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## **Seattle to Portland: Centralia & Its Massacre**

*This is the fifth part of a series that follows the [Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic](#) along its route, and explores the history and transformation of the Pacific Northwest through the communities and stops along the way. See [here](#) for part 4.*

It was nearly 11 a.m. when we arrived in Centralia for the half-way point on the STP, to have lunch with David, our friend who was taking the whole course in one day. We parked in a free public lot and hurried into a little cafe called "Centralia Perk," in homage to *Friends*, which was also an ice cream parlor and antique store. The temperature was already in the eighties at least, and we left a few minutes later with ice cream cones firmly in hand, to walk the half-dozen or so blocks to Centralia College, where the STP riders were coming in.

Along the way, we took a detour through Washington Park, along S. Pearl St., behind the old Carnegie Library, now the [Centralia Timberland Library](#). All over the place, little signs announcing "No Camping" covered the lawns; up to 6,000 people on the STP would be looking for places to crash over-night in Centralia, and this was the one place in town they can't. Because Washington Park is sacred ground.

Right in the middle of the park, in front of a towering flag pole, there's a tall bronze statue of a First World War doughboy called *The Sentinel*. On first inspection, you'd be forgiven for assuming it was part of a war memorial: It sits at the end of the "Freedom Walk," a long, black stone memorial to Centralia's war dead. But *The Sentinel* is not a war memorial; it—and indeed the whole of the memorial in Washington Square Park—is one giant conglomeration of political propaganda, the product of a conflict between the left and right that stretches back 89 years.



Cynder Vain's plaque, installed after a bitter fight in the early 1990s, commemorating the IWW side in the Centralia Massacre. (*K. Patora*)

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Those who view the 1999 riots at the WTO meeting in Seattle as a strange outburst of subversive left-wing political activity in the state know nothing of Washington's political history. The same timber, mining, and railroad barons who whiled away their time [smoking cigars at the Spar Cafe](#) with the highest ranking State officials built their empires on the backs of thousands of workers: the miners, mill workers, lumberjacks, longshoremens, and railroad employees who kept the state's extraction industries chugging along. And by 1919, these workers were desperately fighting to unionize, led by an assortment of communists, anarchists, and radicals.

Socialism and union movements had existed since the post-Civil War era, of course, but in the wake of the First World War, America was a seething crucible waiting to explode. The left, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, was increasing its unionizing activities, while right-wing and nativist movements were forming to oppose them and operate as proxies for entrenched business interests.

Enter the [IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World](#), known colloquially as the "Wobblies." A militant, left-wing union sympathetic to the Soviet Union and popular amongst the timber and mining industry workers in Washington, the Wobblies had in 1919 pulled off one of, if not the only, [successful general strikes in U.S. history](#). On February 6, 1919, 65,000 workers in Seattle walked off the job in support of 35,000 striking dockworkers. In an [editorial from February 4](#), [Anna Louise Strong](#), the legendary leftist journalist, fanned the flames of Communist paranoia by declaring of the strike: "We are undertaking the most tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country, a move which will lead - NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!"

In fact, the general strike led nowhere. The city was paralyzed for five days, but a lack of concrete demands left labor with little to claim as a victory. But the ability of the IWW to even pull off a general strike left business interests and anti-Communists fearful.

One of the main organizations opposing the IWW and other left-wing organizations was the American Legion. Officially formed in March 1919, the [American Legion](#) was ostensibly organized by veterans to support veterans and the "values" they purported to have fought for in the war, but its political purpose was to resist the spread of leftist politics, and members frequently served as strike-breakers against union organizers.

What happened in Centralia on November 11, 1919 was just one of countless flash points in the often brutal and today largely forgotten history of American inter-war politics, but its shadow is long and broad. John Dos Passos, the great, unabashedly left-wing American Modernist, whose reputation has suffered over the last few decades because of his political affiliations, even saw fit to include the events in Centralia in [1919](#), volume 2 of his monumental U.S.A. Trilogy. In his telling:

The timber owners, the sawmill and shinglekings were patriots; they'd won the war (in the course of which the price of lumber had gone up from \$16 a thousand feet to \$116; there are even cases where the government paid as high as \$1200 a thousand for spruce); they set out to clean the reds out of the logging camps...

In Centralia, the Wobblies were vehemently opposed by local timber barons, who backed the American Legion and other anti-union activists as a bulwark against the IWW successfully unionizing their workers. Since at least 1917, the Wobblies had struggled to find and keep a union hall. On Memorial Day 1918, veterans in a parade through Centralia broke off and looted and burned the IWW hall. So, as November 11, 1919, Armistice Day, rolled around, the IWW was prepared for a repeat of the attack, due in no small part to the rumors flying around town that the occasion of the American Legion parade would be used to again dispossess the IWW.

