelphia and the West Coast.

Twenty civilians and three soldiers were shot down in Pittsburgh in the bloodiest of all engagements—a place where, in a style worthy of a historical TV soap opera, the mob sent a gondola car aflame with kerosene-soaked coke roaring into a besieged rail shed packed with troopers. Train service came almost to a halt across Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Presidential hopeful and brilliant Union Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock rode the line for the Pennsylvania, clearing the road with 3,000 troops. A riot at Reading claimed 10 more lives. Chicago, St. Louis and even San Francisco were shut down. In the Golden Gate city an assault on a Pacific Coast mail line dock was ended by a cavalry charge, cossack-style.

It was the first general strike action in the nation's history, and one of the bloodiest, with a death toll of more than 100 and thousands injured. By no means all the strikers were railroadmen, for sympathy work stoppages struck dozens of plants and mills.

THE net result to the forces of labor across the nation was shame in the way metropolitan mobs had rioted. Peter Arthur, leader of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, deplored the violence and pillage and threatened to fire any engineer convicted of mob violence. There was a similarly contrite statement from the trainmen's union.

As was the case with Confederate soldiers at the close of the Civil War, returning employees of the line were required to take a "loyalty oath." By no means all business observers agreed with the railroad's handling of the case. Rancor increased when the B. & O. blacklisted or fired many striking employees, filling the ranks where needed with what regular employees referred to as "scabs."

"This strike is not a revolution of fanatics willing to fight for an idea. It is a revolt of

A few noted that the city had not bothered to close the saloons until the trouble really began in earnest. "Alcohol played its full part in the disturbance," said Jacob Frey, a contemporary observer.

In the long view, one can be charitable with the handling of the case by President Garrett and his terrified associates, the two governors, Mayor Latrobe and the state and federal military.

There was a long tradition, dating at least as far back as the bank riots of 1835, of using armed forces to quell local uproars. John W. Garrett was notably sensitive to the property threat for three good reasons. In 1857, B. & O. conductors and brakemen had walked out and in their support, mobs of armed bushwhackers took up positions along the railway cuts of the main line to Relay and halted service until driven off by civic effort. A bunk car, the "Sebastopol," was converted into an armored train and "looked like a battleship going out of the harbor" as it rolled forward against the guerrillas. In October 1858, a partisan mob of pistol-armed Democrats had terrorized the northbound Philadelphia train at President street station Western gangland style. There were no killings, but the highjackers rooted through the cars way-laying weapons, looking for supporters of U. S. Grant who were en route to the Republican convention.

The third reason for Garrett's caution was unquestionably the terrible riot of the 19th of April, 1861, when more than a dozen citizens and four soldiers were killed in a march of the 6th Massachusetts regiment, en route to Camden Station and the defense of Washington. On that occasion and later, Garrett used B. & O. telegraph and movement capabilities in full support of President Lincoln and the Union effort.

July 20, 1877, was like a tragic replay of the Civil War disaster, uncannily similar, fatal to nearly as many, and occupying almost an identical line of march.

The national mood was grimly action-prone. Scandal after scandal, the majority in-

involved with crooked railroads, was buffeting the shakily elected and new Hayes administration and it was time for a show of strength. Militant anger had to be met with military force, not as a last, but as a first resort. The uproar in Maryland looked like another Civil War in the making to many federal officers and to Confederate retreads as well. The execution of the fierce Molly Maguires after their prosecution by the Reading Railroad, had left the laboring man with a hopeless public image and the hatred of the "power group."

What was worse, the debacles set a style for the later violence of the 1880's and 1890's. Homestead, Haymarket, the Pullman strike debacle were typical examples. The pattern of invoking armed intervention to break strikes was repeated over and over again until the scene shifted to the more evenly matched battles of the 1930's and more recent years. □



The 6th Maryland Regiment fights its way west through downtown Baltimore, left. Below, the mob attacks the armory.

