Americans in the first decade of the new century witnessed the nation’s emergence as a global economic and military power. Nothing symbolized the transformation more than the U.S. Navy’s new fleet of sixteen battleships steaming out of Hampton Roads, Virginia, in December 1907. President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched this “Great White Fleet,” so dubbed because of its snowy paintwork, to display American might around the world and embolden American nationalism at home. Beginning with the wars of 1898, the American economy prospered in part because of military spending and the influence a newly powerful military won in Hawaii, China, the Philippines, Cuba, and elsewhere in Central and South America. Most of the fruits of that prosperity went to a small number of large corporations that had consolidated control of entire industries in new monopolistic cartels called trusts. These industries, selling at home and abroad, demanded more raw materials, particularly metals, than ever before. Between 1898 and 1910, American metal production boomed: pig iron up 131 percent, copper up 105 percent, and lead up 71 percent. The companies that mined and smelted zinc, however, expanded production most, 133 percent. Manufacturers used greater quantities of zinc in familiar ways—to galvanize iron and steel, to make brass, and to fashion decorative sheet metal—but also for components in the new electrical industry. Many manufacturers, particularly in shipbuilding, found zinc-based pigments best at holding color—so it was that Roosevelt’s new ships came to be painted a memorable zinc white.1

Mining companies in the Joplin district stretched operations to meet growing demand. With no new ore discoveries since the 1890s, firms increased the scale of old mines by investing in engines to power hoists, pumps, and jigs and by hiring more wage laborers; while dozens of companies still used horse hoisters in 1904, all used either steam or electric hoisters in 1914. The need for more scale prompted further consolidation, as larger firms acquired smaller competitors. The number of district companies shrank from over 500 in 1904 to 150 a decade later. Some leasing companies started mining for themselves
in this period, including, most important, the American Zinc, Lead, and Smelting Company, which emerged as the district’s largest firm.\(^2\)

Compared to the monopolistic structure of other mining areas, however, small-scale production continued to define the Joplin district, despite the trend toward intensification and consolidation. Though American Zinc came to dominate, scores of small companies pursued scattered ore deposits with modest, flexible methods but now with steam engines in place of horses and with a few more employees. Distinctive Joplin mills dotted the landscape. Industry observer T. Lane Carter reckoned in 1910 that a prospective operator “may do a great deal” with an investment of $25,000. Such relatively rudimentary conditions deterred industry giants from takeovers. The American Smelting and Refining Company, which owned copper mines and smelters in Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, abandoned an effort to take control of Joplin’s zinc production in 1902. Similarly, the National Lead Company, a trust that controlled most of the lead industry, including interests in the eastern Missouri field, dropped its bid to acquire Joplin’s leading producers in 1905. Neither conglomerate believed the area’s unpredictable, dispersed ore deposits were profitable enough to justify the trouble of wrangling agreement from scores of producers. The district’s mining and milling practices seemed “crude and wasteful to those accustomed to more elaborate methods used elsewhere,” engineer Clarence Wright explained in 1913. However backward these methods seemed to outsiders, Carter believed that such practices allowed small and medium-sized companies to flourish in a competitive and democratic environment where “a larger number of men are successful, and the mineral wealth is more evenly distributed among the members of the community than when a mining district is gobbled up by a trust or syndicate and all the profits go to swell the fortunes of a few.” Their competition for that wealth was fierce. Even the district’s producers’ association could not hold together; it disbanded in 1906.\(^3\)

With “crude,” partly mechanized methods, Joplin’s mining companies relied ever more on the muscle power of underground workers to make profits. As the shallow deposits dwindled, companies began working deeper deposits in the band of Jasper County mines that ran continuously through Oronogo, Webb City, Carterville, and Duenweg, known locally as the “sheet ground.” By 1910, these four camps produced over 40 percent of all zinc ore in the district. These deposits were found more than 150 feet deep in a great sheet that was five to twenty feet thick and up to five miles wide and twenty miles long. The problem was that the sheet ground deposits, once milled, yielded a metal content of 4 percent or less, a much lower grade of ore than
The partially mechanized methods used in the sheet ground mines created new opportunities for underground workers that allowed entrepreneurial,
market-based ambition to survive, albeit on much narrower terms, in the district’s new wage-labor regime. These hard, low-grade deposits required extensive dynamite blasting that dislodged great amounts of zinc ore, known locally as “dirt.” Companies invested in air-powered, steel-tipped machine drills to set charges for blasting and hired drill operators to run the machinery. To load the massive quantities of ore that was dislodged, companies enlisted the district’s plentiful and relatively cheap ranks of wageworkers. By 1912, three-fourths of all mine workers labored in the ground; 80 percent of these miners performed one of two tasks, drilling or shoveling. Shovelers were the largest group, accounting for roughly 40 percent of all miners in the ground. Long considered lowly common laborers, shovelers were now essential; companies competed for their services. By 1912, those who excelled were among the district’s highest-paid workers; only the most skilled miners, the engineers and the men who set the charges, the powdermen, earned more than the strongest and fastest shovelers. In less than a decade, men with few assets other than their muscle and endurance had become, according to one report, “one of the factors in the district” whose services “are in big demand.”

Shovelers quietly became indispensable. Local companies, like their counterparts across the country, had employed common wage laborers to perform unskilled tasks in and around the mines for decades but particularly after the acceleration of zinc production in the 1880s. While skilled miners and prospectors enjoyed the highest status and best opportunities, common laborers went unheralded and badly paid. T. Z. Pickers, the private detective who came to Joplin in 1896 to recruit strikebreakers for Leadville, was among the first to report their emerging usefulness. He recommended Joplin “shovelers” as good strikebreaking material: “Good, able bodied young men . . . anxious to learn to use the hammer, and are ready to go.” As Joplin companies produced more and more ore, local observers also noticed the shovelers’ growing importance. In 1901, the Joplin News Herald reported on “a day with the shovellers,” who were “the least spoken of.” The sheet ground expansion lent their work new importance. Companies that mined more ore needed to move it out of the ground faster than ever. On a daily basis, the writer noted, the average mine hoisted 350 cans, each weighing 500 pounds, a total of 175,000 pounds of dirt. In some mines, companies hoisted one 500-pound can a minute. To fill those cans, companies turned to the power of men armed only with a standard, number-two-size shovel. “He is the brawn and muscle of the lower ground,” this observer explained. As unskilled laborers, however, shovelers still earned wages commensurate with low status, on average $1.75 per day in 1901, about as much as common
mine laborers had earned a decade earlier and roughly in line with what unskilled laborers earned elsewhere at the time.7

Despite meager wages, young men in the district and surrounding region sought work as shovelers because the job provided a way to enter the industry now that prospecting was generally closed. “Working in the big mines around Joplin there are hundreds of young men who have in recent years drifted in from country places,” the 1901 observer noted. Many of them came from nearby counties, others from rural areas across the lower Midwest and Upper South. These men benefited from the demand for shovelers because of their youth, since older men could rarely perform the sustained, hard work of moving tens of thousands of pounds of ore a day, as employers increasingly demanded. “Personal acquaintance with ground men reveals that the shoveler is usually a strong, robust young man,” the report continued. The countryside was full of such workers, most of whom had no particular skill or experience outside of routine farm tasks. Once they began shoveling, however, many took defiant pride in their hard work. In 1901, for example,
one shoveler expressed disdain for a crowd of people he overheard worrying about a tired road crew. “Why they ain’t in it with a spade hand,” he said. Give any of them “a Number Two and tell him to hike ‘er, he would throw up his job after the first hour.” In his view, no other worker, skilled or otherwise, worked as hard as a Joplin shoveler.8

Shovelers started to receive higher pay to ensure increased production. When ore prices went above thirty dollars per ton in early 1903, many companies began paying shovelers twenty-five cents per hour, or $2.25 for a nine-hour day, to help ensure full work crews and perhaps to weaken the appeal of western labor agents and union organizers. When zinc prices soared to new highs above fifty dollars per ton in early 1905, companies offered shovelers $2.50 a day. Shovelers no longer performed common labor; they now had an essential task that paid among the best wages in the district. Their rising fortunes helped explain the contemporaneous collapse of the district’s WFM locals. The men who told organizer Matt Wasley in 1904 that “they could get along without organization” knew that shoveling was another means, with strikebreaking, of doing so.9

Joplin miners had to get along, however, amid unprecedented workplace dangers. This was especially the case in the sheet ground mines, where companies moved more ore than ever before. Since the opening of these mines in the 1880s, miners knew that the dry, silica-rich formations gave off lots of dust, a problem that worsened with expansion. Miners in Webb City and Carterville reported rising rates of “miner’s consumption,” a term used by coal and metal miners elsewhere to describe a variety of tuberculosis-like lung diseases. Afflicted miners slowly lost their ability to breathe over a period of months until they could no longer walk. Most ultimately died of suffocation. Local papers regularly reported deaths from miner’s consumption as early as 1903. Although commonly confused with tuberculosis, which physicians knew was a bacterial infection, miners insisted that this affliction stemmed from work in the mines. In 1905, for example, a miner told the Webb City Register that “so many men in this mining district die from what is called miner’s consumption” because of “smoke from them dad blamed old lights they wear on their caps and from the dust in the mine.” Two years later, the paper reported that Ben Peppers, a forty-four-year-old miner who had been a Kansas farmhand, was near death from miner’s consumption he contracted “while doing under ground work.” He died three months later. Ben’s younger brother William, also a miner, had died of “consumption” in 1903. At the time, however, few observers beyond the sheet ground camps noted the problem. The state mining law, for example, stipulated no measures for ventilation in zinc and lead mines until 1907.10

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The rising number of miners injured or killed in accidents captured far more attention. In 1903, thirteen miners died in Jasper, Newton, and Lawrence Counties, most as a result of hoisting accidents, premature explosions, or rock slides and falls, the latter causing about half of all fatalities. The problem worsened as miners moved more rock. In 1904, twenty-four miners died in southwest Missouri. In 1905, the number had grown to thirty-nine, and in 1906, fifty-one miners perished on the job. Dozens more suffered serious injury. The majority of those killed or injured that year—fifty-three men—worked as shovelers. The 1904 death of Harvey Dunlap, a twenty-seven-year-old shoveler from the Missouri Ozarks, epitomized the banality of the dangers the shovelers faced: “The deceased, in a stooping posture, was loading his tub with a shovel, when a small boulder fell from the roof, striking him on the back, the wound causing death by the time his body reached the surface.”

