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Unsolved mystery

Writer delves into controversial 1917 death of union leader

By Will Roscoe for The Montana Standard - 10/07/2006

Readers of the newspaper article, "Butte Book on Lynching Plagiarized," which ran in the Sept. 8 Montana Standard, may have been left wondering how a paper written by a high school student in 1972 could end up the center of controversy more than 30 years later.

It doesn't surprise me. I wrote that paper. Originally titled, "The Murder of Frank Little: An Injury to One is an Injury to All," its subject is one of the most controversial episodes in Butte history — the 1917 lynching of an organizer from the radical labor union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Readers might be interested in learning how I got involved in researching that famous unsolved crime, and how I came close to actually solving it. This is a part of the story that hasn't been told until now.

Thirty-four years ago I was a junior at Missoula's Sentinel High School. With the support of a marvelous teacher, Nancy Walter, I received permission to do an independent project instead of taking the usual American history class. Nancy suggested I look into the 1917 miners' strike in Butte, a local event with national repercussions.

As I began reeling through microfilms at the local libraries, I imagined that I would be writing a long book report at the end of the quarter. But then I got my first "break" (at least, that's how I thought of it in the year of Watergate).

My mother owned a drugstore in downtown Missoula where I worked after school. Around the corner was an Army surplus store run by two former Butte residents. When they heard about my interest in Frank Little, they began to tell me some amazing stories.

Back in Butte, they had been friends with an old Wobbly (an IWW member) named Conn Lowney. Lowney was a barber, and in 1917 he worked at the foot of Anaconda Road across the street from an Irish bar frequented by miners. On the evening of July 31, Conn was tipped off that a lynching party was being organized. He stopped Little on the street to warn him. On crutches with a broken ankle, Little laughed and hobbled off to his boarding room ... and into the pages of history.

Lowney was certain he knew the identities of the lynchers, and for years he kept a journal tracking their activities. As he told it, they all "died with their boots on" — some in a horrific car accident. (One of his suspects, however, a regular at M&M Cigar Store, may still have been alive at the time Lowney died.) In the aftermath of the lynching rumors were rife about the possible perpetrators, and names were published in some local media. In the 1940s, historian Joseph Kinsey Howard reported that it was common belief in Butte that two of the lynchers were businessmen, two were gunmen and one was connected with law enforcement. Given the incendiary speeches Little had been giving to rallies of miners, few doubted that the Anaconda Copper Co. was behind it all.

The names my sources were giving me, however, were new, and the stories they were telling me to my knowledge had never been published. But as the list of names they



Mine workers in Butte gather in this undated historical photograph. They worked and lived in an era of much unrest in Butte, the city known particularly for its labor unions. In 1917, one of the most controversial episodes in Butte history occurred — the lynching of Frank Little, an organizer from the radical labor union, the Industrial Workers of the World. Photo courtesy of The Montana Standard archives



gave me grew I began to realize that their memories of Lowney's stories were beginning to fade.

As I followed up on their leads, I discovered that the lynching still cast a pall over the state. I wrote numerous unanswered letters; I was hung-up on at least once. When I spoke with novelist A.B. Guthrie about my project (I went to school with his stepchildren), he surprised me by insisting that Little got what he deserved.

One key figure who did answer my inquiries was retired U.S. Sen. Burton K. Wheeler. Wheeler had been district attorney in Butte at the time of the lynching. At the age of 90, his memories of the events were vivid. He knew Conn Lowney "fairly well," and while he did not recognize any of Lowney's suspects, he wrote, "If those men were mixed up in it, then in my judgment they were paid to do so by some of the Anaconda crowd." I was left with one clue — the car accident in which one or more of these men met untimely deaths. But when did it happen?

Armed with a list of names that now included a doctor and a state senator, I drove to Butte and walked into the newsroom of [The Montana Standard](#). An old reporter looked me over then disappeared into the file room. When he came back he handed me a slip of paper with a date on it. I could go to the library to find out the rest.

The date led me to the 1947 obituary of Butte businessman Walter Hansen. And there I finally learned the date of the accident in Conn Lowney's stories.

It happened March 21, 1936. Five Butte businessmen — Hansen, Dr. H. D. Kistler, Frank Reardon, Howard Pierce and Alex Loiselle — were all driving to San Francisco, presumably on a business trip. Trying to shave a few hours off the journey, they were speeding at night when their car went off the road outside of Lovelock, Nev. Pierce and Loiselle were killed instantly; Kistler died shortly after. Hansen appears to have suffered permanent brain damage; he spent the rest of his life in a sanitarium near San Francisco. Only Frank Reardon recovered fully, going on to enjoy a long career in Butte politics.

The fact that all these men were prominent citizens stopped me cold. Kistler was president of Murray Hospital, Hansen of Hansen Packing Co., and Pierce owned an automobile dealership. Alex Loiselle was described as "the widely known taxi driver." According to my notes, a "couple" of the men Lowney suspected died in this accident. To speculate that these were Loiselle and Pierce, a limousine driver and an automobile dealer at the time of the events, and connect them with a crime in which a Cadillac was used to transport the victim to the railroad trestle where he was hung, is to say only that one old Wobbly thought it was so.

Sorting all this out was too much for a teenaged historian, and the reactions I was getting were beginning to make me nervous. In any case, the quarter was ending, and it was time to write my report.

I later rewrote my paper and tried to publish it, but without success. Now it turns out it was published after all, although without my permission.

Since credit is finally being given its due, one other name needs to be mentioned. It was David Walter's generous comments on two drafts of my report turned it into something worth plagiarizing. Dave went on to become a well-respected historian affiliated with the Montana Historical Society, and I understand he helped many other researchers over the years. Sadly, he died last July in Helena.

The lynching in 1917 foreshadowed the political backlash that swept the county following World War I. Within a few years of Little's death, nationwide raids and mass arrests would leave the IWW crippled. But in Montana the lynching had a lasting impact. The author Myron Brinig, who grew up in Butte at the turn of the century, has characters and events based on Little in at least three of his novels. Interestingly, in each case Brinig states or implies that his character is gay ... a gay Frank Little? I'm looking into it, over 30 years after I first poked my nose into Butte's tumultuous history.

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The past, it seems, always has new stories to tell.

About the author: Will Roscoe's roots in Montana go back to his great-grandparents, William "Billy" Patt and Emma Kerzenmacher, who were among the first homesteaders in the Madison Valley. He grew up Missoula and attended the University of Montana. In 1991 he received a Ph.D. in History of Consciousness from the University of California-Santa Cruz. He is the author and editor of numerous books, including "The Zuni Man-Woman," which received the Margaret Mead Award of the American Anthropological Association. He lives in San Francisco and may be reached at willrsf@netzero.com.

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