

Multiracial Labor Organizing and Community Building in Roslyn, Washington, 1888-1907

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Nestled in the midst of Washington's Cascade Mountains lies the small town of Roslyn, a community of under 1000 people that is perhaps most famous for its role as the filming location for the hit 1990s comedy-drama series *Northern Exposure*. The town resembles many similar communities throughout the Pacific Northwest because of its past as a mining center. Railroad executives established Roslyn looking to further profit from the land Congress granted them to facilitate the construction of massive railway lines like the Northern Pacific that connected Saint Paul, Minnesota to the burgeoning economic hubs of Tacoma and Seattle. However, this fairly common origin belies a dramatic story of both racial conflict and interracial cooperation that led to the establishment of one of the largest Black communities in the Pacific Northwest prior to the Great Migration of Black Americans into the North during the twentieth century.

In 1888, seeking higher wages and the eight-hour workday, predominantly-white, US-born mine workers in the newly established coal mining town of Roslyn formed a local affiliate of the Knights of Labor and began petitioning the Northern Pacific Coal Company which owned the mines for labor protections. In response, the company laid off the workers affiliated with the Knights of Labor, triggering the union to call a strike that shut down the coal mines. As a way to break the strike, the Northwest Coal Company employed one of the miners, a Black man named James Shepperson who worked in the Illinois and Indiana mines before migrating to Roslyn, to return to the Midwest and recruit hundreds of other Black miners to take the place of the striking workers. The company hired Shepperson due to his experience in the Midwestern mines and his personal connections to many Black coal miners there. Shepperson was highly successful, and by August a train carrying approximately 50 Black strikebreakers arrived. This train was soon followed in October by a train carrying a further 140 Black miners.¹

¹ Raymond A. Hall, "Kings, Knights, and Pawns: Black Coal Miners and Racial Conflict in Washington Territory," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 105, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 89-91.

Tensions threatened to boil over as armed striking miners faced off with armed private agents the company had recruited from the Thiel Detective Agency in Portland, Oregon and with the Black strikebreakers themselves, who had taken up arms during stopovers in Montana and Yakima upon hearing of heightened tensions among the striking miners in Roslyn.² This represented a moment of severe racial antagonism that nearly transformed into open racial conflict. Racial conflict was not merely a remote possibility in Washington's mining towns, as just a year before a group of Chinese migrant laborers were massacred outside of a town nearby Roslyn by private agents posing as state law enforcement.³ Thus, the arrival of a trainload of Black miners in the same region threatened to once again ignite a racial massacre.

By the early 1900s, however, the situation was markedly different. A town that had once nearly seen a race riot had produced, in the estimation of the Walla Walla-based *Evening Statesman*, the "largest local union of the United Mine Workers of America," and one that was uniquely organized on a multiracial basis.⁴ In a town that was composed almost entirely of U.S.-born Black people and first-generation immigrants recently arrived from Italy and Eastern Europe, their unique multiracial organizing strategy played an essential part in the eventual lasting success of the United Mine Workers in Roslyn. Former Black Roslyn mine worker and union member Powell S. Barnett recalled this new union's participation in a 1904 strike that, in sharp contrast to the 1888 Knights of Labor strike, won an improved contract for the workers through its commitment to racial equality in the workplace.⁵

² Ibid., 90-91.

³ Letter from Eugene Semple to Henry J. Snively, September 26, 1888, Henry J. Snively Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 - General Correspondence: Eugene Semple - 1887-1888, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA (hereafter cited as Semple Letter, Snively Papers, UW Special Collections).

⁴ "Largest in this Country: Roslyn's Branch of United Mine Workers of America Number 1500," *The Evening Statesman*, December 8, 1903, 7.

⁵ Powell S. Barnett, interview by Larry Gossett, January 21, 1967, transcript, Powell S. Barnett Papers, Box 1, Folder 3 - Powell S. Barnett Interview - 1967, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 12 (hereafter cited as Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections).

In this study, I will analyze the underlying causes of the stark shift in multiracial cooperation in Roslyn between the 1888 strike and the 1904 strike, both inside and outside the workplace. An acknowledgement of these causes enables us to see how racial cooperation was the essential component missing from the Knights of Labor's 1888 strike which allowed the racially integrated United Mine Workers to achieve their demands and build worker power across racial lines. Ultimately, the migration of native-born white miners out of Roslyn in the months following the 1888 strike created a space for the newly arrived Black miners to create a community in which public goods and cultural institutions were not restricted on the basis of race. Black miners found common cause with immigrant white miners from countries on the European periphery like Italy and Eastern Europe, who also arrived in Roslyn in the years after the strike, in seeking to establish a new community free of the rigid racial and ethnic hierarchies prevalent throughout American society in this period. Through the integration of important aspects of life in town such as workplaces, schools, and holiday celebrations, Black residents played a crucial role as cultural mediators to immigrant workers and their families who were unfamiliar with American customs.

All of these elements facilitated the development of an environment in which interracial union organizing could find great success. Through these various factors, Black miners in Roslyn were able to radically change their fortunes across this sixteen year period and, in doing so, create greater economic opportunity and improved living conditions for all miners in the surrounding community in a period not traditionally seen as conducive to interracial cooperation or labor organizing.

That this stunning display of interracial labor organizing culminating in the successful 1904 strike occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries makes it even more

remarkable. For one, this period of history, following the end of Reconstruction, saw the imposition of Jim Crow laws throughout the South after the withdrawal of federal troops and a massive increase in instances of white supremacist terrorism and anti-Black violence, exemplified by episodes like the Tulsa Race Massacre.⁶ It is important to note that the prominence of white supremacy at this time was not limited to the South, and organizations like the Ku Klux Klan had great influence throughout the North and West as well. In fact, not far from the Black community in Roslyn, a noted eugenicist and Ku Klux Klan supporter named Walter M. Pierce was elected governor of Oregon in 1922.⁷ In addition to this display of interracial solidarity occurring during such an ingrained moment of anti-Black racism prevalent across the country, this period in which it successfully unfolded is also considered to be one that was especially perilous for labor organizing in America. Strikes and other labor actions were frequently met with military force deployed by the state and federal governments, as was apparent in the suppression of the Great Strike of 1877 among rail workers.⁸ Given this hostile environment on two fronts, the abundant success enjoyed by a multiracial cast of labor organizers in Roslyn directly challenges many preconceptions about the extent to which it was possible to build multiracial labor solidarity at this point in American history.

Various publications throughout the years have touched on topics related to this story, from accounts of the 1888 strike that resulted in the introduction of Black miners to the broader history of Black labor organizing and migration to the West. However, thus far none have sought to explain what made the radical transformation in the possibility for racial cooperation in Roslyn between 1888 and 1904 possible. Raymond Hall's article, "Kings, Knights, and Pawns:

⁶ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 209-223.

⁷ Robert R. McCoy, "The Paradox of Oregon's Progressive Politics: The Political Career of Walter Marcus Pierce," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 110, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 407.

⁸ Hall, "Kings, Knights, and Pawns," 92.

Black Coal Miners and Racial Conflict in Washington Territory,” for example, provides an in depth discussion of the background and progression of the 1888 strike, but his analysis does not extend to the multiracial community building in which Black and immigrant white workers engaged in the years following the strike. Similarly, Ronald L. Lewis’ *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980* traces the struggles Black coal miners faced working in an industry in which they were frequently employed as strikebreakers, but his work does not place a central focus on the interactions between Black and immigrant white miners in the same communities.⁹

My original historiographical intervention has been made possible by preexisting work on race relations and labor organizing in the West. A foundational text in the history of Black Americans in the American West is Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990*, which chronicles Black history in the American West from the arrival of the first enslaved people accompanying Spanish conquistadors in what became modern Texas in 1528 through the 1990s. Its title references the mythical “racial frontier,” a concept Taylor developed to describe the aspirations of several Black settlers in the American West who sought to escape the rigid racial hierarchies of American society by moving West into a region they saw as not yet defined by these same hierarchies.¹⁰ Taylor’s work acknowledges that this racial frontier existed far more in the aspirations of Black westward migrants than it did in reality. My research undergirds this by documenting the struggles Black miners in Roslyn faced following their arrival. While Roslyn offered unique opportunities for economic upward mobility and social integration in a period of American history defined by the imposition of Jim Crow laws and a heightening of racist violence across the country, it was not a

⁹ Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987).

¹⁰ Taylor, *Racial Frontier*, 17-19.

colorblind utopia. For example, even in his largely positive remembrances of Roslyn several decades later, former mine worker Powell S. Barnett acknowledged instances of racial discrimination and separation along racial lines. Among these instances was one in which his band struggled to find a music instructor because two white musicians who came to town each refused to work with a band with Black members.¹¹ My paper extends Taylor's analysis by demonstrating how the experience of Black coal miners in Roslyn simultaneously evidenced their aspiration to cross this racial frontier and the reality - filled with challenges and successes - they faced in one specific Western community. However, I also demonstrate that Roslyn, in some key ways, fulfilled these ambitions of crossing "a racial frontier" by offering new opportunities for Black residents to escape the more rigid racial hierarchies established in other parts of the United States.

Other work on which I draw focuses specifically on the implications of Black westward migration for organized labor movements in the Western states. The aforementioned article by Raymond Hall follows in Taylor's footsteps in its analysis of the causes and immediate aftermath of the 1888 Knights of Labor strike in Roslyn. By using a close examination of sources produced about and by some of the strikebreakers brought in by the company, Hall's study chronicles how they organized and armed themselves to defend against threats made by the white workers without relying on the exploitative company guards.¹² Hall's central claim is that the Black strikebreakers, rather than just being unwitting pawns for the company, were aware of the role they would play upon their arrival in Roslyn. From their first moments in Roslyn, then, Hall's work helps demonstrate that Black miners played an active role in seeking to build a better life for themselves and their families.¹³ My paper extends Hall's analysis past

¹¹ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 7.

¹² Hall, "Kings, Knights, and Pawns," 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

his more limited focus on the 1888 strike and its immediate aftermath by detailing the lasting effects of the departure of the majority of the 1888 strikers from Roslyn and the community's new foundation as a majority Black settlement going into the 1890s. Additionally, it expands on Hall's emphasis on the agency exercised by Black strikebreakers during the 1888 strike. My work details how a continuation of this initial agency, combined with the new demographic reality created by the massive departure of native-born white miners, allowed Black miners to become community leaders and spearhead the organizing efforts of the United Mine Workers.

Histories of other instances of interracial labor organizing in America prior to the Great Migration and World War II provide key theoretical insights which support my analysis of interracial organizing in Roslyn and surrounding towns. Much of the literature on this topic centers on the American South, where the largest segment of Black Americans continued to live prior to the Great Migration. Daniel Rosenberg's *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism 1892-1923* epitomizes these works in its careful examination of the "half-and-half" system that provided equal labor responsibilities and representation in leadership positions for Black and white workers.¹⁴ Despite the many differences between the conditions faced by labor organizers and trade unionists in New Orleans and Roslyn, Rosenberg's account helps refute the widespread notion that the "institutionalization of Jim Crow tolled the bell for an important trend of interracial cooperation that had developed during and after Reconstruction" by documenting the interracial labor organizing that emerged there.¹⁵ Some of his theories on how this multiracial organizing became possible, such as close residential proximity between Black and white workers along the waterfront dating from the Antebellum Period and the high concentration of immigrant laborers who did not harbor strong preexisting animosity against

¹⁴ Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism 1892-1923* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 69-71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

Black people, warrant comparison to the causes of interracial cooperation among workers in Roslyn.¹⁶ Rosenberg's work provides an example of the necessity of analyzing interracial unionization efforts and labor struggles in a time and place not viewed as conducive to either. My work further examines some of the dynamics Rosenberg's case study highlights regarding the political and demographic factors enabling interracial labor organizing in this period, such as the lack of residential segregation among the working class and the interactions between Black workers and first-generation immigrant workers who did not have the same strong affiliation with American racial hierarchies as native-born white workers.

