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# The Expansion of Class Concepts and the Colorado Coal Field War Project

David M. Amrine

*Abstract: The Colorado Coal Field War Project was an attempt by McGuire, Reckner, and others to develop a 'working-class' archaeology that served the public as well as the archaeologists performing excavations and research. The attempt was successful, promoting and supporting ideas that had been discussed in archaeology about gender, class, and the treatment of archaeology as a craft. Their example of using archaeology to benefit communities as well as academic interests can and should be tested in other regions of the United States as well as the rest of the world.*

Many authors of the past two decades have called for expanded conceptions of class, gender, and ethnicity (Purser 1991, Wurst 1999, Duke and Saitta 1998, McGuire and Reckner 2003). They have called for studies in which class, gender, and ethnicity are not seen as separate elements, but rather as elements that ought to be studied together in archaeological work. Wurst (1999), Wood (2002), and McGuire and Reckner (2003) have sought to show that class is a concept that can cross-cut ethnicity, gender, and even the differences between the domestic and the public spheres. In addition, they (McGuire, Reckner, and Wood) have called for a “working-class” archaeology that focuses on a dialogue between the working class and the archaeologist in order to produce an archaeology that serves the public in a more meaningful way. They would also remind us that archaeology is a craft involving the production of knowledge for a specific purpose (Duke and Saitta 1998, Ludlow Collective 2001, McGuire and Reckner 2003, McGuire and Walker 1999, Shanks and McGuire 1996).

In order to accomplish their goals, McGuire and Reckner have collaborated on a project called the Colorado Coal Field War Project (2003). This project has focused on the archaeology of the Colorado Coal Field War of 1913-1914, an extremely important event in the labor history of southern Colorado and the country as a whole. They have sought to present this archaeology to the working classes of today through collaboration with modern unions and descendants of those

who participated in or experienced the war (McGuire and Reckner 2003). This paper will examine the archaeological data and conclusions from the Colorado Coal Field War Project, and it will show how this project has been effective so far. The paper will also show how a working-class archaeology could be of benefit in other regions of the United States that have labor histories which could be used to aid the working-class peoples of today in understanding their past. It could also bring these issues of class, which still exist, to the attention of the middle and upper classes.

### *The Colorado Coal Field War - History*

The Colorado Coal Field War occurred in response to labor and company conflict stemming from conditions in southern Colorado coal fields during 1913. The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I), owned by the Rockefeller family, employed around 14,000 miners, most of whom were immigrants representing several ethnic groups. Mining communities were made up of mostly working-class families, but included some managers and professionals. The lives of men and women were substantially different (with men working in the mines and women generally running the boarding houses). In addition, the various ethnic groups formed their own communities within each mining town. Living conditions in the mines and in towns were poor at best, with a mining accident rate that was triple the national average (McGuire and Reckner 2003:85). Companies controlled housing, stores, medical facilities, saloons, and recreational facilities. They also dominated the local political structure, telling miners how to vote and controlling the workers' lives in a way that was described as feudal (McGuire and Reckner 2003:85). In 1913, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) sought to organize miners and called a strike in the fall. Ninety percent of the miners, demanding higher pay, the right to unionize, and that the current mining laws of Colorado be enforced, left their shafts and began to strike on 23 September. The company responded by forcing miners and their families out of company-owned homes into tent camps that were set up by the UMWA. Ludlow was the largest of these with 1200 residents and approximately 150 tents. It was also the UMWA's strike headquarters for Las Animas County. Due to violence that characterized the strike, the governor called out the Colorado National Guard in October of 1913. In April of 1914, these regular troops were called back and the mining companies replaced them with their own employees under Colorado National Guard officers. In preparation for conflict, miners in these camps dug cellars as a place of refuge for women and children (McGuire and Reckner 2003:85).