Industry reformers tried to stop the carnage by enforcing safety regulations. Since the early 1880s, at the urging of coal miners, the state of Missouri had passed a series of laws to regulate the operation of mines, first coal but also lead and zinc: regular inspections, the adoption of safety standards and equipment, and measures to improve working conditions, including a 1901 law mandating an eight-hour day for all miners in the state. From the outset, Joplin’s small mining companies argued that they could not afford to comply and made little effort to do so, even after some grew larger. In 1905, according to Otto Ruhl, a local engineer, no mining company provided a safety cage for hoisting men into and out of the mine. Companies instead used open, free-swinging tubs, little changed from the 1850s. “The general run of operators would strenuously oppose any law compelling them to install cages and safety appliances to thus protect their men,” he explained. Ruhl also blamed complacency among the miners, who, he claimed, readily accepted company arguments about the threat of excessive regulation, a holdover, he believed, from the logic of the poor man’s camp. “Habit and custom holds fearful sway,” Ruhl concluded. The state mine inspector accused companies of using old justifications to excuse inaction. “Conditions which at one time justified the excuse referred to, in the minds of many, are rapidly vanishing,” he wrote in 1906. “The poor operator and shallow shafts are overshadowed by the great majority of those otherwise situated.”

As they had in the past, however, Joplin miners continued to accept the risks of their work. They ignored WFM organizing efforts in the midst of rising fatalities despite the union’s long-standing demand for more stringent safety regulations. Although miners could not ignore the dangers of the job, they did not naturally accept union arguments that explained those dangers
as the result of systemic capitalist injustice. Some miners relied on old forms of private insurance through fraternal orders or private insurance companies, such as the Modern Woodmen of America or the Aetna Liability Insurance Company, to cope with the risks. On average, one in four miners killed or seriously injured in accidents between 1903 and 1906 carried some form of insurance. These men were the most mindful of family security, the main purpose of fraternal and corporate insurance plans alike. However, the vast majority of miners—three of every four miners killed or seriously injured in these years—carried no insurance at all. Some sought spiritual remedies; in 1904, hundreds of people, including many miners, helped turn Charles Parham’s middle-class healing ministry into a popular religious revival that became modern Pentecostalism. Most locals soon cooled on Parham but continued to believe in the miracles of capitalism.\textsuperscript{13}

While miners showed little support for safety regulations, they expressed strong concern that the state’s new eight-hour law might limit their pay. After a series of court challenges, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the law in 1905 in \textit{Cantwell v. Missouri}, despite a ruling earlier that year in \textit{Lochner v. New York} that had overturned a state law mandating a ten-hour workday for bakers. Although the justices filed no opinions, their decision justified the law as a legitimate exercise of the state’s police power. Respondents in the Joplin district claimed that no one liked the law. With zinc ore prices near fifty dollars per ton, companies were in no mood to risk curtailing production by reducing the length of the workday. Meanwhile, many miners complained that a shorter workday would at the same hourly rate result in a pay cut. According to an editorial in Joplin’s \textit{Lead and Zinc News}, “both operators and miners resent the fact that they are being robbed by a law that prevents the full exercise of production in the operator’s mine and brings about the arbitrary cutting down of the miner’s day to a point where his return is for eight hours instead of nine.”\textsuperscript{14}

Miners wanted to keep their daily wage, and some threatened to organize a union to do it. Joplin’s Central Labor Union led that effort in late 1905, although with little to show. Still, some observers concluded that although the threat “did not amount to much,” it prompted employers to find a solution. Some companies began exploring alternative ways to maintain or increase production under the law. The editor of the \textit{Lead and Zinc News} correctly reported that a “change from a day wage to a piece wage will be made in order to evade the law.”\textsuperscript{15}

Larger companies, led by American Zinc, began paying shovelers on a piece-rate basis in early 1906. They adopted the piece rate as a way to protect their low-yield, high-volume operations from constraints imposed by
the eight-hour law. The shortened workday made it harder for companies, especially in the sheet ground, to increase production. Companies could hire more shovelers or buy mechanical loaders, like the sprawling St. Joseph Lead Company in eastern Missouri did, but that required further investment to expand the size of the underground workings and perhaps sink additional shafts. Although many companies made moves in these directions after 1905, most could not afford large capital investments, at least not in such short order. Instead, with ore prices near all-time highs, firms turned first to the cheapest solution: getting more work per hour out of their shovelers by paying them for every can they filled. Under the initial rates, shovelers earned between four and six cents a can, depending on size. Companies moved only shovelers to the piece rate; other workers, including drillers, or machine men, as they became known, continued to earn a daily wage. At the time, piece rates were common in coal mining and some manufacturing industries as a way to increase productivity but not in metal mining. Most western metal miners fiercely resisted piece rates. The WFM argued that the system forced workers to do more for less pay and encouraged reckless practices that made work more dangerous. Many large-scale companies that mined base metals, meanwhile, such as National Lead and St. Joseph Lead, hired recent immigrants to shovel for low daily wages. In the Joplin district, however, piece rates made sense for companies looking to raise production without heavy capital investment and for miners who associated masculine risks with remunerative rewards.16

Shovelers accepted the piece-rate system with an enthusiasm that shocked many observers. With brutally hard work, they registered staggering increases in production and in pay. By early 1907, district residents marveled at the “remarkable feats performed by shovelers” and began tracking the record for highest earnings in a week. In March, twenty-eight-year-old Ed McAuliffe set the record at fifty-one dollars. The following month, Jack Fox, a twenty-seven-year-old Webb City shoveler who hailed from Michigan, beat it by earning fifty-three dollars in a week. He did so by filling 653 ore cans at a rate of eight cents per can. Consider for a moment the prodigious physical effort his achievement required. Filling cans that held 800 pounds of ore, Fox shoveled a total of over 522,000 pounds, or 260 tons, that week, an average of 87,000 pounds, or forty-three tons, per day. To do that in an eight-hour shift, Fox lifted his shovel, which held about twenty-one pounds of ore per full scoop, over 4,140 times a day, 518 times per hour, 8.6 times per minute, or once every seven seconds. He maintained that pace for six consecutive days. Not all shovelers earned these sums, of course. But across the district in 1907 many shovelers regularly earned five dollars a day, or thirty
dollars a week. Eager to boost production with zinc prices still rising, companies responded with new financial incentives to attract the most ambitious workers. Some offered bonus rates that, for example, paid shovelers six cents per can for the first fifty filled in a day and then ten cents a can for any additional cans filled. Shovelers on piece rates could often earn double what they had on an hourly wage.17

Workers like McAuliffe and Fox saw in piece-rate shoveling a new means of poor man’s entrepreneurialism. Despite the sharp decline of owner-operator mines after 1900, many commentators in the district continued to trumpet its “opportunities for poor men.” One newspaper, for example, claimed in 1907 that “the opportunities for creating wealth in the Joplin district today are no less than they were ten years ago,” but rather those “opportunities are multiplying, and the man who comes here now stands a better chance to gain wealth than did the men who have already created their fortunes.” For men with no capital other than their physical labor and their determination, the likes of whom had once been the engine of prospecting, their only available opportunity for earning more than a standard daily wage was in shoveling. Some men left middle-class jobs to work as shovelers. Fox, for example, had previously worked as a clerk but quit because he preferred the pay of shoveling. As another observer explained, “The economic prize of the shoveler’s wages attracts and recruits the beginners.” Stories of record earnings like Fox’s, told with rhetorical flourishes once used to describe successful prospectors, encouraged more young men to try their hand—and back.18

Shovelers turned the piece-rate logic to their advantage to become among the highest-paid workers in the district. “The shoveler, depending on his strength and experience, can make . . . considerably more than the skilled laborer,” visitors to the district noted in 1914, “a condition probably not found in many other mining camps.” The best shovelers honed their technique to make themselves into “fancy” shovelers, whose strength, endurance, and willpower commanded the highest wages. “They say they have created a new profession here,” another commentator explained, “that of skilled shoveler.” Some shovelers adopted a subcontractor gang-labor model. Like leasehold miners in the 1870s, these shovelers hired helpers, often single, younger men, for a set daily wage or a share of the day’s total earnings. This model enabled them to take full advantage of production bonuses by filling 100 or more cans a day. Yet however much shoveling recalled the entrepreneurialism of jug-handle leasehold mining, shovelers ran far different risks than prospectors who invested time and money. If prospectors took chances with their livelihoods, shovelers risked life and limb. Observers emphasized

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the astounding physical exertion that shovelers delivered. As a doctor explained in 1914, “One can hardly realize the severity of this work without seeing it.” Make no mistake, another report concluded, the shoveler “earned his money.”

To do so, shovelers embraced a form of working-class masculinity that heralded physical aggression and dangerous action in pursuit of financial incentives. Whereas prospectors had prized the diligence and sustained effort required to locate and develop a paying mine, shovelers celebrated physical power, strength of will, and heedless action under the piece rate. Early on, shovelers were more likely to be young and single and were celebrated for their youthful virility. “They are stout,” the Joplin News Herald reported in 1901, “and are possessed of that reckless nature characteristic of the country boy.” The shoveler had “no fear for the morrow,” the paper concluded; he “knows no fear of toil and often I have known men to go to dances, stay up all night, perhaps, twice or three times a week, and never miss a shift.” Over time, these men married and started families; as the job gained in status, slightly older men with families also took up the work. According to the 1910 census returns, 53.6 percent of men who worked as shovelers in Jasper County were married. They were less likely to be married than male workers in the local zinc-mining industry overall (64.8 percent), and a lot less likely to be married than men who farmed in Jasper County (80 percent). Still, the best shovelers tended to be younger than other workers. “It was said of a shoveler,” according to a local historian, “that rarely could a mature man enter this line of work and make a go of it, that the men who followed this occupation were developed and this development extended over quite some time. In fact, all good ore shovelers began as youngsters.” The arrogance of youth, however, led shovelers toward short-term imperatives. Men exploited their youthful strength and energy as if infinite, which added a sense of competition over male prowess. While “a husky shoveler who works with a will” but “does not overstrain himself” could sustain high earnings, an industry observer reported, “the striving of the best men in daily rivalry to show a large tally” caused “their early breakdown.” Restraint was difficult, however, when demonstrations of power in pursuit of money garnered respect and status.