Further, Ronald L. Lewis' aforementioned book provides essential background on the development of the coal industry during this period while also providing a unique perspective focusing on the Black miners who worked in the industry from its earliest days in the United States. By focusing on Washington state's oft-overlooked coal mining past and its frequent exclusion from studies documenting Western Black populations prior to the Great Migration, my work continues in the direction set by Lewis' work by bringing light to the contributions of a population that played a key and unique role in the region's economic development.¹⁷ My paper extends Lewis' analysis by applying his theories to the results of the 1888 Knights of Labor strike in Roslyn and considering why, although accurate at first, the predictions of this

¹⁶ Ibid., 6-8.

¹⁷ One of Lewis' main theoretical contributions on which I build is his application of the "split labor market" theory to racial politics in northern coalfields. This model is based on the idea that "racial antagonism develops in a labor market which is split along racial lines, and the price of labor differs for at least two racial groups." Thus, employers, higher-paid workers, and lower-paid workers all have competing interests in such a model, and, "since it is in their interests to obtain labor as cheaply as possible," employers can "seek relief by importing cheaper labor" from workers of a different racial group when workers in a largely racially homogeneous workplace begin agitating for better wages and conditions. However, according to Lewis, historical evidence suggests that racial conflict will subsequently break out, as racial animus becomes mixed with economic incentives for the higher-paid group attempting to safeguard their socioeconomic position. Employers can then benefit from this conflict between groups of laborers, as they are unable to unite together to push for better wages and conditions. After describing this theory in detail, Lewis applies it to various labor conflicts involving Black coal miners throughout the North. He specifically highlights the incidents in Nelsonville, Ohio and Braidwood, Illinois that are some of the first known examples in what would become the relatively common practice of companies using Black miners to break strikes by native-born white miners. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, xiii and 80-82.

theory that emphasize racial conflict ultimately fail to explain the interracial labor organizing that occurred there in the subsequent decades. In Roslyn, due to community building efforts by both Black and immigrant white miners, groups of various racial and ethnic backgrounds managed to coexist and construct a thriving community by coming to an understanding of their shared cultural and economic interests.

Having discussed my intervention in the wider scholarship, it is also necessary to discuss the sources which have shaped my research. Oral history interviews will constitute a significant portion of the evidence supporting this thesis' argument. Given the unpredictability of human memory, and complex incentives that people may have to, knowingly or unknowingly, misrecall certain circumstances of their life, employing oral histories comes with a fair number of challenges when using them as historical evidence. The most referenced collection of oral histories used to illuminate the experiences of African Americans is the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Collection, and my understanding of how to utilize oral histories is informed by how historians have grappled with this collection.¹⁸ Scholars of slavery have thus considered best practices for using oral histories at length because of this collection. The collection consists of interviews conducted with formerly enslaved people throughout the South by interviewers employed by the Federal Writers' Project during the New Deal. These interviews serve as a valuable source of information on the lives of enslaved people, whose personal testimonies about life under slavery were only infrequently recorded in records maintained by historical archives prior to this project.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jeff Strickland, "Teaching the History of Slavery in the United States with Interviews: Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 41-42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

However, these interviews do not just illuminate the perspective of those being interviewed: they are also marked by a substantial degree of bias on the part of many of the interviewers. Many interviewers recording these narratives were white, and some were descended from the formerly slave owning families of the South. These unequal racial dynamics, amplified by the social realities of the Jim Crow South in which they were conducted, meant that historians cannot be sure that the testimonies produced by these interviews represent everything that these formerly enslaved individuals wanted to express about their experiences under slavery.²⁰ The pressure of talking to a white interviewer about a racialized injustice they suffered in the midst of an explicitly racially hierarchical society meant that many of the interviewees downplayed the brutality they experienced under slavery and deliberately painted a rosier picture than existed in reality. Some historians have speculated that the interviewees engaged in this behavior due to a desire to protect themselves.²¹ Therefore, historians' experiences with working with the WPA records has persuasively demonstrated why it is important for historians to be skeptical of oral history sources that originate from interviews where structural factors incentivize interviewees to downplay their negative experiences.

However, the oral history interviews that serve as a significant source of evidence in this study are not subject to the same limitations as those collected by the WPA. They were conducted in 1967 and 1968 as part of the University of Washington's Afro-American History Project. For the project, Larry Gossett, a Black student who would go on to help found the Black Student Union on campus and receive the university's first degree awarded in African American studies, interviewed a number of Black people who had lived in Washington around the turn of the twentieth century. This included several people who had either moved to or been raised in

²⁰ Ibid., 42-43.

²¹ Ibid., 42-43.

Roslyn, reflecting that community's status as a major driver of Black migration into Washington during that period. Because of its status as a gateway for Black migrants into the Pacific Northwest, the multiracial community in Roslyn became a focal point of Gossett's efforts to uncover Black experiences in the region in an era in which historical narratives often left out African American perspectives. Gossett's interviews, unlike the WPA interviews discussed earlier, are hence not characterized by the same set of caveats about racialized power inequalities amongst the interviewers and interviewees. Both the interviewees and interviewer were Black, and so the same sort of interracial dynamics would not have incentivized these interviewees to conceal potential negative memories.

Furthermore, in conducting these interviews, Gossett was careful to push the interviewees to reflect critically on their experiences in Roslyn to shed light on both the good and the bad. He attempted multiple times in various interviews to uncover instances of racial tension along with the instances of multiracial cooperation which the interviewees were so willing to volunteer. For example, Gossett specifically probed Barnett to remember "if there was very much racial tension between the groups in Roslyn," specifying that this was a special focus of his project. Barnett, meanwhile, continued to assert that "there was no racial tension over there. None whatsoever. That may be hard to believe, but there wasn't."²² Unlike the structural problems underlying the Slave Narratives, it is clear that Gossett was not interested in upholding racist narratives about false racial harmony under an explicitly white supremacist system. Instead, he made a real effort to uncover the nuances behind the initial impression that Roslyn represented a post-racial utopia. Therefore, the fact that the interviewees continued to assert Roslyn's uniqueness as a place of community building and solidarity across racial lines, even when Gossett prompted them to

²² Powell S. Barnett, interview by Larry Gossett, March 1, 1968, transcript, Powell S. Barnett papers, Box 1, Folder 4 - Interview Transcript First Draft - 1968, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 8 (hereafter cited as Barnett Interview, March 1, 1968, UW Special Collections).

reconsider these optimistic recollections, suggests that their positive memories of a uniquely racially integrated community are a reflection of what they actually experienced.

It is true that some evidence from these interviews casts doubt on Barnett's uncompromising claim, including his experience in Roslyn's band discussed later in the paper. Nevertheless, it is still clear that the former Black residents of Roslyn felt strongly that the town had a uniquely egalitarian character during this period. Ultimately, then, my use of oral histories still engages them through a critical lens, recognizing their complicated aspects as part of a comprehensive analysis of them as a historical source like any other. Unlike historians working with WPA records, however, my interpretative practice reorients the focus away from a consideration of what was left unsaid. Instead, my focus is on uncovering what stories of a relatively racially harmonious society reveal about the structural differences between how residents of Roslyn constructed race in this period and how this process of constructing racial categories occurred elsewhere in the United States. Using this method, my research began to trace the relationship between coal mining and interracial solidarity building in Washington's earliest years of statehood.

Coal played a crucial role in Washington state's development from the earliest days of American settlement in the region. The United States solidified its control of the West Coast under the administration of President James K. Polk by annexing California from Mexico and settling a boundary dispute over the Oregon Country with the British giving the Americans control of what would become Oregon and Washington. Afterwards, officials in D.C. debated various proposals to link America's new territorial possessions with the East Coast.²³ In 1853, Congress approved an expedition to survey a route for a transcontinental railroad that would

²³ Matthew Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 33.

connect the Puget Sound with St. Paul, Minnesota. Isaac Ingalls Stevens, a veteran of the war with Mexico and later the first governor of Washington Territory upon its formal separation from Oregon, led the expedition over the Cascade Mountains and into the Puget Sound. Upon his arrival, he and other members of the expedition expressed great admiration for the region's natural resources, seeing it as a perfect connection point for commerce from the Midwest. Expedition members admired the "fantastic salmon runs" and the natural harbors and open spaces that could be transformed into railroad depots and "shipping terminals, perfect for future commerce with East Asia."²⁴

One discovery seemed more relevant than the others, though, for the members of an expedition explicitly focused on charting a path for coal-burning locomotives: "abundant coal deposits at the south end of Lake Washington that appeared to 'burn well with strong flame, leaving no slag.'"²⁵ The abundance of coal provided a powerful incentive for eastern industrial capital to invest in opening up access to the region. Congress eventually gave the task of building a railroad connecting Minnesota to the Puget Sound to the Northern Pacific Railroad Company. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation authorizing the company to build a railroad over this route, and also granted it large tracts of land surrounding said route.²⁶

The company made full use of these lands for economic gain, and began founding coal mining settlements throughout the Cascade Mountains when large coal deposits were discovered on company-owned lands. Under the authority of the Northwest Coal Company, a subsidiary of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company created to manage its coal investments, company official Logan M. Bullitt founded Roslyn in September 1886 and oversaw the extension of a railroad line there the following December. By the end of that winter, over 400 workers arrived by railroad to

²⁴ Ibid., 34.

²⁵ Ibid., 34.

²⁶ Hall, "Kings, Knights, and Pawns," 85-86.

work in the new mines and between 150 and 200 tons of coal were departing Roslyn by locomotive each day.²⁷ Unbeknownst to the company, some of the new miners brought to Roslyn between 1886 and 1888 were members of the Knights of Labor, a nationwide labor union that rapidly expanded among workers angry at the federal suppression of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877.²⁸ Labor relations, seemingly harmonious in Bullitt's new town in its first few months of existence, quickly deteriorated as the company displayed a deep hostility toward any form of labor organizing.

By August 1888 the situation reached a crisis point. Knights of Labor organizers had astounding success organizing the Roslyn miners. By the time Knights of Labor organizers declared a strike that month, the *Puget Sound Weekly Argus* reported that there were upwards of 720 miners employed in Roslyn's two mines, and all of them considered themselves members of the Knights of Labor.²⁹ Meanwhile, the Northern Pacific Railroad Company leadership had become completely averse to the continued existence of labor organizations in Roslyn, with company vice president J.M. Buckley declaring in a telegram to Roslyn his intent to "break up the Knights of Labor so far as these mines are concerned."³⁰

On August 11, the company made the first move in this highly tense standoff by bringing in a new mine manager, F.C. Worthington. Worthington gained a reputation during his administration of mines in the Pennsylvania coal fields as a manager especially intolerant of union organizing, and he was appealing to executives like Buckley due to his earlier suppression of movements to increase wage rates in these mines.³¹ While Northern Pacific and Northwest Coal executives feared a repeat of 1877, miners in Roslyn saw the summer of 1888 as the perfect

²⁷ Ibid., 89.