On 20 April, 1914, the Ludlow Massacre occurred. The leaders of the strike were ordered to meet the Guard commander at 9:00 AM at the Ludlow railroad station (McGuire and Reckner 2003:86). In preparation for possible attack, the miners put up gunmen at a nearby railroad cut that overlooked the station. The Guard had placed a machine gun one mile south of the tent camp. At some point in the morning, shots were fired by an unknown gunman and the guardsmen reacted by firing the machine gun into the camp. Conflict continued until dusk, when a train stopped in front of the machine guns. This allowed most of the miners and their families to escape. However, 11 children and two women (hiding in a cellar) were killed along with three camp leaders who were executed by the guardsmen (McGuire and Reckner 2003:86). The camp was subsequently burned and looted by the guardsmen.

Strikers responded to this violent act by initiating a massive takeover of the mining district, destroying company towns and killing company employees. Finally, President Wilson sent federal troops to Trinidad, Colorado to restore order and the strike stopped in December of 1914 when the UMWA went bankrupt. The killing of women and children shocked the nation and led to some small reforms by Rockefeller, although the effects were unproven. Unions, however, were not recognized in Southern Colorado until the New Deal Reforms of the 1930s (McGuire and Reckner 2003:86-87).

### *The Colorado Coal Field War Project*

The goal of the archaeology of the Coal field War Project was to show that the traditional views of class equals workplace equals male and ethnicity equals home equals female are not entirely sound. Instead, McGuire and Reckner argue that “class and ethnicity cross-cut both workplace and home, male and female” (McGuire and Reckner 2003:87). In their own words, they expected “to find that working-class men in the mines and working-class women in the homes shared a common day-to-day lived experience that resulted from their class position and that ethnic differences divided them in both contexts (McGuire and Reckner 2003:87).” To that end, they performed archaeological work at Ludlow and Berwind (a company town).

In Ludlow, McGuire and Reckner performed surface collection to determine the extent of the tent camp as well as excavations of one complete and several partial tent platforms, several shallow, unidentified pit features, a possible privy on the edge of the camp, a possible defensive rifle pit, and two dug cellars. In order to facilitate mapping of the camp, they also used photographs to identify locations of over a quarter of the tents in the colony by superimposing a transparent photo onto the lens of a camera and looking at the

contemporary landscape through the transparency. The excavations they performed yielded a substantial amount of data. Using photos, they determined that tents were built by digging a shallow basin and laying joists on the ground to support a platform and wooden frame. They confirmed this using data from their excavations (McGuire and Reckner 2003:88). The fully excavated tent site was defined using soil stains, shallow trenches from water runoff, and rows of nails following the joists of the tent. They also found large numbers of small artifacts likely left by tent residents. They concluded that the tent probably belonged to Italian Catholics as evidenced by some religious medals and a part of an occupant's suspenders. Other tent excavations revealed oxidized soil characteristic of burning, and metal tent and furniture hardware. In the possible privy on the edge of the colony, they found steel cans of several sizes, medicinal and sauce bottles, tobacco tins, furniture fragments, and a miner's lamp. The stratigraphy and contents of the two cellar excavations consisted of fire damaged items covered over by burned tent remains followed by filler consisting of coal clinker, charcoal, rusted metal, and other burned possessions. This stratigraphy showed the history of the site. The families left their possessions in a hurry, which were then covered over by the remains of burning tents. After the massacre, the cellars were filled in by other miners with the clinker and other refuse (McGuire and Reckner 2003:90). McGuire and Reckner argue that these archaeological data allow us to view the day-to-day lives of those in the Ludlow colony along with the devastation that occurred in the Massacre itself.

Even more compelling is the evidence that was found at the Berwind site as reported by Margaret Wood (2002). Berwind was a Colorado Fuel and Iron town near Ludlow that was likely occupied before and after the strike. Those on the project at Berwind did test excavations in the yards associated with old houses, giving them stratified deposits up to 50cm deep. They also excavated trash dumps, latrines, and privies, sorting them into those dating before, during, and after the strike. In addition, they used photographs and oral histories to verify this. Two features, a town dump and a privy, were also excavated and dated to before the strike. In the privy, regular use and maintenance were evident along with its eventual capping with debris from the destruction of the nearby area (McGuire and Reckner 2003:90).

