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Labor in a City of Immigrants: Holyoke 1882 - 1888

Marianne Pedulla

Holyoke was founded in 1850 by a group of Boston financiers seeking to create another Lowell or Lawrence on the banks of the Connecticut River. The Boston men carved out a section of West Springfield called Ireland Parish, which was detached from its parent by act of the General Court, dammed the Connecticut River, and installed a system of canals. The "Cotton Lords" then erected their mills on agricultural land purchased from its owners and proceeded to create what thirty years later would be the greatest industrial city in western Massachusetts. Several of the early mills failed in the depression of 1857, but business picked up during the Civil War, new mills taking up the abandoned buildings. The manufacturing companies that were to provide employment for so much of working-class Holyoke in the late nineteenth century were largely of post-war vintage. This is important in understanding the difficulty of organizing Holyoke's industrial workers. Not only did the city have no long-standing mill tradition, it also had no long-standing artisan tradition, the earlier inhabitants who were displaced by the mills having been farmers.¹ Holyoke quickly became a city of immigrants. In the years immediately following the war, "Holyoke had the largest percentage of foreign-born population of any town or city in Massachusetts."² English, Irish and Scottish immigrants arrived before the war, more Irish, Germans, and increasing numbers of French Canadians after the war. Bringing with them their own culture and traditions and not having assimilated a long-established Yankee culture, these immigrants made up a working class which was pulled in different directions by competing goals and prejudices. This, too, was to add to the difficulty of labor organization in the 1880s.

From 1873 to 1879, Holyoke was in the grip of economic depression. The factories had stopped earning profits, employment was precarious, and tramps roamed the neighborhoods looking for hand-outs and frightening "respectable" citizens.³ Although many of the mills continued to operate, profits and wages were severely reduced; many working people must have been living close to desperation. The Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics annual report for 1875 described living conditions for working-class Holyoke. The city, it reported, "has more and worse large tenement houses than any manufacturing town of textile fabrics in the state, and built in such a manner that there is very little means of escape in case of fire. The sanitary arrangements are very imperfect, and in many cases, there is no provision made for carrying the slops

from the sinks, but they are allowed to run wherever they can make their way." Moreover, "portions of yards are covered with filth and green slime, and, within twenty feet, people are living in basements of houses three feet below the level of the yard." Living conditions were appalling and housing was dangerously overcrowded. The report concluded that "It is no wonder that the death-rate, in 1872, was greater in Holyoke than in any large town in Massachusetts, excepting Fall River, and if an epidemic should visit them now, in the state they are in, its ravages would be great."⁴ To add to the difficulties of the period, at the end of the 1870s the city began to make a serious attempt to enforce the compulsory school attendance law; many families which had depended on the labor of their children were now forced to seek aid from the city almoner.⁵

Labor protests were almost non-existent. Cotton weavers and spinners at the Lyman and Hampden textile mills had struck in the winter of 1873-1874 when wages were first reduced, but the strike was short-lived and unsuccessful.⁶ For the rest of the 1870s, workers fortunate enough to have a job remained quiet, if not contented. When signs of economic recovery began to manifest themselves, however, labor-management relations grew more turbulent. Business started to boom; many mills offered modest raises, only to have the workers strike because the raises were considered to be insufficient or unequal. These strikes were spontaneous and disorganized walk-outs of workers in specific departments; there was nothing even remotely approaching a general strike and no permanent labor organization emerged. The strikes were over in a day or two. Sometimes the strikers were victorious, returning to work with some sort of satisfactory settlement. At other times, however, the strikers were discharged and others were hired to replace them.⁷ Where labor organization did emerge in this period (1879-1882), it was among the craftsmen—the bricklayers, plasterers, and carpenters. A good deal of the impetus for this was undoubtedly the fact that Holyoke had begun to experience a construction boom.⁸

It was in this atmosphere of labor dissatisfaction and rising expectations that the first Holyoke local assembly of the Knights of Labor was organized in November of 1882. Local Assembly (L. A.) 2322 had fourteen members at its founding; the membership fluctuated over the next three years with inductions and expulsions, the average number of members being about forty.⁹ L. A. 2322 was a mixed assembly, its members representing such occupations as plumber, mason, laborer, upholsterer, mill operative, policeman, and blacksmith.¹⁰ This was to be the only local assembly in Holyoke until 1886, when in a period of six months, four others were organized—L. A. 5005 (mixed) in February; L. A. 7041 (pulp and paper makers) in May; L. A. 7670 (painters) in June; and L. A. 8072 (mixed) in July. All these local assemblies were short-lived, the longest-lasting being L. A. 2322, which was active from 1882 to 1888.¹¹

