Poor Man's Fortune
Roll, Jarod

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Belief in the promise of the poor man’s camp ethic swelled among the miners of the Joplin district, as it was now known. In early 1881, the State Line Herald, which served Joplin and Galena, printed a jesting, psalm-like paean to “the miner” that praised the poor men who had braved this system. Although “none knoweth his nativity nor the dwelling place of his forefathers,” the miner could secure a grubstake and “goeth abroad over the land and seeketh a spot wherein he may pitch his tent and dig for the precious metals.” Once the miner “secured a pick and likewise a shovel,” “he diggeth deep” but “his labor cometh to naught.” Dismayed, the miner “murmured against fate, lifting up his voice and crying, ‘I am undone, yea, flattened out like unto a pan cake.’” Unable to pay his debts, the miner received scorn from “the inhabitants of the land,” who “hold up their hands and say, ‘Behold the dead beat he eateth up our substance and payeth not therefor.’” But the miner did not quit, he “worketh day after day and liveth on the husks of the land.” And then, “he striketh her big, both of lead and zinc metals striketh he them.” Having endured hardship, the miner now set loose “rejoicing on the plains of Joplin,” where “the mighty men of the land doth hearken unto his voice and say, ‘See what this man has wrought!’” The people, too, “sayeth, ‘There is much in the man we knew not of before.’” The miner gained fame and elected office, became “a city dad.” From then on, “he liveth a life of virtue, eschewing evil and becometh a mighty leader in the land. Selah.”

Despite its absurdist lyrics, the song reflected the remarkable actual events of the preceding decade. Independent miners had discovered the lead and zinc that created the district’s richest camps at Joplin, Webb City, Carterville, and most recently, Galena. In small companies and sometimes alone, working miners succeeded in part because the earlier generation of miners had secured favorable leasing terms from those who controlled the land. Those terms allowed men with little property a fair opportunity to enter the metal markets for their own benefit, with some limitations. Thousands of men followed in the belief that they, too, could succeed by investing time and effort in the possibility of striking pay dirt. Most were white English speakers—some with mining experience, others from area farms—who could negotiate
the business of mining on a basis of equality with those who came before. Like the miner in the song, they sought economic independence and social respect as workingmen who fulfilled the era's ideal for responsible manhood as husbands, fathers, and community leaders. They viewed entrepreneurial mining as a proper means to achieve manly standing.

As “The Miner” hinted, however, the poor man's camp ethic had nothing to offer white men who remained poor and dependent. Until he succeeded, the song's miner was disdained as a deadbeat, less than a man. This would matter as the national lead market collapsed in the late 1870s. The price of pig lead had held up through four years of depression but fell sharply in late 1877, partly because of surplus stockpiles and partly because of rising production from new silver-bearing lead mines in Nevada, Utah, and Colorado and new discoveries in eastern Missouri. “This has been in a general way one of the most disastrous years we have ever had,” one industry executive complained. By 1878 the St. Louis price had plummeted to 3.4 cents per pound, just a fraction above the all-time low set in 1845. Smelting and leasing companies cut prices for mineral by half or more. Some smelters closed for good. After thirty years of favorable markets, miners in the Joplin district now faced parlous conditions that strained the logic of the poor man’s camp to the limit.2

Rather than reject that logic, like other workers who were mobilizing in opposition to industrial capitalism, they redoubled their commitment to earning independence as white men through economic risk. Miners in the Joplin district explored alternatives, as long-held suspicions of the smelting and leasing companies remained high. Some rallied to the antimonopoly politics of the renamed Greenback-Labor Party and the Knights of Labor, both of which made gains nationally and in the region after 1878. But even these men, who were a minority, still looked for reforms that would privilege small, market-driven producers like those who had made the poor man’s camp. The vast majority remained confident in capitalism. That confidence led many miners and prospectors to emphasize the production of zinc ore, which, unlike lead mineral, they had the right to sell for open-market prices that were still rising in the early 1880s.

The new wave of zinc-mining prosperity that these miners unleashed would bring changes that ended the poor man’s camp. To profit from zinc, small mining companies, many of which grew from prospecting ventures, increased their scale in subtle ways that required a little more capital than true poor man’s operations. Zinc-mining companies in turn hired larger groups of wageworkers. Incremental, gradual, and led by local white men who themselves had mined, these changes seemed at first to reaffirm the
district’s promise for working miners. By the early 1890s, however, miners in the Joplin district faced worsening chances to become owner-operators. Most of them, inspired by examples of past achievements by other poor men, many of whom were now neighbors or bosses, continued to imagine that the future would offer them the same opportunities as the past. If earlier generations had lived on the “husks of the land” and still prospered, so could they.

The lead slump decimated the earnings of miners under the sliding-scale terms of their “jug handle” contracts. With pig lead selling for four cents in St. Louis in 1879, miners earned only fourteen dollars for 1,000 pounds of mineral. For the first time, successful miners in the camps around Joplin struggled to make headway. “Many miners who have good diggings,” a local newspaper reported, did not produce “enough lead to give them a living.” The Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics asked miners that year about their current earnings and, if they had been around long enough, what they had earned in 1872. Thirty-two miners reported average weekly earnings of only $6.53 in 1879, down from $12.27 a week for those who reported earnings from seven years earlier. “A great many are leaving,” noted a correspondent in Oronogo. “Those that cannot get away are going to work for anything to keep soul and body together,” he continued, citing wages as low as fifty cents a day. For the first time, the miners and prospectors of the poor man’s camp endured a depression that challenged their entrepreneurial ambitions.3

Many miners blamed the crisis on the smelting and leasing companies. Hit by steep price cuts in early 1878, miners at Granby railed against the Granby Mining and Smelting Company and its new owners, who were fighting the railroad over alleged lease violations. Some went so far as to submit affidavits in support of the railroad’s claims against Granby Mining. While the courts resolved the dispute between the companies, the miners got nothing. That November, more miners than before voted for the Greenback-Labor Party, which now supported proposals to protect the rights of workers from corporations in addition to currency and banking reform. Its platform promised to restore the independence of small producers, not foment radical change; the party opposed “strikes, revolutions and all violent measures for the relief of labor.” The Jasper County branch appealed directly to the men of the poor man’s camp with proposals to cap royalty rates and give miners “the right to sell all ores raised by their labor to the highest bidder.” The party’s local candidate for Congress carried Newton County with 1,210 votes, 39.4 percent of the total, and finished third in Jasper County with 1,722 votes, 28.2 percent. The Republicans won the seat. The moderate Greenback-Labor appeal remained strong among area farmers and market-minded miners. In
1880, presidential candidate James B. Weaver received 971 votes in Newton County and 1,111 votes in Jasper County, around 28 and 20 percent, respectively. Weaver ran a strong third in Granby, Webb City, and Joplin. But old partisan loyalties again caused problems. The Greenback-Labor Party ran a joint ticket with Republicans at the state level, which hurt Weaver’s support among regular Democratic voters. These elections revealed considerable popular worry about the power of leasing and smelting companies but also an enduring faith that poor but hardworking men could again thrive in the market economy.⁴

