Primitive justice hampers strikers in Starr County dispute

By BARRY KAPLAN

The Texas Rangers were once the heroes of song and story. In the highly romanticized western novels and ballads of the closing years of the nineteenth century, the Ranger, standing alone and overwhelmed in the face of evil rampant, was a figure to be feared and respected. Alas, for changing times.

Relegated to the same civil service status of other policemen, the Ranger has shrunk within his legend to the stature of a human being no different from any other.

The tradition lingers on, however. Sent to Starr County to aid the local authorities in their attempts to suppress the strikers’ right to free speech and free assembly, the Rangers have kept the pickets at the struck farms off balance. The presence of a man who, at the request of the sheriff, could have an arrested man sent to jail anywhere in the State of Texas, has a terrifying effect on a man whose life has revolved around field and family.

The sheriff’s office has plenty of help of its own in subduing the strikers, as many of the Starr deputies are also foreman and management staff of the struck farms.

The bridge across the Rio Grande at Roma has been the setting for some of the most acrimonious yet farcical incidents of the strike’s nine-month history.

An attempt by strikers to cross the bridge in order to speak to the Mexican strikebreakers in the town of Mier on the other side was met with an interesting instance of international cooperation. Having been told by the Texas Rangers not to permit any of the Union people across the bridge, the Mexican border guards realized when an attempt was finally made that they had no real grounds to detain the people.

The strikers were stopped at the middle of the bridge while one of the guards came over to Roma to ask the Ranger there what sort of pretense could be used to block the strikers. Whatever the answer was, it seemed to fulfill the requirements of international law, and the strikers were turned back.

The bridge was also the scene of an attempt to block the entry of a number of strikebreakers in December, but neither the circumstances nor the results were very funny. In this case, several arrests were made on charges of blocking a public thoroughfare. Uneasy deputies have fired shots over pickets’ heads and trucks have been driven into picket lines at high rates of speed.

Yet there is an ironic, if not altogether humorous twist to the form that the law enforcement takes. Trucks of the struck farms have been used as paddy wagons to carry off arrested strikers, and the trigger-happy deputies are sometimes the employees of the farms whose laborers they hamper in their attempt to be recognized.

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