12 The wild west of employer anti-unionism

The glorification of vigilantism and individualism in the early twentieth-century United States¹

Vilja Hulden and Chad Pearson

When employers organised to address the “labour question” in the opening years of the twentieth century, they did so as the self-proclaimed champions of “independent” (that is, non-union) workers supposedly harassed by labour unions. At a moment when unions were growing, strike activity was intensifying, and the corporate-industrial order was under severe scrutiny, organised employers countered critiques of how economic power undermined democracy by wrapping themselves in a language of fairness and equal rights, characterising virtually all standard labour union practices as coercive while portraying themselves as the true defenders of American liberty.²

Manufacturers took the lead, as organisations like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), the National Founders’ Association (NFA) and the National Metal Trades Association (NMTA) rallied against what they termed the “closed shop” – the common union requirement that all workers at a unionised workplace be union members – with a movement for the “open shop”, a workplace that purportedly welcomed workers without regard to union membership. Although the bulk of research on the employer counterattack has focused on the manufacturers, from the beginning the movement strove for a pan-industrial reach, which crystallised in the Citizens’ Industrial Association of America (CIAA). The CIAA, established in late 1903 to serve as the umbrella organisation of local associations usually known as Citizens’ Alliances, included members from manufacturing, construction, lumber, banking, retail and more. It purported to work “for the protection of the common people” against the “tyranny of labor unions” and to safeguard individual pluck and initiative against the levelling influence of union contracts.³

In this chapter, we show how the employer anti-union movement both boosted and intersected with the American creed of up-by-one’s-bootstraps social mobility. To do so, we turn our gaze away from the manufacturing sector and towards western cattle ranches, on the one hand, and urban small-time entrepreneurship, on the other. The former helps us examine how the employer counterattack linked itself with deep national mythologies of (frontier) individualism. The latter allows us to explore a context in which social mobility – on a modest but meaningful scale – was more reachable to workers than in manufacturing, somewhat changing the calculus of solidarity versus individualism. Analysing how employers

manipulated the cultural tenets and grassroots appeal of social mobility and individualism enables us to better understand what made the employer message palatable to many in the middle class as well as to some workers. At the same time, it illuminates how employers deployed a double standard that cast elite-serving collective action as civic engagement while vilifying worker self-organisation as dangerous and always at risk of tipping over into mob violence.

The first portion of our chapter examines the role of the famous author and pioneer of the Western genre of fiction writing, Owen Wister, in promoting the employer cause. In his writings, Wister – appointed in 1907 as member of the CIAA’s seven-person committee on Education and Publicity – justified and even glorified vigilante violence and strikebreakers by enveloping both in a great patriotic tradition of individualism.⁴ The second portion focuses on employer promotion of “non-union unions”, astroturf organisations that supposedly represented the interests of workers who did not wish to join labour unions. It investigates both the publicity value that such unions had for the employer anti-union movement and the circumstances that might have prompted some workers to associate with them.

Owen Wister and the virtuous scab

Best remembered as the author of the 1902 book *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*, Wister educated and entertained hundreds of thousands about individual heroism and vigilante campaigns for justice. His best-selling book, based roughly on the 1892 Johnson County War – a violent conflict that pitted the elite members of Wyoming Stock Growers Association against numerous small homesteaders – promoted the goodness of individualism, the importance of defending private property, the necessity of showing respect to one’s superiors and the virtue of standing up to the so-called dangerous classes. These values were consistent with the CIAA’s core mission, which included efforts to de-legitimise expressions of working-class collectivism while calling on citizens to respect the men responsible for upholding “law and order”.⁵ By focusing on Wister’s writings, we can better comprehend the ways anti-union employers championed the activities, including vigilante actions of individual anti-unionists.

Class conflict and the question of violence in 1892

Wister started writing about labour-management conflicts a decade before publishing *The Virginian*; for instance, he wrote an article on the Pennsylvania National Guard’s role in confronting the Homestead strikers in 1892, which came out in *Harper’s* two years later. One of the nation’s iconic labour conflicts, the protest, organised by the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers and Tin Workers, demonstrated the workers’ commitment to solidarity. Plant operator Henry Clay Frick, who had locked the men out because they refused to accept a wage cut, was quite frustrated by such solidarity. Writing to owner Andrew Carnegie on 4 July, Frick complained that “The workmen seem to be well organised, and have things, so far, very much their own way, that is to say, are guarding every avenue to the works; stopping all who may, or try, to get in the works”.⁶

During the conflict, Frick employed the services of the Pinkertons, which engaged in a notorious battle with protestors that resulted in the deaths of ten: seven workers and three Pinkertons. In response, Frick asked Democratic governor Robert Pattison to send in National Guardsmen.

Wister was impressed by the 8,500 scab-protecting National Guardsmen.⁷ He emphasised the visual differences between the conflicting sides, saluting the guardsmen for appearing “splendid on paper and picturesque to see”, while labelling their opponents “rats”.⁸ Wister showed little desire to understand the reasons for the workers’ grievances or their desire for a union. Instead he emphasised the dangers labourers posed to property rights. Among the accusations he levelled at the “rats” were that they distributed “incendiary pamphlets”, drove “owners from their property”, “established an advisory committee superior to the civil law” and violated “personal liberty”.⁹ Examples of striker militancy, in Wister’s mind, provided justification for state repression. The workers ultimately lost this struggle, and the membership of the Amalgamated Association Iron and Steel Workers and Tin Workers fell to less than 10,000 members shortly after it.¹⁰