Not all miners believed they would flourish in the Joplin district. Some left to seek new opportunities in western metal camps, where experienced miners could earn high wages. To Joplin miners, one of the most enticing and best known was Leadville, Colorado, a booming but isolated camp over 10,000 feet above sea level and more than forty miles from the nearest train depot. The St. Louis Smelting and Refining Company discovered silver-lead deposits there in 1876 and built a smelter. Picher Lead and Zinc Company sent D. Baumann, who had been an agent of Henry Blow, to monitor developments. With good business sense, Baumann left the company’s employment to manage a Leadville mine, which he named “Joplin.” In 1878, he encouraged Missouri miners to come work for him as wageworkers at the relatively high rate of three dollars per day. Many did so. “Southwest Missouri miners (a few black sheep excepted) are recognized here as the best hands for the Leadville deposits,” Baumann announced in a late 1878 letter to Jasper County newspapers, “and I never hesitate to state here openly that I prefer them to any others for the two reasons that they are Southwest Missouri men and good workers besides.” Other operators hired them too. With lead prices falling, work in the Colorado silver-lead mines compared favorably to the diminished profitability of the lead and zinc operations in Joplin. “They prefer a little silver in their lead,” a local paper explained in 1878, “and there is a prospect that two-thirds of the population of Joplin will be in Leadville by the end of next season.” They were so numerous in the camp that one hotel operator called his place the Joplin Lodging House.⁵

The efforts of Joplin miners to gain advantage in Leadville collided with the workplace struggles of the miners already there. Leadville began as a poor man’s camp in the 1860s, when thousands of prospectors, mostly Irish, Cornish, and native-born white Americans, came to pan the streams around California Gulch for gold. The discovery of lead and silver, however, sparked the rapid development of capital-intensive deep mines by outside investors. In January 1879, a large portion of the camp’s miners formed Local Assembly (LA) 1005 of the Knights of Labor, a growing national labor union that
appealed to both moderate antimonopoly reformers and wageworkers who favored more militant responses to their employers. However unfocused on strategy, the Knights advocated for the autonomy of all workers, regardless of skill or craft, against the rising corporate powers of industrial capitalism. Coal miners led the expansion of the Knights in the mid-1870s, first in Pennsylvania, then across the midwestern coalfields of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kansas and into Colorado in 1878. Although Leadville’s metal miners were the first miners outside of the coal industry to join the Knights, they had connections to independent metal miners’ unions that had formed in Nevada in the late 1860s and in Butte, Montana, in 1878. Like these unions, the Leadville Knights demanded higher wages, particularly a daily rate of four dollars that offset the high cost of living in the mountaintop camp. In May 1880, they went on strike.6

Confronted with direct demands for worker solidarity, the Joplin miners in Leadville continued to work. They thought conditions were fair. “As a general thing,” a correspondent reported, “the Joplin miners are opposed to the strike, claiming that three dollars is enough for eight hours’ work.” When the strike collapsed after the Colorado state government dispatched the militia, their loyalty seemed wise. Mine owners rewarded them. A visitor from Jasper County in August 1880 met fifty Joplin men employed in various Leadville mines. Most worked in managerial positions and reported good earnings. “It makes me feel proud of Joplin,” the visitor declared, “to know that a Joplin miner can always secure work when there is work to be had; he is at a premium, for Leadvillians realize that he has skill born of experience.”7

Most Joplin miners in Leadville did not want to become permanent wage laborers, no matter how well paid. Many were frustrated by the lack of prospecting chances there. According to miner F. F. Smith, who returned to Joplin as soon as he could, “Leadville is a fraud for the laborer.” All of the prospecting “claims that are worth having are all taken up,” he explained to a Jasper County newspaper, “and if you have a claim it takes a small fortune to even commence prospecting on it” due to the camp’s rough terrain and inflated prices. Worse still, Smith said, “the mines are principally controlled by wealthy corporations, thus leaving the poor man the one alternative of working for what he can get.”8

On the other hand, the strike seemed to show that Leadville’s union miners also made work there unreliable. “Every ore-producing mine in the vicinity of Leadville has been utterly stopped from operations by the striking element among the miners,” one writer noted during the strike, “vowing vengeance on” anyone who went back to work. “So you see,” this Missourian
concluded, “the devil is to pay in Leadville.” Caught between big corpora-
tions and a forceful union of wageworkers, the men from the Joplin district
identified with neither. Smith and many others returned home, where they
still saw the best chance for small producers. “The day for the poor man is
past in Leadville, and he stands no better show there now than he does any-
where else. If a man is doing well—making a good living—he had better be
contented, and not run off on every tangent that strike up—it don’t pay.”
The question remained, however, whether the Joplin district would offer
anything better.9

In the 1880s, many Joplin miners turned decisively toward zinc production
to make their living. Conditions in the lead market remained turgid as prices
bounced between 4.00 and 4.75 cents before falling again in 1884 to 3.50
cents. By contrast, the market for zinc ore was growing along with demand
for brass, galvanized metals, and corrosion-resistant paint. New land com-
panies, such as the Joplin Zinc Company, founded by Picher and several
other investors in 1881, and established firms, including Granby Mining,
constructed a series of larger, more advanced zinc smelters in the region:
at Pittsburg, Kansas, in 1878; at Joplin in 1881; and at Rich Hill, Missouri,
and additionally at Pittsburg in 1882. The increased demand raised market
prices for zinc ore, from $14.00 a ton in 1876 to $21.50 a ton in 1886. Dur-
ing that period, district miners increased their annual ore production seven-
fold to more than 75,000 tons, which made the Joplin district the principal
source of zinc ore in the United States.10

Miners in the field around Webb City and Carterville were the first to
focus intensively on zinc. In the late 1870s, they discovered that the field’s
shallow deposits of galena and sphalerite extended down only forty to sixty
feet before giving way to a thick layer of limestone. Some stopped digging
because miners rarely found rich galena deposits below such bedrock for-
mations. Others, however, explored cracks in the limestone. In 1877, accord-
ing to one story, a miner subleasing a claim from the Center Creek Mining
and Smelting Company in Webb City “broke through and discovered a rich
zone of zinc blende ore.” His success “induced others to sink deeper shafts,
and the limestone was soon found to be the cap-rock or roof of the zinc ore
deposits.” According to mining engineer F. L. Clerc, writing in 1882, miners
followed this “immense deposit of zinc blende … continuously for over half a
mile.” Their digging revived work in the field and fashioned a new model for
profitable mining. “The zinc bodies of ore are so much more extensive that
the lead ore is not sought for,” Clerc observed. By 1882, he reported, miners
in Webb City and Carterville “worked principally for zinc ore” and produced “more than half of the zinc ore raised” in the district.\textsuperscript{11}

Small companies of working miners in other camps followed their lead. Market conditions informed the new emphasis as much as geology. Miners who began work in 1878 or after, during the lead slump, had little positive experience with mineral under sliding-scale contracts. They saw greater promise, however, in the zinc provisions of contracts that allowed them to sell ore at prevailing market prices, if not to their lessor then to other buyers, minus a royalty payment. By 1882 seven regional smelters offered prices that continued to climb, up to twenty-four dollars a ton at the end of the decade. Although zinc ore was still worth less than an equal weight of lead mineral, the gap was closing. Many companies reckoned that they could make up the difference and more by exploiting the greater quantities of zinc ore. For the first time in 1883, for example, leaseholders on the South Side Mining and Manufacturing Company’s land in Galena produced more zinc ore than lead mineral, 1,762 tons to 1,184 tons. Three years later, they produced 7,237 tons of zinc and only 835 tons of lead. In all cases, working miners who had assumed the risks of leasehold mining made the decision to pursue zinc, a strategy that emerged, almost literally, from the bottom up.\textsuperscript{12}

