

## SHAWNEE'S GREAT RAILROAD STRIKE

Between June 1922 and March 1923, Shawnee experienced six homes dynamited, several random shootings, the arrest of a former district judge, an active terror squad, a prohibition against public gatherings, and accusations by a United States marshal about an Oklahoma state representative during the Great Railroad Strike of 1922.

The strike, one of the five largest in United States history, began at 10 AM, July 1, 1922 involving 400,000 workers. Shawnee's maintenance shops, some of the largest in the southwest, had 750 workers at the Rock Island roundhouse and another 150 at the Santa Fe shops impacted.

President Harding proposed a settlement four weeks into the strike, but railroad executives rejected it. On September 1, 1922, a federal judge issued the Daugherty Injunction allowing railroads to use government sanctioned force to prevent unions from disrupting the maintenance facilities effectively ended the strike. Workers settled for a 5 cent an hour decrease in pay and forfeited their seniority.

The national strike ended, but the effects lingered in Shawnee. On August 17, 1922 about 30 shots were fired into the Rock Island roundhouse According to an *Associated Press* dispatch out of Washington D.C. on August 22, the "agitation of railroad strikers at Shawnee is at as high a pitch as any point in the United States." An *Associated Press* dispatch out Oklahoma City the same day stated Federal and National Guard troops were standing by in case needed and that sniping occurred routinely in Shawnee. A *New York Times* article on August 26, 1922 reported union leaders proposed taking over security at the Rock Island yard to quench the violence in the area, but the United State Marshal dismissed the idea as unfeasible.

The *Tulsa World* reported on the explosive situation August 27, 1922 saying 150 men including special agents and deputy marshals were securing property valued at \$15,000,000. About 200 "imported workers" lived and worked inside the gates of the rail yards. Another 400 workers were expected the next day coming from as far away as Chicago.

From July 1, 1922 until August 2, 1922, the *Shawnee Morning News* featured banner headlines about the strike. Front page stories appeared in every issue of the *Shawnee Morning News* from July 1, 1922 until September 14, 1922. Shawnee strike activities were also reported in the *Oklahoman*, *Tulsa World*, *New York Times*, and *Associated Press*. Shawnee became the center of national attention, but things were escalating.

Nationally the strike was ending by September 1922, but tensions boiled in Shawnee. On October 2, 1922 a meeting of the Business and Professional Men of Shawnee was moved to the convention center when over 600 people showed up to hear the U.S. Marshal talk about the violence. The next day 1,500 people crowded into the same auditorium to hear union leadership speak. Over 300 local business and professional people signed a petition supporting the railroad and the workers.

In November of 1922, a series of dynamiting incidents began with six Shawnee homes eventually targeted. Sporadic gunfire occurred and several "replacement workers" were beaten and robbed.

On January 5, a former district judge and attorney for the striking workers was arrested for violating the federal injunction. Charges involved the former judge entering the City Café, drawing a revolver, and saying, "If there is a scab here in the house, I want to kill him."

On January 19, 1923, Shawnee's Mayor, the Shawnee Chief of Police, the Pottawatomie County Sheriff, and the United States Marshal published a joint proclamation in the Shawnee Morning News forbidding, "all public meetings and street gatherings for the purpose of disorder, threats, or intimidation," putting Shawnee at the brink of martial law.

By February 25, seven men were arrested for the "depredations" carried out in Shawnee, including the destruction of rail bridges across the southwestern United States. Eventually 17 men were arrested in what the United State Marshal called, "an organized terror squad" headquartered in Shawnee.

One arrestee was the right-hand man of the Oklahoma state representative from the Shawnee. The United States Marshal charged the legislator with having prior knowledge to all of the crimes, but the elected official was not charged. One of the leaders of the "terror squad" alluded arrest for several days after leaping out of the window of a passenger train while being transported to Oklahoma City for arraignment. Perhaps the most notable of the "terror squad" was a young man named James Overstreet, who was sent to the state reformatory in Granite for his involvement in the dynamiting of houses. Overstreet would later become a notorious bank robber and a contemporary of John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd credited with over a dozen bank robberies in Illinois.

The strike of 1922 claimed 11 fatalities across the nation. Shawnee escaped without any deaths, but scores of citizens were victimized and about a dozen striking workers were incarcerated as a result of the mayhem. The strike signaled the beginning of the end to the railroads as the driving force of the Shawnee economy, and the rifts scarred the community for many decades to come.