Vigilante violence from above, however, was apparently quite acceptable to Wister. He condemned the Homestead strikers but showed approval for the violence employed by the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (WSGA), an organisation consisting of the state’s large landowners. These men are best known for their involvement in the 1892 Johnson County War, an infamous case of vigilantism that resulted in several killings followed by a failure of justice. Here, a combined group of roughly 50 WSGA members and their hired gunmen, seeking greater control over land and cattle, invaded northern Wyoming in April 1892. They fought under the banner of combating rustling, annoyed that the courts frequently failed to punish men for this alleged offence. Indeed, juries, seeing little evidence of wrongdoing, typically declared defendants not guilty, sparking signs of disappointment in elite circles. The WSGA vigilantes, joined by Pinkertons and hired gunmen, mobilised in early April. They murdered two men, including a labour activist. After these murders, many Johnson County residents retaliated. The invaders were forced to seek protection, which they received from the governor and President Benjamin Harrison. Community defenders were shocked to discover many deadly weapons and a 70-person kill-list after the shooting ceased. This was a rural, rather than an industrial struggle. But the class divisions were just as clear in Johnson County, Wyoming as they were in Western Pennsylvania. In both cases, the ruling class believed violence was an acceptable way to resolve their problems.

The defendants in this case – one that generated nationwide attention – got off after the court dismissed all charges against the cattlemen. Yet they lost the public relations war.¹¹

The Virginian and the public relations of violence

The invaders, though wealthy, wanted society to see them as upstanding ordinary people; they did not want the public to view them as suffering from what we might today call affluenza. They faced an increasingly unfriendly political and social climate: 1892 was a year that witnessed much class conflict and the rise of

left-wing political activism, which hurt the image of the nation's most privileged residents. In addition to the Homestead Strike and the Johnson County invasion, miners in northern Idaho staged an extraordinary struggle against the ruthless exploitation unleashed by several mine owners, and later in the year, workers mounted a general strike in New Orleans.¹²

The backlash against what seemed like a coordinated campaign against organised labour also found expression in political formations, including the rise of the Populist Party, which held its first meeting in Omaha on 4 July. The Populist Party's platform included goals that reflected the widespread anger felt by many of the nation's farmers and workers. The platform complained about workers' inability to organise and pointed to the unequal distribution of resources, including the large amount of "land concentrating in the hands of capitalists". The organisation's sixth resolution called for the elimination of the Pinkertons, the private security force that elites employed in Homestead, Johnson County and in Idaho's Coeur d'Alene mining districts: "we regard the maintenance of a large standing army of mercenaries, known as the Pinkerton system, as a menace to our liberties, and we demand its abolition".¹³

It was impossible not to recognise that the workplace-based conflicts that erupted in late 1880s and early 1890s were class-based. Outside observers, including journalists, lawyers and government officials acknowledged this stark reality on numerous occasions. That powerful capitalists employed private and public forces added to the drama. George W. Walts, California's Bureau of Labor Statistics commissioner, wrote in 1892, "We cannot overlook the fact that at the present time the relations subsisting between capitalists and labourers are those of war".¹⁴

How to win these class wars and reshape public opinion in ways favourable to the nation's elites were central concerns that occupied the emotional and intellectual energy of large sections of the business community. Anti-union forces sought to win these struggles by developing a multilayered approach, which involved fighting the so-called labour problem in the legal arena, at the point of production and in the realm of popular culture.

A decade after the extraordinary class and political eruptions of 1892, WSGA members, an assortment of businessmen's associations and the ruling class generally, received help from Wister, who shared their fundamental class interests.¹⁵ Wister had developed relationships with elite clubmen while he was a Harvard student. Some of his classmates had moved West, where they entered the cattle business, bought land, invested in livestock and employed cowboys. Wister was not in Wyoming during the 1892 invasion, but he had acquired a general appreciation of it through his ties. During his various trips, Wister made time to visit the WSGA's clubhouse, the Cheyenne Club, which he once called "[c]omfortable, and full of departed glory".¹⁶ Whether in eastern or midwestern cities or in western ones like Cheyenne, clubhouses were fancy settings, where an exclusive fraternity of men discussed the day's politics and their personal and business interests, including their labour-related problems. They sometimes reminisced about the past. During one visit, an invasion participant, W. C. Irvine, offered personal recollections, which Wister described thus: "We stayed till one, and he branched onto

his experiences during the ‘invasion’ of Johnson County. The story was thrilling and picturesque”. Wister was captivated, telling Irvine – an influential figure who had served as a delegate to the convention that led to the formation of Wyoming statehood in 1890 – that he wanted “a written account of all these things”.¹⁷ These tales, told by one of the state’s most powerful people, provided Wister much to consider. Wister wanted to captivate audiences in the same way that the story fascinated him. Such a story, in his view, needed to be told in an unambiguous moral way, one that clearly distinguished virtuous forces from evil ones. This he did in *The Virginian*.

The Virginian helped to rehabilitate the reputations of Wyoming’s agricultural elites and sold extremely well, giving tens of thousands of readers a portrayal of western society as a morality tale. Rather than depict the deeply unequal power relations that generated conflicts like the Johnson County War, *The Virginian* tells us about the triumph of good against evil. In the process, the book helped to turn killers into heroes. At the same time, Wister offered a robust defence of class divisions, which he emphasised were the inevitable outcome of a society that valued hard work and merit: “every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level”. The first page of chapter 13 makes the case for a society that lets “the best man win! That is America’s word. That is true democracy”.¹⁸

The novel’s central character, the thoughtful, soft-spoken and ambitious horse-riding southerner, demonstrates unwavering deference to the landholding elite, a group based on the region’s wealthy cattlemen. Wister created the image of wholesome and virtuous cowboys, the personification of frontier individualism.¹⁹ And we discover that Judge Henry, the *Virginian*’s employer, deserves deference for his “courage and common sense”. Prudent men like him had experienced many humiliations, including the bane of rustling and an unfair court system that frequently freed the criminals. The *Virginian* complained, “For the thieves have got hold of the juries in Johnson County”.²⁰ As literary scholar Sara Humphreys puts it, “the ranch owner, the Judge, is the only man the *Virginian* wishes to please”.²¹

The *Virginian* was the quintessential company man, someone who sought to uphold the status quo. And sometimes this meant resorting to violence. In a revealing passage, Wister emphasises that the victims needed to keep their options open. Good guys, irrespective of class position, could employ “the law or popular justice”.²² If the courts were hostile or indifferent to their interests – or if the legal system simply functioned too slowly – the righteous men could engage in gunfire, kidnappings, lynchings or any other method of punishment they believed was warranted.