Shovelers gained so much acclaim that the Joplin Globe held a contest in 1907 to find the best of all. Lem Smith won the fifty-dollar prize, and over thirteen dollars in wages, by filling 303 cans weighing an astonishing total of 257,550 pounds, or just over 128 tons, during a single eight-hour shift. He did it by working “with the regularity of a machine, and with a strength as steady as that of steel.” Although he tired toward the end, the twenty-
seven-year-old Smith “gritted his teeth as nature rebelled against the awful demands that were being made” and continued to shovel in pursuit of the bounty. Asked how he felt the following day, Smith replied, “Pretty near all in, to tell it square. I loafed the next day. But I reckoned I could afford to take a vacation. I felt tolerably certain that that record would get the fifty.” If anyone wanted to challenge him, Smith was ready. “I can out-shovel any man in the district,” he told reporters and was “willing to back that opinion with a liberal chunk of cash.” Reporters marveled at his achievement but also at his confidence, calm, and crucially, self-possession. “Here is the kind of man you would choose for your expedition if you had an appointment to march across the Sahara and storm the gates of perdition on the other side,” the Globe declared. As this imperialistic motif suggested, the same thing that excited western mine owners also excited these observers: Joplin shovelers were willing to risk their bodies in pursuit of individual economic gain.21

They pressed the individual incentive of the piece rate to extremes that anticipated the findings of scientific management theorists. In his 1911 Principles of Scientific Management, Frederick Taylor described how managers could increase the efficiency of unskilled workers through close instruction, physical regimentation, and individual monetary inducements, a set of practices that became known as Taylorism. He had based his theory on experiments conducted with loaders and shovelers, the archetypical unskilled industrial workers. In one example, he trained a man named Schmidt, a “mentally sluggish” pig iron handler at Pittsburgh's Bethlehem Steel, to increase his handling rate from twelve and a half tons to forty-seven and a half tons per day. In another, Taylor recalled how a team of Bethlehem shovelers raised their individual production from sixteen to fifty-nine tons per day. In both cases, Taylor argued that immigrant workers like Schmidt, whom he deemed inferior, needed personal lures and total managerial oversight to achieve such gains.22 Joplin shovelers, by contrast, applied the logic of individual incentives to themselves long before anyone in the district had heard of Taylorism. Some observers offered them as the model to be emulated in other districts. “The marvelous energy with which the work is carried on, and especially the remarkably high efficiency of labor,” a report from the American Mining Congress declared, “are things to be seriously considered by operators in the Far West.” The shoveler who earned forty-two dollars per week “at the regulation contract price,” he concluded, “is an object lesson in himself.”23

Joplin’s shovelers were now celebrated as exemplars of working-class masculinity. “The shoveler is a typical man, an American,” the Globe exclaimed, who used “brain, nerve and muscle” to perform heroic work. Al-
though Lem Smith stood only five feet, eight inches, tall and weighed 165 pounds, the press reported, his “will power and endurance” typified “the genius” of the shoveler, “a man that literally moves mountains.” “There is an extraordinary mainspring hid in that fellow somewhere that we don’t get to see,” the Globe declared.24

Many believed that the hidden power stemmed from an inherent racial and national superiority. According to one report, the district’s miners “are in a class to themselves” because “they are Americans.” Driven by pursuit of personal prosperity in the tradition of the poor man’s camp, this writer continued, “the American boy has held his own and kept away the foreigner from the field which produces lead and zinc in such quantities as to almost supply the world’s demand for these metals.” They were intelligent, industrious, and independent—in other words, the opposite of unionized or foreign workers, like Taylor’s slow-witted Schmidt. “There is no comparison between the personnel of the miners in this district,” this writer explained, “and those of the Pennsylvania coal fields. The latter are made up of Hungarians, Italians and different divisions of the Slavonic race, who live in squalor and are debased in their habits to a degree impossible for the American boy who works as a miner in this district.” As the Webb City Register boasted, “Our shovelers are intelligent Anglo-Saxons.”25

The shovelers gained status and power because they seemed to embody the ideal image of white American manhood championed by President Roosevelt and other white nationalists. Fearful that native-born white men had become overcivilized and soft and thus vulnerable to domination by other races, Roosevelt advocated that American white men seek a “strenuous life” to hone their racial advantage in the arts of civilization through aggressive physical competition and even violence. Other white Americans joined in this obsession to conflate masculine dominance with assertions of racial superiority, whether they cheered the doomed white boxers who challenged black champion Jack Johnson or Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet” that promised victories over nonwhite people overseas. To observers in the Joplin district, meanwhile, the shoveler seemed to fulfill these great white hopes already. Engineer T. Lane Carter challenged anyone who worried “that the white man is losing the art of hard work” to “visit the Joplin district.” There, he declared, “he will see what the white laborer, working on contract, can still accomplish…. Fancy a white man shoveling 50 tons per day in an eight-hour shift!” The Globe agreed: the shoveler was “a God-fearing, duty-serving, fun-pursuing, hard-working, whole-souled, mother-revering, patriotic, honest-hearted, good-blooded, devil-defying boy, of which, let us be devoutly thankful, there are thousands and millions in this favored land.” As
with the district’s strikebreakers, the shovelers seemed like perfect workers, perfect American men: productive and loyal, trusting in capitalism, native born, and white.26

Not content to reap only honor and respect, shovelers pushed for more money and, in doing so, led the way for other miners to demand more from district companies. Like Joplin strikebreakers had done, the best shovelers sought the highest bids for their services. Many shovelers, meanwhile, continued to seek higher-paying jobs as strikebreakers elsewhere. Their mobility created constant labor shortages that gave all shovelers, no matter the skill, greater leverage with employers and helped reinforce an opportunistic working-class culture in the district. Their leverage, gained amid steadily rising zinc ore prices from 1902 to 1907, worked as long as prices remained high. When ore prices fell during and after the Panic of 1907, however, companies looked for ways to curb the power of the shovelers. By then, some shovelers were determined to defend their position with overtly oppositional strategies, some old, some new, that would embolden many other miners and again bring the WFM back into the district. Once paragons of white American manhood, Joplin’s shovelers soon sparked a local working-class rebellion that would unsettle the prevailing order of risk and reward in district mines.

As demand for their labor grew, shovelers moved from job to job, often with no notice, to take higher piece rates. In April 1907, the state mine inspector reported that companies across the district, particularly those working the sheet ground, needed more shovelers. That spring, Charles Landrum, American Zinc’s mine manager in southwest Missouri, informed Harry S. Kimball, the company’s president, that the “mines are all running in fine shape, excepting short handed as to shovelers.” “The situation is serious,” he warned and predicted that production would suffer. With ore prices above fifty-three dollars per ton, companies risked losing easy profits with ore stuck in the ground. Landrum was offering piece rates that allowed shovelers to earn an average of $3.50 to $4.00 a day but still predicted that “the shoveler situation is going to be bad all summer,” given their new footloose behavior. He also worried that “machine men and other classes of ground labor are likely to go to grumbling” with demands for higher wages to match what the shovelers could earn. American Zinc again raised their pay.27

At the same time, Joplin miners continued to receive offers of employment from big companies elsewhere. Local papers reported the presence of recruiters from western districts that spring, particularly Coeur d’Alene. Idaho mining companies were not looking for strikebreakers, since they

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had crushed the WFM after 1899. They expected trouble, however, from union remnants as the state prepared to try WFM leaders Charles Moyer, Big Bill Haywood, and George Pettibone for orchestrating the 1905 murder of Governor Frank Steunenberg in retaliation for his actions during the 1899 strike. The state’s case outraged unionists and reformers across the political spectrum. By hiring nonunion Joplin miners, the mining companies sought insurance against likely protests. Other western operators also sought strikebreakers that summer. For the first time, copper-mining companies from Bisbee, Arizona, sent agents seeking miners to defy the WFM. According to Landrum, shovelers left for these camps by the “car load.” The state mine inspector believed they went mainly to take advantage of high wages but also “for the novelty of travelling free of expense and obtaining experience in other districts.” Joplin’s shovelers might be among the hardest-working white men in America, but they used their leverage for their own ends, whether seeking higher wages or looking for adventure. Their growing power gave them new freedom, in other words, that was rapidly becoming a problem for district companies.28

The managers of American Zinc, the largest and most modern company in the district, led the search for alternatives to the shovelers. Kimball encouraged Landrum to try “importing foreign labor,” like big lead companies in eastern Missouri did, although he worried that it would incite violence. “There is that serious objection to foreign labor which now exists, and which has always existed” in Joplin, he explained. Both men believed that machine loaders offered the ultimate solution. Landrum was in discussions with the Thew Automatic Steam Shovel Company about its equipment but had not reached an agreement. “I am very much pleased at the interest you take in the shovel matter with me,” he informed Kimball, “and I know that it is our only salvation” in the sheet ground mines.29

Other mining companies soon joined American Zinc in challenging the shovelers. As ore prices weakened that summer, from a high of $53.50 per ton in April to $46.00 per ton in August, the companies’ concern shifted from a shortage of shovelers to a growing need to cut shovelers’ wages. They had adopted the piece rate to encourage cheap, efficient production and had not anticipated how enthusiastically shovelers would respond. “The mine owners of the district are beginning to understand that there is something radically wrong with the wage scale in the Missouri Kansas mining district,” the Webb City Daily Register reported in August, possibly with direction from those same owners. The report recalled that shovelers had earned two dollars a day only a few years before. Now, “many miners are able to make
more than $5 per day,” and some up to eight dollars per day, on the current piece-rate scale. With such high wages, the paper charged, the shoveler “is making more money than” mine superintendents who earned $150 per month. Officials argued that shovelers should not be paid so highly because their “work is termed unskilled labor.” The shovelers had gained power and status so quickly that managers were “at a loss to know how to reduce them without forcing a strike on the part of the miners.” If companies did not find a way, the report concluded, many would be driven out of business. This critique discounted the physical cost of the work by assuming that men could perform the brutal labor required to achieve high pay every day. More pointedly, the attack on skill hit at the respect and veneration that shovelers had accrued for making their task so productive. In doing so, it threatened to undermine the racial and gendered arguments that explained the achievements and justified the privileges of Joplin shovelers. If seen simply as overpaid unskilled workers run amok, as this report claimed, they presented a menace that should be stopped. Harry Kimball soon reached this conclusion himself. As he declared privately to a company manager in early 1908, “The shovelers are the nearest to beasts of any men that I have had anything to do with.”