Small companies could achieve a marginal increase in zinc production with old methods. In Granby companies of two to five miners predominated in the 1880s. When M. L. Wolfe, the Missouri state mine inspector, reported on the camp in 1887, he found thirty-two companies working shafts mostly between fifty-five and eighty-five feet deep: twelve producing lead and zinc, eleven producing zinc only, and nine producing lead only. Most hoisted men and material with animal-powered whims, although some still used windlasses and a few employed more expensive steam engine hoists. Similar operations predominated in many parts of Joplin. When the inspector visited Granby Mining holdings in Oronogo in 1889, he found that “most of the mining done on the land is by small companies. The ore is usually found near the surface, therefore it does not require much capital to open a mine.” These companies produced from two to four times as much zinc ore as lead mineral “on a very cheap plan.” Such small-scale operations bore the legacy of the earliest days of the district, but profitable zinc production called for more elaborate means.\textsuperscript{13}

Some companies began increasing the scale of mining. At first that required digging deeper. “There is not a single instance,” Clerc noted in 1887, “where the supply of zinc ore has been exhausted downward, in working a mine, and the depth of the deposit is therefore unknown.” While some
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mines in Joplin went below 100 feet by 1890, most of the mines in Webb City and Carterville went below 140 feet. The deepest mine, worked by miners Allen and Sheldon on land subleased from Center Creek Mining, went down 180 feet. Deeper mining enabled companies to exploit greater quantities of zinc ore that required enhanced handling and processing capabilities. In Galena, for example, companies working the holdings of South Side Mining earned two and a half times as much from zinc ore as lead mineral, $379,074 to $148,891, between 1885 and 1888 but only by producing six and a half times as much material, 19,989 to 3,043 tons. In addition, miners found that the deep, more plentiful ore deposits usually occurred in hard formations of cemented chert, a silica-rich sedimentary rock. Unlike in the soft ground, where pick work often sufficed, miners working these hard ground formations needed blasting powder to dislodge seams of ore. As a result, miners generated not only more zinc ore the deeper they went but also more rock waste, all of which increased the quantities of material that had to be handled and hoisted for milling.14

These consequences required companies to use more machine power. Those working in Webb City and Carterville were most likely to adopt steam-powered hoists, although a majority continued to use horse-powered whims.

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in 1890, even in mines 160 to 170 feet deep. Of the eleven companies mining on William Daugherty and Thomas Davey’s land in Carterville, for example, four used steam hoists. The mine inspector observed “new machinery being put in” the other mines. The trend was toward mechanization. Between 1887 and 1890, the mine inspector’s survey recorded an increase in steam hoists from 35 to 117. To counter water in deeper shafts, most lessors provided pumping services in exchange for ground rent, while many mining companies installed their own pumps.15

The use of machines for concentrating zinc ore provided another measure of how practice was changing. Methods of hand crushing and jigging developed in the 1870s could not cope with the unprecedented quantity of material that needed milling in the 1880s, so companies increasingly used steam-powered equipment. Most lessors of holdings rich in zinc ore, particularly those in Webb City and Carterville, provided this equipment to leaseholders in exchange for an additional ground rent. As with pumps, however, some mining companies invested in their own machines. For example, the Webb City Lead and Zinc Company, which subleased two plots from Center Creek Mining, used steam-powered jigs, crushers, and rollers at both mines. Machines not only handled far greater quantities of material but also improved the quality and purity of the concentrated ores. According to Thomas Davey, one of the first to mine in Carterville, the use of these machines would usher in “an era of prosperity for land owners, operators and miners that will make the past exceedingly insignificant.”16

Mining companies constructed new buildings to house the machines, which changed the way their operations looked. These clapboard structures, which became known widely as “Joplin mills,” consisted of a squat, two-to-three-story barn to cover the hoisting derrick and the mine shaft; a longer, single-story room for concentrating the ore; and one or more narrow towers, in some cases as high as eighty feet tall, where elevators raised and then discharged waste rock, known locally as chat, onto ever-larger dump piles. These mills were relatively cheap to build and move. Still considered “crude” and “peculiar” by experts from highly mechanized mining districts, the Joplin mills nonetheless marked an important development in the district: the replacement of the open-air whims, wash troughs, and hand-jigging installations of small-scale operations with machines driven by steam power housed on small factory-like sites.17

Companies using more intense operations hired more wageworkers. The initial increase was modest and made up mainly of the sons of local miners and farmers. Most zinc producers employed from eight to twelve wageworkers in 1890, about twice as many as their smaller, mixed-production
counterparts. The largest among them in Webb City employed twenty-four to twenty-eight workers each. In most cases, a majority of these workers labored above ground, either tending the hoist and pumps, operating the concentrating mill, or moving ore and waste rock by hand. Rising production figures, however, reflected an increase in men who worked for wages in the mine. In 1890, the state mine inspector counted 1,631 miners, although without specifying how many owned a share in the claim and how many worked for wages, and 1,872 other mine employees in the Missouri portion of the district. Most worked nine-hour days, the district standard. The increase per mine was inconspicuous, though, as mining companies proliferated during the zinc boom, up to 485 independent firms in 1890.18

These changes opened a new, albeit still narrow divide between the owners of small mining companies and their employees. The forty-one mining companies operating on Center Creek Mining land employed an aver-
The partners who owned the smallest of these companies continued to work in the mine in the late 1880s alongside a few mine laborers to help dig and handle material. This followed a traditional, and still most common, pattern. By contrast, the owners of slightly larger companies, generally those with more than ten employees, had stopped working in the ground or had at least hired others to oversee parts of the operation. By the end of the decade, these outfits were more likely than smaller companies to list wage rates for “pit bosses” and “engineers,” which ranged from two to three dollars per day. These managers made hiring decisions and choices about where to dig and oversaw the miners who did the actual work as well as the larger crews of mine laborers. Most of them had been miners themselves, some very recently, and likely lived near the men they supervised. These close social ties softened, and likely obscured, the slight hierarchies that were emerging.

The “black jack” zinc boom of the 1880s brought a new wave of prosperity to the district but also ushered in a more elaborate system of wage labor. In 1891, the area’s mining companies, led by those in Webb City and Carterville, produced over 120,000 tons of zinc ore that sold for a total of $2.6 million and lead mineral worth an additional $713,000. Successful companies raised wages and hired more mine laborers. That year jig operators, the men in charge of concentrating ore, earned the most of all nonmanagerial workers, from $2.00 to $2.50 per day. Their daily wage matched or exceeded the earnings of most skilled urban workers nationwide. The men who labored for wages in the mines, whether they dug ore or shoveled it, earned from $1.75 to $2.00 a day, rates that exceeded those of semiskilled workers elsewhere but were not as high as those of metal miners in the West. General laborers on the surface earned the least, $1.50 to $1.75 per day. Although production stoppages in small mines were frequent, whether due to cash flow problems or other disruptions, mine laborers in the Joplin district made more money than they had in 1882, when Clerc reported that all mine laborers earned from $1.00 to $1.50 per day. As more companies produced more zinc ore with expanded operations year on year, everyone expected opportunities to expand and wages to rise. Many workers looked forward to using their wages to fund prospecting ventures. Pay in Joplin mines might have been lower than that in Leadville and other western camps, but the money went further. In 1889, for example, according to the new state mine inspector, C. C. Woodson, “wages are fair and the opportunity for owning a home good.” Indeed, Joplin, Webb City, and Galena grew and prospered with businesses, schools, churches, and fraternal organizations, all linked by a new interurban trolley system. Joplin was a remarkable mining center,
another observer claimed, because “it is within the civilized world” with “all of the advantages of any city.” Although more stratified than before, these communities cohered along racial and national lines that reinforced a sense of democratic fairness between white men; Jasper County was 96.5 percent native born and 98.2 percent white. They did not exclude African Americans from the mines yet; as many as 100 worked in the district in 1890. By then, over 32,000 people lived there, including 9,900 in Joplin, 7,600 in Carterville and Webb City, and 3,500 in Galena. Prospectors had made Joplin the “Lead Metropolis of the World” in the 1870s; now their successors turned it into “the town that Jack built.”