At this point, it is important to note that one of the goals of the archaeological work at Ludlow and Berwind was to establish the life of the working-class miners and their families before, during, and after the strike (McGuire and Reckner 2003:90). In the case of Berwind, two sections of town were studied. One dated to between 1900 and 1913 and another dated to 1913-1930. Notice that this provides a nice frame for the 1913-1914 coal war and allows a look at how life may have

changed in response to the events at Ludlow and elsewhere in southern Colorado (Wood 2002).

Before the strike in 1910, 53% of all nuclear family households had at least one unrelated person living and eating in the home. There was an average of three boarders per home. A woman's work in the home consisted mainly of preparing meals for 2 to 11 people from scratch. Housewives who took in boarders earned an average of 25% of the family's total income (Wood 2002). Two features, a trash pit and a midden, associated with 11 Berwind houses (dated to 1904 and 1912 respectively using manufacture dates on glass bottles), were found to contain numerous metal containers associated with food preparation. Mass produced tin cans made up 52.3 % of all metal vessels. This is contrasted with the 1.3 % provided by food storage jars. According to Wood, despite the high price of mass produced canned goods at the time, women who supported boarders as well as their families could earn \$1.50 a day taking on boarders. This is compared to the \$1.92 that a miner could make in a day. The women likely used this money to purchase canned food that would allow them to provide a varied diet with seasonal items (fruits and vegetables) year round. In addition, large cans represented a high percentage in the assemblage, indicating communal aspects of dining in these boarding families' homes.

Wood points out that "through their work preparing communal meals, where both related and unrelated co-residents of a household would get together at least once a day, women helped create bonds of community, support, and mutual interaction" (Wood 2002:76). Although CF&I protested these boarding arrangements which allowed the miners to communicate to one another more effectively, they allowed those arrangements to continue because it cut costs for the company in housing and wages. In addition, the woman's extra income took attention away from the man's low wages.

After the strike, things changed for the working-class women of Berwind as well as their families. In response to the bad publicity brought on by the strike, the Rockefeller family, who owned Colorado Fuel & Iron, instituted company policies that emphasized individual responsibility and rights. In this way, unionization and collective bargaining could be side-stepped and miners could be controlled more effectively. To institute this focus on the individual, the companies set up company boarding houses that they could control and hired mainly married workers with families. Single workers were usually fired at the first opportunity. By 1920, according to census data for Berwind, 58% of all households were those of nuclear families and communal living conditions were effectively eliminated. Although wages were rising, so was the cost of living. Given the average daily wage and the limited and unreliable availability of work, coal miners "were living far below

the federally determined living wage for a family of four” (Wood 2002:79). Women, who were no longer able to add to the income of the home through boarders, had to turn to new strategies.

From the excavation of a midden scatter associated with eight houses, significant increases in metal and glass containers involving food storage were found. This consisted mostly of home-canning jars with glass lid-liners and zinc lids. This increase in food storage items is contrasted by a decrease in the mass-produced cans of the pre-strike era. This data suggests that women were canning their own food. This is supported also by the political environment of the time in which WWI slogans including “We Can Can Vegetables, and Kaiser Too” (Strasser 1982:23 *in* Wood 2002:80) were used to encourage women to grow and store their own food. Canning technology improved as well, further encouraging the use of food storage. Women at Berwind may have shared expensive canning equipment of the time. This use of canning was likely a safety net for the mining family that counteracted the shifting wages and availability of jobs in the 1920s. Wood also points out that, despite the attempts of mining companies to keep families separate by emphasizing individual housing, women may have been able to continue the community ties they had before the strike through the sharing of canning activities. This would continue to link the mining families into a community that shared a common working-class life (Wood 2002).

