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Article Summary: Socially prominent local businessmen led the anti-union movement in Omaha in the early twentieth century. Many unions survived, but the open shop principle promoted by the Omaha Business Men's Association met with early success, was widely accepted and persisted for many years.

Cataloging Information:

Names: TJ Mahoney, David M Parry, Gurdon W Wattles, Walter S Jardine, Andrew Murphy, John H Mickey, Gilbert Hitchcock, Euclid Martin

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Photographs / Images: Powell cartoon showing Omaha Commercial Club aiming for 2,000 members by 1917 (*Omaha Evening Bee*, February 25, 1916); Jobbers Canyon, Ninth Street north from Howard Street, Omaha; Omaha attorney TJ Mahoney; Walter S Jardine of the Omaha Merchant Express and Transfer Company; Gurdon W Wattles, president of the Omaha-Council Bluffs Street Railway Company; Andrew Murphy at his blacksmith and wagon repair shop in 1869; inset list of members of the Omaha Business Men's Association Inner Circle; 1907 view of new buildings of ME Smith and Company, a dry goods wholesaler

THE OMAHA BUSINESS MEN'S ASSOCIATION AND THE OPEN SHOP, 1903-1909

By William C. Pratt

The goal of "a union-free environment" has long been held by many employers. While this notion today has stimulated a major growth industry of management consultants, seminars, and perhaps even degree programs in our universities, the most concerted effort to counter the labor movement in this century dates to the 1902-3 era. Then employers in many communities and industries launched an open shop crusade to promote the hiring of workers without regard to union membership. Its timing is largely explained by the gains unions made during the prosperity of 1897-1902 and the increased prevalence of the closed shop, in which only union members were employed. To be sure, open shop efforts predate that development, but they received an enormous boost when David M. Parry, the new president of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), issued a call to arms at the association's 1903 annual convention. Across the country that spring, numerous employer groups appeared to fight unions in their communities.¹ In some cases, they failed to achieve their basic goal in this era. They often proved persistent, however, and the open shop became a reality in Minneapolis, San Francisco, and many other cities in the Midwest and West by the early 1920s.²

This article focuses on anti-union efforts during the Progressive Era in Omaha — efforts spearheaded by the Business Men's Association (BMA), which later claimed, "Omaha is the best open shop city of its size in the United States."³ Much of this study is an exploration of the still obscure record of the BMA. While it treats a local topic, this inquiry offers an account of labor-management struggles in an important midwestern urban setting and may also serve as a basis for comparative work on other cities.

Omaha was a major railroad and packing center by the early twentieth century.⁴ But the story of its open shop fight is set in the city's commercial districts. While the railroads and packers also battled unions, there is little contemporary evidence to tie them to Omaha's broader open shop efforts in the Progressive Era. The BMA was a local organization designed to counter unions in the building trades and express firms and involved jobbers and other commercial establishments. When it first appeared, the *Omaha World-Herald* referred to the group as "a body composed of wholesalers and retailers."⁵ It was to fight teamsters, hod carriers, bricklayers, waiters, and cooks rather than the railroad brotherhoods or meat cutters.

Organized labor in Omaha and its sister community, South Omaha, had made important advances by 1903. As many as seventy local unions now were established, and it was claimed that 12,000 members were affiliated with

Omaha's central labor body. The building trades were almost completely organized, and crafts such as printers, machinists, and iron moulders had been organized for years; new unions, including those for teamsters, egg candler, and retail clerks, had recently been formed. In mid-1903 the *Omaha Daily News* headed a story: "Omaha Is A Very Strong Union City," claiming that it "had the reputation of being one of the most thoroughly organized union cities in the United States."⁶ Though such words perhaps smack of a working-class boosterism, the local labor movement appeared to be strong in the early years of the century. Socialists also were active within union ranks and occasionally controlled the central labor bodies in both Omaha and South Omaha.⁷ Perhaps their presence added to the numbers of militant unionists. Overall Omaha's labor movement seemed ready to make new advances in the spring of 1903.