As the district changed, albeit gradually, miners and mine laborers in the 1880s still believed that they could also become owner-operators. Despite the collapse of lead prices, the productivity and profitability of the mines continued to rise with the turn to zinc. In every camp, the hopeful saw handsome sums made by men who had been prospectors themselves not many years before. Charles DeGraff was one. In 1883, he left his leasehold in Galena to seek a better opportunity near Joplin. He was among those who located a rich deposit of zinc ore near the old Turkey Creek mines that would become known as Zincite. By 1890, he and his partner controlled a steam-powered mine where they employed eleven miners and laborers. Others discovered new ore at Aurora, in Lawrence County, thirty miles east of Granby. Few doubted that more deposits would be found and that prospectors would make the discoveries, as they always had. Many aspiring miners considered the expansion of wage work a help rather than a hindrance by providing a new, more ready means of finance. They considered their hardships a necessary sufferance in order to establish economic and social independence. Most did not notice the incremental industrial changes that threatened their chances. They still easily imagined succeeding like the men they knew and worked for had done, as their common background and culture rendered doubt into evidence of individual inadequacy, an unmanly failure of nerve. At a time when many men might have questioned their future in the industry, aspiring miners instead took greater risks, both financial and physical, in ever more desperate efforts to become prosperous themselves.

In the 1880s, prospectors worked in all parts of the district, in fields old and new, large and small. “There is a large body of keen, hard-working prospectors,” Clerc reported in 1882, “who during the season wander from place to place, live in wagons, under tents, or in the open air, and carefully observe and follow every real or supposed indication of ore.” Although some were as footloose as this depiction suggests, many prospectors worked on undevel-
oped land near existing mines, often under contract with the same leasing company. In some ways, the growth of small mining companies helped aspiring miners. Prospectors took wage work in developed mines as a means to finance their own digging. By the 1880s, mining companies, particularly those digging deeper for zinc, paid higher wages than ever before and had little interest in exploring the shallow ground that best suited small-scale methods. Consider a group of prospectors, described in an 1881 report by the Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics, who funded themselves by “working for wages in the day time” and then “club together and sink a shaft by working four and five hours every night until the work is accomplished, and thus, by hard work, they try to better their condition.” Eight years later, C. C. Woodson described an identical system. The laborers he met “save their wages, and when a hundred or so of dollars have been accumulated, sink it into some prospecting shaft.” If unsuccessful, he noted, the prospector “takes his rope and windlass and bucket to another spot of land, digs another hole.

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Prospecting at Hell’s Neck, Missouri, ca. 1890. R620, 1-036. Courtesy State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center, Rolla.
and prospects again, keeping on thus until ore is discovered.” In 1891, the Missouri mine inspector counted 1,054 prospectors in Jasper County, 163 in Newton County, and 168 near Aurora in Lawrence County. The latter camp, where a farmer had discovered deposits of zinc ore in late 1885, re-created the excitement of the 1870s and in turn, again, seemed to validate expectations of future success. In 1888, a local miner boasted that now Aurora “is pre-eminently the poor man’s mining camp of the world. Many have made money from the first day’s diggings.”

Yet the economics of zinc ore mining limited what was possible for even the most successful prospectors. Their small companies, equipped only with human and animal power, could not produce enough volume to make much headway. Companies in Aurora, for example, each earned an annual average of $2,429 for zinc and $352 for lead in 1890. That left only modest incomes for company partners after they paid wages and royalties. Companies that did not have the equipment necessary to reach the deeper, richer deposits lost out to those that did. Already by 1888, according to H. R. Ruby, an Aurora miner, many “had to stop and abandon good claims, either on account of inability to purchase machinery for draining, or because they were unable to get down through the rock to where the best ores lay.” Ruby admitted that only the companies with the means to go further “will make a pile of money,” not the prospectors or small operators.

Inspector Woodson, far more skeptical than most observers, nevertheless marveled at how miners maintained their faith in the poor man’s camp. For thirty years, miners had worked the shallow ground deposits from Granby to Galena. The absence of new major discoveries between 1877 and 1885 threw miners back into the established camps, where they explored the ground around and between existing mines. Only the Zincite and Aurora discoveries offered evidence that new camps might emerge. Still, at Granby Woodson met an African American prospector who had spent fifteen months digging a seventy-foot-deep shaft “without making a dollar.” Every day he could be seen “working away as faithfully as he did the day he commenced.” He was “now beginning to get a few ‘shiners,’” or evidence of ore, and so had renewed hope. Woodson might have dismissed this man’s behavior in racist terms, but white miners acted no differently. Another miner had invested twelve years of savings in a failed prospect. Although “as poor as when he began,” Woodson noted, he was still “rich in anticipations.” “He will save his wages,” he explained, “expecting that at last the next prospecting will prove a bonanza.” He interviewed another miner, who along with three partners worked a leasehold near Carterville. They “operate the mine by themselves without any outside help, each man sharing alike.” The man earned $546
the previous year and saved eighty-two dollars. He lived with his wife and one-year-old daughter in a three-room house that they rented for five dollars a month. Woodson noted that the house had “a very poverty-stricken appearance, no carpet on any of the floors, poorly furnished and lacking in cleanliness.” Rather than save his money to improve these living conditions, however, the man reinvested the surplus in the mine. “Owing to this gambling spirit,” Woodson concluded, “but few miners seem prosperous or own their own homes.” The promise of the poor man’s camp provided logic that encouraged miners to endure its poverty.24

In interviews, Woodson learned that miners and their families often invested all of their resources, no matter how meager, in the hope of discovering ore or mineral. In Carterville, he met a family of five that included a miner and his wife, her mother, and her two younger sisters. The husband earned $1.75 a day working in a mine but only for nine months during the year. He spent the other three months prospecting. To cover his lost earnings, the wife and mother took in washing. Altogether they earned $657 in 1889: $379 from the husband’s wages, $186 from the women’s washing work, and $92 from prospecting. This meant they could afford to rent only a two-room house, with all five sharing the single bedroom. Similarly, a man and son who worked as mine engineers earned $751 a year, combined, to support a household of six. They spent any leftover money on prospecting efforts. Others fared worse. Nearby, Woodson visited a prospector, his wife, and their five children, the oldest of which was ten. The father worked for wages in a mine and prospected on the side. The family owned the two-room house they lived in but not the lot on which they raised vegetables for household use. Because prospecting reduced the father’s availability for wage work, he earned $310 that year, an average of $5.96 per week. Although the wife sometimes took in sewing in exchange for butter and some of the children did odd jobs for neighbors, the family was “poverty-stricken and dirty.” The house had “no books, newspapers nor pictures; children have scarcely any clothes on and very dirty looking; wife can’t read.” What surprised Woodson was that this family differed little in its outlook and ambitions from neighbors who earned more. All risked, consensually or not, their future security and present comfort to search for undiscovered metal, a quest that demanded the work of whole households. Women provided crucial labor and earnings to the effort. Such precarious striving stretched the ideal of manly independence awfully thin.25