Almost no detailed information exists about the make-up or the inner workings of these local assemblies, there being no membership lists, minutes of meetings, or newsletters still in existence. But if the expulsions are any indication, L. A. 2322 was overwhelmingly Irish in membership.¹² One of the local assemblies was referred to as the "German Knights of Labor," probably L. A. 5005 which included a number of German weavers and spinners from the Germania and Skinner mills.¹³ The Knights met in their own hall in down-

town Holyoke; meetings were announced by "cabalistic figures" chalked on fences and brick walls, but also in the daily newspaper, which would lead one to believe that some of their secrecy may have been more for effect than the result of any genuine fear of retaliation. Admission to the hall was by password, and the proceedings were kept secret.¹⁴ Most of what is known of the Knights' activities comes from the local daily newspaper, the *Holyoke Transcript*. The Knights often acted in concert with other labor organizations in the city, particularly with the German Socialist Labor Party; since the *Transcript* tended to lump them all together as "the labor men" or "the organized workers," it is sometimes difficult to discern exactly which organization did what. It is possible to discover, from the newspaper, which issues and movements the Knights were involved with, but often impossible to calculate the extent of their involvement. The watchwords of the order were "Organize, Educate, Cooperate."¹⁵ The Holyoke Knights attempted to obey that injunction, but on a much reduced scale because of their weakness.

The activities of the Holyoke Knights were directed toward the passage of a weekly payments law, shortening the hours of the paper-mill workers, and arbitration of strikes. In the first of these, the passage of a weekly payments law, all the Massachusetts local assemblies lobbied in concert through District Assembly 30 of Boston.¹⁶ The mills customarily paid their hands once a month, although some had been known to delay payment for three, four, and in one case as long as six months. The company would invest and get interest on the money, while the employees were forced to live on credit, leaving many perpetually broke.¹⁷ During the depression of 1884-1885, some of the mills cut wages which had been raised two or three years earlier; as a sop to the working people, the owners offered to initiate weekly payments, if a majority favored the reform. Though some working people complained that weekly payments cost them money, since they could buy cheaper when they bought in bulk, once a month, rather than every week, most liked the change.¹⁸ From the employers' side, the reviews were generally bad; not only was it more troublesome to prepare weekly rather than monthly payrolls, but the managers complained that there was increased drunkenness when their hands were paid weekly. The arguments for and against were summarized in the *Transcript*:

With a certain class of employes, weekly pay means a chance to get drunk once a week instead of once a month. The industrious, sober employes have to submit to rules made to fit the drunken and unprincipled. The mill employe or shop hand ought to have his money at the end of the week, and pay his bills with cash in hand instead of waiting for it a month. The employer, on the other hand, wants his help promptly on hand Monday morning, and cannot afford to lose time every week for men to recover from a spree.¹⁹

Upon reflection, however, the paternalism and self-interest implicit in the employers' position was obvious:

If it be so [that weekly payments increase drunkenness] then the logic of it is, that to abolish drunkenness laborers should never be paid Employers are not guardians, and have no more right to

assume to be, than employes have the right to assume to be guardians of employers When an employer talks in favor of long time payments and argues that he does it for the good of his employes his conduct is liable to impress lookers-on as smacking as much, or more, of selfishness as of benevolence²⁰

In fact, many of the mills that had tried weekly payments had gone back to monthly before the law was passed making weekly payments mandatory after July 1, 1886. This new law was hailed by the labor organizations of Holyoke as "the result of the agitation of organized labor, coupled with the growing sentiment among the masses of people that it would be both beneficial and just"; there is no doubt that it was one of the few genuine victories that working people won in the 1880s. The corporations grumbled about the state interfering "between the powers of two men to make a private contract, of no public interest, and merely upon the ground that one of these men is acting in behalf of a corporation which it has at some time created." There was some talk of non-compliance with the law, but it was put into effect without much more than verbal fuss.²¹

Through L. A. 7041, a craft assembly of pulp and paper workers, the Knights got involved in the paper-mill workers' campaign to shorten their weekend hours. Hours of labor were much on the minds of workers in post-Civil War Massachusetts. A law passed in 1874 had restricted to sixty hours a week women and children under eighteen employed in manufacturing corporations. That had effectively shortened the workday for all textile mill employees, but the paper mills, which employed far fewer women and children and in less strategic jobs in the overall manufacturing operation, were affected hardly at all.²² Paper-mill hands, in fact, were required to work longer hours than workers in almost any other industry. Store clerks, too, had worked long hours, six days a week from early morning until as late as ten or eleven o'clock at night (in order, according to merchants, to be able to accommodate the late-working factory operatives). In the spring of 1878, Holyoke merchants agreed to close their stores early Tuesday and Friday evenings; nine years later, the experiment having proven popular with the clerks and not costly to the merchants, the stores were closed a third evening. This trend to shorter hours was not lost on the paper-mill workers, who complained that some paper manufacturers had signed a petition urging merchants to close their stores the third evening, while the manufacturers were refusing to shorten the work hours of their own employees.²³