But such efforts were thwarted by an employer offensive. Whether or not it was directly associated with the NAM open shop drive, the Omaha Business Men's Association surfaced one week after Parry called for an anti-union movement and began its long and controversial role in the city's labor history.⁸ Initially, however, organized labor in Omaha had not anticipated much difficulty in 1903. A brief printing strike had been resolved, and the building trades felt that the year might pass without a major incident. One *World-Herald* article in mid-March actually

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was headed: "Building Trades Look For No More Strikes."⁹

A hod carriers' strike had broken out, but it seemed easily remedied. The new wage scale was quickly agreed upon, and only the date upon which the agreement was to go into effect remained in dispute. That unresolved issue, however, may have played a major role in provoking the worst work stoppage in Omaha history. The Builders' Exchange gave the hod carriers an ultimatum to resume their jobs no later than April 1 and followed that by withholding supplies from contractors who had agreed to the new scale. These measures heightened tensions, and rumors circulated that all building trades unions might go out on May 1 and that the contractors were preparing for a fight. Other unions, including those of the newly organized teamsters and waiters, also set a May 1 deadline for the acceptance of new wage scales. By mid-April it seemed the city was about to witness a major showdown.¹⁰

Then on April 21 the formation of the BMA was announced to the press. Significantly no spokesmen were identified, but a press statement claimed that the employers' organization now represented 800 local businesses. "Its purpose," according to the announcement, was

purely defensive, and made necessary . . . by the apparent determination upon the part of the labor organizations of the city to either control or ruin every business enterprise.

The BMA acknowledged the right of workers to form unions but denounced picketing and boycotts "of persons and firms who are unwilling to submit to their dictation" and concluded with a brief platform:

First: Freedom to employ union and non-union labor without discrimination. Second: No limitation or restriction to output. Third: No sympathy strike.¹¹

On May 1 teamsters, waiters, cooks, bartenders, and carpenters struck. Within a few days perhaps as many as 2,900 workers were out, and much of the city's business had either come to a halt or was greatly reduced. The president of Omaha's Central Labor Union



From the Omaha Evening Bee, February 25, 1916.



FAIRBANKS
MORSE & CO.

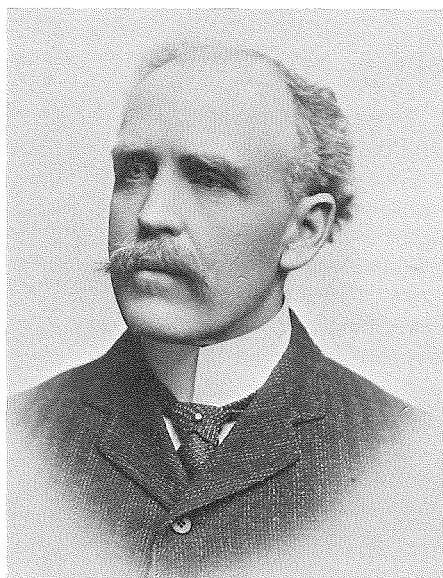
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proposed arbitration, but the striking unions and Socialists denounced the move and later efforts proved unfruitful. Initially the CLU head underestimated the resolve of the employers, as he apparently felt that the vast majority of employers sought a compromise. His conciliatory posture, praised in the daily press, probably was based on an unrealistic estimate of the situation. On the other hand, the striking unions' determination to force the issue seemingly was based on an inflated assessment of their strength and staying power.¹²