The highest-paid wageworkers also invested in prospecting; poor man’s camp aspirations were still widely shared. In Carterville, Woodson interviewed a father who worked as a ground boss and his two sons, the older
a prospector, the younger a mine laborer. The father made $2.50 a day; he earned $480 working eight months in the year. The youngest son earned $2.25 a day. Together they prospected a promising claim that yielded ore worth $250 in 1888. The older son and his wife still lived with his parents, however, in a four-room house along with the other brother and two grown sisters, one of whom was also married. To provide some visual privacy, they partitioned the rooms with a board wall that went halfway to the ceiling. The father told Woodson that he had been mining in the district since 1872. He “had money when he started; has none now.” Still, Woodson reported, they ate well, read newspapers, and sent their children for music lessons. He interviewed another Carterville man who worked as a ground boss and prospected on the side, with earnings of $469 and $250, respectively. This man did not want to follow his older neighbor’s example. “Growing tired of mining,” Woodson noted, but “thinks he will be compelled to remain at mining until he strikes a lead and makes sufficient to go into some other business.” “The only hope for a miner,” the man explained, “is to strike a good lead and quit mining.” This man was stuck in the logic of the poor man’s camp: success was the only imaginable means of escape.26

District miners steadied themselves on stories of poor men who hit pay dirt. “The successful few are heard of not once, but time and time again,” an exasperated Woodson reported. “The story of how one man digging a well for water in his backyard found, instead of water, a vein of ore from which he took out $100,000, is told around almost a hundred thousand times.” Most observers relished the remarkable tale of how the district had come to be. “It is true we have no millionaires,” Thomas Davey admitted, “but the money made is more diffused among the masses. We have many men who have become worth from fifty to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, but they started with almost nothing but their hands only a few years hence.” It was true, and many believed it would continue to be so. To Clerc, in 1887, “it is a settled fact now that the lead and zinc deposits of this locality are permanent and inexhaustible.” Anyone could tap them, he concluded, because “the mines have always been and are yet being worked with the capital which the mines themselves have produced, and all our mine operators, with but few exceptions, have acquired all their wealth from the mines.” No one remembered, however, those who failed. “The trouble is,” Woodson explained, “the savings which could certainly buy a comfortable home are dumped into holes in the ground, which possibly may result in gains of thousands, but which probably and generally result in the loss of all.” Still, the miners and prospectors piled up evidence of their belief that past glories could be re-created. Throughout the district, Woodson reported, “the earth is upturned—holes
and crevices, piles of debris, rickety scaffoldings, abandoned shafts, masses of rock and ore—a result of the prevailing system of mining.”  

In the context of new structural limits, however, the system’s enduring promise encouraged miners to take greater risks, not just with their family finances but also with their own bodies. With less experience running paying mines, narrow operating margins, and little means to develop zinc mines for the long term, they worked faster, with little regard for safety. “Each miner,” Clerc said, “tries to get as much as possible out of his own lot, is only interested in it as long as he expects to work it.” Few miners built timber supports in the shafts or inspected the roofs for loose rocks. “The roof and pillars are badly trimmed,” Clerc concluded, “and in many cases dangerous, fatal accidents being distressingly common.” Woodson observed similar conditions. He counted twelve fatal accidents and twenty-five serious accidents in 1889, most a result of rock falls. These accidents, he said, resulted from men “working the mine for immediate profit, regardless of the future.”

Neither the Knights of Labor, the nation’s largest, most expansive union by the mid-1880s, nor their allies in government could convince Joplin miners to see their interests differently. The Knights built strong local assemblies in Missouri, particularly in St. Louis, as well as in the coal-mining counties in the central part of the state. The Missouri Knights coupled robust organizing efforts, including in the Joplin district, with successful campaigns to enact new legislation based on the national body’s 1878 declaration of principles, primarily the creation of a state Bureau of Labor Statistics and mine safety laws. In 1879 Missouri joined Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Ohio as the only states with agencies dedicated to documenting the lives and labors of workers. The new commissioner of labor statistics, W. H. Hilkene, began surveying workplaces that summer. In 1880, the Knights supported a Missouri law that for the first time required county courts to oversee the inspection of mines, although only those that produced coal. In 1887, a year after a wave of strikes across the state’s coalfields, the legislature created a new statewide mine inspector’s office with jurisdiction over all mines, regardless of product. Miners in the Joplin district could not escape the influence of the organization and its political efforts to protect and empower workers. Some of them were attracted to the Knights, a sign of ongoing interest in antimonopoly ideas, but most of these men were not prepared to abandon their commitments to capitalism.

The Knights of Labor established several local assemblies among workers of all kinds, including some miners, in the Joplin district in the 1880s. The first organizer in the area, John Loftus, was the leader of an assembly of
coal miners in Stilson, soon to be renamed Scammon, in Cherokee County, Kansas, whose work was controlled by smelting companies in nearby Pittsburg. The Irish-born Loftus organized the district’s first assemblies in Galena, Webb City, and Granby in late 1879 in the midst of the lead crisis. Although these assemblies lasted less than two years, the Knights continued to send organizers to the region, most of them from St. Louis. Their appeals led to the formation and re-formation of unstable assemblies in Joplin, Webb City, Carterville, Galena, Zincite, and Oronogo throughout the decade. Most were “mixed” assemblies, meaning workers of all occupations belonged. Miners and mine laborers predominated in Webb City, Carterville, Zincite, and Galena. At Webb City, for example, some of the most “untiring and active” local leaders, R. J. Davis, Edward Armstrong, and P. McEntee, mined metal. Other local leaders were carpenters, blacksmiths, and stonemasons. The assemblies were never large, usually with no more than a few dozen members, and were prone to disorganization.

In contrast to the striking Leadville Knights, the order’s members in the Joplin district favored moderate reform. They boasted some local public influence. Knight J. G. W. Hunt, for example, was both a miner and a real estate developer in Carterville, where he was elected justice of the peace in 1882. Some in the order campaigned for the Greenback-Labor Party, which continued to appeal to farmers and workers with calls for antimonopoly measures, a cheaper currency to help debtors, and a protective tariff. They wanted to preserve the competitive economy, not overthrow it. Nothing made that clearer than the tendency of the Missouri Greenback-Labor Party to run joint tickets with Republicans, as in the 1884 presidential election. They did well in that race, but otherwise independent Greenback-Labor candidates failed to get more than 15 percent of the vote in southwest Missouri. Meanwhile, the Knights organized the first public observance of Labor Day in Joplin in September 1886 with a parade that featured bands, civic leaders, and city officials. Webb City’s Knights requested badges featuring the words “Miners Assembly” for the following year’s parade. Local miners not only had ample opportunity to join and support the Knights, but it was even respectable to do so.

Some miners were drawn to the Knights’ vision of the “cooperative commonwealth.” The order heralded worker cooperation as a primary means to counteract the “aggressiveness of great capitalists and corporations” and escape the vicissitudes of wage labor. Cooperative endeavor, the Knights argued, would help workers share in the wealth they produced. In late 1879, Loftus reported that members of LA 1373 in Webb City “are going in the cooperative business with vigorous measures.” They sold stock, at five
dollars a share, to fund two ventures: a general merchandise store and a plan “to lease 400 acres of ground to prospect on.” Although LA 1373 did not become a lessor of mining ground, it did open a cooperative store with twenty-six members and $400 in operating capital. The store failed within the year, however. Other members, perhaps, recognized the ideals of the Knights in their mining partnerships. The ground boss father and his sons who prospected together in Carterville, discussed above, all belonged to the Knights as late as 1889. Their prospecting effort, with its emphasis on productive labor and self-responsibility, in many ways realized the highest aims of the cooperative ethic; many in the Knights were sympathetic to small capitalists like them.33