The paper-mill employees alternated one week of day work with one week of night work, each week being considered one "tour." Because of the press of orders and the intense competition, the paper mills customarily ran their machinery twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, with two groups of workmen for each twenty-four hours. On weekends, the mills ran until midnight on Saturday, which meant those same workmen had to be back at midnight on Sunday to restart the machinery. The workmen complained that they had to work more hours than in any other industry, "half of the time by night and under a great and constant mental strain and anxiety." Moralists complained that the tour workers' weekend schedule interfered with their religious life, since they spent a good part of Sunday sleeping.²⁴

In July of 1886, the tour workers presented a petition to the paper manufacturers who were holding their annual convention at Saratoga. The workers asked that all paper mills be closed from 6:00 P.M. on Saturday until 7:00 A.M. on Monday. The paper manufacturers took a year to consider the request. Hopes were high that it would be granted, but meeting again at Saratoga a year later, the manufacturers refused to endorse the change on the grounds that it was "inexpedient to legislate upon questions affecting the business management of individual members of the association by undertaking to control the prices of paper, the wages paid to operatives, or the hours of labor." A minority report which recommended that paper mills throughout the country shut down at 10:00 P.M. on Saturday and restart at 6:00 A.M. on Monday was signed by William F. Whiting of Holyoke's Whiting Paper Company and James H. Newton of Holyoke's Newton Paper Company, among others. The signers of the minority report were the city's most paternalistic employers. Newton had already reduced the weekend hours of his workers, to test whether or not the loss of production would be too great for his company to bear; he had settled to his own satisfaction that it was not. Whiting was a United States Congressman who was very popular with working-class voters; it was he who had encouraged the tour workers to present their petition at the papermakers' convention.²⁵

Another Holyoke manufacturer, identified only as a man "whose sound judgment is known and respected by everyone in the trade," told *The Paper World*, a trade journal published in Holyoke:

I am for favoring the help. Give them what they ask for. The paper industry has been singularly fortunate in its freedom from labor troubles. Let us keep it so. In our mills the help have always been loyal to us, and we mean to keep them loyal. It is truer economy for us to keep our help loyal than to make petty savings in wages and working hours and make our men dissatisfied.²⁶

The paper workers continued to press their case, without ever threatening a strike. They did, however, form an assembly of the Knights of Labor, in an effort to put pressure on the manufacturers. One of the tour workers who presented the petition at Saratoga, William Perry, was a Knight of Labor, but it is impossible to say whether this indicates that L. A. 4041 played a prominent part in the campaign.²⁷ In November of 1887, the Massachusetts State Board of Arbitration heard a petition from the employees of the Winona Paper Company, who were asking for relief from the excessive weekend hours. The Board found in favor of the workers. Though it could do no more than recommend a course of action to the paper manufacturers, the moral influence of this decision, coupled with the weight of public opinion which had been steadily moving to the workers' side and the manufacturers' own feeling that the tour workers had a just complaint, induced many of Holyoke's paper mills to voluntarily comply with the Board of Arbitration's recommendation.²⁸

The third area in which Holyoke's Knights involved themselves was the arbitration of strikes. The order opposed strikes except as a last resort; that was almost the only good thing the manufacturers or the *Transcript* had to say about the Knights of Labor. The Knights were involved in one large strike,

which pitted the weavers against the Skinner silk mill in February of 1886. The Skinner silk mill weavers had three grievances—they were paid according to the number of “cuts” of woven cloth they produced, instead of weekly as every other department in the mill was paid; they were paid for a “cut” of 200 yards, but the woven cuts, when measured, often exceeded 200 yards in length; and their overseer, John David Goetz, showed partiality in distributing the warps, thus giving some weavers the opportunity to earn more money than others. Although it was not included in the formal complaint that the strikers released to the newspaper, there was one other complaint against Goetz. He was said to be guilty of “unjust and gross immoral conduct . . . toward the female employees under his charge . . .”; of having “indecently insulted” a woman weaver who said she couldn’t afford to give him a Christmas present; and of striking a young German girl who inadvertently got in the way of one of the looms. Given the prevalent protective attitude toward women employees, it is not surprising that two years later the Knights recalled the strike as having been caused principally by the “immoral conduct” of the overseer.²⁹

