

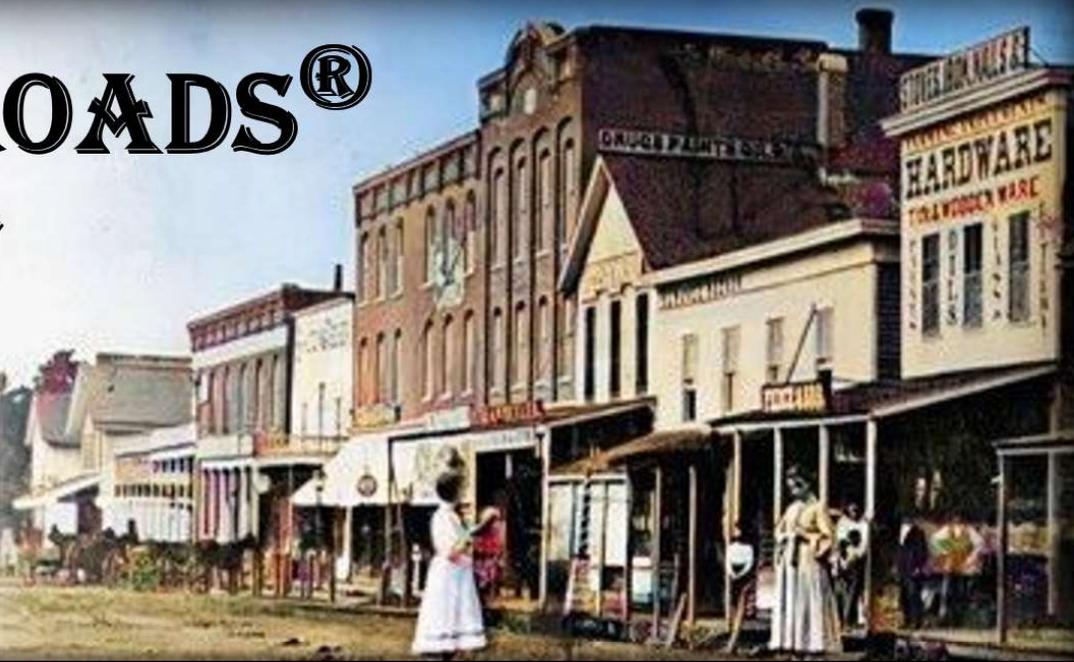
# DUSTY ROADS®

## STORIES OF

## KEWANEE

## PAST &

## PRESENT



Dean Karau

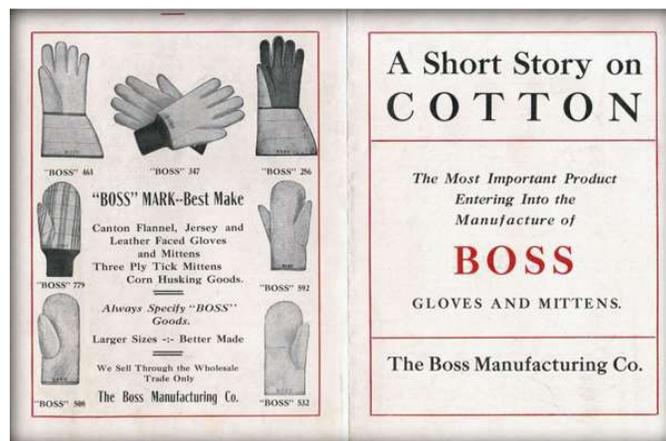
May 2022

### *The 1935 Boss Mfg. Co. Strike* *Part II -The Strike*

*(Part I of this story traced the history of Kewanee inventor H. H. Perkins and his early companies which grew into the Boss Manufacturing Company. Despite the Depression, the early 1930s were an era of further growth for Boss, and it became the leading glove producer in the nation. But the seeds of labor strife were sown during this period, and soon Kewanee would face a strike that would have national implications.)*

Dorothy Mayhew Lay, an impressionable 15-year-old with ties to Boss Manufacturing Co. management in 1935, later wrote about the everyday folks who worked at the company before the strike:

*“The men and women who originally went to work at the leather cutting tables and sewing machines in the locally founded glove factory were representative of the immigrants who came inland from their eastern port of entry. The manufacturing profile of Kewanee had offered jobs for unskilled labor. Poles, Belgians, and Lithuanians were soon joined by German, Irish, and Swedish immigrants. They were hard workers and grateful for the opportunity to work, but, as they became more and more oppressed, they overcame their hesitancy and pushed for a more equitable division of piece rate scale and of the work. The main issues*



*1935 Boss gloves & mittens brochure*

*centered around the right to collectively bargain for wage and piece rate parity.”*

The Depression had forced cutbacks in hours per week as well as wages, making it hard for the workers Dorothy Lay described to survive. Boss management then instituted the Bedeaux system of payment which set a standard amount of required production per minute for every job. For reaching it, workers were given a moderate bonus, and for exceeding it they received a larger one, while some of the savings also went to the foremen and management.