In a spirited response published in the same newspaper, a writer called “Shoveler” fought back by asserting that men like him deserved high wages because they were just as invested in the business of the district as company owners and should be treated as equals. “Shoveler” rejected the notion that they were simple, unskilled workers. “If you will stop most any of the shovelers and enter into a conversation you will find that many of them would be an honor to the position of Superintendent because they see and know all the workings of successful mining,” the writer declared. Admittedly, “many of them are rough and use language that would not do at a Sunday School Convention,” “Shoveler” continued, “but beneath the rough exterior you will find a brain that thinks and an honest heart.” They earned high wages for hard work performed as well as for the unseen expenses they assumed to do it. Their work was so demanding, he explained, that shovelers had to replace worn-out overalls and shoes every week and needed new gloves daily. Shovelers also invested their bodies in the job. “Shoveler” claimed that men like him worked harder than anyone else, to the point “of being tired and worn out so he wished for Sunday to come.” If one was too tired to work, however, “he is the one who loses, not the company.” He reminded readers that companies had chosen the piece-rate system because it increased productivity. High shoveling wages thus reflected commensurate high profits.
“If a shoveler makes more money by contract its because he gets out more dirt and the more dirt goes through the mill the more ore goes into the bin and the bigger the dividend to investors,” he explained.31

“Shoveler” also made racist and nativist claims on this system of risk and reward. What made the Joplin piece rate so effective, he asserted, was that the shovelers were all native born. “As Americans we have made Webb City the greatest lead and zinc center in the world,” he claimed. Shovelers read books, had families, and “prided ourselves on the conditions existing here.” He warned mining companies against bringing in “Dago labor” to replace them. Although they might work for less, “Shoveler” acknowledged, foreigners would soon join unions and be on strike. It was easy, he noted, to incite “rebellion among such trash who eat any kind of refuse, sleep any place and send all they earn back to Italy.” These claims revealed that some shovelers had come to believe that they deserved high wages because they were hard-working, native-born white men who understood capitalism and would not join unions. Ideas about race, nativity, family life, and unions had come full circle in the district, as “Shoveler” deployed logic once used by mine owners to entice Joplin miners into work as strikebreakers against foreign-born union men in order to now keep foreign-born miners out of the Joplin district.32

Above all, “Shoveler” argued that he and his counterparts were themselves entrepreneurs with faith in the market who should be treated as partners. He pledged continued cooperation with companies if they worked with, not against, the shovelers. “When ore is low and expense is high we will take” a pay cut, he promised, “but when it comes up we want our advance in wages”—in other words, a sliding scale that pegged wage rates to market prices. If a superintendent would bother to talk with the shovelers, this writer declared, “he will find the right hand extended to assist rather than retard the progress of this great industry.” If mining companies tried to cut the piece rate out of step with market prices, or if they tried to hire foreign labor, “Shoveler” threatened trouble. “No Sir,” he concluded, “we have helped to build this mining center and we are proud of it and we won’t see any Italian trash come here and reap the benefits.”33

“Shoveler” made these arguments in the presence of alternatives that could have directed the growing oppositional impulses of district miners toward the labor movement and its political allies. Local AFL organizers, led by the Central Labor Union’s Thomas Sheridan, who was elected president of the Missouri State Federation of Labor in 1905, tried to mobilize them around the eight-hour law. The AFL chartered small, directly-affiliated local unions, now called federal labor unions, among miners in Joplin and Webb
City in February 1906, although both collapsed within months. Meanwhile, more radical groups in the area continued to reach out. In the spring of 1906, the small Joplin local of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the city’s Socialist Party local held a series of public rallies to raise money for the defense of Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone. They received only $2.50 from “a large crowd of the unorganized miners.” Area Socialists advocated for the WFM leaders until their acquittal in 1907, in line with the Appeal to Reason. The Appeal emerged as the mouthpiece of American socialism between 1906 and 1908, when its national subscription base expanded to 325,000. Eugene Debs, Kate Richards O’Hare, and other Socialist luminaries regularly passed through Joplin on their way to visit the paper’s office in Girard; Socialist candidates regularly campaigned throughout the district. Most miners either rejected or ignored these voices. The WFM tried again in February 1907 after organizing several locals in the eastern Missouri lead field. “Very few miners” attended organizer Frank Schmelzer’s meeting. The problem, he reported, was the piece rate, which kept “the men contented, for they are always in hopes that they will do better the next month.” Despite growing tensions with the companies, miners like “Shoveler” were confident that their entrepreneurial labors would command a share of prosperity.34

Miners saw that prosperity, and their hold on high wages, challenged by a crisis in financial markets in late 1907 that brought the national economy to a crawl. In the spring a “general depression” in industrial demand weakened the price of all ores but especially copper. When speculators tried and failed to corner the market in United Copper Company shares, they triggered a run on several New York banks and panicked selling on the New York Stock Exchange that soon spread to financial institutions nationwide. Zinc ore prices promptly fell, down ten dollars per ton between August and December to thirty-six dollars. The Panic of 1907, as it became known, lasted into the summer of 1908. During that period, zinc ore sold for an average of thirty-three to thirty-seven dollars per ton, about a third lower than 1907 highs. Mining companies curtailed operations for an extended period. District zinc ore production fell 10 percent and lead ore production fell 8 percent during the panic, while the market value of all mined ores fell 26 percent to $10.4 million, making 1908 the worst year since 1903. American Zinc did not shut down its operations but regularly threatened to do so. Its managers claimed they could not mine the sheet ground for a profit as long as zinc ore prices remained below forty dollars per ton.35

American Zinc and other companies responded by slashing wages. The cut was severe: from $3.00 to $2.50 per day for machine men; from $2.25 to $1.75 per day for general labor; and from six cents a can to four cents a
can for shovlers. As in the past, miners seemed to accept the move as a legitimate business decision. According to an industry observer in late 1907, “these reductions were received by the men in good humor, and, indeed, in many cases the men themselves proposed that the reductions should be made.” While no doubt overstating their equanimity, this writer echoed “Shoveler,” who had assured readers that miners understood the relationship between market prices and wages. They also understood, from recent harsh experience, that wage cuts were preferable to mine closures. Union activists, meanwhile, pointed out that they had no choice. “The unorganized mine workers have suffered reduction of from 25 to 40 percent in wages,” reported Charles Fear, who had recently started an AFL-affiliated “conservative labor paper” in Joplin. Although Fear heard many complaints, “they can do nothing but to accept the reduction.”36

If acquiescent while prices were low, district miners made new, more forceful demands for higher wages when the market recovered. In late August 1908, miners at two smaller mines north of Webb City went on strike and received modest raises. To prevent further strikes, some companies agreed to raise shoveler wages 10 percent once zinc ore went above forty dollars per ton, which it did in November. Initially, American Zinc refused to give in. Landrum threatened to “shut down the mines indefinitely” if shovlers at American Zinc went on strike. Internally, however, Landrum worried that the company would not be able to recruit enough shovlers if other companies raised wages. In the meantime, American Zinc continued to test a steam shovel that it hoped would reduce its dependence on troublesome human hand loaders. “We will shake them to action with the automatic shovel,” Kimball explained to another manager. Rather than test the company’s resolve directly, American Zinc’s miners protested in subtler ways. After a rock fall killed a shoveler in mid-September, miners in two sheet ground operations refused to work the following day. Although such acts of respect for the dead were common among coal miners, Joplin miners left little evidence of following the practice until now. By stopping production to mark death in the midst of a tense debate over wages, they claimed a relationship between physical risk and financial reward. Union miners elsewhere had galvanized collective action around common dangers for decades, of course. Joplin miners were learning their tactics, albeit without union affiliation. A week later, shovlers began sending up near-empty cans. Landrum’s deputies interpreted the slowdown as a wage demand. He gave in with a half-cent raise per can. “Everybody is busy and happy,” a deputy reported, “and are getting fine results.” Others were not convinced the peace would last.37

WFM president Charles Moyer, for one, launched a new organizing cam-
campaign to take advantage of these conflicts after his charges were dropped and he was released from prison in early 1908. Moyer dispatched William Burns to Joplin as part of a renewed drive to strengthen the union’s presence in eastern districts. Moyer hoped to make the WFM more stable, a process that began when the union left the tumultuous IWW the previous year. Burns spent three weeks in the district “but was not successful.” Undeterred, Moyer sent William Jinkerson in October. Local Socialists helped him set up meetings in Webb City, where miners had just won small concessions from American Zinc. “But they showed no interest in organizing,” Jinkerson reported. Most of them, he explained, banked instead on the victory of William H. Taft in the upcoming presidential election because he advocated a higher tariff that promised to raise zinc prices. “They were perfectly confident,” he explained, “that the election of ‘Taft and Tariff’ on zinc would save them.” In Joplin, Jinkerson “was unable to find a man who was willing to lend his assistance towards organizing.” Instead, he reported, “they were rather inclined to snarl and insult you when you approached them.” In November, Taft outpolled William Jennings Bryan in Jasper County; he won Oronogo, Neck City, Carterville, parts of Webb City, and Prosperity, all majority miner precincts. Socialist Eugene Debs, meanwhile, won 5 percent of the county vote. Jinkerson’s experience showed that although miners had become more rebellious in their demands, they also remained hostile to the WFM and anticapitalist politics and continued to believe that they could leverage higher wages from market rises.