What did Wister mean by “the law or popular justice?” In many cases, plain old state law seemed like a reasonable option. After all, by the late nineteenth century, the legal authorities were mostly consistent in their willingness to protect both property and managerial rights in the face of challenges from rustlers, populists and labour activists. However, the American legal system was also designed to advance the principle of due process. Those accused of crimes were supposed to enjoy the presumption of innocence and the right to a trial by a jury of peers. Sometimes, elites complained, jurors were unwilling or unable to see things from their

point of view. In these cases, “popular justice” remained the best course of action. The dilemma of whether to select “the law or popular justice” was not a choice simply for the western settler elite. In *The Virginian*, the always-insightful Judge Henry announces that the “ordinary citizen” had a duty to act when confronted with cases of rustling – or when faced with any other form of lawbreaking. Such vigilantism, “so far from being a defiance of the law . . . is an assertion of it”.²³

Judge Henry drew sharp distinctions between “popular justice” in the West and white supremacist vigilantism in the South. Aware of the racist cruelties of southern lynch mobs, he explains to the Virginian’s fiancé, Molly Wood, that he opposed the burning of “Southern negroes in public”. But he was fully supportive of the hanging of “Wyoming cattle thieves in private”.²⁴ The South, in the judge’s view, was “semi-barbarous”, while “Wyoming is determined to become civilized”. The off-stage popular justice of the West was merely a means of upholding law and order, not a spectacle: “We do not invite spectators to enjoy their death agony. We put no such hideous disgrace upon the United States. We execute our criminals by the swiftest means, and in the quietest way”, he explained to Wood.²⁵ Besides being more civilised, Judge Henry explained, this was also much wiser from a business perspective, since open displays of violence had the potential of discouraging investment.

At the book’s triumphant conclusion, the hero, armed with his Winchester rifle, kills the story’s chief villain, Trampas – a threatening rustler, someone “courageous with whisky” and a stand-in for the cowboys killed during the 1892 invasion.²⁶ Trampas was not only a threat to the property interests of the region’s most powerful men; he also suffered from moral lapses. The action-packed story has been read by millions and thus has shaped our understanding of 1890s-era western conflicts. The takeaway: readers gained an appreciation of the landholding elite, a group that was determined to, in the words of Christine Bold, protect “its privilege in the name of democracy”.²⁷

Scabs and Heroes

The project of defending “privilege in the name of democracy” also neatly describes the employer open-shop movement, launched in earnest the very year when Wister’s novel appeared. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Wister attracted the attention of the leaders of that movement, who requested his assistance in spreading anti-union propaganda. Like the western cattle ranchers, the employers who organised to oppose unions perceived themselves as – and wished to be perceived by the public as – upholders of law and order and protectors of underdogs from the onslaught of union “tyranny”. The slogan of the CIAA, “For the Protection of the Common People”, emphasised this role, as well as underlined what the movement stood *for* rather than what it *opposed*. Organised employers, far from being vicious union-busters, presented themselves as upholders of deep-seated American values, such as the right of a worker to work when and where he pleased, a position captured by Harvard president Charles Eliot in calling scabs “heroes”, a viewpoint the National Association of Manufacturers was happy to print.²⁸

Wister, too, viewed strikebreakers as heroes, as he made clear in an essay in 1904, a couple of years before he joined the CIAA's propaganda committee. The "scab", Wister explained in a *Saturday Evening Post* article,

stands for liberty, the right to live, the right to work, every right that we have all inherited in the land of the free. As the patriots stood against George and his Stamp Act in 1776, so in 1904 does the scab stand against Unionism and dynamite. He is the human symbol of protest against tyranny.²⁹

For Wister, "the scab", stigmatised and repeatedly confronted with threats and violence, deserved as much admiration as the nation's earliest and most iconic history-makers. If scabs could sometimes be violent, no matter: the morally just visionaries who led the American Revolution, including well-known military men and nameless yeomen farmers, also achieved political freedom by mobilising troops and using violence. In that founding spirit, Wister called for renewed outbursts of patriotism and self-defence in workplaces throughout the nation against the forces that sought to take away the constitutional freedoms gained from the revolution. Violent opposition to closed or union shops was, he implied, not only justifiable, but necessary and deeply patriotic.

Thus, honest "ordinary citizens" in whatever context, had a right, even a duty, to challenge what Wister and other anti-union activists considered injustice, even if they were required to take to violent means to do so. Deferential cowboys like the Virginian, who understood the moral uprightness of the elites and the threat posed by rustlers, and strikebreakers who understood how union "rats" squeezed both the employer and the non-union worker were Owen Wister's heroes. They had, and should have, the backing of both lawmen and the industrious and patriotic men behind the open-shop movement, those fully committed to helping "the common people" resist union pressure.

Wister was a big hit with those in the leadership of anti-union organisations. National and regional employers' associations praised his books in their publications, and they invited him to speak at their conferences.³⁰ They realised that this literary giant had the unparalleled power to shape the views of the masses, which is something ordinary employers could not achieve.