²⁸ Ibid., 87.

²⁹ "Situation at Roslyn," *Puget Sound Weekly Argus*, Sept. 13, 1888, 1.

³⁰ Ibid, 1.

³¹ Hall, "Kings, Knights, and Pawns," 89.

time to negotiate and gain the improved livelihood they had been promised in the West. The Roslyn coal field was the most productive in the Washington Territory by the summer of 1888 and the company was preparing to open a new mine in what would become the neighboring community of Ronald. Roslyn's miners felt that these achievements should translate into higher wages and reduced hours for workers, and they undergirded their demands with the belief that Northwest Coal and Northern Pacific would do anything necessary to keep the profitable Roslyn coal flowing.³² This prediction proved to be all too accurate, although not in the way these workers anticipated.

The Knights of Labor initiated a strike soon after Worthington's arrival, demanding his dismissal as well as increased wages and decreased working hours. Rather than negotiate with these miners, company executives resolved to break the strike by bringing in new miners who were willing to work at the current wage and hour rates, and thereby undercut the Knights of Labor's negotiating position.³³ One group in particular stood out to company executives looking for miners who could rapidly migrate to Roslyn to break the strike: Black Midwesterners employed in the mining industry there.

In the Midwestern coal mining industry, in the traditions of which Worthington had acquired his tactics and attitudes, Black miners were frequently employed as strikebreakers in mines previously worked by all-white crews. This strikebreaking tactic was made famous during the Hocking Valley Strike of 1874 in Nelsonville, Ohio. When the workers in the Nelsonville coal mines, who were almost exclusively native-born white miners, organized a strike on April 1, 1874 in response to a drastic cut in wages, the mine operators imported between four and five

³² Ibid., 89.

³³ Ibid., 90.

hundred Black workers from the South to take their places in the mines.³⁴ This tactic succeeded in breaking the strike, but at the cost of inflaming racial tensions in the region.

This tactic soon attracted the attention of national labor organizations. The *National Labor Tribune*, the organ of an early nationwide miners union called the Miners' National Association, denounced the Black strikebreakers as "ignorant, dissolute villains" who were "hurried from their miserable, filthy dens, into the beautiful Hocking Valley" where they proceeded to "steal" the homes and livelihoods of "honest, hard working miners" who were proper "citizens."³⁵ This scathing attack on the character of Black miners heralded the onset of severe racial tensions within the coal mining labor movement that would find full expression in the attitudes of striking miners in Roslyn over a decade later. Additionally, the fact that this national newspaper claiming to represent the interests of all miners was so explicitly racist reveals the severity of racism in the mining industry into which Black miners were attempting to integrate. Promised an escape from the racist society of the formerly slaveholding states in the South, Black miners arriving in Midwestern mining towns were instead met by a working class community that regarded them as an existential threat to their livelihoods and responded to their arrival with unrestrained prejudice.

Following the breaking of the Hocking Valley Strike, coal mining companies readily utilized Black miners as strikebreakers throughout the region. One instance of these tactics that would parallel the events in Roslyn occurred in May 1877 in Braidwood, Illinois when native-born white miners there struck for several weeks demanding higher pay. When the mine operators responded by importing several hundred Black miners from Virginia and other Southern states, tensions boiled over into a riot on July 23 when the striking miners, with no

³⁴ Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

interference from the local authorities, forcibly rounded up the Black strikebreakers from the mines and forced them “out into the country.”³⁶ White mine workers throughout the nation read about these events in the pages of labor publications like the *National Labor Tribune* quoted above and came to resent the role Black strikebreakers could play in disrupting labor actions. Many of Roslyn's original miners, arriving in town on a rail line directly from the Midwest, were likely to have at least heard of these disruptive events throughout the Midwestern coal country, if they had not been participants in some of these struggles themselves.

Therefore, both sides of the strike knew what could be at stake when an initial train brought 50 Black miners from Illinois and Indiana to begin filling the places vacated by the striking miners. Northwest Coal took precautions to avoid the repetition of a race riot like the one that took place in Braidwood. Worthington hired private agents from the Thiel Detective Agency in Portland, Oregon to guard the train and protect the Black strikebreakers upon their arrival. What began as a labor dispute soon drew the attention of state authorities when these private guards began harassing civilians in the region and claiming they were US Marshals.³⁷

Yakima District Attorney Henry Joseph Snively, investigating the situation at the behest of Governor Eugene Semple, was blunt in his reports to the territorial governor. He declared that the men who claimed to be US Marshals were no more than “vagrants, within the meaning of the law,” and asserted their unsanctioned activities impersonating agents of the federal government were an “outrage.”³⁸ Snively was especially sensitive to this issue, as just the year before he dealt with a situation bearing an eerie resemblance to this case in its involvement of racial tensions stoked by privately hired detectives impersonating government officials. That case culminated in the massacre of itinerant Chinese laborers on the top of a nearby mountain by employees of a

³⁶ Ibid., 82.

³⁷ Hall, “Kings, Knights, and Pawns,” 90-91.

³⁸ Semple Letter, Snively Papers, UW Special Collections.

detective agency claiming state sanctioned authority, and Snively was determined to prevent these new private agents from instigating another racial massacre.³⁹ Concerned by Snively's reports, Governor Semple sought to take a more active role in resolving the brewing conflict.

It was not long before the governor himself would be drawn directly into the situation. On August 29, he received a petition signed by hundreds of striking miners in Roslyn calling for the state government to disarm the company's hired private security force and leave the recently arrived strikebreakers unprotected. The miners signing the petition declared they were "grossly outraged and insulted" by the presence of armed security forces in their community, and they also directed their ire at the Black strikebreakers who "allow[ed] themselves to be shipped across Continents to places where they are to supplant good hard working men, who have opened and built the country, and made neat homes for themselves." After denouncing the character of these strikebreakers with words evoking both racism and nativism, the petitioning miners then declared that the Black strikebreakers should be "treated as a public nuisance, as far as the law will permit, and not [be] protected in their inhuman crime."⁴⁰ In contrast to later labor organizing efforts in Roslyn that took place across racial lines, these US-born white workers refused to conceive of the recently arrived Black miners as being equal citizens with the same fundamental economic interests. Seeing these Black workers more as a "public nuisance" than potential allies against the exploitative company that owned the mines, the potential for interracial labor cooperation in 1888 was slim due to the white miners' antagonism.

This petition facilitated the realization of Snively's previous reports about disturbances in Roslyn and compelled the governor to act to prevent a repetition of events like those that

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰Petition from Striking Miners to Eugene Semple, August 29 1888, Eugene Semple Papers 1858-1908, Box 11, Folder 13 - Copies of Letters and a Petition Relating to Strike at Coal Mines at Roslyn and Newcastle - 1888, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.

transpired in Braidwood. Snively soon reported the arrest of the detectives “charged with committing a riot,” and men working for the county sheriff moved into town to prevent tensions from boiling over.⁴¹ With the situation now somewhat under control, Governor Semple decided to visit Roslyn on August 30 and attempt to work out an agreement between the striking miners, the Black strikebreakers, the sheriff’s deputies, and the now arrested detectives.⁴²

In his later report to the Secretary of the Interior about the crisis, Semple described how he found the Black strikebreakers at work in the newly opened mine number three upon his arrival, apparently refusing to let the tensions in town distract them from their attempt to earn a livelihood. Semple, seemingly impressed by their determination to build a new life for themselves despite the inauspicious circumstances, lamented that the company’s actions drove a racial wedge between two hard working groups of miners. He wrote that he was “inclined to think that this policy is the worst that could be pursued” for the wellbeing of the Black miners because importing them to break a strike would cause the other miners to think that Black miners were chiefly “used by capitalists as instruments to create artificial standards of wages.”⁴³ At the state level, then, many of those with power in the territorial (soon to be state) government were particularly interested in easing racial tensions and preventing the outbreak of violence on racial lines. Both during and after the strike, this intention would be important, as Washington’s political leaders acted to defuse racial tensions and prevent the types of massacres and expulsions seen in other parts of the country. Attempting to resolve the situation in such a way that both

⁴¹ Letter from Henry J. Snively to Eugene Semple, August 29 1888, Eugene Semple Papers 1858-1908, Box 11, Folder 6 - Incoming Correspondence: Yakima County, Kittitas County - 1887-1888, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.

⁴² Eugene Semple’s Report to the Secretary of the Interior, October 3 1888, Eugene Semple Papers 1858-1908, Box 14, Folder 1 - Report of Governor, Washington Territory, to Secretary of Interior - 1888, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA (hereafter cited as Eugene Semple Report, UW Special Collections).

⁴³ Ibid.

groups could continue to labor in Roslyn, Semple organized a meeting with the striking mines where he appealed to them to welcome the newly arrived Black miners.

At this meeting, as documented by a reporter for the *Tacoma Daily News* in attendance, the striking miners again appealed to the governor to disperse the armed guards from the town and pressure the company to institute an eight-hour workday. They also asserted their belief that the company was introducing Black people into the territory to “take the place of Chinese in various capacities,” as immigration of Chinese laborers into the territory began to fall following the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.⁴⁴ This Act severely curtailed the ability of companies to hire Chinese laborers, who, like other marginalized communities in the United States, were willing to work for lower wages in worse conditions than native-born white workers with a comparatively more privileged position in the labor market. Thus, when seeking workers capable of undercutting organizing efforts by native-born white workers, companies increasingly turned to other marginalized populations like the Black miners from the Midwest brought to Roslyn. However, this process heightened both xenophobic and racist sentiments among workers in the region. Native-born white workers thus applied anti-Chinese, xenophobic sentiments, motivated in large part by a desire to protect their heightened economic status, to other marginalized groups arriving in the region at this time. These native-born white workers perceived these new groups as merely taking the place of Chinese labor, and therefore as threats to their predominant concern: protecting US-born white workers’ place at the top of the economic hierarchy from any potential outside threats.

Later in the meeting, Governor Semple and the county sheriff agreed to replace the private detectives with sheriff’s deputies who would be accountable to the public. However, the governor refused to entertain demands that the Black miners also be deported from Roslyn. He

⁴⁴ “Conference at Roslyn,” *Tacoma Daily News*, August 31, 1888, 1.

declared that they were just as capable as any other miner, and that once they had settled into their new lives “they would demand as high wages [as] are paid elsewhere.”⁴⁵ Thus, in Semple’s view, the ultimate fate of the miners’ demands to achieve higher wages and reduced working hours would be determined by their willingness to include the newly arrived Black miners as fellow workers and educate them about the potential for labor organizing. He would authorize the removal of the armed private agents of the Thiel Detective Agency, but Kittitas County sheriff’s deputies would ensure public order and protect the strikebreakers. As a result, while the Northwest Coal Company suffered a minor public relations embarrassment because of the racial tension, their main tactic for breaking the strike ultimately succeeded. By October 1, the strike was broken, and the company enforced a new contract on returning strikers that cut their wages by between 10 to 25 percent.⁴⁶

Semple, although willing to defend the Black miners and lay out a vision wherein both groups could work alongside each other in harmony, should not be mistaken for an advocate of racial egalitarianism. In the same report to the US Secretary of the Interior in which he delivered a report on the Roslyn disturbances to the federal government, he also expressed his thanks to President Benjamin Harrison’s administration for advocating to uphold the Chinese Exclusion Act when it was challenged in front of the Supreme Court that same year. He expressed his conviction that “when the last of these unpopular people have left our shores,” there would begin a “new era of prosperity and good feeling on the Pacific Coast.”⁴⁷ Therefore, had the company instead hired Chinese laborers to break the Roslyn strike, the course of events would likely have turned out very differently in the absence of Governor Semple’s interventions to protect them. This intervention was founded on his belief that Black miners could eventually integrate into the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁶ Hall, “Kings, Knights, and Pawns,” 91.