As the recovery turned into a boom, miners kept pushing to make this true. Ore prices continued to rise in 1909. “Some of our men are grumbling,” Landrum reported; he expected trouble “if we do not give them a raise.” Landrum gave in. He had little choice, since the steam shovel had turned out to be less efficient and more expensive than human shovelers. Still, the company suffered a shortage of shovelers all summer. While shovelers resumed old tactics of moving around in search for the best piece rate, machine men and common mine laborers also demanded higher pay. In November, miners at American Zinc’s Davey mine threatened to strike if they did not receive an additional twenty-five cents per day. Landrum again granted the raise.

For many miners, these skirmishes validated confrontation as a negotiating tactic, especially when companies tried to cut wages as ore prices fell back to forty dollars per ton in 1910. In neither boom nor bust, they struggled to trust company claims that new wage limits were fair in relation to the ore market. Miners responded with three oppositional strategies, some old, some new: strikebreaking elsewhere, making legal claims for workplace injuries, and staging bigger wildcat strikes.
Some went as strikebreakers to South Dakota’s Black Hills, where the WFM clashed with the Homestake Mining Company. In the face of union efforts to compel a closed shop in late 1909, the company locked out its miners and resumed operations in early 1910 on an open-shop basis. To accomplish this, they dispatched labor agents to the Joplin district to recruit nonunion miners to Lead and Deadwood, South Dakota, with a promise of free transportation and wages of four dollars per day. While only a few dozen miners accepted the offer in early January, thirty or forty were leaving each day by the first week of February, just as American Zinc and other companies announced a 10 percent wage cut. “The serious part of the business,” Landrum reported in March, “is that they are taking the young men and especially the shovelers.” Other mine workers also left, although Landrum believed that most of those with families would stay. By April, Joplin newspapers reported that over 1,000 miners had gone to South Dakota. “This system of taking the labor out of the district has resulted in taking away so many of the men from all the camps in the field that mines and mills are unable to secure full crews,” the Joplin Daily Globe declared. Despite weak prices, the paper claimed, local companies feared that further wage cuts would encourage more miners to leave for the Black Hills. The WFM’s Moyer did too. “The unorganized of Missouri are always with us,” he lamented.41

Other miners pressed for a bigger share of district profits by taking advantage of new laws that expanded their power to sue employers for workplace injuries. In 1907, the state of Missouri had finally answered the demands of recent mine inspectors with three new regulatory laws: one that created a second zinc and lead mine inspector position; one that gave inspectors more scope to scrutinize the health and safety of employees, particularly regarding air quality; and one that made mining companies liable to compensate workers injured, or the families of those killed, in their employment. With the last of these, workers gained new power to seek compensation for injuries, whether caused by company negligence, a coworker, or unavoidable accident. The new compensation law also annulled limited liability contracts between companies and employees and restricted employer liability only in cases where the worker’s own negligence caused his injury. Miners started taking advantage of it in late 1908, albeit initially in small numbers. Local lawyers such as Sylvan Bruner helped them file the suits in county court. As tensions over wages grew in 1909, however, more and more miners sued their employers. Miners might reject many government regulations, but they trusted local juries, full of people like them, to rule against companies often owned by outsiders, just as the squatters who had resisted Blow & Kennett in 1857 had done. “The subject of accidents and liabilities is becoming a seri-
ous one,” Landrum complained in January 1910. It got worse that winter. In a single March week, Landrum reported that miners had filed suits for $12,000 in total damages. Given the broad language of the law, local juries usually sided with injured miners. Some companies started settling out of court. Some, such as American Zinc, took out liability insurance to cover their exposure.42

By suing for compensation, miners found another way to claim the financial premium they associated with physical risk taking. This was especially the case for shovelers, who earned the highest wages and suffered the most injuries. In 1910, for example, shovelers at American Zinc suffered injuries at fourteen times the overall rate in district mines and mills; they were four times more likely than those in the next most dangerous job, machine man, to get injured. Shovelers also led the way in compensation suits. In one year at American Zinc’s Davey mine, shovelers claimed 43 percent of all compensation awards. Their suits made the financial value of their bodies explicit. Herschel Stringer sued for $300 after cutting his foot. George Young sued for $300 after an ore can fell on his leg, “skinning his shin just below the knee.” The company settled with other miners for smaller sums. American Zinc paid Jesse Slater $8.75 for a “mashed” finger. The compensation law provided some relief but also bolstered the entrepreneurial thinking that framed bodily power as investment capital. Miners’ aggressive use of the law also made risk-taking behavior costlier, in terms of both wages and potential liability, for employers already keen to rein in labor costs.43

In the midst of these upheavals, miners used wildcat strikes to make wage demands only a few weeks after others went to South Dakota as strike-breakers. “There were a great many strikes throughout the district and I presume that as many as 1,000 men struck for the advance,” Landrum informed his boss in March 1910. These strikes lasted only a day or two and lacked any organizational coordination but unsettled company officials nonetheless. American Zinc temporarily relented by restoring wages. Other companies continued to try to cut wages, however, in response to stagnant ore prices. Miners responded with more wildcat strikes. Hundreds of miners walked out of sheet ground mines in May and again in July. They attracted unlikely support. The normally antilabor Engineering and Mining Journal declared in an editorial that Joplin miners deserved to “get all they can.” The journal hoped that the strike would draw attention to the “highly dangerous and unsanitary” conditions in the district and compel the “enforcement of a drastic, sanitary law.” In addition to deaths from rock falls and other accidents, the editor explained, many more Joplin miners died from rampant lung ailments. In the sheet ground, he explained, miners inhaled dust composed of
small “sharp, angular fragments” of rock that “makes them peculiarly sub-
ject to pulmonary troubles, from which a large number die at comparatively
early age.” This was notable because no major publication had identified the
prevalence of miner’s consumption in southwest Missouri before. The editor
blamed the miners for not taking more active steps to reduce dust, such as
wetting the mine faces and shafts, but admitted that ineffective mine regu-
lation also contributed. “Until the miners of the district awake to the dan-
gers under which they work and demand such a law,” the editor lamented,
“they will continue to court the chance of early demise” by laboring in condi-
tions “as dangerous as work in an arsenic factory.” The miners who went on
strike in 1910 demanded higher pay, not health and safety regulations. For
many shovelers, in fact, time taken to soak piles of ore with water, as the edi-
tor suggested, was time lost putting that ore into cans, and cans were what
paid. And yet their parallel strategies of wildcat strikes and damage suits
suggested, as the editor hoped, that Joplin miners might be on their way to
making more coherent demands. In the meantime, the 1910 wildcat strike
wave fizzled. A few groups won small pay increases, but most lost. The last
strike at American Zinc ended in late July when Kimball declared he would
shut down the mines rather than grant the raise.44

Although this pattern of rebellion occurred without union direction, the
WFM sought to take advantage of the new dynamic. At first, Moyer was
skeptical. He admitted to delegates at the 1909 convention that “it is strange”
to “see the unorganized workers striking to enforce better conditions, as they
have lately in the state of Missouri.” As their obstreperousness continued,
however, he became more optimistic. “While our past efforts have apparently
failed to arouse these people to the necessity of united action,” he told con-
vention delegates in 1910, “it is encouraging to know that in late years they
at times rebel, and in their unorganized condition strike in protest against
the attempt of the employer to further reduce wages.” The union’s executive
board sent Jinkerson to the district again that spring. Echoing the Engineering and Mining Journal’s recent observations, the union hoped to build
a campaign based on wages and safety. “Owing to the condition of work-
ing these mines, many men are killed or injured,” Moyer explained. Among
those casualties, union leaders noted that “a large per cent of the miners
are afflicted with miner’s consumption.” They admitted that Jinkerson’s task
would be difficult. The only Joplin miners “who understand organization,”
the board declared, “are men who have worked in the various camps of the
West during strikes and are full of prejudices which makes it very difficult
to organize.”45

Despite these doubts, Jinkerson established a beachhead. In March,
he organized a new local in Joplin, 217, with about twenty members, and made good headway in Webb City and Carterville. “Joplin now seems sure of having the miners organized as never before,” local AFL leader Charles Fear announced. Even Kimball, American Zinc’s president, admitted that the WFM “may be able to form a local union.” Local 217 was still small, however. At the convention that summer, C. L. Bailey, its president, called for more organizers. “We must state that as a local union, we are very weak and have but a very small membership” and “are not growing fast,” his resolution admitted. “The miner of this district must be educated and his attitude towards organization changed,” Bailey declared. “Our members are new to the work, we lack experience, we need organization, and we need help,” he concluded. “We urge you to consider our appeal” for the miners of Joplin and “in other districts, which are so affected by the strike-breaker and scab from this district.”

Yet the ongoing battle in the Black Hills, the latest in this chain of destructive conflicts, loomed over the union’s organizing attempt that summer. In South Dakota, Joplin strikebreakers and union miners revived and even amplified animosities born in earlier clashes. The strikers sang the “Scab’s Lament,” a version of the tune first composed by their predecessors in Coeur d’Alene. They created new ones, too, such as “The Song of Missourian,” which likened Joplin miners to oxen. Strikebreakers also wrote their own songs, such as “The Man from Missouri,” which denigrated the WFM and, more important, asserted the independent privileges of white, native-born American men:

Here’s to the Joplin miner, the man from old Missou,
If the Homestake company sticks by him, he’ll surely pull her through;
There’ll be no strikes nor walkouts, no grievances to tell
For being white and human, he knows when he’s treated well.