As these miners interpreted the cooperative ethos of the Knights to suit their aspirations, just like other members did across the country, their aims strained the dominant “noble and holy” culture. The order valued the achievement of individual workers, even those who were petty capitalists, so long as they remained within the confines of a republican ideal of true manhood that emphasized obedience to community and family, temperance, and mutual assistance. While Joplin miners aspired to be respectable men, their often reckless pursuit of commercial gain never quite fit with this valorization of sober self-restraint. Even Loftus, who led Stilson LA 535, one of the Knights’ oldest assemblies, seemed tempted by the poor man’s camp. Within months of arriving in Joplin, he began prospecting with a convert’s zeal. “I have been prospecting all summer,” he informed Terence V. Powderly, the order’s national leader. “I have the best prospect around here.” As a skilled coal miner, Loftus had high hopes of making money because the leasing system allowed miners to “go to work & prospect & if you strike up lead or zinc ore you can pay your 10 per cent royalty out of that.” He wrote to Powderly to urge the Knights to develop cooperative mines in the district, like the one LA 1373 proposed, and “make this the great central point of cooperation in our order.” The Knights did so elsewhere, with investments in several mid-western coal mines. Loftus hoped the endeavor would provide fair conditions and security for workers. But he also wanted to make money himself. He punctuated his report with a claim that clashed with most of what the Knights stood for: “A man may be poor here one day & rich the next.”34

Many of the Joplin miners who joined the Knights could not fully accept the ethic of solidarity that bound the union together, especially when asked to support wageworkers elsewhere who did not share their faith in capitalism. Beginning in 1884, the Knights required all assemblies to pay into an “assistance fund” to support strikes. Following the order’s 1878 declaration of principles, its national leaders opposed strikes in all but the most justi-
fied and winnable situations, but as hundreds of thousands of new members swelled the organizational ranks in 1885 and 1886, they struggled to maintain discipline. Local assemblies across the country launched a wave of strikes, most spectacularly against Jay Gould’s southwestern railroad system, which called for greater contributions to the assistance fund. Miners in Webb City LA 6240 and Zincite LA 7278 did not want to pay because they did not see the benefit for themselves. In 1887, LA 6240 requested “exoneration from paying Assistance Fund.” They explained that they were “a Lead Miners’ Assembly, never had a strike, and are not likely to require assistance.” Although their request was denied, the assembly survived. The men in LA 6240 did not necessarily oppose the strikers, since they continued to advocate for the “industrial masses,” particularly in the elections of 1888 and 1890 when LA 6240 campaigned for the Union Labor Party, the latest guise of the Greenback-Labor movement. But they could not imagine themselves ever going on strike, because doing so would mean directly opposing their employers, some of whom were also members, such as the father and son pit bosses in Carterville, and thus risking their own prospecting dreams. Their ideal of independent manhood rested on economic risk taking, not reliance on assistance from other men. Moreover, with more time and a little luck, they might soon find themselves employing wage laborers in their own mines, the end goal that informed their opposition to monopoly in the first place. The Knights no longer seemed right for those miners who had joined. After 1888 only one assembly remained active in the district: LA 6240, which folded in 1891 amid a dispute about its financial accounts.35

The majority of miners and prospectors showed even less affinity for the state labor reforms the Knights helped create. At the time of Woodson’s visit, most miners, regardless of the size or method of their operation, violated the state’s mine safety regulations. The 1887 law not only created the office of state mine inspector but also required protective measures in all mines, including safety catches on hoisting equipment, covered cages for lowering men into the mine, escape and ventilation shafts, and adequate roof supports. When M. L. Wolfe, the first inspector, visited Joplin in the summer of 1887, he found most mines “being worked in a desultory and primitive manner” by miners who did not know that state law now applied to them. “The violation was not intentional,” he noted. Maybe not, but they should have known because political supporters of the Knights of Labor had pushed for it.36

Many miners, especially those wringing what they could from small, non-mechanized operations, considered the law a risk to their livelihoods. Wolfe thought that most would comply where “practicable” but also accepted argu-
ments that small-scale miners, especially prospectors, “cannot comply literally” because of the expense involved. Woodson found that nothing had changed when he inspected district mines two years later. Rather than enforce the law, he, too, resorted to the logic of the poor man’s camp. “As the principal mining done is by miners or small operators, who have limited means with which to open up their mines,” Woodson explained, “they would be compelled to abandon their mines if the law was enforced requiring them to put in covered cages, with safety catches, appliances, etc.” The burden of safety equipment would fall hardest on cash-strapped prospectors and small-time operators, he added, who simply could not afford it. Despite his misgivings about their “gambling spirits,” aired in the same report, Woodson concluded that the strict application of a law meant to safeguard the health and safety of miners “would be death to the lead and zinc industries of Southwest Missouri.” Both he and Wolfe called for the state legislature to develop a new, separate law to govern lead and zinc mining “that did not hinder or injure our poorer class of miners.” The consequences were real: ten men died in Jasper County mines the following year.37

And so, paradoxically, the men charged with enforcing a law meant to protect miners argued instead that the miners of the poor man’s camp should ignore labor union and government efforts to rein in their entrepreneurial risk taking. The logic and power of poor man’s mining had impressed Wolfe and Woodson, particularly because of the apparent willingness of Joplin miners to accept the risks of industrial capitalism in the hope of hitting pay dirt. “The miners,” Wolfe reported in 1887, “are intelligent and seemingly contented. Strikes are unknown.” That Webb City’s Knights, the strongest union voice among district miners in the 1880s, said much the same thing seemed to confirm his analysis. Wolfe credited the system of prospecting and leasehold mining for the harmonious labor relations. It offered miners “better opportunities for acquiring wealth,” he explained, and in doing so “makes them free and independent.”38

The continued expansion of zinc-mining operations in the 1890s forever closed those opportunities for most miners in the district. The zinc boom energized the sale of leaseholds and land, which now traded at the Kansas City Mining Exchange and the new Joplin Mining Exchange. “Jack is up,” one newspaper reported in 1892, as the price of zinc ore went above twenty-six dollars per ton. Investors, many from the East and abroad, formed new land companies that consolidated control of prime mining tracts. This was similar to contemporary developments in coal, particularly in Appalachia, and in eastern Missouri lead, but rather than run the mines themselves,
these investors maintained the customary leasehold system. They replaced human prospectors, however, with steam-powered churn drills to quickly survey the quality and extent of their holdings before leasing. Their leases, in turn, favored bigger, more mechanized mining companies. Poor men were steadily pushed out. For most miners in the Joplin district, remaining free and independent had never been more difficult.39

A small number of investors took control of large tracts of mining land in response to the rising profitability of zinc production. Local land and smelting companies with longtime holdings led the way. Granby Mining, which owned over 15,000 acres in Jasper and Newton Counties, and Center Creek Mining, which leased 200 acres between Webb City and Carterville, both demonstrated the profitability of leasing land to zinc-mining companies. Center Creek Mining was so confident that it bought 160 acres of its leasehold from the Webb family in 1890 for $315,000. Others followed. In early 1891, the Picher brothers and three other local investors bought 1,000 acres on the eastern edge of Joplin that prospectors had explored only at shallow depths. They chartered the Rex Mining and Smelting Company with $250,000 in capital stock to lease and manage the land. Outside investors also consolidated large landholdings. In the summer of 1891, for example, Richard Heckscher and August Heckscher, cousins who owned anthracite mines in Pennsylvania, formed the Empire Zinc Company, capitalized at $750,000, to purchase more than 200 acres near Joplin. By the summer of 1894, 186 of the 332 mines in Jasper County were on land controlled by one of seven such leasing companies. Their holdings, all leased or subleased to local mining companies, yielded 71 percent of all zinc ore mined in the county that year.40

With higher stakes, mining companies accelerated the intensification of methods. While visitors might still marvel at how “the surface of the ground is completely covered with old dump piles,” engineer John Holibaugh reported in 1894, “these are only the relics of the early days of mining for shallow deposits of lead and zinc.” The present and the future belonged to companies mining deeper ore. “To-day,” he continued, “we find modern ore dressing and concentrating plants in full operation among these old dump piles” because of the rising productivity of companies “producing the ore from a depth of 150 to 200 ft.” In order to handle greater quantities of ore and waste rock, mining companies invested in more steam-powered hoists, pumps, and jigs. The largest companies on Rex Mining and Smelting land, for example, “all have good steam hoisting and pump plants” as well as steam-powered concentrating plants. Although many companies continued to mine in the old way, with animal and human power, Holibaugh
concluded, “the greatest and most marked improvements have been made within the past six years and the next few years will see even greater changes in the mining and handling of the ore.”