⁴⁷ Eugene Semple Report, UW Special Collections.

local community. Undergirding Semple's actions, then, was an intense xenophobia that revealed the hostility of native-born white populations in the Pacific Northwest to immigrant labor and culture. This xenophobia would frame later attempts at integration by immigrant workers in the region and the resistance with which native-born white miners confronted these attempts. This framing further highlights Roslyn's remarkable future status as a space in which immigrant workers could build an integrated community alongside Black miners.

Often ignored by the focus on the actions of company officials and state authorities in negotiating a peaceful solution to the crisis, the Black strikebreakers themselves exercised much agency upon their arrival in Roslyn that was key to shaping their later integration into the community. Company officials seeking to copy Midwestern strikebreaking practices turned to the aforementioned James Shepperson, a Black miner in town who had arrived in Roslyn along with the early group of almost entirely white miners from the Midwest. Shepperson, who was born into slavery in Virginia in 1858 or 1859, had moved to the Midwest during his early adulthood to work in the coal mines there, and he eventually found himself among the first miners to settle in Roslyn. Due to his experience working alongside Black miners in the Midwest, company management charged him with gathering the initial group of Black strikebreakers to disrupt the Knights of Labor strike.⁴⁸ By 1896, as remembered by various miners who had known Shepperson like Edward Smith, Shepperson boasted that he had brought over 2000 Black people, including miners and their families, to work in Roslyn's mines.⁴⁹

One of the Black miners Shepperson contacted in Indiana was Powell Barnett's father, Powell Barnett, Sr. Living amid the precarity and racial conflict of the Midwest's coalfields,

⁴⁸ Brigida R. Blasi, "Rediscovering Dana: The Forgotten Black Coal Miners of Southern Wyoming," *Western Historical Quarterly* 51 (Autumn 2020): 249.

⁴⁹ Edward Smith, interview by Larry Gossett, April 27, 1968, sound cassette, Edward Smith Oral History Interview, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA (hereafter cited as Smith Interview, UW Special Collections).

Barnett Sr. accepted Shepperson's promises of "better wages and working conditions" and boarded the train to Roslyn along with approximately 80 other Black miners.⁵⁰ Barnett's father was well acquainted with the racism and discrimination Black people faced across the country. In the East, this occurred while he was enslaved in Virginia from his birth in 1854 to the end of the Civil War; in the Midwest, this was during his subsequent career in the Midwestern mining industry. While employed there, he was forced out of Braidwood during the race riot after arriving to work as a strikebreaker. He eventually settled in Indiana, where Shepperson encountered him in his recruitment of Black miners to go west.⁵¹ Faced with harsh racial discrimination and limited stable job prospects, Black miners like Barnett hoped to cross the "racial frontier" and find a better life in the still sparsely populated West.⁵²

As the Black strikebreakers moved ever closer to Roslyn on the train from the Midwest, they became aware of the inflamed tensions in town that threatened to boil over upon their arrival. At a stop in Missoula, Montana they finally acquired news about the strike in Roslyn and the threats being made against any potential strikebreakers.⁵³ While the protection offered by the private detectives hired by the company offered some reassurance, the Black strikebreakers refused to go further unless they felt confident in their ability to protect themselves. As the daughter of one of these strikebreakers on the initial train into Roslyn, Leola Woffort, later noted, the Black strikebreakers "came through Roslyn with shotguns, revolvers, and so forth, loaded to

⁵⁰ Roslyn Coal Mines, Powell S. Barnett Papers, Box 1, Folder 1 - Reminiscence: Family History - 1967, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 1 (hereafter cited as Roslyn Coal Mines, Barnett Papers, UW Special Collections).

⁵¹ Family History, Powell S. Barnett Papers, Box 1, Folder 1 - Reminiscence: Family History - 1967, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 1.

⁵² Of course, this notion of a "sparsely populated West" was a narrative deliberately constructed by American society to encourage settlement in lands that had been forcibly taken from Indigenous peoples in the region. Prior to Roslyn's foundation as a mining town in 1886, it had served as part of the homelands of the Yakama Nation for countless generations before they were forced onto the Yakama Reservation following the Yakama War of 1855. For a more detailed discussion of Indigenous dispossession in the Pacific Northwest, see Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

⁵³ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 7.

protect the families and other people on the train.”⁵⁴ Woffort's father, like many of these initial strikebreakers, had been part of the Black strikebreakers in Braidwood who were subjected to violence by a mob of white miners with no intervention by the company. These miners therefore sought to protect themselves without relying on a coal company who ultimately saw them as expendable.⁵⁵ Their determination to take their protection into their own hands demonstrated an early unwillingness to submit themselves to the company's authority, despite having been hired by said company to suppress a strike. The Black miners sought greater economic opportunity and the potential for a life free of the rigid racial hierarchies imposed throughout the East and the Midwest by accepting the company's wishes to act as strikebreakers. However, their actions showed these Black miners did not trust the company to act in their best interest after the inability or unwillingness of coal companies in the Midwest to protect Black strikebreakers from instances of mob violence. This distrust, and subsequent agency in advancing the interests of themselves and their families, laid the foundation for later labor organizing against the company once the Black community in Roslyn had been firmly established.

The harsh opposition they faced in Roslyn did not deter these Black miners from settling there, and they established the beginnings of a thriving community within months of their arrival. Barnett skillfully summed up the reason that the Black miners stayed in Roslyn, despite the hostility they encountered, when he surmised that “[my] father found conditions there better than they were in Illinois and Indiana.”⁵⁶ In contrast to the severely reduced wages that Black workers were paid further east, the wages paid to the newly arriving Black workers in Roslyn “were in keeping with conditions at the time, and the average miner could average about 75 to 80, maybe

⁵⁴ Beulah Hart and Leola Cravens Woffort, interview by Larry Gossett, February 2, 1968, transcript, Oral History Interview with Beulah Hart and Leola Cravens Woffort, Folder 1, 1968, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 1 (hereafter cited as Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1

⁵⁶ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 1.

85 dollars per month, which was considered average.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the “work was easier and the wages were higher than in the Midwest” for Black miners.⁵⁸

Black miners arriving in Washington state at the time expressed these sentiments themselves. One Black miner named Charles H. Johnson, who had been brought in by the company to the nearby community of Franklin to break a separate Knights of Labor strike in 1891, wrote an opinion piece in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* describing his perspective on the hostility encountered by strikebreakers. Black people in America, he explained, were “scuffed at and looked upon as the dregs of all races,” and when unions like the Knights of Labor refused to accept them as fellow workers and cast them out, “only to starve him and his family to death,” then it made sense that they should do whatever necessary to provide for themselves and their families.⁵⁹ All the Black workers wanted, Johnson continued, was “a little morsel to help keep our starving souls as we travel this journey of life...we are aware that prejudice is against us here: but where can we go? It is against us everywhere.” Acknowledging that this prejudice existed everywhere in America, Johnson concluded that all that was left for Black workers was to take any opportunities that opened to allow them to make a living, as “half a loaf is better than none.” Finishing his piece by expressing that “we want to live and to let others live,” and not to create racial hostility, Johnson made a powerful case explaining why Black workers took opportunities to work as strikebreakers in mining towns like Franklin and Roslyn.⁶⁰

After the breaking of the strike, company officials made appeals for the white workers in Roslyn to stay in the mines and work alongside the newly imported Black workforce.

Worthington even attempted to frame the strike’s outcome as a victory for Roslyn’s miners

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸ Roslyn Coal Mines, Barnett Papers, UW Special Collections, 1.

⁵⁹ “Miners’ Rights (From a Colored Standpoint),” *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1891.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

against union organizers seeking to control their labor. While admitting the workers who stayed would be working at a rate reduced by between 10 and 25 percent from the pre-strike terms, Worthington claimed that this actually constituted a good deal for the workers because “the rules and regulations of the Knights of Labor would not be in force, and if a miner earned \$3.50 a day he could have it all and not have to turn the surplus over to the Knights of Labor.”⁶¹ With this understanding, Worthington proclaimed to a reporter from the *Puget Sound Weekly Argus*, harmony would reign in Roslyn’s mines and “the camp would now be better than ever.”⁶² Evidently, most of the strike’s participants did not agree with Worthington’s sunny outlook, as by the following January a large number of the town’s initial population of native-born white miners had left.

Unwilling to accept the terms of working alongside Black miners in racially integrated mines upon which the company insisted, groups of white miners confronted their supervisors with chants like “if he works n*****, he cannot work us!”⁶³ When Northwest Coal refused to acquiesce to demands to segregate the workforce, native-born white miners began emigrating in droves and the company continued to import Black miners from the East to take their place. By February, the company brought another train with 500 Black miners from Illinois into Roslyn to patch the hole in the workforce created by this exodus of native-born white workers. A report in *the Seattle Post-Intelligencer* made clear that “this importation means that Roslyn is to become a [Black] town and that the three mines of the company are to be run exclusively by [Black] labor.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ “For the Roslyn Mines,” *Puget Sound Weekly Argus*, Oct. 04, 1888.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Hall, “Kings, Knights, and Pawns,” 91.

⁶⁴ “Five Hundred Bound to Roslyn,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Feb. 14, 1889.

In towns like Franklin, where native-born white miners remained a significant portion of the population, Black miners generally remained relegated to the same place in the social hierarchy that they occupied in the segregated and racist societies in the East. Roslyn, however, owing to the departure of almost all native-born white miners and the subsequent opportunity Black miners had to serve as the bedrock of a new community, offered a unique opportunity to construct a society from the ground up in which people of various ethnic and racial groups could live and let others live.

While conditions were certainly not ideal in Roslyn in the aftermath of a near race riot, the labor conditions they encountered there were significantly better than they could find elsewhere. Black miners faced depressed wages and pervasive racism throughout the United States during the nineteenth century. The combination of average wages and the flight of most of the town's native-born white workers after the 1888 strike convinced many of the Black miners that they could find a reprieve from these issues there. As native-born white miners left town, Black miners wrote to their friends and relatives still in the East encouraging them to migrate to Roslyn, where, according to Barnett, there were "improved conditions over what they had there." Due to these appeals, Barnett continued, "quite a few of them came in 1889."⁶⁵ What striking white Knights of Labor members had seen as the utter destruction of their ability to build a better life through labor power before the strike was what newly arriving Black miners took as an opportunity to build a new community absent the racial prejudices and hierarchies to which the departing native-born white miners adhered.