Similarly, in “Why We Are Here,” strikebreakers sang that “the mines were full of Slavs and such, who were really in Americans’ places.” Now, “the miners are Americans, English-speaking lads, / The pride of Uncle Sam, and not to be called ‘scabs.’” They claimed priority by reason of race and nation. Union leaders struggled to imagine how Joplin miners would ever become union men. The WFM’s executive board, at the same time it dispatched Jinkerson to Joplin, called the strikebreakers who went to South Dakota “degenerates” and “the ‘scab’ workingman” a “miserable, cowardly renegade.” Many of them believed that most, if not all, Joplin men suffered moral and mental deficiencies. Among the causes of the “deplorable” conditions in Joplin, the board claimed, was the “lack of intelligence and unity
among the workers.” By using terms that invoked the racist theories of contemporary eugenicists and xenophobes, WFM leaders revealed, at best, a weak understanding of what motivated Joplin miners. Even Moyer still struggled to form alternative explanations. He admitted that “it has been difficult to understand why these workers surrounded as they are by organized labor, seeing and realizing its benefits, should stand aloof, ever ready to sell themselves to the employer for the purpose of assisting him in wresting from their fellow miners conditions which have cost them years of determined effort to secure.”

Jinkerson attacked the racist and nativist logic of Joplin miners head-on, looking for total conversion, not pragmatic compromise. The WFM was, after all, a diverse union, with many foreign-born members from southern and eastern Europe, including in the eastern Missouri lead field where Slavic and Italian miners had rallied to the union in recent years. According to Landrum, WFM organizers were making progress until “one of them the other night made the declaration that all laborers were brothers, and that he had equal rights with all, under the union, no matter from whence he came.” In the wake of the South Dakota clash, the approach failed. “This started trouble right away among the Webb City shovelers,” Landrum continued, “as they did not propose to recognize the ‘hunkies’ or the ‘niggers’ as brothers of theirs.”

Ironically, the shovelers’ animosity to foreign-born workers forced American Zinc to stop an attempt to recruit Russians to replace them. “It is not true that there has been any talk or thought of employing foreign labor,” Landrum lied to local reporters in July. “We have the best set of men in the world and have no thought of making any change.” According to Otto Ruhl, a local mining engineer, managers such as Landrum feared that “an attempt to import foreign labor would result in solidifying this union sentiment.” As these glimpses suggest, Joplin miners gained leverage by strenuously asserting their privileges as native-born white men. Those assertions, however, left them in limbo: in opposition to their employers but unwilling to support the only organization that represented those who did the same work as them. As a solution, some disgruntled shovelers hoped to establish an independent union under local control for native-born whites only.

The WFM altered that calculus when it voted to reaffiliate with the AFL in 1910. The union needed help after its defeat in South Dakota that spring. By allying again with AFL president Samuel Gompers, WFM leaders continued a moderate course that emphasized organization building and collective bargaining over its previous commitments to revolutionary economic change. In Joplin, WFM organizers placed these new goals at the center of
their appeals. Charles Mahoney, who led the divorce from the IWW, delivered the news himself in a series of rallies. The organizers had help from Joplin’s Central Labor Union, which claimed more than 900 members in various trades. Gompers himself instructed Charles Fear, who was elected to the state legislature in 1910 as a Republican, to give “every assistance” to the WFM. Rechartered in 1911 under the banner of AFL pragmatism, WFM organizers redoubled their emphasis on higher wages and safer working conditions as the main goals of union membership. In September, Guy Miller, the latest organizer to direct union efforts in the district, distributed a circular with this core message: “Unorganized men can make no effective demand for increased wages or better working conditions.” Joplin miners had learned this the hard way, he suggested, as strikebreakers and wildcat strikers whose minor rebellions had done nothing to alleviate their long-term problems. Only union men in stable organizations, he asserted, had the power and the allies to win. He challenged them by appealing to their claims of white male supremacy. “You must sink to the level of brutes,” Miller concluded, “or rise to the level of men.”

By 1911, Joplin miners presented unresolved problems for local mining companies and labor unions alike. They staged no major wildcat strikes after July 1910 because they had little leverage to make direct wage demands, with ore prices stuck around forty dollars per ton. Many miners continued to assert their autonomy in other ways, however. They still moved frequently between employers in search of higher piece rates or daily wages. This aggressive mobility, especially among the shovelers, continued to bedevil companies with labor shortages. “The system thus seems almost to have outgrown its usefulness,” Ruhl observed, as the costs of shoveling culture counteracted the productivity gains it yielded. Meanwhile, Local 217 had reestablished the WFM in the district, now with AFL support. Whether the union’s new affiliation would overcome the prejudices of local miners remained to be seen. At the same time, miners continued to sue employers for injury compensation, which caused employer liability insurance rates to skyrocket. Mining companies, led by American Zinc, looked to lower these costs. Landrum proposed that the largest operators agree to fire “careless men” and those who were “unreasonable and insisted on going into Court.” Landrum’s plan did not take, but it revealed that the Joplin miner’s great advantage, a willingness to court danger for financial incentives and social status, was fast becoming a central issue of concern for union organizers and mining companies.

Against all expectations, the WFM, backed by the AFL, made a strong and nearly successful campaign to organize the district in the years leading up to
the Great War. With ore prices stagnant, organizers interested more miners in union membership as a way to make their work sustainable over the long term. Their message reflected the union’s moderate turn since 1910: to deliver steadier, higher daily wages through collective bargaining and to deliver safer workplaces through demands for greater state regulation of the mines. Union organizers focused in particular on the growing crisis of “miner’s consumption,” the prevalence of which raised new questions about the sustainability of the shovelers’ culture. They talked less about the racial implications of union solidarity. Just as the WFM seemed to convince miners across the district to embrace collective security, war in Europe revived ore markets and exacerbated the politics of nationalism. Miners rallied in large numbers to defend their economic and racial interests in an independent movement that would challenge their newfound loyalty to the WFM. They wanted it all: higher pay, stronger health and safety measures, and the privileges they expected as white, native-born Americans.

By the end of 1911, Guy Miller’s clear focus on wages and safety, and AFL backing, established the WFM’s strongest-ever presence in the district. He organized four new locals to join Joplin 217: Neck City 219, Carterville 221, Webb City 226, and Prosperity 232. The task was not easy. Miller faced ongoing hostility to the WFM—“It nearly always comes from strikebreakers,” he explained—and “classic objections” based on nativist racism, such as “I don’t want to be a brother to a Dago.” But although the locals were small, he believed that the union’s more conservative appeals were “changing the sentiment” toward unionism. Miller understood that meant convincing miners to abandon thinking inherited from the bygone days of the poor man’s camp. He believed that the continued concentration of mine ownership by firms such as American Zinc would “teach men the necessity of organization more effectively than any organizer can.” The locals aimed to achieve a daily wage of $2.50 for all of the district’s 5,466 miners, a modest increase when they received an average of $2.32 per day in 1911. Miller still had work to do to convince the shovelers. “They are the only ones who ever make big money,” he explained, “but it is at the cost of life and health.” Observers who claimed no friendship with unions thought he might succeed. According to Otto Ruhl in late 1911, the miners “have shown a growing tendency toward some cooperation among” themselves “and the present year has seen a respectable number of miners organized into a union.” That year the Missouri Bureau of Labor Statistics counted 70 members in the Joplin local, 24 in Neck City, 103 in Prosperity, and an impressive 600 members in Webb City.52

While seeking standard safety regulations, the WFM made a bold new demand for the state mine inspector to confront the rising rates of lung disease
among district miners. The problem was worsening rapidly. In 1911, the Missouri Board of Health recorded a tuberculosis mortality rate in Joplin of 220 per 100,000 people and in Webb City of 336 per 100,000 people, well above the state’s overall rate of 155 deaths per 100,000. Because doctors did not yet acknowledge miner’s consumption as a condition separate from tuberculosis, these figures included both causes of death. In contrast to the confusion among doctors, the WFM insisted that miner’s consumption was an occupational disease caused by breathing dust-laden air. “In the sheet ground of the Webb City district the men work in a cloud of dust,” Miller reported in 1911, with the result that “consumption claims them in a few years.” Later that year local union miners were themselves calling for state officials to do something. “We need good mine inspectors,” a member of Neck City 219 said, “as bad air is killing more men than anything else.” Jack Fox, the former clerk who became a standout shoveler in 1907, died from lung disease in 1911.53

Although these were small steps, the locals survived, even amid fluctuating ore prices. New union members received their strongest test in late 1912 when ore prices suddenly soared above fifty-five dollars per ton, a record high. Rising wages convinced many to leave the union. Over the course of the year, the Webb City local lost two-thirds of its dues-paying members. Just as soon as prices had spiked, however, they fell again to just over forty dollars per ton in early 1913. Companies shut down production and cut wages. Shovelers again staged wildcat strikes in protest. Now, however, union locals were in place with answers for miners once again whipsawed by market swings. In the 1912 election, Socialist Eugene Debs won 10 percent of the district vote, while outpolling either Taft or Roosevelt, who split the Republican vote, in several precincts; Debs won a plurality in Prosperity and Duenweg. Organizer Marion Cope, who had replaced Miller in Joplin, held weekly meetings at each local in early 1913. In Webb City, he told a crowd of 150 miners that unless they “organize themselves they must expect to accept whatever rate the operators feel able or willing to offer them.” More than 300 sheet ground miners joined the union that year. W. J. Edens, a local miner and member of the Joplin local, believed that his colleagues were finally abandoning their faith in the poor man’s camp. “[The miner] knows that the prosperity of the operator of today is not shared by him,” Edens informed readers of Miners Magazine in April. “He knows that the price the operator gets for his ore has nothing to do with determining the wage he is paid for his labor.” Finally, Edens believed, “the miners of the Joplin district are showing signs of an awakening.”54