The leader of the American Legion was a man by the name of [Warren O. Grimm](#), a former All American football hero, freshman class leader at the UW in 1910, and a frat boy from Sigma Nu. He was also a veteran of the [American Expeditionary Force Siberia](#), a little-known venture wherein around 5,000 Americans were sent to fight the Bolsheviks in Siberia for the purposes of defending the Trans-Siberian Railroad in Vladivostok, from 1918-20. According to the historian James W. Loewen, in his book [Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong](#),

Grimm had expounded at length on his experiences in Vladivostok to lobby against the Wobblies, calling them the "American Bosheviki."

On the eleventh, while a small group of Wobblies remained to protect the union hall in the Roderick Hotel on Tower Ave., between Second and Third Sts., other workers armed themselves with rifles and took positions near by, with the intent to protect themselves and their headquarters if attacked. The American Legion parade, the ranks of which were swollen with visitors from Chehalis and too large for the tiny town, was scheduled to pass by the Roderick not once but twice. The second time around, all hell broke loose.

The exact series of events is a matter of dispute, but more or less everyone agrees the following events took place: the American Legion leader Warren Grimm turned to his followers and called out "Halt! Close up!"; at some point before or after, a group broke off and charged the union hall; and finally, in response to either the call or the attack, the Wobblies started firing.

Numerous theories abound: Did the Wobblies fire without provocation? Did the American Legionnaires attack the hall first? What did Grimm intend with his command?

The most compelling explanation, offered during the murder trial of IWW members the next year, held that a group of Legionnaires were under the pay or influence of the Centralia Citizens' Committee, a proxy of F.B. Hubbard, the president of the Eastern Railway & Lumber Company, who had an ongoing dispute with the IWW and was their leading opponent in town. This theory holds that Grimm, who was looking back over his marching Legionnaires, saw a group break away in a premeditated attack the hall, and tried to order them to stop; Wobbly Eugene Barnett, who had a direct shot at Grimm at the moment he made the command, mistook the order as one to attack, and fired. Whatever the case, within minutes, Grimm and Arthur McElfresh were shot dead in the street. The Legionnaires descended on the union hall, where Ben Cassagrande was shot to death, most likely by Wobbly Wesley Everest.

Everest fled the scene armed and was caught trying to cross the Skookumchuck River by Dale Hubbard, F.B. Hubbard's nephew. Hubbard's pistol was jammed; he was shot by Everest in the stand-off, who was subsequently arrested while pistol-whipping the mortally wounded Hubbard.

That night, a lynch mob descended on the jail. The city's power grid was cut, and in the darkness Everest was dragged from the jail. As he was pulled out, Dos Passos has him telling his comrades: "Tell the boys I did my best." He was beaten, strung up with a noose and tossed off a bridge three times, until his neck broke, and was then shot. According to some accounts (which Dos Passos bought) he was castrated before death, but no autopsy was taken to confirm or disprove the claim: the coroner laughably ruled the death a suicide. Everest was buried in an unmarked grave in the pauper's cemetery, its location forgotten for generations.

But for years, the legacy of the so-called [Centralia Massacre](#) has provoked angst and bitter conflict. *The Sentinel* was raised in 1924 by the American Legion in honor of their fellows killed, with no notice or remembrance given for the Wobblies, who were, after all, harassed and persecuted for years leading up that tragic day, to say nothing of Everest's shameful fate.

It wasn't until 1989 that anyone managed to break through Centralia's silence over the rest of the community's role in causing the violence in 1919. A 14-year-old student by the name of Cynder Viles researched the events for her [National History Day](#) project, and, with the support of the [Queen Anne Historical Society's](#) student plaque program, which allowed students to place historical markers, chose to honor the Wobbly side of the Massacre. Months of acrimony followed as community leaders and the American Legion objected to her efforts to place a plaque commemorating the Wobblies next to *The Sentinel*. In 1992 Viles, who ultimately won her battle after standing her ground after contentious public meetings, was awarded the [National Council for the Social Studies' Academic Freedom Award](#), the first student ever to have won it.

In response, in 1993 Centralia installed the "Freedom Walk," which, in the words of the historian Loewen, "Implicitly...conflated the 'The Sentinel' with conventional World War I doughboys..."

If it's hard to imagine that the town would resort to such cynical means to re-purpose a monument and suppress the town's past, that's nothing compared to the cynicism of the marble monument itself. In an act of what appears to be a disgusting sort of fidelity to fiscal responsibility, the long slab of black marble, listing Centralia's war dead in every war since WWI, was left with a fair amount of blank space at the end, in grim anticipation of future wars. Perhaps the only thing more grotesque than the Walk's purpose and grim extra space is the fact that they're near running out after only 15 years.

*Next: That good old offensive Uncle Sam sign.*

By [Jeremy M. Barker](#)