Thus, in less than a year, the Black miners initially intended to serve as a temporary solution to the labor shortage created by the strike now found themselves serving as the

⁶⁵ General History: Mr. Powell Barnett, Powell S. Barnett Papers, Box 1, Folder 1 - Reminiscence: Family History - 1967, University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA, 2 (hereafter cited as General History: Mr. Powell Barnett, UW Special Collections).

backbone of Roslyn's mining operation. As for the remaining native-born white miners in Roslyn, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* predicted that they would soon join their fellow miners in leaving town once a new train full of Black miners arrived. Even if they could tolerate working in a racially integrated workplace, the reporter assumed that the rising Black population in Roslyn would make property in the town "practically valueless" to any white residents - a reference to the ways that racist housing policies affected the housing market in other parts of the country.⁶⁶ Given a precipitous drop in property values, white miners would be forced to abandon the once "beautifully situated" and "happily growing place" as it descended into a "bitter" situation that was supposedly inevitable for a Black-majority settlement.⁶⁷ Clearly, then, this pessimism about Roslyn's future was shared between the white miners abandoning the town and the established regional press, indicating that Washington state did not represent a point beyond the mythical "racial frontier" that so many Black westward migrants in this era hoped to finally cross. Nevertheless, as the following discussion will illustrate, the community that subsequently developed in Roslyn represented a rare site where Black residents could find reprieve from the racist hierarchies that structured life throughout much of the rest of the nation.

Seemingly coincidentally, this same edition of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* documents one of the last newsworthy events generated by Roslyn's chapter of the Knights of Labor. A member named W.T. Wilcox, joining other native-born white workers in leaving town ahead of the arrival of 500 more Black miners, attempted to abscond with \$142 of the organization's remaining funds before his plot was discovered and he was detained in neighboring Cle Elum.⁶⁸ Following this act of failed embezzlement, Roslyn's Knights of Labor chapter essentially ceased

⁶⁶ For a more detailed discussion of how racist housing policy and methods of calculating property value discriminated against African Americans in the twentieth century, see Taylor Keeanga-Yamahtta, *Rats, Riots, and Revolution: Black Housing in the 1960s* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁶⁷ "Five Hundred Bound to Roslyn," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Feb. 14, 1889.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

operations. With the speedy decline of the organization that had once united nearly the entirety of Roslyn's pre-strike population, a new chapter opened for Roslyn, now holding the distinction of being the only Black-majority town in the Pacific Northwest.

Demographic developments in Roslyn following the departure of most of the original native-born white miners were crucial in allowing Black and white miners and community members to reconfigure the social relations of the town and join together in advancing their joint interests and achieving extensive racial integration. Initially, the departure of native-born white miners gave the new Black residents breathing room and an unprecedented opportunity to acquire land and job opportunities that would normally have been restricted to the other side of the color line. After the exodus of Knights of Labor members, along with continuing to bring in Black workers, the company gradually transitioned to also actively recruiting newly arrived immigrants to work as miners in Roslyn. The company particularly targeted Italian and Slavic workers, as they were also generally willing to work for lower wages than native-born white miners would normally accept.⁶⁹

As a result of this recruitment strategy, Roslyn's unique population structure compared to other towns in the Pacific Northwest endured. Whereas it had once been unique, immediately after the 1888 strike, due to possessing an almost entirely Black population, by the early 1900s it contained a unique mix of Black and first generation immigrants from the European periphery. Notably, it still lacked the large numbers of native-born white miners who formed a significant population base for the region's other mining communities. A reporter visiting the town in 1905 remarked that, compared to the "peculiar looking, acting, and talking" immigrant miners who made up the other significant portion of Roslyn's population, the Black residents seemed to "be

⁶⁹ "At a Mining Camp," *The Seattle Republican*, October 27, 1905.

the only white, American folk there.”⁷⁰ Ironically, then, after living on the margins of mainstream American society elsewhere, in Roslyn, Black residents effectively acted as the “representatives” of it to first generation immigrants from the European periphery who had little exposure to the United States’ language, people, and way of life.

Experiences with American society beyond the confines of Roslyn’s town limits were essential in creating ties of solidarity between these immigrants and Black Americans in Roslyn. Throughout much of the country, both Black and immigrant miners in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century felt marginalized by a society dominated by native-born white interests. To the south in Oregon, for example, Governor Walter Marcus Pierce championed a bill to abolish private education in the state. While facially neutral, nativist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which counted Pierce as a strong ally, championed the law as a way to abolish Catholic education specifically and thus discourage Catholic immigrants from settling in the state.⁷¹ Catholic immigrants were likely to be from countries on the European periphery like Italy in this period, and were thus undesirable to nativists who classified them as falling outside the boundaries of full whiteness.⁷²

Whether through religion, language, dress, habits, or skin color, then, these groups could be easily recognized as the “other” by residents of surrounding communities who interacted with Roslyn as part of the extremely lucrative regional coal trade. The first-generation immigrants and Black people who composed the vast majority of the population of the city thus felt a substantial degree of solidarity that neither of these groups felt with native-born white workers in the region. Seeking to find allies in a society that was largely hostile to their interests, Black and immigrant

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ McCoy, “Oregon’s Progressive Politics,” 411-12.

⁷² For a more detailed discussion about how certain European immigrant groups were seen as less desirable and not entirely white by native-born white Americans at various points in history, see Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

white miners found that the marginalization they each experienced gave them incentives to cooperate across racial lines. Woffort recalled, for example, that many of her mother's friends were Italian and Eastern European immigrants, and she suspected that the deep connections they formed were due to the problems they both had that alienated them from mainstream America. Her mother's problem was "simply being [Black]," Woffort explained, revealing an awareness on the part of Black community members that native-born white society, in Washington and the nation as a whole, saw their race itself as a threat.⁷³ Their marginalization due to their race, an attribute that could not be changed through processes of assimilation open to other groups, rendered Black residents unable to fully integrate into most American communities dominated by native-born white people.⁷⁴ Knowing that racial discrimination would mark them as targets no matter where they found themselves in the country, Black residents had a strong interest in taking a leading role in building a community where this linkage of social status with race could be minimized.

On the other hand, the major barriers to integration for white immigrants were the "language problems" and cultural differences that defined their differences from native-born white people.⁷⁵ In Roslyn, without a predominant group of native-born white people into which these immigrants could assimilate, cooperation with Black residents provided the most clear path forward to overcome these differences with mainstream American society. Rather than turn against each other to compete for limited resources monopolized by entrenched native-born white individuals, these groups instead found an opportunity to recognize their common struggles born out of the racism and xenophobia prevalent throughout American society. In doing

⁷³ Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections, 5.

⁷⁴ For a more detailed discussion about the complexities of racial assimilation and "passing," and why these processes were generally denied to African Americans and not European-origin immigrants, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

so, both groups were able to stake out a unique claim to a version of American identity that elevated the attributes of multiculturalism and multiracialism that were not yet considered the virtues they are today by modern American society.

The degree of racial integration in Roslyn was shocking to Edward Smith. By 1907, when Smith came to the mines from Virginia at the instigation of his sister, who had married another Black Roslyn miner, he reported that there were approximately 400 Black miners in town out of a total population of roughly 2600.⁷⁶ Coming from a segregated society in the South, Smith expressed his shock at the degree of racial integration in Roslyn. As he expressed, “if you could pay the rent for the house, you got it, there were no racial restrictions on that.” When Gossett pressed further and inquired into the rates of Black homeownership - not just renting - in Roslyn, Smith asserted that “quite a number of them [Black families] owned their own homes in Roslyn and Cle Elum,” including, eventually, Smith himself.⁷⁷ Separately, Barnett emphasized that, unlike other mining towns, Roslyn was not divided into sections based on race. According to him, “there was no part of town where it was exclusively...white or anything else. [People] lived wherever they could buy or build a home.”⁷⁸ And after most of Roslyn’s white population fled following the 1888 strike, there were plenty of empty homes and lots in Roslyn proper into which the newly arrived Black miners could move.

Woffort too expressed surprise that during the 1890s, so soon after the Black strikebreakers had arrived to disrupt labor organizing in Roslyn, Black families like hers were able to buy homes while continuing to work in the mines.⁷⁹ Thus, initially, the flight of native-born white workers proved mutually beneficial to the company and the Black miners.

⁷⁶ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 11.

⁷⁹ Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections, 2.

While the company could lease, and eventually sell, the lots and houses that these previous miners abandoned, the Black miners could access the stability that comes with home ownership. With shelter over their heads that was not constantly at risk of being taken away through racist violence like in Midwestern coal communities such as Braidwood, Black residents could turn their focus to activities like creating cultural institutions and finding ways to advocate for their material interests. Ready access to stable housing, which they could own without fierce competition with an entrenched population of native-born white individuals, was the first condition that enabled Roslyn residents to transform the town from merely the deserted site of a failed strike into a thriving, multiracial community.

However, this freedom from precarity was not universal nor unconditional, especially in the period before the miners were organized in a union. As Barnett recalled, “the company would rent you a lot for a dollar a month and take it off your paycheck at the end of the month and sell you lumber from their mill to build your home.” While this opened up the possibilities for Black homeownership at a time when so many lots had been vacated by the native-born white workers who left Roslyn at the end of the 1888 strike, it also placed these residents at the mercy of company policy. As Barnett further explained, “if you had ever got up the nerve to say you should have better working conditions, it wouldn’t be long before the foreman...asked you to move your house off.”⁸⁰ While Black Roslyn residents in this period were thus able to escape the housing precarity created by residential segregation or endemic racial violence occurring elsewhere, company policies combined with the lack of worker power still put their livelihoods at the mercy of a company fiercely opposed to any labor activism. According to Barnett, prior to organizing a union, all miners and their families “became a captive group of people.”⁸¹ The

⁸⁰ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6

initial availability of housing and the precarity that accompanied it as the company continued to be paranoid about the potential for labor organizing likely reinforced attitudes that the miners would ultimately have to stick up for their own interests. Far preferable to the total arbitrariness and destruction of racist violence, unpredictable company eviction practices nonetheless continued to loom over the heads of the townspeople and began uniting them against a common threat to their livelihoods. Without the threat of racist violence costing them their homes and jobs, these new Roslyn residents could turn their creative energies toward limiting the corporate power that was now the biggest threat to their ability to live in peace.

Notably, Black property ownership was not limited to homes and small plots of land either. Edward Smith recalls one Black man, Mr. McKesson, became a mine owner after becoming wealthy through business dealings in Roslyn, and came to own an iron mining claim near Red Mountain in Benton County. Another Black man who passed through Roslyn, Mr. Thornton, gained wealth as a homesteader and became one of the most prominent independent farmers in the region.⁸² Smith himself became one of these property owners in the community after saving up money during his work as a mining engineer for 11 years. He used his accumulated funds to purchase a plumbing shop from an Italian American man who expressed no reservations about selling it to a Black man.⁸³ Shepperson, who continued to play a leading role in Roslyn in the decades following the initial migration of Black miners in 1888, was a prominent property owner in Roslyn who, at various times, owned saloons, restaurants, dancing halls, and social lodges. When Barnett was first forming a town band in Roslyn, they rehearsed in the hall owned by Shepperson and paid him 15 dollars a month in rent for the space.⁸⁴

Expanded rights to property ownership therefore were a successful path to wealth for Black

⁸² Smith Interview, UW Special Collections

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 7.

residents of Roslyn and the surrounding region. As miners accumulated money, making no less than the immigrant workers hired to labor alongside them, they accessed business ventures on equal footing with these other miners, as demonstrated by an Italian American man selling his shop to Smith. In turn, these business ventures allowed both Black and immigrant residents to control key aspects of industry while also having the capacity to fund the cultural events that made Roslyn such a lively and welcoming community.