At its peak fourteen or more unions joined the strike, and several others were locked out.¹³ The teamsters provided the largest single group of strikers, but the building trades unions and a host of other specialized crafts (leather workers, egg candlers, and freight handlers) joined. The BMA was prepared for a long struggle and had devised a strategy for a war of attrition. Central to this strategy were political and legal maneuvers. While pressure upon the governor did not lead to the sending in of the National Guard, it did cause local authorities to deputize non-striking employees and after protest, to remove that status from union members. The BMA's legal approach consisted of seeking injunctions against the teamsters and waiters and forbidding picketing and other "interference" with the operation of businesses. Two lawyers represented not only the BMA but other employer groups in the controversy, and one of them, T.J. Mahoney, later was credited with the idea behind the BMA.¹⁴

In addition to political and legal efforts, many employers imported strikebreakers from outside the city and state. For example, one of the leading express companies recruited drivers from St. Louis, and the local



Omaha attorney T. J. Mahoney was reputedly the chief organizer of the BMA. (NSHS-P853)

papers often reported the arrival and controversy surrounding the use of strikebreakers. Frequently such replacements quit after being contacted by strikers.¹⁵ On the other hand, local authorities sought to protect them, and in some cases the courts enjoined unions from harassing them.

While employers sought to destroy union efforts to establish a closed shop for workers, their representatives seemingly tried to impose a closed shop on employers of the strikers. Prior to May 1 the Builders' Exchange had stopped deliveries to contractors who had agreed to the hod carriers' scale taking effect on March 1. One restaurant owner also complained of a threat to cut off his supplies "unless I recede from my agreement with the cooks and waiters' unions."¹⁶

The employers were well prepared in 1903. Their strategy was to wear their opponents down on several fronts, and it gradually succeeded. While some firms (mostly smaller ones) signed the teamsters' scale, most refused and ultimately the drivers were forced to return without union recognition.¹⁷ The 1903 strike, despite protestations to

the contrary, was built upon the teamsters' walkout, and when they conceded, the heart of the struggle was gone. Some unions held out, but others returned without concessions. The day before the teamster return, the bricklayers had broken ranks with other striking building trades unions, which also undercut their position.¹⁸ The 1903 strike proved a serious setback for the local trade union movement and was a major turning point in the city's labor history. Organized labor's earlier momentum had been halted and then reversed.¹⁹ While the remainder of 1903 and part of the following year would bring temporary gains in South Omaha's packing district, local unions recorded few advances until the World War I era. They confronted a united and aggressive combine of employers well equipped with legal and financial resources to combat their efforts. In some respects Omaha labor's "lean years" began in 1903.

The BMA went on the offensive. An article recounting its successes appeared in the NAM magazine *American Industries*; a spokesman announced plans to recruit thousands of members; fifty of its members pressured the city council to kill a pro-labor ordinance that would have permitted the dissemination of "unfair" cards calling for the boycott of "unfair" business; and the organization sponsored a well publicized but closed meeting at which the NAM's president, David M. Parry, delivered an anti-union address.²⁰ Parry's visit occurred in December of 1903, and his speech was open only to BMA members. The next day the *Daily News* reported: "The hall was completely filled with prominent business men of the city."²¹ In his speech, he praised local employers for their recent anti-union efforts:

I am glad of the opportunity of meeting with the business men of Omaha, who so successfully grappled with the situation some months ago, when the labor unions attempted to tie up the city. I wish as a business man to compliment you upon the manner in which you arose to that occasion and saved the credit and honor of the city of

Jobbers Canyon, Ninth Street north from Howard Street, Omaha. Many of the men involved in the BMA inner circle were jobbers or wholesalers. From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.