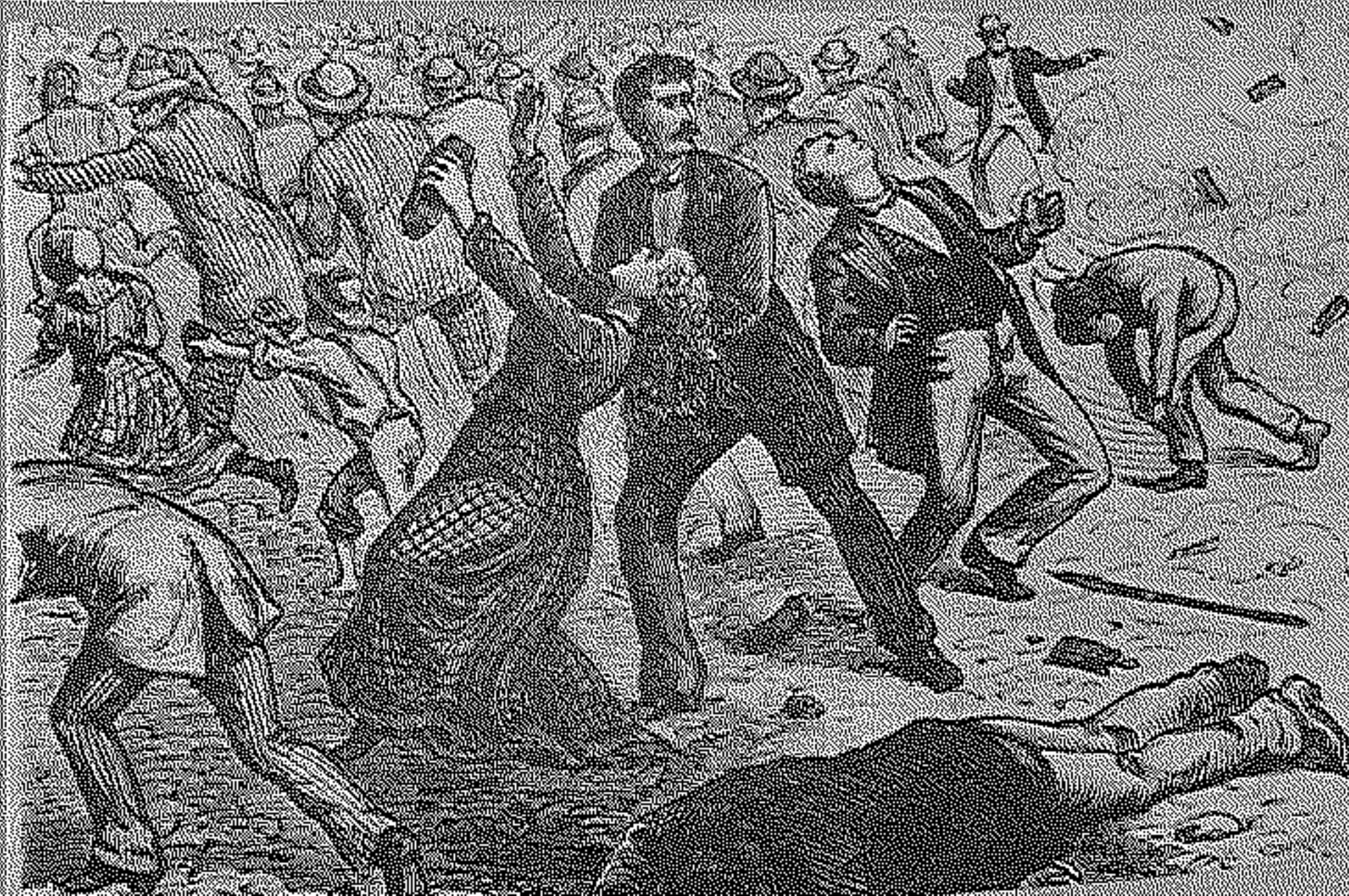


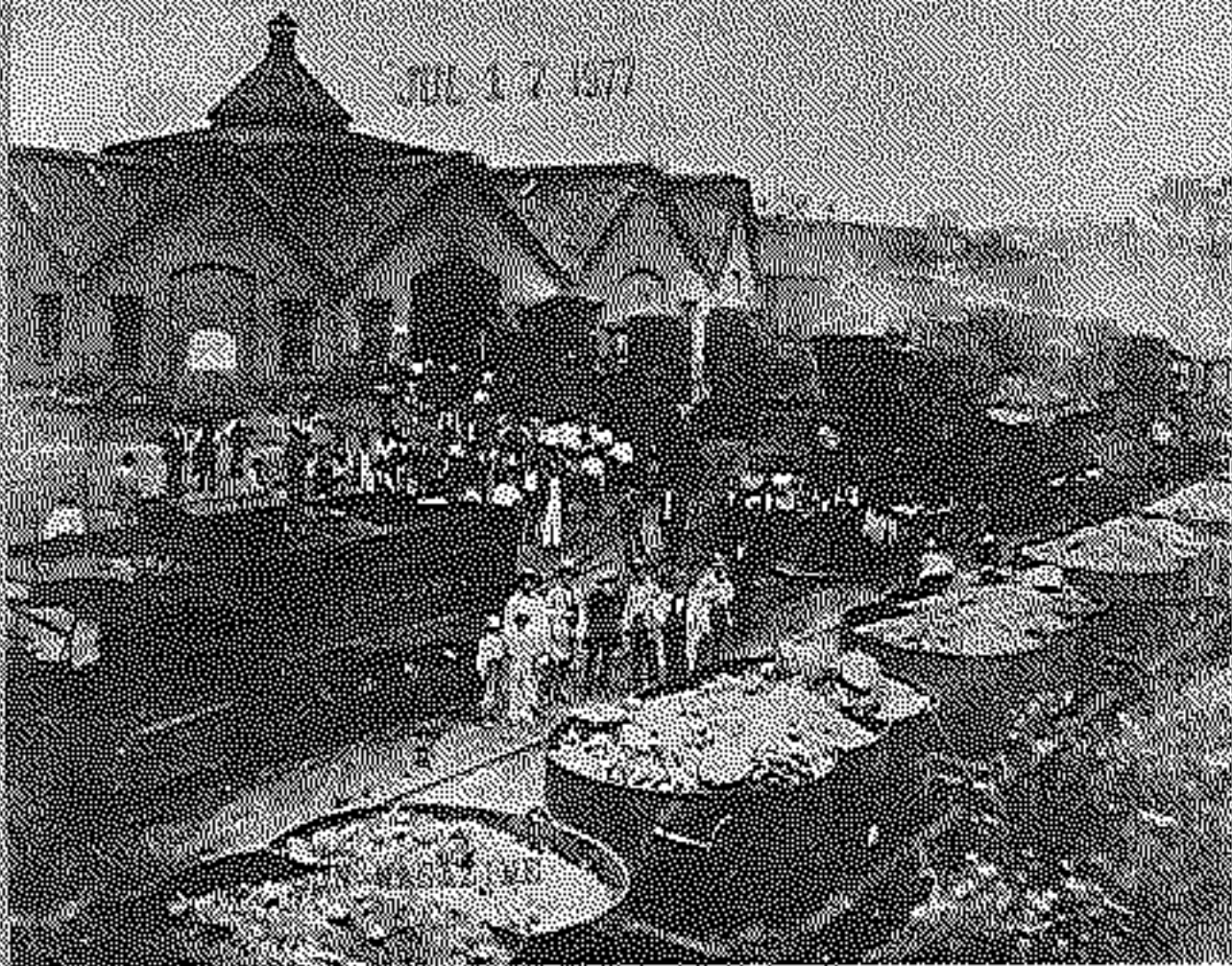
BALTIMORE & OHIO RAILROAD-STRIKE,
JULY, 1877

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Above: 'The scene after the first volley.'
Below: 'The mob assaulting a member of the
6th.' Among those killed during the rioting was a
barefoot newsboy in shirtsleeves.





Above: B. & O. engines, probably immobilized, in Martinsburg in 1877. Below: 'firing the Camden Street Station.'



Recalls Thrilling Features Of Riot Nearly 50 Years Ago

Charles A. Malloy Describes Mob's Attack On Fifth
And Sixth Regiments When They Were Called
Out To Quell Strike Disorders.

Maryland Special V.

Next month Baltimore will reach, but probably will not celebrate, the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most extraordinary popular uprisings in the city's history.

The date is July 20. The anniversary is that of the riot which figured in the national strike of 1877.

For the morning of July 20, 1877—when nine were killed, sixteen injured seriously and many slightly hurt—was the occurrence of weeks in which there were under constant military surveillance.

Killing In Other Towns

The feeling of revolt began to manifest itself when railroads announced that owing to the business depression of the times the wages of all trainmen during more than \$1 a day would be reduced by ten per cent, and there was another riot in Cumberland, Frederick and other railroad towns before the disorders broke out in Baltimore.