On the surface, the “B system” didn’t sound bad for the workers. But in practice it was. The superin-

tendent and foremen controlled the work assignments in ways which could make it difficult, if not impossible, to meet the numbers needed to come close to the wages the workers had made before.

For instance, one employee explained the leather cutting pay:

*“In the leather room each worker was given so many pounds of leather to start his day. It was weighed and handed out to you and you took it to your bench. You were paid then by the numbers of the dozens of gloves you turned out.”*

Continuing the explanation, another employee said

*“the [B system] was based on your top speed [as measured by experts] and you had to maintain that all the time or you wouldn’t make your quota. It was an impossible situation.”*

And, the hides of leather given out each morning

*“came in grades – 1, 2, 3, and rejects. Your output depended upon how good the hides were that you were allotted. . . . [But] most of the leather we got was inferior . . . and it was impossible to make good time in cutting such leather into gloves.”*

According to many of the workers, there was no impartiality at all in the system, and a number of the foremen had no scruples at all. In fact, some of the foremen would accept bribes from a few of the employees – *“these fellows would bring vegetables from their gardens to the foremen and would often go down to his house and do handy work for him.”* The favored employees would get the better raw

materials with which to work and would get full a week of work while others got inferior grades of leather and were allocated only a few hours of work each day.

(Later, even some in management agreed that some of the foremen’s behavior was reprehensible. After the strike, one said that a particular foreman *“must certainly have been a slave driver,”* and he admitted that *“it took the strike to reveal the inequalities in [some types] of foremen.”*)

Moreover, according to the workers, Boss had the worst working conditions of the big Kewanee factories. Yet workers would not quit for fear of retaliation. According to one worker,

*“if you quit at Boss, [the plant superintendent] would get on the phone and call Boiler and Walworth and tell them not to hire you, he’d tell them you were unreliable.”*

When the workers complained about some supervisors who controlled the work and the unfairness of the B system, management viewed their concerns as ingratitude and believed that only tight controls could maintain the company’s profits in the midst of the Depression. Moreover, certain ethnic groups were looked upon by management as particularly problematic. As someone in management later said,

*“[t]here was a strong feeling . . . that the Southern European immigrant faction was the cause of the unrest in the factory. Boss officials felt these malcontents should be contained.”*

Finally, the unrest led to worker action. In February 1935, workers in the leather-cutting department formed an unaffiliated labor organization. In March, a committee met with the plant superintendent and requested a modification of the B system. They were told an effort would be made to remedy conditions. But it did not materialize.

In early May, the employees became affiliated with the American Federation of Labor as Local 85 of the International Glove Workers’ Union of America, and mem-



*Boss corporate office, W. First Street on the corner of Chestnut Street.*

bership was open to all production employees.

But then the company began applying pressure on the workers. Over the next month, Boss foremen began issuing veiled threats that *“the situation was getting serious.”* They strongly suggested that employees attend union meetings and *“go to bat”* for Boss. They demanded *“the names of the girls in the sewing department who were members of the union.”* One foreman threatened a woman that

*“the union would take her money without giving her anything in return, and that [the foreman’s] brother, who had been discharged by his employer for joining a union, had to leave town in search of other employment.”*

In July, a foreman tried to intimidate employees, saying

*“well, the boys took a strike vote last night . . . it looks pretty bad. . . . They are going to make a mistake. . . . That is an awful thing. . . . I had a brother that was in a strike down there at Walworth’s, and he never could get a job*

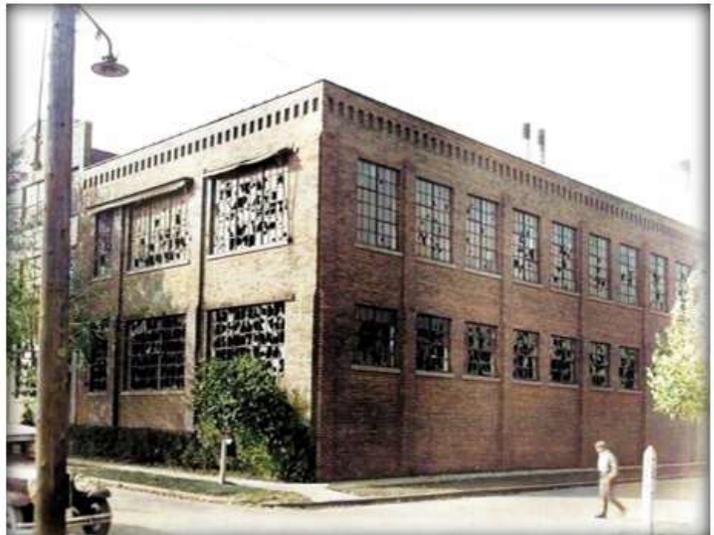
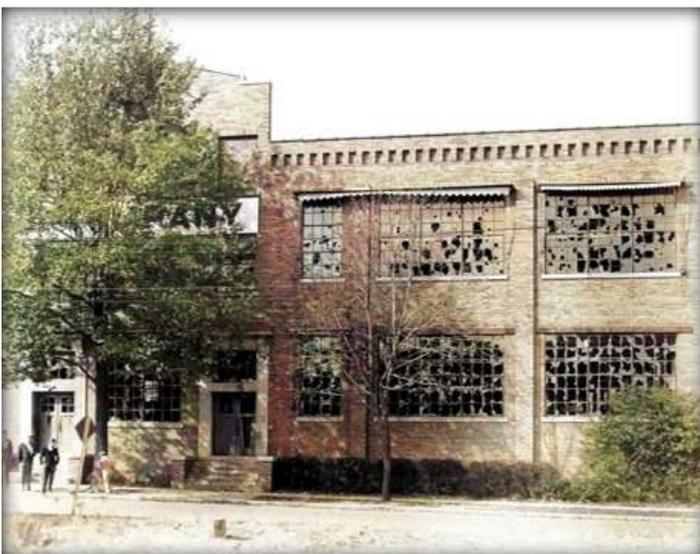
*again, and he had to move all the way to California. There are some more around town that could not get any jobs in these factories.”*

