

The 1947 John Morrell Factory Strike

From Dixie's Perspective – Part II



The John Morrell Plant

Dixie was 8 years old in 1947. She lived on the East end of Ottumwa not too far behind Sutherland Lumber. In the summer of 1947 there was an event that affected the entire town of Ottumwa and stuck very much in Dixie's memory. This was the John Morrell labor strike. By the end of this story you should be able to understand how and why Dixie developed such a strong belief and support for labor unions.

Dixie recalls the strike was a very big deal for the city of Ottumwa. Anyone and everyone who wasn't working went and lined the sides of the streets by the Morrell plant. This was the picket line. Tensions throughout the city were high. Dixie had several family members that were out of work because of the strike.

Every day the replacements workers known as scabs would be escorted into the factory. When their shift ended the Sheriff would then escort the scabs past the picket line. The picketers would rock the scabs cars back and forth and yell things. At the plant wasn't the only place where tensions were high.

The Union members would do whatever they could to get to the scabs. One guy named Jonas Collier had a wonderful, large garden. One night the strikers tore up every inch of his garden. It also wasn't uncommon for a scab to have green paint thrown all over their house or car. I asked mom why "green" paint. She answered "green is scab color". Apparently this was common knowledge. There were also times when for example a scab would walk out of a store and a group of strikers would beat the scab up. To the strikers, these scabs were taking their jobs and their livelihood.

During the strike John Walker who had a tavern and grocery store allowed everyone to charge their booze and groceries. He basically helped carry everyone through the strike. When the strike was over he let everyone pay on their grocery bills as they could. One interesting story regarding Walker's tavern is that after the strike was over, nobody was coming back to his bar. Everyone had a tab and owed money. One night he called

everyone over to his bar. He put all their tabs together and burnt them. He told everyone that their slate was clean. After that everyone started coming back to his bar.

During the strike the CIO union (not the AFL-CIO) setup a soup kitchen at the union hall. Every day they served soup and crackers for lunch and dinner. The union hall was very close to where Dixie lived. When it was time for lunch Dixie remembers the soup ladies yelling at her and the other neighborhood kids to come and eat. She remembers the soup being sooooo good.

It is interesting to hear about the long term affects of the strike. Once you were a scab, you were ALWAYS a scab. Dixie remembers one time talking with her sister Dort about someone. Dixie couldn't remember who Dort was talking about. To clarify, Dort said it was, you know that old scab so and so...this was almost 50 years after the strike!

An interesting side story...

When I was in middle school there was a Greyhound bus driver strike. I remember one night on the news there was a story about strikers shooting at the buses and the drivers. I remember making a fatal error. I suggested in front of Dean and Dixie that the strikers shouldn't shoot at the buses, that they could accidently hit an innocent passenger. I don't think I have ever seen Dixie get so worked up. By the end I understood that those scab sons of bitches deserved to get shot at and that if a dumb son of a bitch was going to cross the picket line and ride Greyhound they deserved to get shot at. I remember Dad actually sitting back and laughing. I helplessly tried to defend my point while mom got more and more mad. Finally I came to my senses and (for my well being) agreed with everything mom was saying.