After analyzing these artifacts, Wood puts forth two main points: 1) Before and after the strike of 1913-1914, women played a vital role in supporting the mining household and providing a means by which the community, although composed of men and women of different ethnicities, could share its working-class experience and form a working-class consciousness that would lead to the strike. Women continued to play a vital role in shaping community connections and supporting the family after the strike. 2) Simply viewing women through the middle-class view of the domestic housewife would lead to researchers overlooking the vital role that women at Berwind played in class struggle and the working-class culture.

The final goal of the Colorado Coal Field War Project is to provide a model for a working-class archaeology; it reveals the continued existence of class despite claims that class no longer exists (McGuire and Reckner 2003:90-94). McGuire and Reckner argue that the information derived from the archaeological data on the everyday lives of the people at Ludlow and Berwind “humanizes the strikers because it talks about them in terms of relations and activities that our modern audiences also experience; for example relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, and activities such as preparing food for a family, or how to get the laundry done.” (McGuire and Reckner 2003:91)

McGuire and Reckner also describe many of the projects that have been instituted in order to make the results of the Coal Field War Project available to the working class. At the actual site of the Ludlow massacre, kiosks have been set up explaining the event and the archaeological work that has taken place there (McGuire and Reckner 2003:90-94). Students involved in the fieldwork at the project have been provided with opportunities to share in the process of interpretation and have been given the responsibility to explain the work to the general public at UMWA memorial services at Ludlow using an exhibit of the fieldwork (Walker and Saitta 2002). There have also been programs instituted for the further education of the public, including teaching packets for Colorado public schools, a curriculum for Middle Schools on the history of labor in Colorado, a Colorado Endowment for the Humanities sponsored project training institutes for teachers at Trinidad State Junior College. This project trains teachers on labor history and aids in developing classroom materials; materials used include a historic trunk with artifacts, photos, and text that circulates through the Denver Colorado School District. These efforts have had a definite effect on the social atmosphere by serving both the descendants and the descent communities (communities that may not be directly related to miners, but have common elements due to similar situation or location, e.g. modern unions and working-class communities in southern Colorado). In fact, striking steelworkers from Pueblo, Colorado who visit the Ludlow memorials have used the Ludlow Massacre as a symbol in their struggle to stop forced overtime. This has worked so well that the Oregon Steel company, for whom they work, has changed the named of their Pueblo subsidiary from CF&I to Rocky Mountain Steel in order to avoid association with the Ludlow Massacre (McGuire and Reckner 2003:90-94).

McGuire and Reckner argue that, through their archaeological work and the efforts in the community, they are “building archaeology that working people can relate to both emotionally and intellectually” (McGuire and Reckner 2003:94). They admit that this archaeology has not overcome all boundaries between the middle-class archaeologist and working-class ideals, but argue that they have sought to create the Marxist ideal of praxis in their work.

### *Discussion*

Having discussed the data presented by those who worked on the Colorado Coal Field War Project, there is the need to answer the question of whether or not the archaeology done there has actually contributed to archaeology as a whole and whether it is viable as a model for further research by other archaeologists. The short answer, so far, is yes. They have shown persuasively how archaeology may be

used in a way that seeks to bring the struggles of working-class people to light and show that class is alive and well in the twenty-first century. Shanks and McGuire have called for archaeology to realize its place as a *craft* (Shanks and McGuire 1996). To a certain extent, this goes along with the Marxist ideal of praxis mentioned above. Shanks and McGuire, in *The Craft of Archaeology*, argue that archaeology is not some romantic field where men like Indiana Jones find incredible secrets in far off lands or solve complex puzzles to unveil valuable artifacts. They also argue that it is not a place in which ivory tower theoreticians and lay fieldworkers stand at odds with one another. Instead, they point out that archaeology is a craft that blends theory and practice into a cultural production that can serve others on many different levels. This involves archaeologists realizing that they are producers of a cultural product that does not exist in a vacuum, but rather works within a political context that it must consider (Shanks and McGuire 1996). The Colorado Coal Field War Project has achieved this goal. Instead of focusing on theory or material data alone and producing an archaeological work that would be published in a journal simply for other archaeologists, they have *crafted* a past around the Ludlow Massacre that pays heed to the material data, but also produces results that can be used in aiding causes in the present. They have “crafted” the past and made more than just a rote intellectual product.