After an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate with the proprietor, William Skinner, the weavers struck. Of the ninety-five strikers, some sixteen were members of L. A. 5005 Knights of Labor, which became their representative. Former Knights of Labor Grand Secretary Charles H. Litchman arrived from Marblehead in hopes of arbitrating the dispute. He failed, and the strike dragged on for nearly three months. District Assembly 30 endorsed it; the Central Labor Union of New York City (where Skinner had a Broadway showroom for his products) got the tailors and cutters to agree to boycott Skinner silk and satin; but the company had a sufficient supply of the product to meet demand. The strikers began to drift away to other jobs and other cities and by May, when the Haymarket Square dynamite bombs had been thrown in Chicago and the country was wallowing in anti-labor hysteria, the Skinner strike was forgotten. It was not forgotten by the Knights of Labor, however. Two years later Skinner ran for Congress, and though he was the approved Democratic candidate, the Knights repudiated him because “Local Assembly 5005 . . . was thoroughly demoralized and defeated, and one more lapsed assembly was the result of the strike.” Workingmen were urged to vote against Skinner, and he was defeated.³⁰ The one area in which the Knights seem to have acquired considerable influence was the political arena. In September of 1886, the Knights and a handful of crafts union members organized “The Holyoke Political Labor Group” (sometimes called the “Organized Political Labor Group”), which endorsed candidates acceptable to labor. Local politicians were sufficiently impressed with its strength to court its endorsement.³¹

In retrospect, the Knights were unsuccessful in organizing Holyoke’s workers. In six years, the five local assemblies probably enrolled no more than three hundred people. They never organized more than a small fraction of the mill operatives, the most numerous group within the working population. It must have puzzled the Knights themselves, who imported speaker after speaker to tell the working people to forget their differences, and to unite and elect sympathetic politicians regardless of their political party. J. F. Busche, editor of the *Workingman’s Advocate* of New Haven, told Holyoke workers: “We have been divided, we are republicans and democrats, but the bosses are capitalists.”

The Knights had a vision of a society where working people would realize that they were workers first, not Republicans or Democrats, Protestants or Catholics, Irishmen or Germans. But their vision was contrary to the reality of Holyoke's demographics. The various ethnic groups could not forget their mutual antagonisms. The women, who made up a fourth of the working population at the beginning of the decade and a majority of the workers in the textile mills, were impervious to the Knights' appeal. There is no evidence that the Knights made any special effort to recruit women. One letter published in the *Transcript* extolling the virtues of the order is headed "Laboring Men, Unite" and addressed to "Brother workingman."³²

As the dominant ethnic group in Holyoke at the beginning of the decade, the Irish had a history of labor protest going back to 1848 when Irish workers building the canals had struck over a wage reduction. It surprised no one that the Irish were involved in the Knights of Labor, but they also had other avenues to advancement. Through the Democratic Party, they were taking over the city government and using the power of patronage to dispense jobs and liquor licenses. From 1885 to 1887, the mayor was Dr. James J. O'Connor, a Harvard graduate and the son of an Irish railroad worker. The Irish were also moving successfully into the employer class—the Lynch brothers, the Connors brothers, and Daniel O'Connell were the most prominent businessmen, and there were a handful of Irish doctors and lawyers.³³

The rivals of the working-class Irish were the French Canadians, who in the late 1870s began coming in response to advertisements posted in Canada by Holyoke mill owners. By the beginning of the 1880s, the French Canadians comprised nearly twenty-five percent of Holyoke's population. The longer-established working people bitterly resented their presence. The French Canadians were said to undercut the laboring class by agreeing to work for less money. Many employers, taking advantage of the situation, threatened disgruntled employees that they could be replaced by Canadian workers. There being a housing shortage at the time, the Canadians came in large families who crowded into tenements, often living fifteen or twenty people in one small apartment.³⁴ One workingman complained about the way the Canadians lived in the city. He declared that "The municipal laws should be enforced, the sanitary condition of dwellings investigated, and they should be compelled to live as our people do live, with a due regard to health and comfort . . ."³⁵ The virulence of the mutual dislike between the Irish and the French Canadians was expressed in numerous "race wars" during the 1880s. The fights would usually start in the mills, then spread to the streets where the school boys would join in.³⁶ Given the situation, it is unlikely that these two ethnic groups could have been united.