The Baltimore riot was described recently by Charles A. Malloy, late West Baltimore stationer who, on a night of 20, was called out with his company when the Fifth and Sixth Regiments of militia were mobilized by the Governor in presence order.

"We had been expecting the call for days," Mr. Malloy said, "because for some time it had been easy to see that violence might and probably would break out of the strike. The feeling not only in Baltimore but all over Maryland was intensely bitter and the sympathy of the greater part of the working people was with the strikers."

Ordered To Mobilize

"I and a considerable number of other young men who belonged to the Fifth Regiment spent most of the week prior to the riot at the armory, waiting for action."

"We got our orders to mobilize before noon of July 20, which was Friday. We were going to Cumberland, where trouble was brewing. Several of us were dispatched as couriers to spread the order by word of mouth, since our officers feared that ringing the old military call on the fire bells would precipitate the violence we were organizing to prevent. The call was 1-2-1."

"But it was found necessary to ring it after all, and enough men could be found by the companies. And the result was all that our officers had feared. We organized and marched down Euter street from the armory."

"Already the streets were teeming with strikers and strike sympathizers. Lumps and fists were shouted at us, but no action was taken against us until we reached Baltimore street."

Mob Armed With Stones

"There we met a mob which blocked the streets. They were armed with stones and as soon as we came within reach they began to throw at us."

"We kept our ranks, and they naturally gave way before us, but not before several of our men had been injured by the missiles. We marched on, in fairly good order, to Camden Station, where we were to encamp."

"We entered the train, but within a very few minutes we were ordered out again, and deployed around the station to keep order there, for by that time there was a mob of several thousand."

"About this time the struggling remnants of what had been the Sixth Regiment, which was to go with us, reached the station. Their experience had been far worse than ours."

Attack Made On Armory

"Their armory was where the Levering House now stands, at Front and Fayette streets, and while they were mobilizing within the mobs stormed the building."

"When they flung open the doors and rushed in, 200 strong, fully armed and with bayonets fixed, the rioters gave way a little. But the rain of stones increased, and I think there was a loss of 100 of the mob members as well."

"Their route lay along Baltimore street. They held their fire as long as it was possible I believe. And indeed, there was some dispute as to whether their officers ever gave the command to fire or whether the militiamen took it upon themselves."

Gunmen Fire On Mob

"But they did, driving the rioters before them with a continuous discharge of munitions. Most of the mob who were killed outright in the disorder died then."

"The odds were strong against the Sixth, of course. It seemed that the hardest elements in town had gathered to oppose them. One by one they threw down their arms and joined with the rabble. Some were overcome by superior numbers. Some were injured by missiles. By the time the Sixth Regiment reached Camden Station the command as an entity had disappeared. It never was organized again."

"It was just before dark that we arrived at the station."

Mobers Fire Back

"For two or three hours there was no act of violence, but the mob was growing. At 10 o'clock the rioters fired the station."

"The French responded. They were loaded, their apparatus wrecked and their hose slashed with knives. Yet we managed to restore order and to extinguish the fire."

"All that night we stood to arms. We were vigilantly beleaguered all that night and all of the next day, Saturday."

"Late Saturday it was determined to make an effort to disperse the mob. We were thrown into formation at the corner of Camden and Fayette streets. Then

we received and executed the command to load our guns."

Police Go Into Action

"Barracks were our place then loaded when our ranks opened rapidly, and a column of city police marched through toward the mob. They carried drawn sabres, and fired one volley into the air. Then each policeman charged the mob, seized the first man his hands came to, and hauled him into the station waiting room."

"As soon as another was secured, the policeman returned for another, until the station was packed with them. Had it not been for the militia, standing with loaded weapons ready for the command to fire, it is doubtful whether the police could have carried out the plan, for I don't think there were more than two-thirds of them."

"But the plan was carried out and the backbone of the riot was broken then and there. The men arrested were taken to jail."

"The militia were far from being through with their work, however. For two weeks we bivouacked at Camden Station and then when the mob again gathered daily died out we were taken out to Riverside Park, where we remained two weeks more."

"Part of the time we went out in town to guard railroad bridges, but we never were forced into action."

"At the end of the four weeks or so we were paid off—\$13 each—and I recall signing my names to a four line and taking as many oaths of allegiance to get the money."

Riot, 1877
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