The Colorado Coal Field War Project has also contributed to understandings of gender. In her article describing the migration patterns of women and men in two late-nineteenth century towns, Margaret Purser argued that gender is something that goes beyond simple understanding of the lives of women in the past. She argues that by viewing gender as something more than a collection of natural and universal traits in men and women, we can look at broader social patterns (Purser 1991). Archaeologists can then, through gender, look at larger interpretations of society that include gender. In this case, the same applies to class. Wood’s article on the women of Berwind has accomplished this goal in a thought-provoking way. By looking at the archaeology of Berwind households, she has shown that women played a vital role in developing the class consciousness amongst working-class families in the mining camps that was necessary for the organization of the 1913-1914 strike. Instead of using imposed models such as the ‘cult of domesticity’, which is a traditionally middle-class concept, she has looked at women as agents in a much broader social environment. By taking on boarders and, later, by sharing the experience of canning goods, they not only participated in supporting their families along with the men who went to the mines, but they also allowed the community to come together and share the experiences that resulted from a working-class environment (Wood 2002). This view fits the idea that Purser put forward, proposing that “gender is not limited

to households, or to women, but is a fundamental part of what organizes individuals into households and structures their relationships with the larger community and society around them” (Purser 1991:14). In addition, it illustrates that class was not limited to the working environment in which men labored, but also existed in the homes of different mining families. This illustrates nicely that the traditional view of class equals workplace equals male and ethnicity equals home equals female is not entirely accurate and needs rethinking (McGuire and Reckner 2003). Wood’s work also shows how gender and class are intertwined. In the case of the miners in the company towns and their families, both gender and class played a major part in the way these people saw their world.

The Colorado Coal Field War Project has also worked quite nicely with the proposals of Louann Wurst (1999), who calls for the understanding that the study of class is not a study of distinctive groups, but rather a study of the relationships between those groups. In *Internalizing Class in Historical Archaeology*, she argues that this understanding of relationships requires abstraction that will further an understanding of class. These include abstractions of extension, levels of generality, and vantage point. Abstractions of extension require that we see class on multiple scales. Class doesn’t exist in a vacuum at the individual level, nor does it exist only on a universal level across all of society. It can be seen on many different scales (Wurst 1999). The Coal Field War Project did this well, although it did largely focus on the working-class as a discrete category. The studies at Berwind and Ludlow looked at more than the individual level. They also, through documentary evidence and the archaeological record, looked at how the regional interplay between the companies and the workers affected the local level. They studied the interrelations between different levels of class (i.e. the miner and the company men) and they looked at how the individual actions of women in homes and men at work affected the actions of all the working-class people banding together under the UMWA. Abstractions of levels of generality are similar to the abstractions of extension in that they deal with different scales, but they focus on becoming more generalized. The Coal Field War Project did this in both a spatial and a temporal sense, though they could have gone further with the spatial sense. Speaking temporally, they used the data gained about the working-class in the past and related it to the working-class of today through their efforts at working with the descent communities, including modern unions, descendants of the miners, and the people of towns in which these events took place. They generalized the situation of the miners and their families in the past, showing that the miners and workers of today could relate to this knowledge and that conditions similar to what miners suffered from 1913 to 1914 still exist today. Finally, using the documentary evidence of the time, they used

abstractions of vantage point, which involves looking at class relationships through the eyes of different groups within the class structure. Specifically, they did not just describe how the working-class lived, though that was a primary focus. They made an effort to show how the companies saw the same conflicts from another side of the same class relation (Wurst 1999). For instance, Wood (2002) points out that the Rockefellers honestly believed that focusing on individual rights and responsibilities among miners through company policies encouraged miners to voice grievances. The Rockefellers also believed that simply changing the design of company towns would solve the problems that miners had with earlier conditions and improve their living situation.