Astroturfing support: non-union unions and open-shop employers

Around the time of the founding of the Citizens' Industrial Association of America, there appeared a spate of stories about "independent workmen" opposed to unions coming together in a spirit of mutual support and labour-capital harmony. Some such stories portrayed supposed workers' organisations expressing their appreciation of leaders of the open-shop movement, such as in a *Los Angeles Times* story about James W. Van Cleave, the president of the National Association of Manufacturers, being awarded a "handsome walking stick" in recognition of his work "in the preservation of harmony between the fair-minded worker and the

fair-minded employer”.³¹ Other stories reported on parades by such organisations, such as in a September 1904 Associated Press story about a Labor Day parade in Cripple Creek, Colorado. The non-union parade purportedly comprised “3,000 independent workmen” carrying signs that apparently rejected union organisers with such slogans as “We Don’t Hire Salaried Agitators Here”.³²

These stories were, in general, either purely fake or at least comprehensively engineered by employers and/or their agents. The Cripple Creek non-union parade probably did take place: it was reported in multiple local and national papers (although the claimed participant numbers fluctuated). It was hardly a spontaneous worker rejection of unionism, however. Cripple Creek had in 1903 and 1904 been the site of a miners’ strike suppressed with extraordinary and widely publicised state and vigilante violence, culminating only the month before the Labor Day parade in deportations at gunpoint of Western Federation of Miners members and sympathisers. It must have been amply clear to remaining townsfolk that suppleness in dancing to the mine owners’ tune was a key qualification for continued residence in the area. The intimidating meanings of the parade were thus well understood both locally and by unionists in general, even if the parade may also have been intended to generate positive publicity among a national middle-class audience.³³ The incident where a workers’ organisation honoured Van Cleave with a special present is rather less likely to have even occurred; the only paper to report the story seems to have been the then notoriously anti-union *Los Angeles Times*, and moreover, the story reported the prize being presented by one M. M. Mulhall – better known to posterity as an undercover political operative on the NAM payroll.

Though it is impossible to trace specific stories conclusively to CIAA or NAM sources, we do know that both maintained close relationships with newspaper and magazine editors (and sometimes were editors themselves) and hired publicity bureaus to conduct campaigns, including ones involving planted news stories.³⁴ The main function of such news was to lend plausibility to the employers’ self-appointed project of “protecting the common people” and to their claims that ordinary workers were oppressed by “tyrannical” labour unions.

But parades and prize ceremonies were one-time events, easily forgotten. What if there existed sustained worker organisations that explicitly rejected unionism and allied with employers? That would provide a much stronger boost to employers’ claims of being the true allies of workers. If such organisations could get off the ground, their activities could be promoted and publicised as examples of genuine grassroots discontent with labour organisations, which of course would lend significant legitimacy to employers’ claims of union tyranny as well as would demonstrate the enterprising and individualistic spirit of the American workingman.

Stories about such “non-union unions” appeared with some frequency in the early years of the twentieth century, roughly coinciding with the launch of the open-shop campaign. In early 1903, news stories reported on a new organisation, later christened the Independent Labor League of America (ILLA), guided by

the former Unitarian minister turned expert in moral instruction, Edwin Milton Fairchild of Albany, New York. The stated goals of this organisation were to “protect independent workmen in their independence”, “sustain higher wages by skilful, energetic cooperation with our employers” and “compel labor unions to observe the laws”.³⁵ The ILLA workers would reject strikes and instead strive to advance themselves by “earnest co-operation with employers and legitimate business methods”.³⁶ Fairchild, who was a strong believer in instilling values and character through education, did not deny that the organisation was instigated by employers. Rather, he made that a virtue, arguing that it showed real goodwill on the part of the employers to understand that “some kind of labor organisation is proper and within the rights of employees” and thus encourage “the more intelligent and American portion of the laboring people of Elmira” to create a union that would be “an embodiment of our national spirit” and with which employers could discuss.³⁷

At almost exactly the same time an “Independent American Mechanics’ Union” or “Independent Order of American Mechanics” was incorporated in Anderson, Indiana to defend against any attacks on “the inalienable right of all mankind to work for such wages as shall be mutually satisfactory to the individual workman and his employer”, while by the fall, an “American League of Independent Workmen” was operating in Spokane, Washington and a “Citizens’ League” affiliated with the Indiana organisation had been established in Fort Bragg.³⁸ The ILLA also added chapters in several cities besides the original Albany and Elmira ones, and the Indiana organisation claimed to be making “rapid strides” in cities across the Midwest.³⁹ Labour papers noted that such non-union unions seemed to be newly proliferating, though they were not a novelty, having existed in specific industries particularly for the purposes of “making a show of non-union labor” to intimidate workers. Labour editors predicted that whatever the present purpose of such associations was, they would quickly “degenerate . . . into strikebreaking machines”.⁴⁰

There is little doubt that these “non-union unions” were closely affiliated with and initiated by the employers involved in the open-shop movement. The timing of their rise matches precisely the open-shop movement’s launch; they often arose in areas with strong employer organisations; their titles and planks are worded alike and parrot the open-shop movement’s language; and they usually praised open-shop employers for their “valiant work” in assisting them and occasionally invited open-shop employers to speak at their events. Indeed, non-union organisations sometimes explicitly stated that they would not establish branches in cities that already had a Citizens’ Alliance, “on account of the similarity of principles” between the two.⁴¹ Employer support, certainly, was explicit: the NAM passed a resolution at its 1903 convention to support such organisations, and its president openly offered them financial support.⁴² Moreover, there is evidence that these organisations were indeed used for strikebreaking: the National Metal Trades Association (one of the key open-shop employer organisations), for example, used the Elmira ILLA’s membership to recruit strikebreakers, and it seems that these organisations often cropped up at locations where there was an ongoing strike.⁴³

