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The Homestead Strike and Lockout, 1892

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Source: *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 81-85

Published by: [University of Nebraska Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40634762>

Accessed: 19/10/2011 11:19

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*Robert Gibb*

## **The Homestead Strike and Lockout, 1892**

1.

"Fort Frick," the workers called it, meaning  
The fence and towers he'd ordered built about  
The mills, barbed wire tautened from a looping  
Script in which the knowing could read lockout,

Scabs, cold stoves in the dead of winter,  
A non-union shop. When it came, Homestead  
Had sentries set all along the river  
And roads into town, a steamboat, the *Edna*,

Patrolling the waters, pickets posted  
On the bridges as far as Pittsburgh  
Where one night they spied barges being towed,  
A flotsam of Pinkertons on the current.

The alert was sounded. By 4:00 A.M.  
The millgrounds were crowded with waiting men.

2.

*for my grandfather, Robert Gibb*

Like the rest of Homestead he'd lain awake  
Those nights, listening for nearly a week  
To something like the last dissolving wake  
Of sound, barely audible, as it leaked

From the mills. Silence filled his bedroom.  
 Out the window, in the absence of smoke  
 And billowy clouds of soot from the flues,  
 He could see the stars, burning and remote,

The color, almost, of coal fires. And then  
 It came to him that what he'd been hearing  
 All that time were the gas flames flaring from  
 The street lamps: those flickering blue rings

It seemed were everywhere out there  
 Roaring above the dark wards of the river.

3.

The gangplank flung down like a gauntlet,  
 The battle was on, men dead already  
 Before cover could be found, bullets  
 Barking into the barges, a steady

Hail pitting the sides of the mills: positions  
 They'd defend all day, though other workers  
 Brought up dynamite, the musty cannons  
 They couldn't aim. Nor were the skyrockets

Of much help, or the raft they soaked with oil,  
 Lit, and let drift toward the broiling men,  
 The torched car on the tracks. Whatever failed  
 Merely fueled them on, for more than eleven

Hours, until the Pinkertons, routed,  
 Were drummed in tatters to the Opera House.

4.

In Dabbs' photograph, after the battle,  
 The barges have been finally set on fire,

A victory more pyrrhic than substantial,  
 Dark clouds billowing above the mill shore

In a great plied mass, spilling upwards  
 Out of the frame, the watery horizon  
 That splits the work in half: the murky  
 Buildings divided from their reflections,

The smoke churning upwards from its cindery  
 Tree burning head down in the tintype.  
 It's either evening or nineteenth century,  
 The light's dissolve into longshot and time,

The world over water, its ashen stacks,  
 Guttering on the surface like a match.

5.

When he burst into Frick's office, dazzled  
 For a moment by the moted light streaming  
 Through the windows, he seemed adolescent  
 As a lover, which he was: history's darling

On his first big date, trembling with a passion  
 That brought Frick to his feet, though too late  
 To do anything but flinch as the gun  
 Went off, the metal penetrated

His neck twice before they knocked Berkman down.  
 Even then, his ardor undiminished,  
 He managed to crawl toward the sound  
 Of the wounded Frick and try to finish

Him with a dagger. And then one last gasp:  
 The fulminate of mercury he nearly gnashed.

6.

When the young Guardsman named Iams shouted  
 "Three cheers for the man who shot Frick,"  
 And meant it, the words were barely out  
 Before he was arrested for sedition

And sentenced to be strung up by his thumbs  
 Until the taut bones slipped their sockets  
 And he hung – a slack, broken, pendulum  
 Turning on the tips of his toes. Unconscious

When they cut him down, he woke on Sunday  
 To be sheared and stripped of his uniform,  
 Driven from a regiment which was paid  
 To break the strike. After all, he'd sworn

An oath to this militia, hadn't he?  
 The guardians of order hate anarchy.

7.

"Attentat," not murder, they thought of it,  
 Men such as Berkman, believing that war  
 Between classes was just as real as war  
 Between states, although the industrialists

Suffered a deficit of casualties.  
 By the time of the strike in Homestead  
 Thousands of men were either maimed or dead  
 From working in the mills: a banality

No one else seemed much troubled by, except those  
 "Apostles of Anarchy and Hops," as one  
 Weekly called them, after the assassination  
 Was botched and acts of violence opposed,

The town and millgrounds safely under wraps,  
The militia ensconced in its bivouac.

8.

By the first snows of winter it was lost,  
Homestead, my Catalonia: eighteen-  
Hundred strikers left unemployed, their jobs  
Gone to scabs, the municipality

Taken over by industry shills.  
Within a year it would be another  
Squalid company town, numbing labor,  
Wages down, private cops prowling the mills.

"Life worth living again," wrote Carnegie  
From Europe, dedicating monuments  
As always to his own munificence,  
And dreaming of the Homestead library:

Turreted, vast, imposing. "An emblem,"  
He tried to claim, "of harmony and union."