Omaha in the eyes of the rest of the country as a law-abiding liberty-loving American city.²²

One of the main reasons the NAM leader spoke in Omaha was to try to persuade the BMA to join the newly formed Citizen's Industrial Association, an anti-union group of which he was president. At the time of the 1903 strike, BMA spokesmen had denied that their organization was affiliated with a national group.²³ However, the BMA subsequently joined the Citizen's Industrial Association, and its president, Euclid Martin, was elected to the national organization's executive committee in February of 1904. Upon returning from the convention, Martin and three other BMA members were enthusiastic about the new employer group. Again there was a positive report on the BMA. Said Martin: "The Omaha organization is regarded as one of the strongest in the country, and this reputation is redounding very much to Omaha's advantage."²⁴ In late 1904 Martin was again elected to the Industrial Association's executive committee.²⁵ Two years later T. J. Mahoney was chosen for the governing body.²⁶ But the national open shop association apparently did not have the staying power of many of its local affiliates and faded from view.²⁷

However, the BMA continued as a significant force in Omaha labor relations. It may have played a supportive role in the 1904 packinghouse strike in South Omaha, and its attorney, T. J. Mahoney, served as one of the packers' lawyers during the conflict.²⁸ The organization was occasionally mentioned in the press in regard to labor disputes, but it assumed a higher profile during the city's 1909 street railway strike.²⁹ Though street railway employees had organized as early as 1902, it was not until 1907 that they had a serious confrontation with the company. That controversy was resolved at the last minute. In the fall of 1909, however, several hundred street railway employees struck for union recognition and a pay raise. The presi-



Walter S. Jardine of the Omaha Merchant Express and Transfer Company was a key figure in the BMA. Courtesy of the Douglas County Historical Society.

dent of the company was Gurdon W. Wattles, also a banker and prominent local booster. He had organized and managed the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, headed the Grain Exchange, and had been the 1908 King of Ak-Sar-Ben, Omaha's most prominent civic organization. While he considered himself sympathetic to the workingman, Wattles was opposed to unions and seized the 1909 occasion as an opportunity to break the union in his company.³⁰

Following the strike vote, the BMA announced its support for Wattles's firm, and approximately 250 of its members volunteered as special deputies for the duration of the strike. Said the BMA president:

The Business Men's association will assist the street railway company in every way possible in putting down the strike. . . . We were organized to fight strikes and we won't be asleep during this one. . . . We are not opposed to labor unions, but to the closed shop. The street car men want a closed shop, but we believe that any man ought to have a right to work in any shop without regard to whether he belongs to a union or not.³¹

The company promptly contracted with a New York strikebreaking firm for

several hundred strikebreakers. Though many of them pocketed fares and proved undesirable, their employment made it possible to run the main lines much of the time. Wattles was determined to break the union and refused to arbitrate the dispute. Some violence occasionally ensued, but it was not sufficient to justify a harsh crackdown on the union. While the BMA offered full backing to Wattles, it seemingly was not as involved in this strike as in the 1903 episode, and there were several businessmen who urged the company to compromise. The Ak-Sar-Ben festival was scheduled for October, and the civic group's notables sought a settlement to avoid interfering with that activity.³² Local officials did meet with company representatives to work out terms, but Wattles insisted upon some discrimination against union members. First, in addition to refusing to recognize the union or raise wages, the proposal allowed the company to refuse to rehire as many as ten percent of the strikers and proclaimed that all new employees would be non-union. Gradually, however, the striking workers drifted back to work, and the 1909 street railway strike ended in defeat for union workers. By October 13 Wattles could write to a private correspondent:

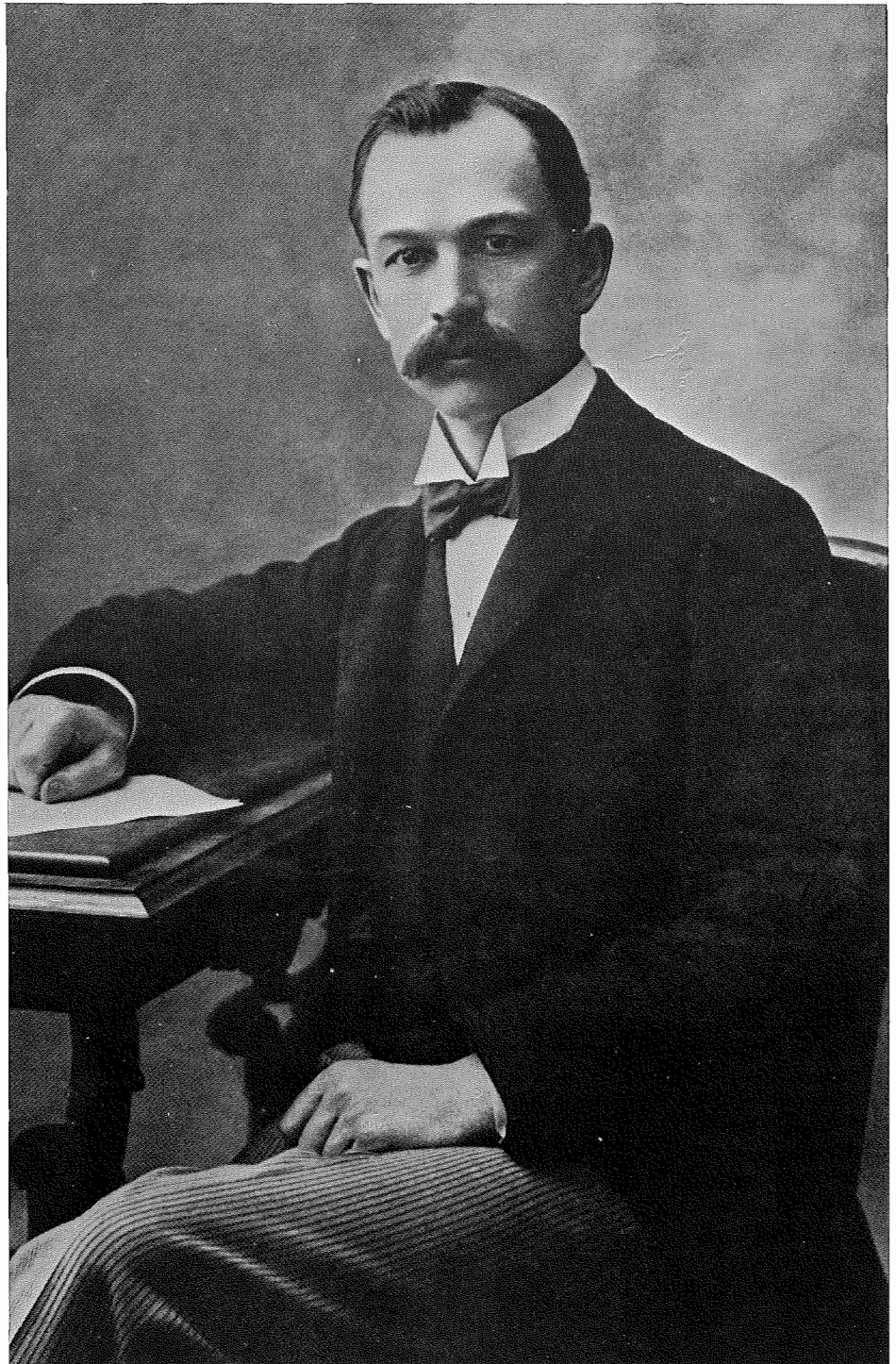
We shipped back the last of the strikebreakers a few days ago and are running the entire system with our own men. We could use a few more of the strikers, if they come back as nonunion men, which they must do, as from now on we will not employ a man who belongs to a union, and if he joins one we shall discharge him.³³

Wattles's words here reveal the true anti-union sentiments of the open shop cause. While he and the BMA might publicly claim that they were not out to destroy unions, their actions demonstrated otherwise. They sought, in today's parlance, "a union-free environment."