Quite possibly, since they generally followed British developments quite closely, American open-shop employers got the idea of “non-union unions” from Great Britain.⁴⁴ There, the National Free Labour Association (NFLA) had been active since the early 1890s. The association was founded and headed by William Collison, who explained that he, though a workingman himself and a former union member, had become disgusted with trade unions. Unionism, in his telling, had veered away from “sober discrimination and . . . the path of public sympathy” that posited no “essential antagonism between master and man”; it had given way to “faction and self-interest” and been taken over by “mob managers”.⁴⁵ Having left the unions, he instead created the NFLA, which preached against “union tyranny” – and found much favour with employers both for its rhetoric and for its provision of strikebreakers, earning Collison the sobriquets “King of Blacklegs” and “Prince of Scabs”. In 1906, Collison visited the CIAA’s annual convention in Chicago, where he was eagerly interviewed by the leaders of the open-shop movement; upon returning home, he founded a British version of the Citizens’ Industrial Association, though that association was apparently not particularly active.⁴⁶

Like the American non-union unions, the NFLA was to a great extent the creature of employers, especially those active in the powerful Liberty and Property Defence League.⁴⁷ It depended heavily on employer support and catered to employers’ demand for workers who did not mind working during a strike. It also appears that its “conventions”, though well publicised, were largely faked, with “delegates” collected from among down-at-heel hang abouts and paid for their attendance. And despite Collison’s version of how he was motivated by a wish to combat union “dictation” and the socialist drift of British unions, the association’s origins were closely tied to employers and their strikebreaking needs: before founding his own organisation, Collison was a chairman of another Free Labour Association, this one created by the Shipping Federation keen to disguise its strike-breaking activities.⁴⁸

At the same time, Collison did in fact come from a working-class background, and he was genuinely piqued at the New Unionism and its language of class. His NFLA was in his control and in accordance with his ideology, even if his finances came largely from employers, and even if strikebreaking was his major service.⁴⁹ The individuals associated with non-union unions might, then, have had real grievances or aspirations beyond making a quick buck; the remainder of the paper explores what we might uncover, or at least speculate, regarding those aspirations based on the available sources.⁵⁰

The problem, of course, is that information about the individuals associated with the elusive “independent labor leagues” is scarce in the extreme. By their very nature as astroturf creations, these organisations held few meetings, left behind no documents and rarely produced publications independent of those edited and written by the employers who promoted them. Most of them were short-lived; some apparently existed only to enact the occasional publicity stunt. The non-union unions’ existence was much more ephemeral than that of the company or “yellow” unions that became more prominent after World War I in the

United States and that had been growing for some time before the war, e.g. in Germany.⁵¹ Unlike company or yellow unions, the non-union unions did not enrol large numbers of workers in a sustained way and only appear to have activated substantial numbers in the context of employer-generated strikebreaking campaigns. The non-union unions also portrayed themselves more as organisations of concerned citizens than as employee representatives, so while company unions usually provided at least some employer-controlled form of representation or benefits, the non-union unions offered at best the promise of a job and possibly an informal connection to the organisation's employer sponsors, with its potential to facilitate upward mobility.

Thus, there is little formal material to draw on. Collison's American counterparts left far fewer traces of themselves than he did, either biographically or ideologically.⁵² Those few whose words we do have, though, seem to reflect Collison's sentiments quite closely. For example, in 1904, a machinist named John Galloway testified against union-sponsored legislation at a congressional hearing as the representative of a Dayton, Ohio non-union union called the Modern Order of the Bees. Though probably there at the instigation of Dayton's open-shop employers, Galloway waxed quite eloquent in recounting how the union's efforts to coerce him to join "put me on my American dignity right away" and prompted him to denounce the union's socialistic ideas.⁵³ Galloway illustrates that in the opposite scale from unions' proposals of solidarity and contracts were the appeal of the ideology of liberty and individualism as well as the allure of social mobility and pride in modest prosperity; Galloway, for instance, spontaneously made reference to how his hard work had gotten him "a little house in Dayton that I would not exchange for Mr. Roosevelt's place" and how his "family [was] getting along as well as anyone's family". In short, there was the promise of the "American dream", if only one adhered to the right values. To the extent that non-union unions played on these emotional strings, they may have held some appeal.

Most of the non-union unions were too ephemeral to have left even many names of members or officers behind, and the claims of "hundreds" of members are probably about as reliable as Collison's convention delegate numbers.⁵⁴ However, to the extent that it is possible to trace the men whose names appeared as spokesmen or directors, they seem often to have been involved in the building industry or in urban trades. For the one organisation that was slightly longer-lived, the American League of Independent Workmen of Spokane, Washington, this was particularly true; indeed, the league, reportedly founded by an engineer called George B. Weaver, soon boasted that it was doing "more building with non-union than union men in this city".⁵⁵ The men listed in connection with the league in news stories or city directories nearly all came from the building industry. Luther Holcomb, the man most often cited as a spokesman of the league, was listed in a 1902 Spokane city directory as a carpenter, and William H. Schleppy, sometimes listed as a president for the league, is listed in a 1901 directory as a carpenter and contractor. Similarly with others linked to the organisation: T. W. Ettershank was a painter and J. P. Earl a carpenter. Most of these men also seem to have risen in the world, at least a little bit, between 1900 and 1910: Holcomb went from being

a carpenter to being a building contractor, as did Earl; Schleppey went from being a contractor to being an architect; Ettershank bought a paint and varnish store with his brother.⁵⁶