Reflecting the feeling against the French Canadians in Massachusetts, an extraordinary attack on them appeared in the 1881 Bureau of Labor Statistics annual report. Writing of the objections to the adoption of a law to provide a uniform ten hours of labor in industry, the Bureau blamed the French Canadians for the employers' reluctance to lower hours:

With some exceptions, the Canadian French are the Chinese of the Eastern States. They care nothing for our institutions, civil, political, or educational. They do not come to make a home among us, to dwell with us as citizens, and so become a part of us; but their purpose is merely to sojourn a few years as aliens, touching us only at a single point, that of work and, when they have gathered out of us what will satisfy their ends, to get them away to whence they came, and bestow it there. They are a horde of industrial invaders, not a stream of stable settlers These people have one good trait. They are indefatigable workers, and docile. All they ask is to be set to work, and they care little who rules them or how they are ruled Now it is not strange that so sordid and low a people should awaken corresponding feelings in the managers, and that these should feel that, the longer the hours for such people, the better, and that to work them to the uttermost is about the only good use they can be put to³⁷

Such an outcry arose over these slurs that Carroll D. Wright, Chief of the Bureau, held a hearing at which French Canadians appeared to protest the description. The *Transcript*, too, came to their defense, writing of Holyoke's French population:

The French Canadians of Holyoke number about 5,000. They are industrious, frugal and peaceable. Their women have the natural taste of the race for dress and the trade of the Canadians is quite an item to the merchants. Some of them own real estate and houses in which they live. The manufacturers by whom they are employed speak of them as hard working and steady and took the initiative to procure them as laborers, sending to Canada for that purpose. One thousand four hundred of their children are of school age and about 75 percent of these attend school. The evening schools are also attended by them to some extent. Like all classes and nationalities the French Canadians have their defects, but they are not of so permeating a character as to call for so severe and wholesale an arraignment as that contained in the last report of the Bureau of Statistics.³⁸

Of the three dominant ethnic groups in Holyoke, Germans were by far the smallest (five hundred in 1880, about three times that in 1890), but they were the tightest-knit and most highly-organized community.³⁹ They also were more predisposed than either the French Canadians or the Irish to labor organization, and a small but very active group were involved in the Socialist Labor Party. In the 1880s, the party brought such Socialists as Johann Most, Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor and her "husband" Edward Aveling, and the German Socialist leader Wilhelm Liebknecht to speak to the working people of Holyoke.⁴⁰ The Skinner silk mill strikers received more support from the German community than from any other group. Balls and gymnastic exhibitions were held at Turners Hall, and the German Dramatic Society put on a play to raise money for the strikers. The Turnverein Society even expelled Goetz, the overseer whom the strikers found so offensive.⁴¹ Under a kind of umbrella organization called

the Trades and Labor Assembly, the German Socialists often collaborated with the Knights of Labor, particularly in the political arena. In 1885 the Socialist Labor Party, the Knights, and five other small Holyoke unions succeeded in nominating a labor candidate, Jeremiah J. Keane, a 28-year old bricklayer, who went on to win election as state representative and to make an admirable record of supporting labor legislation and municipal suffrage for women.⁴²

After the Haymarket Square incident in May of 1886, there was some anti-German sentiment in Holyoke, born of the feeling that labor dissatisfaction was the result of "socialistic, anarchistic" German agitators. A workingman writing to the *Transcript* in late 1886 in favor of the weekly payments law, felt compelled to sign his letter, "NOT A ROSENBURG!" Even within the German community the Socialists were a source of tension. A German writing to the *Transcript* described the more recent German immigrants "as belonging to the lower classes in the Fatherland, and who had come over here to create disturbance. They were socialistic in their sentiments and since their advent in Holyoke they had created jealousies and contention among all the Germans in the city." Two Germans, a spinner and a weaver, were discharged by the Germania mill "for being too vigorous socialists." Finally, in late 1887 there was a disturbance in the Turnverein Society and forty Socialists who were accused of trying to take over the society were expelled.⁴³

It is known that there were Germans in the Knights of Labor local assemblies, but not how their numbers compared to those of the Irish. Two factors may have limited the appeal of the order to the Germans. One is that the Knights had a reputation for attracting more unskilled than skilled labor. Many Germans looked down on the Irish and French Canadians who made up the bulk of Holyoke's unskilled working population. The Germans were largely Protestant and urban, whereas the Irish and French Canadians were Catholic and rural.⁴⁴ Also, much more than the other two ethnic groups, the Germans tended to be skilled workers who had little difficulty finding work in the textile mills. One mill, the Germania, was, as its name indicates, started by Germans and the workforce was predominantly German. Many were recruited in Germany by mill agents, and the mills had paid their passage to the United States.⁴⁵

The other factor that may have limited the Knights' appeal to the Germans was its temperance sentiment. Grand Master Workman Terrence Powderly was well-known to be an abstainer. At his reinstallation in 1886, the *Transcript* reported approvingly that with the other officers, he "raised his right hand to Heaven, . . . and all repeated after him a solemn vow not to use any alcoholic liquors during their term of office."⁴⁶ In the first local assembly organized, L. A. 2322, at least five of the members were then or were later to become officers of the St. Jerome Total Abstinence Society, a predominantly Irish organization socially and politically influential in Holyoke.⁴⁷ The German attitude toward abstinence was perhaps best expressed by an anonymous German who said, "We ought to stay on our knees all day and thank God for beer." More seriously, the German Turnverein Society depended on the proceeds from the sale of beer in the Turn Halls to support its educational, cultural, and benevolent activities.⁴⁸ Judging by the names of those arrested for drunkenness in Holyoke, alcoholism was not the threat to the Germans that it was to the Irish.

