

Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement

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Iowa Senator Guy Gillette chaired a Senate committee to study the problem and quickly became a proponent of grain-based alcohol production. The committee concluded that the government must support a new agency devoted to synthetic rubber production made exclusively from plants. Despite its efforts, the president vetoed the bill. The Gillette Committee then threw the debate into the public limelight, harnessing spirited public support throughout the Midwest. Roosevelt responded by supporting research and production on both grain- and petroleum-based synthetic rubber. By the end of 1942, the debates calmed and production of synthetic rubber reduced the urgent rubber shortage.

The whole rubber supply drama reaches a climax in chapter 6; there Finlay's organization proves to be weak. By that point it is unclear why the mammoth effort to grow or synthetically produce rubber never satisfied the demand. Not until chapter 7 does Finlay tell us that ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and scandal together with weather and disease events plagued much of the effort. In chapter 8 Finlay concludes the story by noting that with the end of World War II, the quest for rubber self-sufficiency waned, following the pattern that had persisted during most of the first half of the century.

Growing American Rubber is a good history of the rubber industry, private and public efforts to control the industry, and its vulnerability to world politics. This is important because we all need to understand that increased globalization and increased outsourcing intensify our vulnerability. Therefore, this book should be of interest to historians of science and technology, economics, and the twentieth century as well as to makers of public policy.

Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement, by Steven K. Ashby and C. J. Hawking. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xi, 358 pp. Illustrations, notes, glossary, index. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Reviewer Colin Gordon is professor of history at the University of Iowa. He is the author of *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (2008); *Dead on Arrival: The Politics of Health Care in Twentieth-Century America* (2003); and *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920–1935* (1994).

Each era of American economic history has its emblematic labor struggle: Homestead in the 1890s, steel at the close of World War I, the Flint Sit-Down in 1936–37, General Motors in 1946, the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 1968. Each of these, in its recounting, is held out as both a snapshot of that era's labor relations and the blueprint for a new la-

bor movement. In more recent years (Lordstown in 1972, Hormel in 1986, Pittston in 1989) these struggles have ended badly, and the lessons drawn have been both more bitter and more romantic. *Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement* tells the tragic story of the lockout at A. E. Staley's corn-processing plant in Decatur, Illinois, in the mid-1990s, a struggle that overlapped with local strikes at Caterpillar and Bridgestone-Firestone. The authors were deeply immersed in the fight as part of a local and national support network for the Staley workers.

Staley is a masterful and cautionary account that brilliantly captures the obstacles and dilemmas faced by organized labor at the close of the twentieth century. The confrontation begins in the shadow of globalization, when the Staley plant is acquired by the British sugar giant Tate & Lyle. The local union, Allied Industrial Workers 837, had been on the defensive through the 1970s and 1980s as concessionary bargaining (in the wake of the Chrysler bailout and the PATCO strike) became the rule. For Staley workers, those concessions (and the subsequent lockout) involved not just compensation but plant safety, an issue chillingly underscored by the book's prologue. The local's response drew on a wide array of strategies, including "work-to-rule" control of the shop floor; an ambitious (if unevenly successful) corporate campaign targeting Tate and Lyle's brands (Domino Sugar), its corporate customers (Pepsi), and its institutional stockholders (State Farm); and an expansive solidarity effort involving other local unions, churches, and national fundraising and outreach by the local's "road warriors." All of this found only ambivalent support from national labor unions. The AFL-CIO's timid support of Decatur workers was the final nail in Lane Kirkland's coffin in 1995, but the new leadership was not much better.

Like the P-9 Hormel strike a decade earlier (see Peter Rachleff's fine *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland*), the Staley standoff ended in defeat and recrimination. Abetted by the weariness of Staley workers and leadership change in the local (now under the mantle of the United Paperworkers), the two sides agreed to a contract that cemented all of the company's original concessions: 12-hour shifts, mandatory overtime, unlimited subcontracting, weakened safety standards, and stark cuts to health coverage for current workers and retirees.

As much as there is to admire in Ashby and Hawking's sobering and sympathetic account, I cannot share its optimism that Decatur could and should have been "a rallying cry for a resurgent labor movement" (290). The defeat rested not on the weakness or treachery of local turncoats and national union leaders but on the political cli-

mate in which they operated. With a tenuous share of the private labor force (barely 7 percent), stark obstacles to new or secondary organizing, little check on union-busting strategies, and a near evaporation of federal responsibility for workplace health and safety (at its current staffing and inspection levels, it would take OSHA 133 years to inspect each workplace under its jurisdiction just once), the labor movement faces not an uphill battle but a cliff.

Stories from the Heart: Missouri's African American Heritage, compiled by Gladys Caines Coggsell. Missouri Heritage Readers Series. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009. xvi, 141 pp. Illustrations, index. \$15.95 paper.

Reviewer Kristen Anderson is assistant professor of history at Webster University, St. Louis. Her dissertation (University of Iowa, 2009) is "German Americans, African Americans, and the Construction of Racial Identity in St. Louis, 1850–1870."

A master storyteller with the Missouri Folk Arts Program, Gladys Caines Coggsell presents here the tales she has collected over the past two decades through her fieldwork among the African American population of Missouri. Like any good storyteller, she recognizes the value not only of the stories people tell, but of the words they use to tell them. Those interviewed thus tell their stories in their own words, while she provides background information and transitions to knit the pieces together. These stories span Missouri history geographically and chronologically, including tales from all regions of the state, both rural and urban, and from throughout the twentieth century. The topics of the stories range from tales told to children — such as "Why Dogs Chase Cats" — to accounts of growing up as sharecroppers in the Missouri Bootheel or undergoing school desegregation in St. Louis.

The Missouri Heritage Readers series is designed to provide high-quality historical scholarship that is accessible to nonacademic readers. The book succeeds admirably at this goal and is a very accessible introduction to the history of African Americans in Missouri, particularly on the issues of childhood, education, community, and work. Although the discussion of these issues may not be new to scholars of African American history in Missouri, these stories are new, and scholars and general readers alike will benefit from them. This book will also find a readership among scholars of the African American experience in the Midwest as well as those interested in storytelling and the oral tradition in history.