The WFM locals withstood another challenge in the winter of 1913–14 when labor recruiters came to Joplin looking for strikebreakers to go to
Colorado’s southern coalfields and Michigan’s copper range. The union and its allies worked hard to counter their promises. Reuben T. Wood, president of the Missouri State Federation of Labor, and organizers from the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) rallied support. Cope used two strategies: accusing the agents of misleading potential recruits about pay and conditions and appealing to the growing sense of union solidarity in the district. Union activists took care to tailor their arguments to the nativist limits of that solidarity, however. Rube Ferns, a UMW organizer from Scammon, Kansas, and former world welterweight boxing champion, claimed that many of the strikers were not foreigners. He explained that “40% of them are Americans, Irish, English, Scotch and other English-speaking people” on “strike for a living wage and conditions to work where their lives will not be impaired” and thus worthy of respect. Before leaving in January 1914, Robert Copeland, the agent for Rockefeller’s Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, recruited only 100 strikebreakers in the district, a tenth of the number that went to South Dakota. In April, union leaders deterred recruiters from Michigan in similar fashion. Regardless, the UMW and WFM lost both strikes, most notably in Colorado, where, beginning with the infamous Ludlow Massacre in April 1914, strikers and the state National Guard went to war. For the first time, Joplin miners had generally stood aside. According to Wood, “the Joplin district purged itself of the name of disgrace.” Both he and Moyer believed they would now complete their organization of the district’s miners.55

Indeed, the union movement showed life in 1914. In January, Cope and Ferns organized a new local, number 138, in the new camp of Commerce, near Miami, Oklahoma, thirty miles southwest of Joplin. The mines in Oklahoma had been marginal until 1913, when a series of new zinc ore discoveries spurred development and production, which exceeded 32,000 tons in 1914, a threefold increase in two years. Meanwhile, in Joplin and Webb City, miners continued to join the WFM. Local 226 remained the largest, now with over 800 members.56

Union miners could also take heart because the problem of miner’s consumption finally attracted serious attention. In 1912, the state mine inspectors began urging companies to reduce dust in the mines as a means of preventing the disease. They were joined by a group of middle-class women, led by Bess Hackett, a society editor for the Joplin News Herald, who formed the Jasper County Anti-Tuberculosis Society. In 1913, the Missouri Board of Health reported that deaths from tuberculosis in Joplin and Webb City had jumped by 40 percent over the previous year’s already very high number. Although the state figure included deaths from miner’s consumption, Hackett
feared that it still undercounted the true total. To get a fuller picture, the society surveyed the people most acquainted with the disease: the wives, mothers, and daughters of the district’s miners. By communicating directly with these women, the society identified many more miners who died of lung disease but did not get counted: those who sickened and died without ever visiting a doctor and those who went to die at homeplaces in surrounding counties. Their findings were shocking. The society reported that more than 1,100 miners from Jasper County died of tuberculosis “or miners’ con” during the eighteen months of their survey. In one mining town, the society found 132 widows of miners who had died from lung disease. They believed that as many as 60 percent of miners currently working in the sheet ground had some form of lung trouble.57

These findings emerged at a time when the district had never been busier or richer. Between 1912 and 1914, ore and mineral sales exceeded $46 million. Joplin had become a prosperous city of over 32,000 residents with a sizeable middle class of professionals, merchants, and skilled workers. They enjoyed clubs and fraternal organizations, public parks, paved sidewalks and streets, and an interurban train system that provided fast, relatively cheap travel to neighboring towns that wanted to emulate Joplin, such as Webb City and Carterville, home to over 11,000 and 4,500 residents, respectively. Prosperity, however, created and widened class divisions that strained the district’s older sense of social equality. The Anti-Tuberculosis Society was sympathetic toward the sick but also afraid of them.58

Many middle-class residents increasingly worried that the costs of the mining industry would ruin their good fortune. In late 1912, Dr. Alice Hamilton surveyed the people who worked at and lived around the Picher Lead and Zinc Company’s Joplin smelter for evidence of lead poisoning in a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor. Her report found a few people “with lead convulsions or insanity” in the immediate vicinity of the smelter. The crisis of miner’s consumption, meanwhile, threatened to taint the district with “one of the worst reputations,” that of being plagued by tuberculosis, a disease most associated with the poverty of African American and immigrant communities, even though most of the deaths were caused by mine dust, not bacteria. In 1914, the Anti-Tuberculosis Society hired a nurse to visit sick miners and set up an open-air tent to care for the worst cases.59

Middle-class antituberculosis reformers blamed the miners themselves for the epidemic. Although still unsure how miner’s consumption related to tuberculosis, most local observers now agreed that “the dust evil” in the dry sheet ground mines was the main physical cause. They also agreed that the
best way to stop the dust was to add waterlines to all machine drills and to wet down blasted rock before it was shoveled. Civic leaders were doubtful that the miners would cooperate, however. “The miners themselves seemed to be the least interested” in protective measures, mine owners declared, because they “give little consideration to their personal health.” The Webb City Daily Register, meanwhile, believed that “the miner’s own carelessness” regarding personal health exacerbated lung injuries caused by dust. “In many instances the miner’s system is undermined by bad habits, and either through ignorance or carelessness [miners] fail to protect their health either in their habits or in their manner of living,” the paper declared, with heavy class-based condescension. Men considered American heroes ten years before were now a threat. Despite the growing consensus about dust, middle-class commentators concluded that the miner needed to be educated and, if that failed, actively prevented from “infecting his fellow toilers.” The Anti-Tuberculosis Society agreed to pay for “government experts” to come to the district “to remain among the miners and educate them.” In October 1914, Hackett sent a request for assistance to Rupert Blue, the U.S. surgeon general. Sensing “a good opportunity for a scientific study of ‘miner’s consumption,’” Blue dispatched A. J. Lanza, a surgeon with the U.S. Public Health Service, and Edwin Higgins, an engineer with the U.S. Bureau of Mines, to Jasper and Cherokee Counties to conduct a month-long field study.60

In preliminary findings, Lanza and Higgins concluded that “miner’s consumption” was actually silicosis, an occupational disease caused by inhaling silica-rich dust, echoing what the union and miners themselves had been saying for years. The pair examined ninety-three miners from Webb City and Carterville who volunteered for the study, sixty-four of whom had diseased lungs. Although they had tuberculosis-like symptoms, very few tested positive for tubercle bacillus. Their disease was silicosis, sometimes with a secondary tuberculosis infection. With lungs lacerated by minute, razor-sharp silica, these miners found it harder and harder to breathe and grew weaker until they could no longer work. Most were reduced to permanent bed rest, where they slowly suffocated. Those in most danger were the machine men and the shovelers. Lanza and Higgins concluded that piece-rate incentives, “when unrestrained except by the individual strength and willingness of the miner,” encouraged the most detrimental behavior. They found shovelers “already on the down grade” after five years on the job. “Hard, constant work had broken these men down,” they reported. “The whole picture furnishes an example of burning the physical candle at both ends.” Although Lanza and Higgins believed that miners should be encouraged to improve their living conditions above ground, their recommendations focused on health
and safety measures in the mines. They called for installing waterlines on all drills and mine faces, prohibiting the employment of anyone under twenty years old in shoveling, enforcing “maximum daily tonnage for shovellers, so that they can not injure their health through overwork,” and implementing an extensive educational campaign about the causes and remedies of the disease. Rather than seek out the union, however, Lanza and Higgins worked most closely with district mine owners, whom they convinced to form an organization, the Southwest Missouri Mine Safety and Sanitation Association, to enact their recommendations. American Zinc’s Howard Young was its first president.61

While the new association considered workplace reform, company officials emphasized the need to impose greater control over the miners if the reforms were to stick. In late 1914, the association announced an ambitious aim to establish “rules which may be introduced over the entire field, looking to the reduction of rock dust in the mines, the amelioration of conditions now pronouncedly unsanitary, and other rules for the better safeguarding against ordinary accidents.” Companies would enforce these rules on a compulsory basis, “as will tend to educate the miners.” The association wanted Lanza and Higgins around to help install the new safety regime. Young, for example, praised Lanza and Higgins for getting “the miners in a frame of mind to cooperate with the operator and helping better working conditions under ground.” The pair had left the district after completing their study, but the mine owners soon invited them back. Lanza and Higgins returned in February 1915 with plans to stay for six months to write a full report. They spoke to large crowds, some over 1,000 strong, of miners and their wives about progress on reforms. The presence of so many women at meetings about the inherent vulnerability of hypermasculine men reflected the immense psychological and economic burdens foisted upon women in the families of sick miners and suggested that they were a major force for change. Lanza and Higgins reported receptive audiences. In March, the Southwest Missouri Mine Safety and Sanitation Association, with the help of the state mine inspectors, secured three new mine safety laws that fell well short of what Lanza and Higgins had recommended: two focusing on sanitation and one mandating the installation of waterlines.62

District companies were particularly keen to exert greater authority over their workers as war in Europe sparked a new metal market boom. In addition to bringing Lanza and Higgins to “educate” the miners, leading companies also punished union members. Cope informed the WFM executive board in late 1914 that “employing companies were discriminating against all who joined the union” with blacklists. At the same time, according to

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American Zinc’s internal records, companies tempted miners with market-based raises as ore prices skyrocketed, from an average of forty-three dollars per ton in November 1914 to sixty-seven dollars per ton in February 1915. American Zinc offered loyal workers a sliding scale for raises that followed the price of ore. In February, for example, Young announced that American Zinc would pay a bonus of one cent per can for shovelers and twenty-five cents per shift for all other miners when ore went above sixty-five dollars per ton, so long as shovelers worked twenty days and other miners worked eighteen days a month. To prevent the recurrence of labor shortages, meanwhile, Young decided to hire “foreigners from the Kansas coal fields” as shovelers. The move enrag ed the company’s native-born miners. “The American shovelers started to running these fellows out and it has cut our night shift force down very much,” Young informed Kimball in March. But the company continued to hire more. Taken together, these moves reflected a concerted effort by the district’s largest company to take full control of its miners once and for all.63