Construction was not only a major battleground between unions and employers, but local building and contracting was squarely within what Andrew Wender Cohen has called the “craft economy” – the everyday business of baking bread, transporting goods, barbering, building and otherwise keeping a city’s daily life running along. This craft economy was characterised by a mix of individualism and collective governance, agreements enforced by violence and ostracism and low barriers to setting up as an entrepreneur.⁵⁷ While Cohen discusses the fluidity of the craft economy mainly from the point of view of how it retained an emphasis on “well-governed agreements” and craft rulemaking rather than efficient corporate structures and free markets or freedom of contract, seen from another angle the urban economy also lent itself to individualistic upward mobility.⁵⁸

The distance between workers and entrepreneurs in the urban economy remained relatively short, and both had a precarious position vis-à-vis those above them in the hierarchy. The smaller among the entrepreneurs might aspire to rise in the world through association with larger businessmen, and joining the anti-union associations could provide a handy networking opportunity. As one union president snidely but astutely observed, when a Citizens’ Alliance was set up in a town, the town’s small businessmen flocked to curry favour with the big shots:

[A]ll the small fry of manufacturers, as well as storekeepers, druggists, even peanut vendors, joined the alliance. Just think of the prestige they would have when the big manufacturer, driving along in his carriage and four, would clasp the hand of the peanut vendor and say, “Brother of the Labor Bursting Brigade”.⁵⁹

In the urban economy, there were many workers who were more like “peanut vendors” than full-blown proletarians with factory jobs. In the urban crafts, an aspiration for economic security and self-respect could be expressed in striving for small entrepreneur status just as rationally as it could be manifested in staunch unionism.⁶⁰

For a worker in the early twentieth-century urban economy, to graduate from being in another man’s employ to holding a place among the “small fry” of the retail, commercial and city services entrepreneurs was a realistic aspiration, and the Spokane case seems to indicate that some of those associated with non-union unions did just that. The capital required to set up as a building contractor, a baker or a team owner was minimal; the majority of such businesses were proprietorships operating on narrow margins and led by men with limited formal education.⁶¹ And despite academics’ penchant for envisioning social mobility as rising in the world through moving from manual to white-collar occupations, most working-class folk with upward aspirations in the early twentieth century dreamed not of office jobs but of small businesses that would allow them to control their work time, accumulate a nest egg and pass something more on to their children than they had

received.⁶² When such aspirations combined with the realistic opportunities of the craft economy and its often quite rancorous rivalries and were bolstered by a broader culture praising individualism and entrepreneurial striving, it is perhaps not surprising that some workers opted for sidling up to anti-union employers who could easily offer the capital and the business opportunities to enable a worker amenable to the anti-union message to prosper as an entrepreneur.

Owen Wister's career and non-union unions illustrate both the cachet of individualism in American culture and the diligence with which anti-union employers deployed it to benefit themselves and undermine working people. An individualistic frontier mythology reverberated in the willingness of Wister's heroes to take (manly) action, at the same time as this action was softened to middle-class palatability by the deference and upwardly mobile aspirations of the novel's eponymous Virginian and the figure of the virtuous scab. Similarly, a spirit of can-do attitude and hard work infused the stories about non-union unions, where upstanding workmen willing to do a fair day's work came together to defend their American liberty against union tyranny. Lost strikes and failed boycott campaigns, the frustrations of union rules and the attractions of possible upward mobility surely sometimes got workers to wonder if individualism might not offer a better deal than union solidarity. Yet – as is perhaps best illustrated by the contrast of glorifying elite-perpetrated vigilante violence while condemning even worker efforts at rulemaking as violent “tyranny” – in the wild west of employer anti-unionism, some people were more equal than others.

Notes

- 1 Small portions of the first part of this essay are published in “‘The Law or Popular Justice’: Owen Wister and the Legitimation of Employer-Class Violence,” in *Private Security and the Modern State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. David Churchill, Dolores Janiewski, and Pieter Leloup (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).
- 2 The literature on the turn-of-the-century sense of crisis over the future of democracy in the context of great trusts, economic inequality and an increasingly visible and restive lower class is too massive to be cited here. For one standard treatment see Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: United States, 1877–1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987).
- 3 The most recent work investigating these organisations is Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America's Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). See also Howell John Harris, *Bloodless Victories: The Rise and Fall of the Open Shop in the Philadelphia Metal Trades, 1890–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Sidney Fine, “Without Blare of Trumpets”: *Walter Drew, the National Erectors' Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903–57* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Sarah Lyons Watts, *Order Against Chaos: Business Culture and Labor Ideology in America, 1880–1915* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 143–70.
- 4 “National Association Committees,” *The Square Deal* 2 (February 1907): 15.
- 5 G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister* (Austin: University