Racial integration in the workplace mirrored the unsegregated housing patterns. Smith reported the shocking ease with which he was able to obtain equal employment working alongside white miners in Roslyn soon after his arrival in 1907. As he explained, he went to the mining office shortly after his arrival in town where a man in a suit “had me sign a slip, and then they gave me a job as an engineer.”⁸⁵ Miners of all races worked alongside each other during his time in the mines, and the only problem that he remembered this policy creating was when one newly arrived white miner sought to move between multiple mines in the area hoping to find one where he did not have to work alongside Black miners. However, much to his disappointment, all of Roslyn’s mines were racially integrated, and this miner soon left town.⁸⁶ Crucially, this demonstrates that Roslyn continued to be a hostile environment to the racist and pro-segregation views held by native-born white miners like those who led the 1888 strike. Much like what happened to the group of these workers who attempted to negotiate the introduction of workplace segregation as a condition for returning to the mines, local residents and managers filtered workers with these views out of the community by continuing to insist on racial integration.

After the exodus of native-born white workers in 1888, workplace leadership positions opened, and the company turned to the newly arrived Black miners to fill them. Once in these

⁸⁵ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

positions, oral history testimonies like Barnett's provide ample evidence that these Black workers were able to remain among the higher ranks in the workforce even as the company began to bring miners from areas like Italy and Eastern Europe into town to satisfy the state's growing fuel needs by expanding the lucrative mines. As immigrant miners worked alongside and reported to Black workers, new possibilities opened for interracial solidarity that were unimaginable in the other, segregated coalfields throughout the nation in this period.

In the mines, Barnett, who worked as a coal miner, noted that there was "no discrimination on jobs regarding color, nationality, or anything like that. If a man was competent to perform the services, they gave him a job around that line." As an example, Barnett presented the case of chief engineer Nick Carter, who was Black, being given "charge of all the engineers and other help around the engineering plant where they ran the machinery that ran the mines."⁸⁷ Barnett also recalled other Black workers who were in high-ranking positions, including electrical engineer John Spindle who "took care of all the electrical problems for the company in Roslyn, Ronald, and Cle Elum." Altogether, "dozens of men...occupied positions that were not considered merely in the menial class."⁸⁸ And when Barnett's interviewer pressed him to remember whether the white workers laboring underneath Black superiors accepted that arrangement, he affirmed that the "cosmopolitan crew" behaved no differently when taking orders from Black or white engineers.⁸⁹

The experience of seeing workers of all ethnicities laboring beside each other in a cooperative manner uniquely gave workers and their families the ability to perceive common interests and objectives with their fellow miners. Combined with the abundant displays of cultural unity organized by various Roslyn organizations that welcomed individuals of all

⁸⁷ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 10.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁹ Barnett Interview, March 1, 1968, UW Special Collections, 8.

ethnicities, it would have been exceedingly hard for Roslyn residents to not see their fates as bound up with those of Roslyn's other distinct racial and ethnic communities.

One area in which Roslyn residents perceived their fortunes as being tied up with those of fellow residents of different racial backgrounds was through their shared love of baseball. White and Black players played side by side on Roslyn's town team, which competed against the (often racially segregated, all-white teams) from the surrounding towns in the Cascades.⁹⁰ Roslyn's multiracial baseball scene would go on to produce one of the first Black players to break professional baseball's color line and play for a professional team. Jimmy Claxton was born in a multiracial family in British Columbia - his mother was a white woman and his father was a mixed Black and Native American man. By 1906, the family moved to Roslyn, seeking both work in the mining industry and a place where the interracial couple and their mixed race children could live in relative safety and comfort. Claxton, then aged 13, began playing baseball in town and quickly developed a reputation throughout the region as a talented pitcher.⁹¹ Smith was among the many Black miners to know Claxton during this period and who fondly remembered Claxton and his immense contributions in making Roslyn's team a formidable force in regional baseball. Smith continued following Claxton as his career progressed, and expressed pride when, in 1916, he managed to play for the Oakland Oaks, a professional team in the Pacific Coast League. However, Claxton could only achieve this by exclusively claiming Native American ancestry, as Native Americans, unlike Black people, were allowed to play in the otherwise all-white leagues during this period.⁹²

Roslyn's integrated baseball team reflected its essential identity as a multiracial town. Unlike teams from neighboring towns, whose players were largely all white, fans from the

⁹⁰ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

multiracial town of Roslyn rooted for a team made up of both white and Black players who each held essential roles. Roslyn's regional reputation, which was often at stake in these games between local towns, rested on the same kind of interracial cooperation on the field as took place in the mines. That elite Black players like Claxton defined the team and its legacy shows how comfortable Roslyn residents were identifying their town with a multiracial population, even in a period where much of American society was organized according to racist logic. The baseball team represented a central part of cultural life in Roslyn and an institution in which both Black and white residents had an equal stake, regardless of the racial identity of the players on the team. This mutual social identification with the same cause helped pave the way for labor organizing efforts that would require Black and white workers to trust other workers to represent their material interests well, regardless of race.

Furthermore, the communities surrounding Roslyn noted its success in baseball and many attempted to attract its players, Black or white, to their teams. Smith recalled with some satisfaction that the neighboring community of Cle Elum, which was much more predominantly white, managed to attract one of Roslyn's Black players to their team. This player soon distinguished himself as the best player on Cle Elum's team, and helped make that town a formidable opponent for Roslyn.⁹³ Thus, Roslyn's racially integrated baseball team was able to encourage further interracial cooperation throughout the local region as other teams from the Cascades and Central Washington competed against Roslyn and interacted with its Black players. As Smith recalled, Roslyn players "helped break down the color line in Central Washington's baseball games," a notable feat in a country where baseball leagues continued to be segregated at the national level until 1947.⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 1947 was the year Jackie Robinson formally ended segregation in Major League Baseball by starting as the first baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Jimmy Claxton, the most famous baseball player from the Roslyn team, carried on this tradition of breaking down baseball color lines, albeit only publicly acknowledging the white and Native American portions of his ancestry, when he went on to play for the Oakland Oaks in 1916. Roslyn's cultivation of Claxton's talent on the integrated baseball team, which was not a given in most other parts of the country where sports were highly segregated, was key to facilitating his later success on the national stage. The construction of a multiracial community in Roslyn, therefore, had lasting and progressive impacts on national race relations during this period of otherwise intense racial divisions.

Outside of cultural institutions like sports teams, holidays and festivals were another uniting force in the community. Even those holidays which one might expect to be only celebrated by a particular ethnic group were widely celebrated across racial lines. According to Barnett, there was "complete unity there among the people" in times of festivities, and "any civic affair was put on jointly" by Black and white residents. Fourth of July and Labor Day, "the two big days when we had social affairs going on," according to Barnett, "were sponsored jointly by committees" staffed by Black and white community leaders.⁹⁵ Additionally, Emancipation Day was one of the most important holidays of the year in Roslyn after the initial wave of Black miners who settled there in 1888 instituted the tradition.⁹⁶ Massive festivities were organized for the occasion every year, and Smith remembered that "all the Black people and many white people would gather in the [base]ball park to hear the speakers."⁹⁷ Barnett emphasized this aspect of festivities in Roslyn as well, remembering that when there was "a city-wide celebration of some kind, everybody participated on an equal basis. There was no distinction, nobody was left

⁹⁵ General History: Mr. Powell Barnett, UW Special Collections, 2.

⁹⁶ This holiday, which has been celebrated by numerous Black communities in the United States since the abolition of slavery, is now federally recognized as Juneteenth National Independence Day.

⁹⁷ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

out at all.”⁹⁸ Surrounding communities, many of them predominantly white, were also invited to the celebration, and the *Seattle Republican* reported that Roslyn residents “want all of the surrounding towns to take part in the barbecue...Franklin, Ravensdale, Yakima, and Ellensburg are especially invited.”⁹⁹ All of this evidence indicates that multiracial participation in these events was part of their very fabric, and not just an occasional, unusual occurrence. All of the interviewees who mentioned holidays in Roslyn did not fail to also mention that equal numbers of white and Black residents attended the festivities, even for a holiday like Emancipation Day that one would expect to be far more salient for Black people. Therefore, what made holidays special in Roslyn was not just the specific occasion being celebrated. It was also, crucially, the fact that each of these celebrations provided a space for multiracial and multicultural engagements that residents found to be at the core of the town’s identity.

The fact that Black residents were effectively acting as the cultural mediators of “Americanness” to the communities of first generation immigrants that came to inhabit Roslyn alongside them illustrates how equal participation in these holidays became such a big component of life there. Black residents, speaking English from childhood and being immersed in American culture, even if at its margins owing to racial discrimination, were able to lay a claim to a knowledge of American culture that these immigrants did not possess upon their arrival in Roslyn. Jointly participating in these holidays was thus their way of acclimating to American culture and, in doing so, laying claim to a more permanent version of American citizenship. A distinct and clearly articulated multiracial identity for the town, so rare in any other part of America during this period where towns were largely either monoethnic or strictly segregated, emerged from Black residents leveraging their connections to American culture to

⁹⁸ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 11.

⁹⁹ “Roslyn Items,” *The Seattle Republican*, June 16, 1905.

facilitate the acculturation of newly arrived immigrant groups from the periphery of Europe. It is possible to surmise that Roslyn's adoption of an explicit multiracial and multicultural identity, so reliant on this dialectic relationship, would not have occurred had a large chunk of native-born white workers, with their own direct ties to mainstream American culture and their investment in American racial hierarchies, remained in Roslyn after the 1888 strike.

Overall, this focus on cultural activities reveals the central role that Roslyn residents felt the town's multiracial character played in crafting its overall identity. One of the key ideas that Barnett emphasized concerning Roslyn's legacy was the fact that, in the town, "people were just ordinary people, one man was just the same as another." People of all racial and ethnic backgrounds would "drink together and they'd go to the store and buy together, they'd go to the ball game together, everything they did was on an equal basis."¹⁰⁰ That this was continually emphasized by former Roslyn residents demonstrates that the multiracial character of Roslyn's festivities, events, and institutions was not accidental and thus something that can be ignored. Rather, it was central to how residents saw their town as unique from other communities in the state and nation. As Barnett remembered, "it was really appalling to me when I would pick up the paper and read about [racial] distinction...we just couldn't understand it."¹⁰¹ This lack of understanding came from how deeply Roslyn's identity was based in its multiracial composition and its residents' open embrace of that fact. The unique method of acculturation at work in Roslyn did not generate the degrees of racial animus amongst the white immigrant populations in town that other immigrant populations acquired when they settled in areas where the main "representatives" of American culture were native-born white people.

¹⁰⁰ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

This investment in a multiracial society founded on a unique process of identity formation also involved the children raised in this community. The education system in Roslyn reveals the distinct multigenerational character of these attempts to build interracial solidarity, as all children attended the same schools regardless of their race. Smith remembered that “all the kids attended the same school, and they all got along well.”¹⁰² Leola Woffort remembered that the “schools were open” to children of all racial groups, and that “if you were willing to study you would get a wonderful education...if you had the mind to learn they didn’t pay too much attention to your color.”¹⁰³ This “wonderful education” in Roslyn was evident to Woffort in the success of those who graduated from its schools, and she recounted with pride that one Black woman named Lillian advanced from the Roslyn schools to graduate as valedictorian from Central Washington University.¹⁰⁴ Education in Roslyn, therefore, unlike many other school systems throughout the country and even within the state, did not restrict opportunity on the basis of race. In addition to educational opportunity, demonstrated by Lillian’s academic success, this unique system of integrated education also offered possibilities for social mixing between ethnic groups.