In July a union committee again met with the plant superintendent and asked that Boss negotiate with the union. Boss refused. As a result, a strike was called for August 6.

Boss’ position was that the majority of its workers were not union members. It also believed that the Wagner Act, which gave workers the right to collectively bargain, was unconstitutional. Therefore, it would not budge, refusing to recognize and negotiate with the union.

The workers similarly held their ground. While some workers sided with management, the Kewanee factory remained shuttered as a hot and humid summer dragged on. Out-of-work employees milled around the plant and the Boss corporate office building downtown.

A Labor Day celebration by the workers and their supporters was planned for Chautauqua Park but had



*Broken windows in some of the Boss buildings which occurred during the strike*

to be postponed until the end of September due to the weather. When it was held, three thousand attendees participated. Civic and union leaders spoke, games were played, food consumed, entertainment was provided, and a good time was had by all.

But in early October, violence intruded on what had previously been a relatively peaceful strike. When six management men entered the factory, “*all hell broke loose*,” according to one employee, and “*the strikers began paying kids so much money per bucket of rocks from the railroad bed to toss through the factory windows*.” All of the windows at the plant and many at the downtown office building were shattered. Local police, aided by county deputies, and ultimately state militia, gained control of the situation and relative peace returned.

By mid-October, the governor’s office had investigated the strike and called Kewanee business, union, and civic leaders to Springfield for discussions. The governor ultimately submitted a compromise proposal, and it was soon accepted by both Boss and the union. The strike was over. On October 17, the Boss’ factory doors opened again.

In 1939, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals found that Boss wrongfully refused to recognize the union as the exclusive bargaining representative of its employees. The Court found that Boss

*“had interfered with, restrained and coerced its employees in the exercise of their rights to self-organization; that [Boss’s] conduct tended to discourage membership in the Union; and that the [National Labor Relations] Board was justified in directing [Boss] to bargain collectively with the Union as the exclusive representative of its production employees.”*



In assessing the strike, a former employee later said that

*“the strike had to come. The working conditions and intimidation and no freedom of thought wasn’t democratic. . . . All there was for dedicated, hard work was a 2% raise in pay every four years if you were lucky. There was no management-employee relationship at all – they were different worlds. The unions helped us get organized, but we didn’t gain much in 1935. We did pave the way for better conditions for those who came along a lot later.”*

A former Boss executive later admitted that the stance the company took was ill-informed:

*“Management and the firm’s legal body had no doubt but that the Wagner Act was unconstitutional. Had management known or been advised of its constitutionality, they would have not held out so long. We should have given in sooner.”*

The 1935 Boss strike in Kewanee may not have reached the length, level of bitterness, and violence as other strikes of the era. Nevertheless, it was another link in the chain of the strengthening of labor movement in the U.S. in general and in Kewanee in particular. It also left an imprint on many Kewaneeans, including Dorothy Lay, who said the strike

*“became forever an important part of my young womanhood. . . . [A] fifteen-year-old girl witnessed an unforgettable confrontation between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots.’”*

Unfortunately, the divide between the “haves” and “have nots” exists to this day.

*(A special thanks to Nelson Mayhew Lay for talking with me about his research and kindly sharing his thesis, entitled LABOR VIOLENCE IN A SMALL TOWN: THE 1935 BOSS MANUFACTURING COMPANY STRIKE AT KEWANEE, ILLINOIS. Among other sources, I also relied on the article by Nelson’s mother, Dorothy Mayhew Lay, entitled STRIKE!, published in TALES FROM TWO RIVERS III, and the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals’ written decision.)*

You can see more of my stories, photos, and videos about Kewanee on my Dusty Roads® Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/dusty.roads.kewanee>.



*Dorothy Mayhew, 1935 Kewanee High School sophomore*