- of Texas Press, 1989 [1968]); Darwin Payne, *Owen Wister: Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 135, 175, 234; Louis Tanner, "Owen Wister: The Public Intellectual" (PhD diss., The University of New Mexico, 1999); Gary Scharnhorst, *Owen Wister and the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015); Stephen J. Mexal, "'My Dear Judge': Owen Wister's *Virginian*," Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and Natural Law Conservatism," *Western American Literature* 51 (Fall 2016): 279–311.
- 6 Henry Clay Frick to Andrew Carnegie, July 4, 1892, University of Pittsburgh digital archives, on-line: <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735066205083/viewer#page/1/mode/2up>
 - 7 On the strikebreaking campaign and the backlash that it sparked, see David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 36–43; Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century South* (Athens, OH: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 157.
 - 8 Owen Wister, "The National Guard of Pennsylvania," *Harper's Weekly*, September 1, 1894, 824. On the Pennsylvania militia in the aftermath of the 1877 strike see Robert M. Fogelson, *America's Armories: Architecture, Society, and Public Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 38–39.
 - 9 Wister, "The National Guard of Pennsylvania," 825.
 - 10 Michael Mark Cohen, *The Conspiracy of Capital: Law, Violence, and American Popular Radicalism in the Age of Monopoly* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 129.
 - 11 Many have written about this invasion. See Lewis L. Gould, *Wyoming: From Territory to Statehood* (Worland, Wy: High Plains Publishing Company, Inc., 1989), 137–58; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 169–75.
 - 12 David R. Berman refers to these mine owners as "absentee capitalists", since they tended to reside outside of northern Idaho. See David R. Berman, *Radicalism in the Mountain West, 1890–1920* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2007), 19. On New Orleans see Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 114–18.
 - 13 "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party," <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/>
 - 14 Quoted in Robert Ovetz, *When Workers Shot Back: Class Conflict from 1877 to 1921* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 193.
 - 15 For the relationship between Wister and these vigilantes see Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, 127–29.
 - 16 Owen Wister, October 4, 1892, "Diary of Western Trip No. 7", Folder 1, Box 2, Owen Wister Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.
 - 17 Owen Wister, "Diary, Bowie, Bayard, Grant, Bisbee, Tombstone, Tucson, San Francisco, Cheyenne, May-August 1894," Folder 7, Box 2, page 23, Wister papers.
 - 18 Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (Mineola and New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006; 1902), 85.
 - 19 As Mark Lause has demonstrated cowboys were far from individualistic. He refers to them as "The Dangerous Classes of the American West". See Mark Lause, *The Great Cowboy Strike: Bullets, Ballots & Class Conflicts in the American West* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 53–84.
 - 20 Wister, *The Virginian*, 240.
 - 21 Sara Humphreys, "'Truer 'n Hell': Lies, Capitalism, and Cultural Imperialism in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," B. M. Bwer's *The Happy Family*, and Morning Dove's *Cogewea*," *Western American Literature* 45 (Spring 2010): 37.

- 22 Wister, *The Virginian*, 247.
- 23 Ibid., 255. On the Virginian's relationship to the judge see Humphreys, "'Truer 'n Hell,'" 37.
- 24 Wister, *The Virginian*, 253.
- 25 Ibid., 254.
- 26 Ibid., 271.
- 27 Christine Bold, *The Frontier Club: Popular Westerns and Cultural Power, 1880–1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.
- 28 Charles J. Bonaparte, "President Eliot and the American University," *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 19, 1904, 2. Also, see the NAM publication: "President Eliot on Violence and Folly Among the Unions," *American Industries* 1 (November 15, 1902): 10.
- 29 Owen Wister, "The Land of the Free," *The Saturday Evening Post* 117, October 29, 1904, 7.
- 30 "Brief Notices of New Books," *The Exponent* 3 (May 1906): 36; "Citizens' Industrial Association of St. Louis Program," *The Exponent* 3 (August 1906): 3; "Books for Christmas Gifts," *American Industries* 6 (December 1907): 40.
- 31 *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1907, 9. (The *LA Times* was notoriously anti-union at the time.)
- 32 *Omaha Daily Bee*, September 6, 1904, 3; *The St. Louis Republic*, September 6, 1904, 3; *The Times Dispatch*, September 6, 1904, 7. A note on newspaper sources: most newspapers cited here come from the *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* collection, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>. Colorado newspapers are from the *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*, www.coloradahistoricnewspapers.org. A few papers, such as the Spokane papers cited later, come from the *Google News Archive*, <https://news.google.com/newspapers>, and some major papers (like the *LA Times*) are from the proprietary ProQuest Historical Newspapers database.
- 33 The *Erie News*, for example, ran an item the following year in reference, apparently, to a repeat of the 1904 parade: "How Would You Like to March in a Labor Day Parade Gotten Up By the Citizen's Alliance? That is What the Miners of Cripple Creek Will Do on September 5," *Erie News*, September 1, 1905, 8. The story of the Cripple Creek labour conflict is ably told in Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
- 34 Vilja Hulten, "Employers' Organization Influence and the Progressive-Era Press," *Journalism History* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 43–54.
- 35 *The Sun* [New York], January 1, 1903, 5 (reprinted in many other papers.) There were also a few brief notices in late 1902 that a secretary of a new association of workmen hoping to secure their "right to labor where they choose" was calling for expressions of interest in the organisation and had received favourable responses both from workers and from financial supporters. This may or may not have been related to the Fairchild-sponsored organisation. The secretary was called James W. Bellinger, identified as a "clerk" with an address in New York City. *New-York Tribune*, November 12, 1902, 1; *Warren Sheaf*, November 27, 1902, 7.
- 36 *New-York Tribune*, March 19, 1903, 1.
- 37 *The Sun* [New York], March 21, 1903, 8. For more on E. M. Fairchild's career, see Allison L. Jackson, "The Character Education Work of Milton Fairchild: A Prism for Exploring the Debate Between Liberal Progressives and Conservative Progressives in the Early 20th Century" (PhD diss., Notre Dame of Maryland University, 2018). For more detail on Fairchild's views and activities with regard to labour see Pearson, *Reform or Repression*, 75–77.
- 38 *The Butler Weekly Times*, March 26, 1903, 3; *The Spokane Press*, October 1, 1903, 1; *The San Francisco Call*, September 2, 1903, 1.
- 39 Pearson, *Reform or Repression*, 77; *The Indianapolis Journal*, July 20, 1903, 2.
- 40 *The Labor World*, March 28, 1903, 4.