This racial integration in the school system demonstrates that Roslyn’s investment in its multiracial identity was a multigenerational project. In a community in which people of all racial backgrounds shared the same neighborhoods, stores, workplaces, and celebrations, it made little sense for residents to enforce the educational segregation that was commonplace across the country during this period. In this way, the breaking down of racial barriers that occurred in Roslyn when Black and European immigrant miners mixed in the aftermath of the outward migration of native-born white miners was not limited to the initial generation that came to work

¹⁰² Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

¹⁰³ Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 4.

in the mines. The values of interracial cooperation and multiethnic solidarity continued to define Roslyn in the decades following the 1888 strike and the arrival of Black miners.

Interracial cooperation also existed among children outside of the classroom. This cooperation in extracurricular activities ranging from play to economically assisting their families further demonstrates how an integrated school system, combined with the lack of segregation in housing discussed earlier, gave residents strong incentives to form alliances across racial lines from an early age. Woffort testified to this fact through numerous memories of schoolchildren in Roslyn participating in afterschool activities ranging from playing games together to going to “pick coal off the rock dumps” so that they could save money for their families who would otherwise have to buy coal for personal use from the company store.¹⁰⁵ She was additionally a member of the school’s glee club and described how “at the assemblies, we sang, all the girls who had beautiful voices sang,” demonstrating another instance in which children in Roslyn regularly interacted across ethnic and racial divides.¹⁰⁶ Her sister, Beulah Hart, described a lively after school life in which all of the children would gather together to play games like “kick-the-can and...hide-and-seeK in the corn,” and, most popular among the children owing to the town’s robust culture surrounding the sport, baseball.¹⁰⁷ Children of different ethnicities and racial backgrounds were not raised in a society that understood difference as unknowable nor a threat. Instead, children saw those physically and culturally distinct from themselves as natural classmates, playmates, and allies in the many chores and errands with which the children of mining families were tasked.

Additionally, this growth of interracial solidarity among the youth took place in stark contrast to strict American racial categories of Black and white that placed each individual

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 10.

within an inflexible racial hierarchy. This meant that, in the absence of a sizable native-born white population, no one ethnic group was able to position itself as representing “whiteness.” As Woffort explained, the white children identified variously as “Italian and Slavic and Croatian and English” based on their parents’ nationality.¹⁰⁸ This splintering of ethnic and racial categorization allowed Black children to position themselves in the school system as one of the many ethnicities within a constellation of groups who made up Roslyn’s diverse cultural and linguistic landscape. Because of this unique dynamic, children in town did not grow up with just one definition of “whiteness,” and this meant that they were less willing to accept rigid racial hierarchies premised on white supremacy which influenced white children in most other American communities. Additionally, their understanding of race was undergirded by a concept of Blackness which operated differently for Roslyn’s white community than it did amongst white people in other parts of the country. Instead of Blackness signifying something negative to European immigrants in Roslyn, it instead denoted one’s capacity to act as a cultural mediator to newly arriving immigrant populations.

Just as interracial cooperation became a central aspect of the town’s identity for adults, so too did this mindset become ingrained in the minds of the coming generations. The social understanding and cooperation built within this integrated education system carried into the mines where most of the young men would go to work upon graduation. By the time they reached 16, as Woffort explained, the boys would generally leave school and “go into the mine...for their livelihood.”¹⁰⁹ Once in the mines, as previously discussed, Roslyn residents remained immersed in a social system in which they frequently interacted with other residents across racial lines and depended upon them to earn a living. Social bonds forged in integrated

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

schoolhouses and mineshafts allowed both Black and immigrant Roslyn residents to feel secure as members of a stable, cooperative community that continued to expand during the 1890s with the arrival of successive waves of new miners.

As the Black community in Roslyn became firmly established throughout the 1890s and developed good relations with the white residents both in town and in the surrounding communities, it began to exercise political power in addition to its social and cultural influence on the region. This political power both shows another example of Black residents acting as cultural mediators for newly arriving immigrant white workers, and further demonstrates how Roslyn's multiracial community had lasting impacts on race relations at the state level. As Smith recalled, "Jim [Shepperson] and Ed Claxton got involved in politics, and I knew both of them like everyone else in town." Shepperson and Claxton (who was the mixed-race father of aforementioned baseball star Jimmy Claxton) exercised political power through their high ranks within the Republican Party in Kittitas County.¹¹⁰

Shepperson's trajectory in state politics illustrates the influence and unique opportunities political advancement created for Black Washingtonians. After arriving in Roslyn as a miner employed by the company, by 1900 Shepperson had become the effective leader of the Republican Party in Kittitas County. In July of that year, he launched a campaign for county commissioner.¹¹¹ Additionally, Shepperson exercised influence as head of what one might call the Republican "political machine" in Roslyn, or as what Smith termed the "political gardener" in town. Smith would later relate that "the governor had [Shepperson] as a representative in town, he would gather votes" and "tell people, Black and white and whoever would listen to him, to vote for this man." In return for their votes, Shepperson would promise to use his influence

¹¹⁰ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

¹¹¹ "Colored County Commissioner," *The Seattle Republican*, July 13, 1900.

with the state party to secure certain benefits for the community that would help the town's mining economy continue to thrive.¹¹² Shepperson's adept political skills were noticed throughout the state, and the *Seattle Republican* noted ahead of the 1900 election that "Mr. Shepperson has never lost a political fight [in Roslyn], and he is thoroughly in touch with the situation at present." Writing into the paper, Shepperson pledged that the Black community in Roslyn would not "lose a single vote" in supporting President William McKinley's reelection campaign and the Republican gubernatorial bid.¹¹³ That the *Seattle Republican* covered political developments in Roslyn with such interest reveals that political actors in the state's main power centers, like Seattle, felt that Black leaders there were sufficiently influential to affect the outcomes of elections on the state level. Such coverage suggests that Roslyn's multiracial community was able to exert influence on the state as a whole disproportionate to its size.

The influence and high ranks Black Washingtonians attained within the Republican Party speaks to transformations that the creation of the Black community in Roslyn initiated not just in Roslyn, but also in the broader politics of Washington state. The prominence gained by Black politicians from Roslyn suggests that their ascendance was not just an anomaly confined to the town. Rather, the changing racial dynamics in Roslyn during these years influenced the possibilities for Black people in Washington state as a whole. This lasting and extensive influence shows the foundational strength of the multiracial community that emerged in Roslyn, as this comparatively small mining town was able to fundamentally alter the course of state history.

This expression of Black political power in Roslyn was yet another example of Black residents in Roslyn effectively acting as cultural mediators for the newly arriving immigrant

¹¹² Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

¹¹³ "The Colored Voters are Still Republicans 16 to 1," *The Seattle Republican*, October 26, 1900, 1.

workers in the years following the 1888 strike. Without native-born white residents to fill the political roles necessary in a growing mining town with thousands of residents and the social roles as cultural mediators necessarily for newly arriving immigrants, Black people in Roslyn filled the gap as the group most familiar with American culture and democratic practice. By engaging in ventures that were invested in building a multiracial character into the city and by taking on political roles, Black residents proved they were willing to take a leading role in guiding Roslyn's development in a direction contrasting sharply with the path followed by the state's other communities, whose governments were dominated by native-born white people. Additionally, their ability to get elected in Roslyn's multiracial society, where Black residents could not decide election results alone, proved the willingness of white residents with immigrant backgrounds to participate in public life on an equal basis with Black residents. This willingness extended to electing Black residents into public offices representing residents of all racial backgrounds.

Roslyn, therefore, was not just a town in which workplaces and schools were desegregated and in which residents of all races could live in the same neighborhoods. Crucially, it was a place in which the foundations of public life, from cultural festivities to government offices, were defined by an explicitly multiracial and multiethnic character that was unique within the Pacific Northwest during this period. This unique character enabled Black people in Roslyn to assume, alongside white people of immigrant backgrounds, positions of both informal and formal power to an unprecedented degree.

By 1903, after sentiments inclined toward multiracial cooperation were firmly entrenched in Roslyn, conditions were ripe for effective interracial labor action as well. Roslyn miners cooperated across racial lines in their burgeoning unionization effort, which was key to their

eventual, and relatively rapid, success. This kind of cooperation facilitated the useful secrecy which undergirded the movement: by the time company management took action against the unionization effort by firing its leaders, already around half of the miners had agreed to join the union. The central goal driving this organization effort was a desire to place a “union man” in “the office where the coal was weighed.”¹¹⁴ Workers were paid based on the amount of coal they mined, and became outraged when they discovered that they had been “short weighted” to an extent that each miner lost seven to eight dollars a month in pay.¹¹⁵ Realizing they could not resolve this issue unless the workers had a representative that could ensure fair payment for their work sparked the initial desire to join together into a formal labor union. Soon, this initial desire would become Roslyn’s local chapter of the United Mine Workers of America.

This organizing effort, formally begun in September 1903, had by December produced “the largest local union of the United Mine Workers of America” in Washington state, with over 1500 miners claiming membership. The Walla Walla-based *Evening Statesman* attributed the rapid success of the union to the cooperative “spirit of the camp” in Roslyn, which limited divisions among the workers and allowed their union to “eclipse all others in point of membership and...enthusiasm” in the state.¹¹⁶ What this article did not touch on, however, was that this cooperative spirit was one that explicitly crossed racial lines and was reliant on the high degree of interracial solidarity taking place on the ground. The degree of cooperation across racial lines was a massive contributing factor to this unifying “spirit of the camp” that enabled the union organizers to undercut company leadership and create one of the hitherto largest labor organizations in the state behind their backs.

¹¹⁴ Roslyn Coal Mines, Barnett Papers, UW Special Collections, 2.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁶ “Largest in this Country: Roslyn’s Branch of United Mine Workers of America Number 1500,” *The Evening Statesman*, December 8, 1903, 7.

Recollections from Roslyn miners in the 1890s and early 1900s as well as news reports in the regional press reveal that the racial attitudes of Roslyn's chapter of the United Mine Workers were markedly different from those of the Knights of Labor who had previously tried to organize the mines in the 1880s. The years of interracial community-building efforts that occurred in Roslyn since 1888 did not merely allow Black and white residents to live alongside each other peacefully within the town. These efforts also materially improved the lives of all workers in their workplaces, Black and white. It gave workers experience in seeing each other as allies capable of organizing across racial lines to meet their economic needs, a necessary component of labor organizing in a society where corporate powers relied on racial distinctions to break strikes and foster animosity.

During the 1904 strike, Smith's friend Robinson remembered a key moment which evidenced the interracial solidarity that had come to characterize labor organizing in the Roslyn mines. The mine operators initially offered the union a contract that would have welcomed back all of the white miners and most of the Black miners, but would have forced the strike's Black organizers out of their jobs. Smith spoke of Robinson's recollection, stating, "the company owners tried to say that [the Black miners] were on strike because [they] weren't too good as workers, and so [the company would] like to replace [them] with whites again." The company justified their appeal to white workers with explicitly racist logic rooted in trying to incite a racist reaction among the white union members by claiming these Black organizers were not actually interested in bettering conditions in the mines, but instead only wished to avoid work. Because of Roslyn residents' investment in multiracial cooperation, however, such an appeal did not succeed. Barnett recalled that the 1904 strike only ended when "all those men who had been deprived of their jobs during the organization period...received back pay in full" and were

“reinstated in their jobs with no malice.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, in contrast to the unsuccessful 1888 strike, these striking miners refused to have their demands undercut by racial divisions fomented by company management. This refusal meant that the company was unable to divide the workers by race and in that manner destroy the organizing effort by playing the racial groups against each other. The miners’ explicit rejection of this attempt by the company demonstrates how the interracial community building that occurred in Roslyn in the years since 1888 created a new environment in which interracial solidarity could prevail over racial prejudice and union busting techniques predicated on it.