From the above discussion, we can see that the Colorado Coal Field War Project was an effective use of archaeology, and that it utilized and improved upon concepts of class and gender that had been proposed earlier by other archaeologists. Arguably, though, more can be done. The Coal Field War Project focused mainly on southern Colorado and the state of Colorado in its study. Understanding that there are limits to archaeological fieldwork, and that projects like this one can take time, it is respectfully noted that much more can be done in regards to the archaeology of the working-class.

Implementing this style of archaeology could be very useful in many different settings. The labor movement of the early twentieth century, for instance, did not exist only in Colorado. There are other major events which took place elsewhere in the United States that added to the general changes in labor relations that occurred at the time. For example, West Virginia is a state that has been, and still is, dealing with many of the same labor issues since the mid to late 1800s when industrialization occurred throughout the state. Indeed, it is during this time, when multiple resources (natural gas and coal being two of the principals) began to be extracted from the state in large quantities (Williams 2001), that labor relations dealing with companies and mining began to appear. West Virginia has a rich history of coal wars and instances in which the working-class struggled against company men for its rights. For example, while the Coal Field War was going on in Colorado, officials in the state of West Virginia were allowing companies to break up UMWA organizing efforts; similar poor working conditions, like those in Colorado, also existed. Although things did not get worse until later (the 1920's), West Virginia saw a series of small mine wars, and one in particular is commemorated by the state's people each year. About a decade after the Ludlow Massacre, numerous conflicts occurred, including the Matewan Massacre in Mingo County, West Virginia, in which ten people were killed in a skirmish between strikers and company men (Williams 2001). In addition, the wars between miners and companies led to the use of red bandanas by

miners to mark who was friend or foe. This led to the commonly used term “redneck.” Suffice it to say, there was union conflict going on in West Virginia, and as of yet, sources indicating archaeological work at sites like Matewan have not been found. Thus, it is proposed that research similar to what has been done at Ludlow and Berwind could also be done in West Virginia. West Virginia’s working class is large and still struggles with colonial-style economics where resources are pulled from the state with little return to its citizens (Williams 2001). There is ample room for a working-class archaeology to be developed in the towns and regions where the descendants of those who lived during these events still reside. In keeping with Wurst’s call for abstractions of class that involve multiple scales, we could include studies at West Virginia in the understanding of the struggle of mine workers in the early twentieth century. This, in addition to the studies done in Colorado, would expand our frame of reference for working-class archaeology from a regional to a national level.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has sought to examine the effectiveness and implications in archaeology of the Colorado Coal Field War Project. We have seen that the project not only honors its Marxist roots by attempting to follow the ideal of praxis (the practical application of knowledge), but also that it serves as a model to transform archaeology into something more than just an intellectual pursuit. It serves to make archaeology a craft in which purposeful and meaningful work is done that can aid in interpreting the past for the people in the present. The Project has also shown that gender is not a discrete, naturalistic category that can only be discerned through individuals or the household, but rather that it can be used and analyzed within the context of broader social events such as class conflict. It is in the interest of archaeologists to accept the practical application of archaeology and attempt to apply it elsewhere. Colorado and West Virginia are not the only places in which archaeology of the working-class can be examined and utilized to aid in the struggles of modern workers. There are multiple areas in the world where miners and other workers in the past have experienced class conflict and are still enmeshed in it. We can aid these people in their struggles and better educate the middle and upper-classes by utilizing the concepts of a working-class archaeology.

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