- 41 *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, February 17, 1905, 15.
- 42 *The Sun* [New York], October 25, 1903, section 2, page 3; *The Indianapolis Journal*, July 20, 1903, 2; National Association of Manufacturers, *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Convention*, New Orleans, LA, 14–16 April 1903 (New York, 1903), 290.
- 43 *The St. Louis Republic*, May 18, 1903, 3; for NMTA use of strikebreakers, see *The Sun* [New York], June 21, 1903, 3 and Pearson, *Reform or Repression*, 76–77.
- 44 British affairs are commented upon regularly in the open-shop publications; see also Howell John Harris, “Between Convergence and Exceptionalism: Americans and the British Model of Labor Relations, c. 1867–1920,” *Labor History* 48, no. 2 (2007): 141–73.
- 45 William Collison, *The Apostle of Free Labour: The Life Story of William Collison, Founder and General Secretary of The National Free Labour Association* (London: Hurst and Blackett Limited, 1913), 39.
- 46 Geoffrey Alderman, “The National Free Labour Association: A Case-Study of Organised Strike-Breaking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *International Review of Social History* 21, no. 3 (December 1976): 309–36; Alessandro Saluppo, “Authoritarian Reflexes: The Perspectives of British Employers on Labor Repression in the United States, 1890–1914,” paper delivered at 2020 *American Historical Association* meeting, January 6, 2020 (paper in possession of authors.) See also the account of Collison’s talk and the questioning of him by John Kirby and others in the reprinted CIAA proceedings in *Square Deal* 2, no. 6 (January 1907): 18–22.
- 47 Norbert Soldon, “Laissez-Faire as Dogma: The Liberty and Property Defence Leagues, 1882–1914,” in *Essays in Anti-Labour History*, ed. K. D. Brown (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1974), 159–82; Eric Bristow, “The Liberty and Property Defence League and Individualism, 1882–1914,” *Historical Journal* 18 (1975): 761–89.
- 48 Alderman, “National Free Labour Association.”
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson have noted in a different context resisting the temptation to dismiss conservative-oriented, top-down-funded “grassroots” movements as pure publicity stunts may pay off in a more complex understanding of ordinary people’s relationship to political discourse. Skocpol and Williamson argue that while the Tea Party had plenty of backing from corporate interests, the grassroots element was real enough and differed in viewpoints quite substantially from the free-market orthodoxy promoted by the Koch brothers or the right-wing media pundits it is usually associated with. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 51 For example, Klaus Schönhoven notes that yellow unions in the German iron, electrical, and chemical industries had reached a membership of nearly 300,000 by 1914. Klaus Schönhoven, “Germany to 1945,” in *European Labor Unions*, ed. Joan Campbell and John P. Windmuller (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992), 149–66. On company unions in the U.S., see Daniel Nelson, “The Company Union Movement, 1900–1937: A Reexamination,” *Business History Review* 56, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 335–57.
- 52 Of course, the United States had its own famous men accorded the title “King of the Strikebreakers”, notably James Farley and Pearl Bergoff. However, neither claimed particular ideological or emotional conviction about unions as their motive, nor claim to head a principled organisation, nor come to the business via union membership and disillusionment, like Collison. Instead, both apparently drifted to strikebreaking more or less by accident as youthful hoodlums and started “detective agencies” to carry on the business. Robert M. Smith, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), Ch. 2.
- 53 Statement of Mr. John Galloway, United States House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, *Anti-Injunction Bill: Complete Hearings*, January 22–March 22, 1904 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1904), 279–88.

- 54 Often the claim was made that it was easy to recruit disgruntled union members to these non-union unions; for one example see *The San Francisco Call*, September 2, 1903, 1.
- 55 *The Sun* [New York], October 25, 1903, section 2, page 3. It is not clear what kind of an engineer Weaver was (building engineer? mechanical engineer?) nor is there much unambiguous information about his background, though the story in *The Sun* states that he has been shuttling around the country creating non-union unions and is associated with the ones in Indiana as well. Also, somewhat intriguing with regard to the theme of disillusionment with popular politics is that Weaver may previously have been a Populist but switched to the Republican Party; see *Colfax Gazette*, January 26, 1900, 4.
- 56 In addition, there was a Richard Sharpless, a jack-of-all-trades variously listed as barber, teamster, driver and clerk. All information here comes from city directories and census records contained in the HeritageQuest database. Although there are of course multiple names that could fit the names associated with the League of Independent Workmen, especially when news stories only identify them using initials, I have cross-checked the entries using e.g. information about addresses to ensure that all entries concern the same person and, with a high degree of confidence, correspond to the people named in the news stories. Ancestry.com., *U.S. City Directories, 1822–1995* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).
- 57 Andrew W. Cohen, *The Racketeer's Progress: Chicago and the Struggle for the Modern American Economy, 1900–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On anti-union employers in construction, see Fine, “Without Blare of Trumpets”.
- 58 Cohen, *Racketeer's Progress*, 48.
- 59 “President Lynch's Jottings from January 15th to February 15th, 1905,” *The Journal* (of the Metal Polishers', Buffers' Platers', Brass Molders' and Brass and Silver Workers' International Union), 14: 3, 9 ff.
- 60 Decades ago, Michael Kazin criticised efforts at labour history syntheses for paying too little attention to the reality that “workers have simultaneously articulated not one ideology but several, roughly corresponding to different spheres of their lives”. Though much has changed, this still retains some resonance. Michael Kazin, “Struggling with Class Struggle: Marxism and the Search for a Synthesis of U.S. Labor History,” *Labor History* 28, no. 4 (September 1, 1987): 497–514; also see Dana M. Caldemeyer, “Unfaithful Followers: Rethinking Southern Nonunionism in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power*, ed. Matthew Hild and Keri Leigh Merritt (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), 112–25.
- 61 See e.g. Cohen, *Racketeer's Progress*, 40–43.
- 62 Using records from the Emigrants' Savings Bank Tyler Anbinder makes this case forcefully for Irish immigrants in New York City, arguing that though they managed to save surprising amounts of money, they cared little about “their place in some imaginary occupational hierarchy”. Tyler Anbinder, “Moving beyond ‘Rags to Riches’: New York's Irish Famine Immigrants and Their Surprising Savings Accounts,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 741–70.