Holyoke had no large leisure class. Many of the owners of the textile mills lived elsewhere. Factories that had local proprietors were of comparatively recent establishment, and their owners often boasted of their humble origins. The largest private fortunes in the city—those of Skinner, Newton, Whiting, and Parsons—were made during or after the Civil War. On the surface at least, the city was socially democratic. Paternalism played a large part in the relations between management and workers in Holyoke. Even when the mills had absentee owners, the department foremen or overseers, most of whom had been promoted out of the working class, tried to cultivate friendly relations with their hands. The *Transcript* records numerous instances of workers giving a departing foreman a gift with expressions of respect and gratitude for his fair and generous treatment. Mill proprietors who resided in Holyoke, such as Skinner, Whiting, and Newton, were proud of the fact that their employees could communicate directly with them when they had a grievance. The establishment of labor unions was seen as an unfriendly way of dealing with grievances. When employees of the Holyoke Lumber Company went on strike because of a dispute about hours, the proprietor, J. C. Lewis, complained that the men “should have come to him and had a friendly talk over the matter” He did not believe “that the strikers took the right course in striking as they did and hopes that in time the men will take a manly view of the situation and desire to deal with the question in a manly manner.”⁴⁹

Most of the mills engaged in practices which viewed coldly can be seen as sugar-coating to the basic conditions of a mill operative’s working life, but which in the paternalistic atmosphere of the time were considered as evidence that mill owners really cared about the welfare of their employees. The mills sponsored baseball teams in the summer and sleigh-rides for their workers in the winter. Some of the mills vaccinated employees, paid their doctor bills if they were injured on the job, and their funeral expenses if they died.⁵⁰ The *Transcript* wrote:

There is a general friendly feeling between the workingmen and those by whom they are employed. Many of the manufacturers and agents have themselves been working men, and all have a kindly feeling for their help. This is shown by the neatness and comfort of the mills, the general regard for their healthfulness and safety, the attractive yards of many of the mill buildings, the mill-teams carrying employes to and from their work on stormy days, and in many other ways. A strike in this city could not rationally assume the form that it does in Fall River, as a fight between oppressor and oppressed.⁵¹

But by the mid-1880s, however, even the “bosses” were beginning to recognize that “kindly feelings” were not enough. *The Paper World*, a trade journal of the paper manufacturers editorialized: “Modern competition is so intense that the individual employer can no longer decide for himself how humane he will be . . .” and that “Experience has shown that there would be no limit short of utter exhaustion, to the labor exacted from women and children, and in some cases from men, if a reasonable limit were not imposed equally on all competitors within a commonwealth by the law-making power.”⁵²

Undoubtedly, the large number of women in the workforce was an important factor in the paternalism of Holyoke's employers. In 1879 the *Transcript* noted that "fully one-fourth of the population of the city may be classed under the honorable name of 'working woman.'" In the textile industry a majority of the employees were women. These "female operatives" were not looking back to a recent revolutionary past, like early nineteenth-century Lowell mill girls, but in most cases they were daughters of a patriarchal immigrant family. Although some of the older mills provided boarding houses for single women, most young female operatives lived either with their families or in private boarding houses, sisters often boarding together. The evidence is that most women worked only until they married, then stayed home to raise their children. Meanwhile, the family went through a difficult period, sometimes alleviated by taking in boarders, until the children were old enough to work, usually in their early teens. Holyoke women were encouraged to feel that they were well taken care of—the hours they were required to work were regulated by state law, they were not required to work at night, and the boarding houses customarily charged women fifty cents a week less for their board than men were charged. But their wages were even lower than the men's, and the city almoner reported that many of the people who came to him for support were old women who had worked for years in the mills "but have had claimants upon their care and have not been able to save anything for their own need."⁵³

One reason why Holyoke women did not join the Knights of Labor may have been that both their family life and their work life conditioned them to an acceptance of male domination, the employer at work being similar to the father at home. Another reason may have been that joining a labor union would have set their position firmly in the working class whereas, on the surface at least, the female operative's status was uncertain. In 1883 the *Transcript* reprinted from a Lowell newspaper the obituary of a Lowell woman, a long-time factory operative, who had been much loved for her benevolence. The Lowell paper headed the item, "She Was Only A Mill Girl," indicating that mill girls had suffered a downfall in status from the proudly independent, respectable Yankee female operatives of the early nineteenth century. There is no indication that the Holyoke female operative saw herself as "only a mill girl," or that the community at large regarded her as such. The *Transcript*, when it did not refer to female operatives as "girls," tended to call them "young ladies of the weaving (carding, dyeing, etc.) room of the _____ mill," or "lady operatives."⁵⁴ Their weddings, parties, and vacations were reported on the same pages as the doings of the middle class. There seemingly was no great gulf separating factory operatives from women who worked in what might be considered more prestigious occupations. In the 1880 United States census for Holyoke, there are a few instances where a family would include one daughter who was a factory operative and one who was a milliner or a school teacher.