New, more accurate prospecting methods supported these investments. Land companies replaced the traditional means of prospecting with crews using steam-powered drilling rigs to survey geological formations. Drill crews could sink a prospecting hole up to 400 feet deep in two weeks. Rex Mining and Smelting was the first land company to rely on drills, which quickly “proved large deposits of lead and zinc ore.” The company leased mining lots based on the drill record. Accurate readings of the location, depth, and quality of ore deposits attracted the best-equipped mining companies, allowed land companies to more accurately assess royalty charges, and lent assurance of profits for all concerned. The other large land companies soon adopted the same practice. They employed independent drilling firms, such as P. L. Crossman and Brothers, to do the work on a contract basis. A drill survey proved especially valuable at depths below 100 feet, where the richest and thickest zinc deposits lay. In 1899, P. L. Crossman and Brothers reported it drilled “more holes from 200 to 250 ft. deep than any other depth.” While the basic leasehold pattern of mining did not change, the adoption of drill-hole prospecting favored the largest, most mechanized mining companies.

As opportunities for traditional prospecting dwindled, most miners entered an increasingly permanent state of wage labor. Between 1891 and 1893, the number of prospectors at work in Jasper County fell from 1,054 to 500, in Lawrence County from 168 to 86, and in Newton County from 163 to 70, most of them seeking shallow deposits that the larger zinc-mining companies did not want to pursue. Those companies hired bigger crews of mine laborers. Mining firms on land controlled by Center Creek Mining, Chatham Mining Company, Eleventh Hour Mining Company, and Rex Mining and Smelting employed ten to fifteen wage miners each, on average, in 1894. The J. J. Luck Mining Company, meanwhile, employed between twenty-five and thirty-five workers at its operation in Galena. These companies were still small compared to other mining firms in the United States. In the eastern Missouri lead field, for example, the St. Joseph Lead Company employed 583 miners to operate eight shafts. Still, more and more miners worked for wages in southwest Missouri each year: up from 3,578 in 1891 to 4,117 in 1893. Many of these additional mine laborers came from area farms with little or no mining experience but hoped to make a good wage and perhaps somehow realize the promise of the poor man’s camp. By 1892, however, Granby Mining offered the only realistic opportunities for them on its shal-
low holdings in Newton County, where in an attempt to re-create the magic of the late 1860s, it provided small-scale miners all of the equipment they needed in exchange for half the proceeds of their efforts. Still, this model was the proverbial exception, which even Granby Mining admitted when touting itself as “one corporation at least, that gives every laboring man who chooses to work on its lands a chance to make a fortune.”

For most miners, the consequences of this transformation would have been difficult to perceive in the midst of the unprecedented national economic crisis that began in January 1893. By May, the bankruptcy of several national railroads and other companies had led to the nation’s worst financial crisis yet. At least 3 million workers were unemployed by the end of the first year of a depression that would last four years. For the first time since the early 1870s, the price of zinc ore plummeted, from $26.00 per ton in August 1892 to $16.50 in June 1893. It continued to fall that summer, down below fifteen dollars per ton, the lowest price since 1877. As mining companies failed to find buyers, most simply stopped production. “Many of the large operators closed down,” Holibaugh noted, “while others worked only a small force in prospecting and developing, so that zinc mining was almost at a standstill.” After producing over 8 million pounds of zinc a week in April 1893, district companies mined less than 2 million pounds a week in August. Operators told the Missouri state mine inspector that they would not reopen their mines “until such time as they can be made to pay.” Miners had weathered past economic crises by prospecting new lands and developing zinc production, but they were more dependent on wage labor in 1893 than ever before. Although many still believed in the possibilities of the poor man’s camp, they were now forced to consider its limits and perhaps its demise.

The first tremors of the depression were felt in the district when union coal miners in southeast Kansas went on strike. In May 1893, thousands of miners from Scammon, Weir City, and Pittsburg protested a wage cut by stopping all coal production in Cherokee and Crawford Counties. These miners still belonged to the Knights of Labor but had recently also affiliated with the new United Mine Workers of America (UMW), a national union of coal miners formed in 1890. Their strike, supported by the UMW and soon joined by coal miners in central Missouri, deprived both the largest mining companies and the area’s zinc smelters of fuel. The district’s most mechanized mines felt the coal shortage first. Within a week the Joplin press reported, “The effects of the strike are already becoming manifest in the closing down of some producing mines in Joplin, Carterville, and Webb City.” More closed in the weeks that followed for want of coal but also be-
cause area smelters stopped buying ore. The potential long-term closure of the smelters presented a greater threat. Due to the complicated process for smelting zinc ore, smelting companies had to keep furnaces charged in order to avoid costly damage that would need repair. Most had enough coal reserves for a few weeks. Smelter closure, a Joplin reporter feared, would mean “a failure of a large portion of the demand for zinc ore, a fall in the price of that, until it would not pay to mine it, and at least 5,000 men in the zinc region would be without work until the smelters would again be started.” He hoped the union would stop the strike before its effects decimated the Joplin district. “This would mean the making of a scene of suffering which the miners’ organization can scarcely afford to assist in causing” and “would do their cause more injury than any other scheme that could be devised.”

As the strike wore on into June, many in Joplin blamed the UMW entirely for the falling price of zinc ore, misinterpreting a symptom of the depression as its cause. According to the editor of the Joplin Morning Herald, a Democratically affiliated paper, the union’s “demand is made in the name of Labor, but examination discloses that it is essentially selfish, because only a particular branch of labor would be benefitted, and that at the expense of other branches.” He targeted UMW “walking delegates,” union representatives who coordinated regional action, as “agitators” whose influence would ensure “a continuance of the strike to the bitter end.” Two weeks later a contributor stated simply, “The coal miners’ strike is causing mines to close down.” Business leaders agreed with the faulty analysis. “In consequence of the strike in the coal mine the business this month will be very small,” reported William F. Sapp, a Galena-based mining company boss.