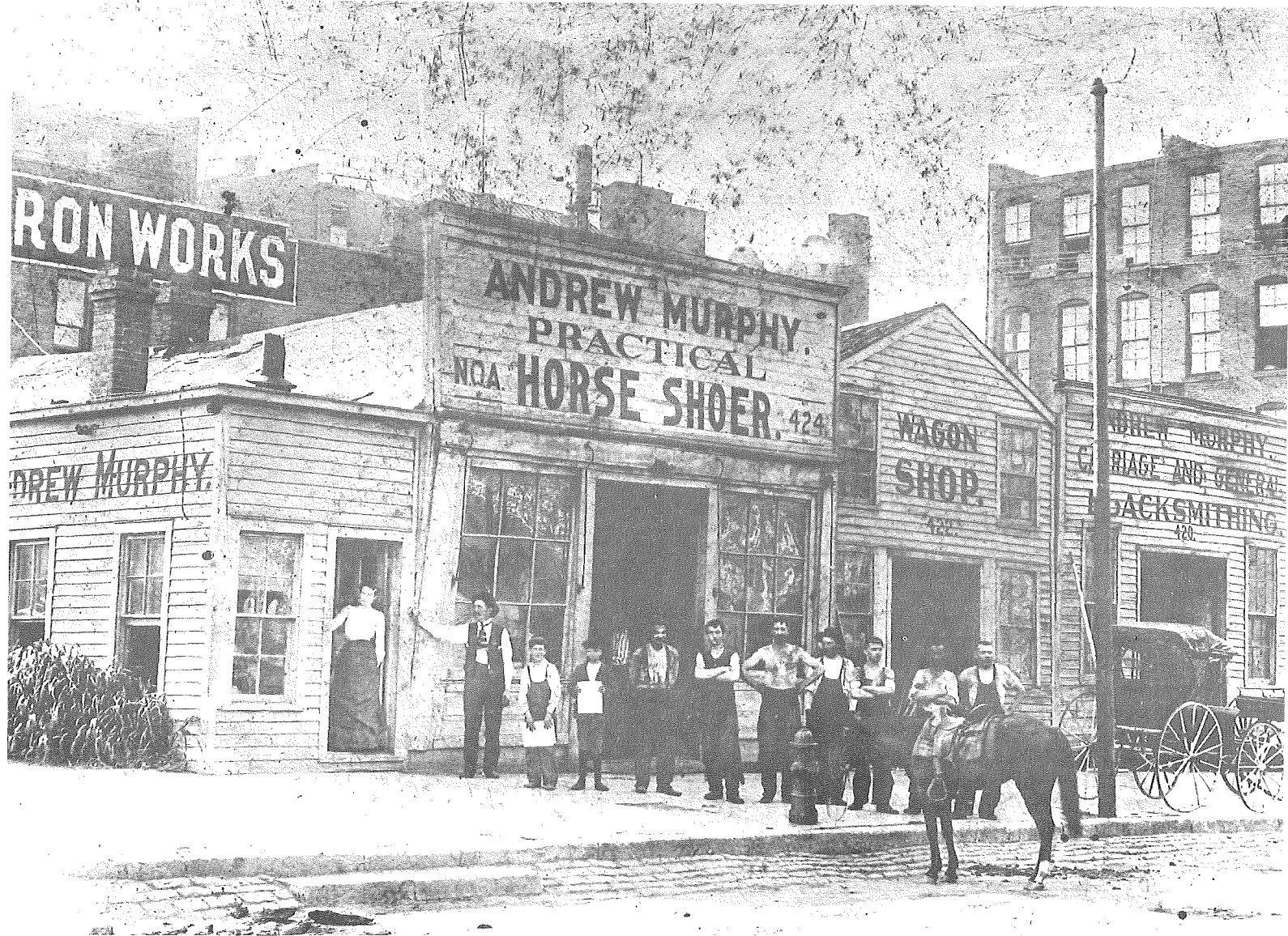
Despite the BMA's prominence in the city's labor relations, it remained essentially a secret organization, and the identity of its leadership was seldom disclosed. The association always had a listing in the city direc-