At this crucial moment, the WFM faltered. Crushing strike defeats in South Dakota in 1910, Utah in 1912, and Michigan in 1914 depleted the union treasury. In the summer of 1914, the WFM’s largest, richest, and oldest local, the Butte Miners’ Union, collapsed amid violent infighting between conservative leaders and radical insurgents backed by the IWW. The union’s locals in eastern Missouri also shattered along political and national lines. In the meantime, Moyer and the WFM leadership tried to merge with the UMW, itself reeling after defeat in the 1914 Colorado coal strike. The coal miners rejected the proposal because of the dire state of the WFM. Without dues from Butte, the union nearly dissolved. In August, Miners Magazine cut its format from eighteen pages to four as “a matter of economy.” That same month, rather than sending reinforcements to help Cope, the executive board temporarily laid off all organizers in order to remain solvent. Cope returned to Colorado. The locals quickly weakened; Commerce 138 folded. After four years of union presence, Joplin miners now faced American Zinc with little support from the WFM.64

Without WFM direction, miners across the district relaunched an independent drive to get higher wages and to protect their nativist privileges. In May 1915, miners around Webb City started a series of small wildcat strikes for more pay. They also moved against foreign-born miners. At American Zinc, Young informed Kimball, “American day-shift shovelers ordered all foreigners to leave the district.” The implosion of the WFM exacerbated the situation. Several dissident union organizers from other districts, including former WFM and UMW members, led by a man named George Wallace,
came to take advantage of the organizational disarray. They convinced many miners to start their own local union. They called it the American Metal Miners Union (AMMU). S. E. Graves, a “renegade” from a WFM local in eastern Missouri, was elected president. Charles Fear, the local publisher, politician, and AFL organizer, supported the move. By the end of May, the AMMU claimed 600 members, most of them in the sheet ground mines.65

The AMMU promised to give miners what the WFM seemingly could not: the benefits of stable and safe terms of work and the power of racial and nativist exclusion, free of outside interference. The union stated aims that corresponded to the “pure and simple” collective bargaining doctrines of the AFL: employer recognition of the union, a district-wide wage scale agreed through contracts, the arbitration of disputes, and “safer and more sanitary conditions.” Most important, the AMMU proposed a daily wage for all classes of workers, including shovelers, with a sliding mechanism that would go up or down twenty-five cents per day for every ten-dollar move in the market price of ore. For shovelers, that scale would start at $3.00 per day when ore was $40 per ton and rise to $4.75 per day when it reached $110 per ton. While the sliding scale demonstrated how miners remained committed to market thinking, the union’s abandonment of the piece rate revealed a willingness to moderate the most flagrant entrepreneurial commitments, in line with recommendations from Lanza and Higgins. The AMMU explicitly limited its membership and benefits to white, native-born Americans. “This is a white man’s camp; down with the foreigner,” the AMMU blared. Union leaders publicly refused to affiliate with the WFM after Cope returned to try to regain control. They attacked the WFM as a friend of foreign-born miners, “an aggregation of ‘Bohunks.’” At one rally, Cope tried to speak but was pulled down from the platform. “Take him down,” members of the crowd yelled. “He wants the foreigners in.” “We are forming our own independent union,” another union leader told the press. “It is the purpose of the men who are responsible for the organization to keep it Americanized just as it has been in the past. Foreign labor will not be admitted and we do not want it understood that we are affiliating with any other organization.” The AMMU, Graves explained, “is to be a white man’s organization.” With ore prices nearing $100 per ton and nationalist fervor rising after the Lusitania sinking, the AMMU was popular. Within a month, it claimed over 2,000 members.66

Confident and aggressive, the AMMU launched an all-out strike on June 29 to reshape labor relations in the district. The strike began in the sheet ground, where over 1,000 miners quit work, at first to reverse a recent wage cut. The rebellion grew as they demanded “a fair share” of wartime

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profits. Miners deserved these rewards, AMMU leaders argued, because they faced “the hazard of underground work” to produce the ore. According to the AMMU, anything less than a wage that matched surging market prices could not be “fair, honorable or patriotic”—a betrayal of their white, nativist prerogatives. The striking miners made brazen shows of force in a series of parades and rallies in Webb City, Carterville, and Joplin. In Joplin, 2,500 union miners and supporters paraded down Main Street. They carried American flags, large and small. The union continued to grow. By July 1, nearly 3,000 miners were on strike. By July 3, the union had shut down every mine in Jasper County and planned to extend into Oklahoma. Some observers estimated that as many as 8,000 miners were on strike by July 4.67

Although at first dismissive of the strike as a “good natured holiday,” district mining companies soon took a publicly respectful but firm stance. They hoped to contain, not antagonize, the miners and did so by appealing to the entrepreneurial traditions of the poor man’s camp and their sense of racial prerogative. A contingent of operators, led by Young, met with union representatives to refuse their proposed scale but reported that “the conference broke up with good feeling.” He believed that most men wanted to go back to work and would do so with some pressure and inducements. The same day, the Joplin city council passed an ordinance requiring a permit to parade. Meanwhile, American Zinc directed the sheriff and police to protect mine property, particularly the water pumps. On July 6, ninety mine operators announced a compromise to end the strike. They offered to pay men who went back to work the prestrike wage of four dollars per day or ten cents per can and would institute a temporary sliding scale for all workers “based on the price of ore, so that the miner, as in the past, will share in the prosperity of the district.” They would not attempt to hire foreign-born workers. Neither, however, would the companies “recognize the so-called union nor stand for union domination or control.” Joplin mayor Hugh McIndoe urged the men to remain true to the district’s poor man’s traditions, which he believed were still attainable. “There is but a small space that separates the miner from the operator,” he said. “I hope that within the next year you men will make enough that you will be operators and dealing with employees who are asking for more wages.” If compromise did not work, American Zinc was prepared to compel them. Young hired fifty professional strikebreakers from the Bergoff and Waddell firm, which had broken the 1914 WFM strike in Michigan, in case these appeals failed.68

The AMMU capitulated immediately. Two days after the company announced its compromise, miners in Neck City voted to go back to work. At Chitwood, miners were “anxious to return to work at the former wage scale”
with the new sliding mechanism. Miners in Webb City and Carterville abandoned the strike on July 10. The Joplin local, the last to hold out, decided to go back on July 11. The “roar of assent was so decisive that a vote was not taken,” the press reported. The local president, Adam Cullifer, a fifty-five-year-old mine engineer who had worked in the district since the 1870s, encouraged his colleagues to take advantage of the high wages on offer, more than four dollars per day in most mines, and the promise that pay would rise further along with the ore markets. “I desire to get all I can for my work and to work under the best conditions possible,” Cullifer explained. “If we can’t be the operators,” he declared, “let’s work for the operators, if we can, and be satisfied when we obtain good wages.” He and others proclaimed that they would never go on strike again. The strike might have been a mistake, but viewed in terms of the entrepreneurial and white nationalist commitments of many district miners, it had not been a complete failure. They had forced the companies to commit, albeit temporarily, to a wage scale based on market prices and to the exclusion of foreign-born miners from the district. Without a written agreement, they trusted the verbal pact between white men. Young reported that American Zinc’s miners “are apparently in good spirits.” The Neck City AMMU local celebrated with a barbeque and baseball game.

Surprisingly, the AMMU and the district’s union movement survived the strike. Many members, including Cullifer, wanted to stay organized to make the sliding scale permanent and defend their nativist privileges. They believed that the best way to do that was by affiliating directly with the AFL, without the WFM. Union leaders approached Gompers about doing so, but he reaffirmed the WFM’s jurisdiction over all metal miners. He urged them to “become part of the Western Federation of Miners and make common cause with the organized workers of America.” Moyer visited the district himself in the weeks after the strike. WFM leaders had been in denial over the AMMU; Cope explained its bellicose popularity as the result of foreign interference, the dirty work of clandestine German agents who wanted to disrupt Allied metal production. Moyer, however, tried to harness the nationalism of the AMMU by portraying the WFM as little more than a gateway to the AFL. He promised to make the AMMU a district council within the WFM, a designation that provided maximum local autonomy and tacitly approved its racist and nativist aims. Gompers approved the strategy. Other union leaders followed, including AFL mining representative James Lord, former Butte Miners’ Union leader James Lowney, Reuben Wood, and mining union luminary Mother Jones. They all reiterated the pledge that the AMMU would retain near-total control over its affairs. It worked. In early
August, the AMMU locals in Joplin, Webb City, Chitwood, Oronogo, Prosperity, Duenweg, and Carterville affiliated with the WFM. Miners formed new locals in Zincite, Galena, Sarcoxie, and Commerce in September and October. “I do not know just how this is going to work,” Young informed Kimball, “but it looks as if the Western Federation are getting a stronger hold on the Joplin miners than they have ever had before.” By the end of 1915, the WFM had more than 5,000 members in the district, although most identified their membership primarily with the AFL.70

In a significant turnaround, Joplin miners now represented one of the strongest contingents within the weakened WFM, a dire sign for the union. Of seventy-seven locals in good standing, eleven were in the Joplin district. In late 1915, Charles Moyer informed Guy Miller, who was organizing in Arizona, that the WFM considered Missouri “the most important field in its jurisdiction.” After almost twenty years of ruinous conflict between Joplin miners and the WFM, he believed the union was on the verge of having them completely organized, albeit on a promise that the WFM would leave them alone. Despite the racial and ethnic enmity at the heart of that conflict, Moyer had even come to value the district’s staunch white nativism. “They are all practically one nationality,” he told Miller, which he now acknowledged as a source of strength and unity that benefited organization. If anyone doubted that Joplin would soon be “the best unionized district in the United States,” WFM organizer Joseph Cannon declared in September 1915 with a highly ironic flourish, considering past events, “just watch them. They will ‘show you.’”71

After a decade of chaotic wildcat opposition to company shutdowns, pay cuts, and threats of mechanization and cheap labor, Joplin miners had by 1915 forced area mining companies to honor two key demands: a market-based wage scale and the exclusive hiring of native-born white men. To do so, they had wielded collective force through an independent union that reaffirmed their faith in the power of physically strong white American men to command high wages and social respect. Despite defeat in the 1915 strike, a majority of miners for the first time seemed ready to join the WFM, if only as a means to AFL affiliation, as a way to defend that social and economic bargain. Their swing toward the WFM and the AFL was not a recantation but rather a reconfirmation of their commitments to local control, white nationalism, and the entrepreneurial incentives of the sliding scale on the eve of American entry into the Great War.