

Bomb Found at Gleeson!

On the morning of April 14, 1917, Rube Wells, a well-known local miner in the area, was walking past the stables of the Copper Belle mining company in Gleeson and spotted something amiss in the brush which grew alongside the building. What appeared at first glance to be just another bit of wind-blown garbage turned out to be something much more weighty, sinister, and dangerous.

A Quaker Oats carton sat nestled among the weeds and the brush. Protruding from the carton were the ends of small filaments, carefully placed and poking through the cardboard. Rube Wells, a miner well versed in the ways of dynamite and explosives, recognized the filaments as fuses, and immediately reported the matter to Gleeson Deputy Sheriff Lafe Gibson. Looking at the infernal contraption, Gibson in turn picked up the phone and called Cochise County Sheriff Harry Wheeler.



Sheriff Harry C. Wheeler had, for many months, been dealing with struggles between the labor unions and the giant copper companies. Strikes and walkouts, spies, infiltrations, and violence had marked the mining industry of Arizona. On one side of this very public wrestling match was Walter Douglas, the owner of the massive Phelps Dodge Mining Company. On the other side were the members and leadership of the I.W.W., the International Workers of the World, a labor union popularly known as the “Wobblies.”

The I.W.W. was an international “working class union” with an agenda which looked to most Americans as both radical and socialist. It was formed in 1905 in Chicago at a gathering of about two hundred avowed socialists, anarchists, and radical trade unionists from around the country. I.W.W. propaganda called for the elimination of all private ownership of mineral rights, the overthrow of the “employing class”, the abolition of the wage system, and “doing away with capitalism.”

On the other side was Walter Douglas and the other owners of “big copper”. To Douglas, any form of labor union was anathema, and even the suggestion of compromise with such organizations was something to be fiercely, and even violently, put down. To this end, Douglas employed every means at his disposal. He bought every daily newspaper in the state, and most of the weeklies as well. These newspapers were directed to give only the “Copper” side of any story, and to vilify and demean unionized labor and its members.

Douglas also hired men to go “undercover” and join the Wobblies, rising up in their leadership. Douglas directed these “spies” to insert even more radical language into brochures and pamphlets, and to incite even more radical and violent reactions among the rank-and-file Wobblies. In this way, he intended to lump all unionists into one big collection of “radicals and

criminals”, thus giving ample reason to crush all labor unions in the mining industry.

On March 1, 1917, a telegram was made public which had been sent to the German Ambassador in Washington in which his superiors instructed him to encourage Mexico to declare war on the United States. The outrage sparked by this telegram helped to bring about the United States entry into World War I on April 6, 1917. Douglas used his newspapers to print the suggestion that the Wobblies, an “International Union”, were funded by Germany and were trying to sabotage the production of copper in Arizona. In fact, some of the Wobblies did call for shutting down the production of copper across the whole state. Notably, however, not a single case of actual sabotage was ever attributed to the Wobblies. In terms of sabotage, they were all talk, and never actually committed any overt acts.

It was just one week after the American declaration of war, amid all the talk of bombings and sabotage and anarchy...amid all the accusations, the hysteria, and the calls for patriotism and unity, that Sheriff Harry Wheeler got the call from Lafe Gibson about a bomb at the copper mine in Gleeson. Rushing over to the small mining town, Wheeler and Gibson examined the contraption, which was loaded with multiple sticks of dynamite, rusty nails, and scraps of iron.

Carefully taking the package about a mile out of town, they buried it underground and lit the fuses. The bomb exploded, sending bits of shrapnel flying but injuring no one. The resulting investigation produced nothing, and the maker of this sinister carton was never determined.

Three months later, in July of 1917, Sheriff Harry Wheeler organized and carried out the famous “Bisbee Deportation,” in which any member of any labor union in the town of Bisbee was marched at gunpoint down to the ball park, loaded up into cattle cars, and sent off to New Mexico, where they were abandoned. No “Wobbly” or any sympathizer was allowed back into Bisbee. Over a thousand labor unionists, most of them legal citizens of both the U.S. and Arizona, were deported from their homes and families, never to return.

Along with the newspaper hype, the speeches, the pamphlets, and the rumors of I.W.W. “treachery”, one has to wonder whether the bomb found at the Gleeson copper mine was not also an influence on Sheriff Wheeler, fueling the fear which brought about that infamous deportation.

