

Excerpt 1 from Oral History Interview with Upton Sinclair

Joe Toyoshima interviewed journalist, activist, and labor organizer Upton Sinclair in 1966. In the interview, now part of the Urban Archives General Oral History Collection, Sinclair discusses several events throughout his life, including his activism. Here he provides a brief narrative of the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, part of a labor dispute in the coalfields of Colorado, and his involvement in the ensuing protest and final resolution of the dispute.

Transcript:

US: The Rockefeller was our Broadway demonstration. Well, that's a long story you know, I've told it in my autobiography. The Rockefellers had this—these great coal mines or iron mines out in the Rocky Mountains and they were fortified camps and no union organizer was ever allowed in there. And the strikers went on strike and went down and started a tent colony in the valley, in the town of Ludlow. It's known as the "Ludlow Massacre." They had, I don't know a thousand, ten thousand mine workers and their women and children down there. And they held out for several months, and the Rockefellers or their leaders—their managers, I don't know who committed the crime. Rockefeller must have known about it.

Anyhow, they set down in the night and poured kerosene on the tents. I suppose they thought tents wouldn't burn fast, but they set fire to the tents and I think it was three women and eleven children were burned to death. It's known as the Ludlow Massacre. And there was two or three inches about it in the New York Times and that was every word in New York. And I set out to bring it—to force it upon public attention and I organized what we called the Mourning Parade. I got a group of people to agree to walk up and put a band of mourning crepe around their arm and walk up and down in silence in front of Mr. Rockefeller's office. I took Mrs. Cannon, the wife of the mine union president down to see him and he refused to see her.

And that was the worst way he—the worst mistake he ever made in his life because he brought all this down on him. And we started to walk, and I and three or four ladies were arrested the first thing in the morning. The police, of course, we had announced in the newspapers what we were going to do, and we were arrested and fined three dollars. And I refused to pay the fine, so I spent a couple of days in The Tombs prison and then my lawyer sent in word to me that I couldn't bring appeal—couldn't appeal the sentence unless I had paid money. I couldn't demand to get my time back, you see. So I paid the dollar fine and came out.

And we kept that parade going for about six weeks, and the long story, I've told it in my autobiography, we broke Rockefeller's will. He just couldn't stand it anymore. Some young anarchists went up, planned to go up and blow him up, and they were making bombs in a New York tenement and blew themselves up, and Rockefeller read all about that in the next day's newspaper. And I guess that's the real thing that he couldn't stand, you see.

JT: And you also talked to the Theodore Roosevelt, didn't you, and he played a part in the—talking to the Rockefellers?

US: Not—no, not in that. What—it was Franklin Roosevelt that played a part in that struggle. In 1934. But the Rockefeller story, it grew and grew and grew and got worse and worse. I've told all about

it in my autobiography. You can tell your students to get it in the library. He finally gave way, and went up to the mining camp, he and his lawyers, and worked out a settlement with the strike leaders. And old Mother Jones was there and people have forgotten who Mother Jones is. She's a wild—was a wild-eyed old Irish woman who went wherever there was a big strike and just raised hell and cursed the mine owners or whatever they were. And she was a figure, of course. The workers all adored her. She was their heroine. Mother Jones they called her.

And when they made the settlement—when Rockefeller made the settlement up at the mine in Colorado, that had a dinner and a peace meeting, and John D. Rockefeller danced with old Mother Jones.