There is evidence that some young women may have preferred factory work. One article stated that "Girls are attracted to the paper mills by the cleaner work and better pay for the number of hours of employment," and that "This enables these mills to secure a better class of help than others, and among the paper sorters and calendar girls will often be found high-school graduates from good families, who prefer the mill work to teaching school or sewing."⁵⁵ This

description gives one an over-all impression of the docility of Holyoke's women. The *Transcript* credited their large numbers in Holyoke's workforce with the relative absence of strikes. One writer observed that "Women are less inclined to organize strikes, more gifted in bearing the ills of hard times, less gifted in organized resistance, and a strike of women would be free from the violence and bloodshed that in the coal mines and iron works renders a long-continued strike a genuine reign of terror."⁵⁶ In 1881 the state passed a school suffrage law allowing women who paid property taxes to vote for school committeemen. Despite encouragement from Senator Hoar, the *Transcript*, and the Massachusetts School Suffrage Association, only four Holyoke women registered to vote.⁵⁷

Two allegations were made against the Knights that help to explain their unpopularity. One was that they were un-American, that they represented a disturbing foreign element intruded into working life. When the Knights, during a strike at Millville, forbade their members "to speak or have any dealings with the 'scabs,' the boarding house keepers where they live, or grocers or marketmen who supply them with goods," the *Transcript* stigmatized them as "Tyrannical Knights." Complaining that "In the case of strikers, it very often happens that individual workers feel compelled by their obligations to sacrifice their own interests at the dictation of the leaders," the *Transcript* described this situation as "a subserviency which is akin to slavery, and it is a system which is not, and could not be of American origin."⁵⁸ When the American Federation of Labor was created in 1886, *The Paper World* predicted its eventual triumph over the Knights because it would have to "carry no such rabble of agitators as have weighed down the Knights" Good behavior could not be expected of the Knights "so long as the turbulent foreign element has charge of affairs."⁵⁹

The second charge levelled against the Knights was that they were "unfriendly to the unions" and that, because of their inclusiveness, skilled workers would be submerged under the mass of the unskilled. Speaking of the American Federation of Labor's respect for the autonomy of the various crafts within it, *The Paper World* wrote: "The constitution and by-laws of the Brotherhood of Carpenters, for instance, are made by carpenters, while in the Knights of Labor they would be made by hod carriers and loafers, as well as by printers, bakers and so on."⁶⁰ This aspect of the Knights was particularly upsetting to some of Holyoke's employers, who had come up from working-class origins and who resented "ignorant" Knights trying to tell them how they should run their businesses. During a strike of bricklayers at Lynch Brothers, backed by the Knights of Labor, one of the owners challenged the expertise of the union representative:

Mr. Lynch discussing the situation this noon with a prominent member of the union made the assertion that if forced to it he was still able to do a good day's work. A slight hint on the part of the labor man doubting the assertion brought forth a challenge to the effect that he [Lynch] would work a week in competition with the Knight of Labor, at any kind of masonry, and at the end of the week the party performing the most work would take the wages of both. The offer was not accepted.⁶¹

In the six years that they were active in Holyoke, the Knights of Labor aroused fear, out of proportion to the actual threat they posed to the prosperity or peace. They never organized more than a small fraction of the working people; they counseled against strikes and violence and recommended using the ballot box instead. Labor organization was put on a firm footing in Holyoke in the 1890s, but it was in the form of craft unions. What the Knights accomplished for the working people in the 1880s was to help them find their voice, particularly in politics.

NOTES

1. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts; A Case Study of the Industrial Revolution in America* (Hamden, CT, 1968), pp. 29-31.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
3. *Holyoke Transcript*, 1 November 1879, p. 8.
4. Massachusetts, *Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* (1875), p. 392.
5. *Transcript*, 2 March 1878, p. 5.
6. *Transcript*, 4 February 1880, p. 2.
7. *Ibid.*; also, 3 April 1880, p. 4 and 29 May 1880, p. 8.
8. *Transcript*, 10 January 1880, p. 4; 17 January 1880, p. 4; 21 January 1880, p. 3; 25 February 1880, p. 2; 10 March 1880, p. 2; 20 March 1880, p. 4.
9. Jonathan Garlock, compiler, *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT, 1982), pp. 191, 636.
10. *Journal of United Labor*, V (May 10, 1884): 693.
11. Garlock, pp. 191-192.
12. *Journal of United Labor*, V (May 10, 1884): 693.
13. *Transcript*, 24 August 1886, p. 4.
14. *Transcript*, 30 August 1886, p. 4.
15. *Transcript*, 10 November 1885, p. 4.
16. *Journal of United Labor*, V (February 23, 1885): 921.