Antiunion animosity peaked when striking coal miners arrived in the Joplin district looking for work, reportedly for wages as low as $1.25 a day, far below the standard wage. “Ye men of Joplin who depend on your labor to support yourselves and families and are used to good wages, what do you think of that?” a Morning Herald correspondent asked. Rather than “sympathize with strikers who came here to lower the price of your wages in order that they may barely make a living whilst they bring about a better price for their own labor,” the writer advised, “we should look out for our own interests first.” The paper’s editor lauded the absence of labor unions among the metal miners by comparison. “Labor is better paid and is better contented in the Joplin district than in any other mining district in the country, and it is a noteworthy fact that there is an absence of labor organizations. The miners are independent workers.” According to his analysis, the traditions of the poor man’s camp focused the minds of Joplin miners on new discoveries as the way to prosperity, even if they worked as mine laborers. “Strikes in the
lead and zinc district are quite different from strikes in the coal district,” he quipped, “and much better for everybody.”47

Despite these tidy explanations, miners and others soon realized that the metal industry faced bigger problems. The price of zinc ore continued to fall as smelters in Illinois also stopped purchases. “The bottom seems to have fallen out of the lead and zinc market and prices can hardly be worse than they now are or have been for several weeks,” the Morning Herald reported in late June. “The coal miners’ strike is a factor in the matter,” the paper still argued but now admitted the concurrent effects of “the prevailing business depression over the country.” In early August, as the UMW strike collapsed after the coal operators began employing African American strikebreakers, observers turned their full attention to the broader crisis. One account declared the second week of August the district’s dullest for business in ten years. A mine owner explained that he would not reopen his mine “until the price of jack gets back to $24 to $26 per ton.” Soon, all of the large mining companies in the district, including all of the largest zinc producers, had ceased operations. Everywhere else, companies cut wages.48

Some miners considered organized action in response to these developments. In Webb City, a small group revived LA 6240 that summer. “I think that next report that you get from us will be very encouraging,” miner A. A. Phillips informed the Knights’ national office. “I never saw so many that were anxious to join when approached in the right way,” he explained. “Times is very hard here and work very slack and people are investigating the causes of it.” The assembly gained only thirty members, however—fewer than had joined in the 1880s. It folded in early 1894.49

The crisis prompted others into public debates not seen since the early 1870s. In late August, 300 miners from Webb City and Carterville met in a series of open meetings to discuss what to do when “the pumps were stopped, wages lowered and the miners and their families were suffering.” Some wanted to strike. At a meeting in Prosperity, a new camp south of Carterville, most called for moderation, no doubt influenced by the collapse of the UMW strike the week before. They agreed that the “pressure of earnest moral suasion be brought to bear on the lease holders by personal application and petition to have them” open the mines. Eight hundred miners and mine laborers signed.50

In doing so, they appealed to a poor man’s camp tradition of fairness and equality of opportunity between men who came from the same social class and shared common interests. Their petition included a statement accepting lower wages for the duration of the crisis, as long as operations restarted. They justified the concession by asserting their manly responsibilities as
heads of households. “The drift of nearly all the speeches was that the men needed work to support their families,” according to one report, “and that they were willing to take reduced wages until the price of ore came up.” This paternalistic explanation not only ignored their reliance on women’s labor but also belied a sense of crisis among men who expected to be self-made. They remained committed to capitalism, even if only out of desperation. The miners “were willing to suffer some loss on account of the low prices of ore.” Some spoke like men who still expected to become mine owners. A miner named Cox said that while “he did not advocate low wages” because of pride in his craft, “it was the sheerest nonsense to expect men to run their plants at a loss, just to give the miners work at full pay. Men had better work for a dollar a day than not work at all.” A miner named Patton denounced talk of strikes as “just the kind of talk that drove capital away, tied up money in bonds and left such fellows to go hungry.” He wanted work, “and it took men with money to give work during such times.” “Treat your employer right,” Patton concluded. These men still accepted poor man’s camp logic. “The miners are in perfect accord with the operators,” one newspaper concluded, “and are willing to work at reduced wages for a time, just so they get work.”

Some miners looked with hope to the smaller, owner-operator companies that seemed to fare better than the larger outfits. Due to the closure of the mechanized firms, district miners produced only 86,800 tons of zinc ore in 1894, down from the all-time high of 128,200 tons in 1892. Most of that production came from companies working shallow deposits. “The production was confined entirely to subleasing and small concerns who were satisfied to work their mines if they could only make miners’ wages,” Holibaugh reported. From Galena, Sapp noted that the only companies that remained active were “those where the miner is obliged to labor for his daily bread.” Desperation was still seen as an important source of virtue. According to Francis LaGrave, the Missouri state mine inspector, “the small producer, frequently employing only the labor of himself and family, can always make a living at prices which would mean ruin to larger operators.”

Meanwhile, the manly appeals at Prosperity seemed to work, as landholders opened land to unemployed miners for prospecting. This was done mainly to forestall protests. For mine laborers who had not seen the roaring events of the 1870s, however, these developments suggested that the poor man’s camp was not dead. Even LaGrave, who should have known better, agreed in his annual report. “The closing of these mines,” he observed, “seems only to have changed the manner of occupation of miners, as there are comparatively few men out of employment around the mines.” Some of these prospectors turned unemployment into pay dirt. They “have made sev-
eral valuable discoveries of ore,” LaGrave reported. A poor man could not only survive but still thrive in the Joplin district, another industry expert reasoned, because he “invests nothing but his labor and if he can secure the food to renew his physical energies he can accomplish more than capital.” Miners did not object at the ballot box in November 1894, despite the chance to vote for the insurgent People’s Party, which inherited the Greenback-Labor legacy. The winning Republican congressional candidate carried both Jasper and Newton Counties; the People’s Party candidate finished a distant third with less than 15 percent of the vote.53

When larger companies resumed production in late 1894, district watchers saw only resilience, not augurs of change, despite the ongoing national depression. Prices remained low; zinc ore sold for an average of $16.86 per ton in 1895, 25 percent below the all-time high average of $22.51 in 1890. “In spite of this,” LaGrave reported, “the mines are in a prosperous condition, and while not worked to their full capacity, are steadily pushing developments, expecting that the near future will bring greater demand and better prices.” Larger firms resumed buying land and leases, especially where prospectors had recently made new discoveries, such as Duenweg. These companies hired more and more mine workers. LaGrave counted 4,366 mine laborers in 1895, up from 3,341 a year before, a jump of 30 percent. Land companies also resumed systematic prospecting, albeit with drill crews. “I may judge from the amount of drilling and the large number of shafts being sunk in what may be termed new territory,” he added the following year, “the probability of an increased production for several years to come turns to an assured fact.” Market conditions in the first half of 1896, when ore neared twenty dollars per ton, seemed to prove him right.54

Yet the contours of power in the district had changed a great deal: the largest land and mining companies emerged from the depths of the depression with more control over production than ever before and a realistic new sensitivity to downward swings in the metal markets. Economic uncertainty in the summer of 1896 exposed the new dynamic. In July, the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination of William Jennings Bryan, a former congressman from Nebraska with strong ties to the People’s Party, spooked the nation’s manufacturers. Some feared that Bryan’s demands for inflation and cheaper credit would spark a new, more severe economic crisis. As many companies slowed production to await the outcome of the election, commodity prices slumped. Zinc prices fell too. “There is an uneasy feeling among the mine operators in regard to future prices of ore until after election,” an observer in Joplin noted in August. Many mining and land companies ceased production altogether, while “those who are working their mines

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are reducing the number of men employed and are making only enough ore to pay expenses and keep the men employed.” Unlike during the recent crisis, however, these companies did not allow unemployed miners to prospect on their holdings. For example, when Scott McCollum and four other miners approached Dan Dwyer, the superintendent of the Rex Mining and Smelting Company, to lease a plot of land, he turned them away. Dwyer “said he would not lease any until after the election, and if McKinley wasn’t elected, didn’t know as he would open up any ground at all.” “Every place a man went,” McCollum explained, “it was just about the same—nothing ’till after the election.”

Prospectors such as McCollum, following the path of so many capital-poor but ambitious miners before him, now had nowhere to turn. “When mines are closed down and land owners will not lease to men to prospect,” he asked, “what can they do?” The question did not yield easy answers.