The union remained united across racial lines, and their insistence on continuing to strike until all miners could regain their positions in the mines under the benefits of the new contract resulted in the company relenting and offering all of the strike’s organizers their jobs back, Black or white.¹¹⁸ Having worked alongside each other in the same roles in the mines and lived next to each other in town while partaking in the same cultural traditions, the white miners with immigrant backgrounds were unwilling to abandon their fellow workers at this critical moment. The Roslyn of 1903 and 1904 was thus unrecognizable from the Roslyn of 1888, both in its racial composition and in the attitudes of its workers who were committed to an organizing strategy that took into account the shared interests of all of the town’s working families.

Although this was undeniably a significant victory for labor power in the state brought about by interracial cooperation, it is also crucial to acknowledge that interracial community building and labor organizing in Roslyn represented a case unlike any other within the region’s history. Additionally, this reality does not mean that Roslyn’s uniqueness made it a racial utopia. There were patterns of racial separation that endured even after the departure of the majority of

¹¹⁷ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 12.

¹¹⁸ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

the participants in the 1888 strike. For example, although interracial friendships were common, romantic pairings and family composition continued to be largely segregated on the basis of ethnicity. Woffort recalled that members of each ethnic grouping were expected to date within that group, so that, for example, “if you were an Italian...you married an Italian boy or an Italian girl.” Notably, some individuals did cross these boundaries and marry across ethnic lines, like the Claxton family whose mixed-race son Jimmy achieved baseball fame, but Woffort said that people involved in interracial marriages were “kind of ostracized by both [groups.]”¹¹⁹

Additionally, although he did not go into the details, Barnett explained that the Black and white bands in Roslyn were separate. However, they apparently would play for the same town events, such as baseball games and Fourth of July celebrations, and would be treated equally during these performances. Nevertheless, one incident Barnett recalled involved a white instructor who refused to teach the Black band proceeding to get a job teaching a white band in town, and this white band apparently did not object to the instructor’s refusal to treat the Black band equally.¹²⁰ While Barnett does not dwell on this point, it does suggest that not all social activities in the town were racially integrated. The only reason Barnett gave for the formation of a separate band was when he claimed that the Black residents, seeing that the Slavic residents and Italian residents each had a band, wanted one for themselves.¹²¹ Interracial cooperation clearly did not mean that Roslyn residents were “color blind,” and racial distinctions, though not necessarily framed in terms of superiority and inferiority, endured. What is important in analyzing Roslyn’s circumstances, therefore, is understanding how groups that perceived themselves as racially distinct nonetheless arrived at the common ground necessary to organize for their common interests together.

¹¹⁹ Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections, 5.

¹²⁰ General History: Mr. Powell Barnett, UW Special Collections, 3.

¹²¹ Barnett Interview, March 1, 1968, UW Special Collections, 9.

Racist attitudes also existed in surrounding mining communities whose populations looked very different from Roslyn. The neighboring community of Cle Elum held the region's high school, and many of the teachers who staffed it were hired from other parts of the state. While Woffort recounted that the Cle Elum students did not take issue with Black students in their classes, many of the teachers coming from other towns in the state with little to no Black populations held some prejudices against the Black students. Woffort contended that this high school experience in Cle Elum is where Roslyn residents "met [their] biggest prejudice," as she did not encounter explicit racism within Roslyn itself while growing up.¹²² Furthermore, when Barnett was trying to start a band with a few of his Black classmates, two separate white instructors refused to teach their band and instead opted to instruct white-only bands in the region instead. One of these instructors, he noted, had come to the town from Virginia.¹²³ Yet again, these stories reveal that, while the circumstances in Roslyn may have inculcated a feeling of interracial solidarity among residents, outsiders brought along racist attitudes that affected Black opportunities in a region, state, and country still dominated by white supremacy. The fact that these more viciously racist attitudes are uniformly described as originating outside of Roslyn further supports the idea that it was the absence of native-born white workers after 1888 that made the full extent of racial integration in Roslyn possible.

Roslyn's embrace of interracial solidarity following the departure of native-born white miners continued in the years following the successful 1904 strike, and it remained as one of the defining features of the union in Roslyn. Smith recalled no racial discrimination during his time in the union. In fact, he saw the union as a means for the advancement of Black interests in Roslyn due to its policy of allowing Black miners to serve in its highest offices. Recalling that

¹²² Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections, 8-9.

¹²³ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 7.

one Black man he knew, Mr. Rudolph, was the secretary for the union for a number of years, Smith declared that “there was no [racial] restriction there, everyone just mingled together, and there were no objections when we ran for office, no one objected at all.”¹²⁴

The fact that the union retained its multiracial character meant that it benefited workers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, as they all worked in the mines together and were granted the opportunity to participate in crafting the union’s agenda. The unanimous praise for the union in the recollections of former Roslyn miners reveals the success of this strategy for maintaining labor power. One thing that was universal in former miners’ recollections about their lives in Roslyn was their appreciation for the union and the benefits it brought for the workers. As Smith recalled secondhand from his friend Robinson, “we didn’t have anything before the union, nothing...we made a dollar and a half a day and the [mine] owners treated us like dogs, white or Black it didn’t matter.”¹²⁵ Barnett remembered that, “after the United Mine Workers organized the miners,” the town became a “thriving community.” As miners saw their pay increase, and therefore had more money to spend, business in town rapidly expanded and soon there was a plethora of shops competing with the overpriced company store, in addition to other new businesses like saloons and barber shops.¹²⁶ The fruits of Roslyn miners’ embrace of interracial labor organizing were visible throughout the town and their contribution to community prosperity inspired further commitment to these ideals.

Although this high degree of interracial cooperation was unique to Roslyn in this period of Washington state history, much evidence indicates that workers who were raised and worked in Roslyn’s racially integrated community continued to carry attitudes of interracial solidarity when they moved to work in other parts of the state. That these attitudes spread beyond Roslyn’s

¹²⁴ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Barnett Interview, January 21, 1967, UW Special Collections, 12.

boundaries was also made clear by the expansion of African American political representation in the region previously discussed. Smith remembered how his friend Robinson, unlike him, moved out of Roslyn to Seattle looking for work when Roslyn's coal industry began to decline. Working in the dockyards of Seattle, Robinson found that the white workers were far less willing to work alongside Black workers than the white miners in Roslyn, and these white dockworkers often looked down on him. However, one white worker there did not contribute to the widespread anti-Black animosity and befriended Robinson. He even stood up for Robinson against the racist comments and attitudes of the other dockworkers. Later, Robinson discovered that this man was also previously a miner in Roslyn, and Robinson concluded that the man's time working in the racially integrated mines there had made him committed to racial equality in the workplace.¹²⁷

Such an example suggests that Roslyn's unique racial dynamics were not limited to that specific town during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While many miners did migrate out of Roslyn as new economic opportunities arose amidst the rapid economic growth in Washington state throughout the twentieth century and in response to the decline of mining as a significant industry in the region, the feelings of interracial solidarity fostered by the town and by the union did not disappear with their movement. Robinson's story reveals that the unique mix of conditions in Roslyn that enabled cooperation among Black and immigrant white miners engendered a lasting predisposition to interracial cooperation in these workers who would go on to organize across racial lines throughout the state.

Indeed, this focus on the town's lasting legacy outside of its boundaries is important when considering the broader implications of this story because the Roslyn of the turn of the century did not remain a thriving coal mining town forever. Oil gradually began to displace coal as the state's most important fuel source during the 1920s, and the town continually emptied of

¹²⁷ Smith Interview, UW Special Collections.

miners in the following decades. By 1963, the last coal mine closed, and Roslyn's days as a thriving coal mining community founded on a unique form of interracial solidarity were already long over.¹²⁸ Although Roslyn's robust interracial community did not endure over these decades due to this massive outward migration of miners, the Black families who migrated out of Roslyn as part of this wave also carried on this community's legacy across the state. These families maintained social ties forged in the coalfields and used these ties as the basis for new communities in the growing cities throughout the state in constant need of workers to fuel economic development. Black people leaving the mining industry and migrating to bigger cities like Seattle, Ellensburg, and Yakima "would be friends of the people who used to live in Roslyn," according to Beulah Hart.¹²⁹ When Barnett migrated to Seattle in April 1906 at age 22, not wishing to work as a miner for the rest of his life, he was able to initially find room and board with the Gleeves family, a Black family he had known in Roslyn before they also moved to Seattle.¹³⁰ That these types of social ties persisted, even in the face of the disruption caused by the later decline in the mining industry, shows the importance of Roslyn as a space for Black people to forge social ties in the era before the Great Migration of African Americans out of the rural South.

That memories of Roslyn were so prominent for Black people who had lived in Washington state prior to the Great Migration should not be surprising. Roslyn had an immense symbolic meaning for those who had been part of its community as a place of stability for Black people in a world where such stability was not only rare, but constantly at risk. As larger Black communities grew in other cities throughout the state, its legacy survived through the social

¹²⁸ Jim Kershner, "Roslyn: Thumbnail History," *HistoryLink.org*, December 12, 2009, <https://www.historylink.org/file/9239>.

¹²⁹ Hart and Woffort Interview, UW Special Collections, 11.

¹³⁰ General History: Mr. Powell Barnett, UW Special Collections, 5.

bonds of former Roslyn residents. These former residents helped form the bedrock of Black settlements in other Washington cities that welcomed the larger migration of Black people into the state during the Great Migration. Demographic changes and the fortunes of the coal mining industry would gradually decrease the salience of Roslyn as a site of possibility for Black Americans in the West. Nonetheless, its lasting legacy in fostering Black communities throughout Washington state reveals the town's central importance to the experiences of Black Americans building lives in the West, whose relationships with Roslyn have hitherto not been a priority of academic scholarship.

Perhaps less explicitly, its legacy also survived in shaping the racial attitudes of white people who lived, worked, and grew up in Roslyn like Robinson's friend. When thinking about Roslyn's history today, its example looms large for the ways in which we talk about the potential for solidarity building across racial lines. Roslyn's model represents a sort of alternative reality compared to the racial relations that predominated in America during the Gilded Age and through the turn of the twentieth century. But it must also be understood as a road not taken by broader American society. Many native-born white Americans during this period continued to be invested in racist understandings of social relations that inhibited the pursuit of shared material goals across racial and ethnic divides. Yet, the Black and immigrant white miners who populated Roslyn effectively served as a case study on how a radical restructuring of the racial hierarchy in the midst of a town's development could shape labor relations. Although this restructuring at first threatened to boil over into racial violence, by the early 1900s it was apparent that the rigid racial hierarchies upheld by native-born white workers and administrators alike were among the foremost obstacles to the pursuit of labor power.

What the residents of Roslyn at the turn-of-the-century demonstrated was that, in an environment in which access to public goods like housing, education, and cultural institutions was available to all people -regardless of race - it was indeed possible to create truly effective solidarity amongst workers. This solidarity was so effective that it was integral to workers emerging victorious in a massive labor organizing effort against Washington state's largest and most profitable coal corporation. When thinking about how to build solidarity today, in an era still defined by racial divisions and racist violence, Roslyn's example figures prominently as a model for inspiring these same kinds of simultaneous labor and community alliances.

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