17. *Transcript*, 26 July 1886, p. 4; 27 July 1886, p. 4; 3 August 1886, p. 4.
18. *Transcript*, 31 July 1886, p. 4; 29 April 1885, p. 5; 7 September 1878, p. 4; 22 November 1886, p. 2.
19. *Transcript*, 21 May 1881, p. 4.
20. *Transcript*, 20 August 1886, p. 2.
21. *Transcript*, 21 May 1881, p. 4; and 23 July, p. 4; 32 July, p. 4; 3 August, p. 4, 1886.
22. Green, p. 199.
23. *Transcript*, 30 March 1878, p. 4; and 8 January, p. 8; 2 February, p. 4, 1887.
24. *The Paper World*, December, 1887, p. 15; *Transcript*, 30 July 1886, p. 4.
25. *Transcript*, 30 July 1887, p. 1; 6 August 1887, p. 4; 30 July 1886, p. 4; 11 April 1887, p. 4; and *The Paper World*, December 1886, p. 8.
26. *The Paper World*, March, 1887, p. 4.
27. *Transcript*, 21 June 1887, p. 4.
28. *Transcript*, 26 November 1887, p. 4; *The Paper World*, December 1887, p. 4.
29. *Transcript*, 8 February 1886, p. 4; 17 October 1888, p. 4; 2 March 1886, p. 4; 19 March 1886, p. 4; 17 October 1888, p. 4.
30. *Transcript*, 9 February, p. 4; 20 February, p. 8; 22 February, p. 4; 11 March, p. 4, 1886; and 17 October 1888, p. 4.
31. *Transcript*, 28 September 1886, p. 1.
32. *Transcript*, 28 January 1886, p. 4; 10 November 1885, p. 4.
33. *Transcript*, 20 March 1886, p. 7; 14 December 1888, p. 4.
34. *Transcript*, 10 December 1879, p. 2; 5 April 1879, p. 4.
35. *Transcript*, 23 April 1879, p. 2.
36. *Transcript*, 10 November 1882, p. 4.
37. Massachusetts, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* (1881), pp. 469-470.
38. *Transcript*, 29 October 1881, p. 5.
39. Green, p. 367.
40. *Transcript*, 9 October 1886, p. 8.

41. *Transcript*, 27 March, p. 8; 29 March, p. 4; 8 March, p. 4; 23 March, p. 4; 6 March, p. 8, 1886.
42. *Transcript*, 24 October 1885, p. 4; 25 April 1888, p. 4; 9 May 1888, p. 4.
43. *Transcript*, 27 July 1886, p. 4; 29 January 1886, p. 4; 29 June 1886, p. 4; 12 November 1887, p. 4.
44. Green, p. 111.
45. *Transcript*, 8 June 1881, p. 2; 18 January 1882, p. 2; 11 February 1882 p. 4.
46. *Transcript*, 29 November 1886, p. 2.
47. *Journal of United Labor*, V (May 10, 1884): 693; *Holyoke City Directory*, 1883-1887.
48. *Transcript*, 11 November 1882, p. 4; 1 October 1885, p. 4.
49. *Transcript*, 4 May 1887, p. 4.
50. *Transcript*, 21 May 1881, p. 4; 13 November 1882, p. 4.
51. *Transcript*, 7 February 1880, p. 4.
52. *The Paper World*, March 1888, p. 10.
53. *Transcript*, 10 May 1879, p. 4; 2 June 1888, p. 8; 14 August 1880, p. 4.
54. *Transcript*, 16 May 1888, p. 4; 19 May 1888, p. 8; 22 June 1888, p. 4; 29 June 1888, p. 4.
55. *Transcript*, 11 December 1882, p. 4.
56. *Transcript*, 7 February 1880, p. 4.
57. *Transcript*, 6 September 1879, p. 4; 13 September 1879, p. 9; 23 October 1880, p. 4; 13 September 1879, p. 9.
58. *Transcript*, 21 August 1885, p. 2.
59. *The Paper World*, January 1887, p. 10; March, 1887, p. 20.
60. *The Paper World*, August, 1887, p. 15.
61. *Transcript*, 8 May 1888, p. 4.