tory, but the names of key figures other than its officers were kept out of the public eye. During the 1909 streetcar strike, however, the group's executive committee issued a signed statement to the press. This list of twenty-six is the most complete listing of BMA "influentials" available, and that, along with the names of a seven-man arbitration committee during the 1903 strike and the officers provided in the 1904-10 city directories, is the basis for the following observations.³⁴ Many of the men involved in the BMA inner circle were jobbers, wholesalers, or retailers. More than half were presidents of their own firms or officers of local businesses. Two printing establishments were represented, both of which had established the open shop by 1909, and several members were involved in the construction business either as suppliers or contractors, including a former president of the Omaha Builders' Exchange. Only one individual was a full-time banker, but at least three others had some banking interests.³⁵ None of them, however, was primarily associated with either the Union Pacific or the local packinghouses, though one person was a director of the stockyards company. That individual, T. J. Mahoney, was one of three lawyers in the BMA inner circle and reputedly the mastermind behind the formation of the local open shop organization in 1903. A prominent attorney, he was dean of the Creighton Law School, a past president of the Nebraska Bar Association (1907-8), and a moving force in the Omaha Civic Federation. Earlier Mahoney had served as state chairman of the Democratic party (1896) and had been identified with the anti-Bryan wing of the party. He was one of the few Catholics within the BMA inner circle and was active in the Knights of Columbus.³⁶

More representative of the local open shop influentials was Euclid Martin. He had served as BMA president from 1903 through 1907 and was a leading farm implements dealer. Active in



Gurdon W. Wattles, president of the Omaha-Council Bluffs Street Railway Company, was backed by the BMA during the 1909 Omaha tram strike. Courtesy of the Douglas County Historical Society.



Andrew Murphy, a BMA influential, opened a blacksmith and wagon repair shop (above) in Omaha in 1869. In 1902, a year before the BMA was founded, Murphy relocated the business and went into automobile and truck repair. (NSHS-D517-32-255)

Democratic politics, he too had been a leader within the anti-Bryan element, serving as state chairman (1894), and was appointed the city's postmaster by Grover Cleveland. For many years he had been active in the local business community, first working with the Board of Trade and then the Commercial Club. In 1900 and again in 1909 he was elected club president, the only person in the period under study who served more than one term in this post. Aside from these two years, he was a member of the club's executive committee the entire time he was associated with the BMA.³⁷ He also was one of the founders of the Happy Hollow Club, which prohibited both drinking and gambling in its clubhouse.³⁸ (Ten other members of the BMA sample belonged as well.)³⁹

Walter S. Jardine was a key figure in the BMA from the beginning. According to one local history, "he succeeded in organizing the Omaha Business Men's Association, which has up to the present kept Omaha free from strikes or internal industrial trouble." He reportedly authored the group's bylaws and constitution and played a prominent part in the 1903 strike. Operating a large express business, he imported strikebreakers from St. Louis to replace union teamsters. Jardine served four years on the Commercial Club's board of directors but probably was more active in other organizations. In the 1890s he was a major fund-raiser for the Trans-Mississippi Exposition and helped organize Ak-Sar-Ben, serving on its board of governors for a decade. He was a Mason and had

belonged to three other fraternal orders. Unlike Mahoney and Martin, he was a Republican and later was elected a city commissioner (1915).⁴⁰

Several others in the BMA's inner circle had backgrounds similar to those of Martin and Jardine. Perhaps none of them was native to Omaha, but most had settled in the city prior to 1890. An examination of their involvement with the Commercial Club establishes a direct link between the BMA and the Chamber of Commerce antecedent. Of the thirty-three names in this sample, twenty-nine were members of the Commercial Club; twenty-three had served at least one term as a club director; and sixteen had been members of the club's executive committee. More significant, however, is the fact that thirteen served two or more years on this governing

body, and another seven participated at that level five or more years between 1900 and 1910. All told six men were elected chairman of the executive committee, and six of them were chosen as president of the Commercial Club. In this eleven-year period there was only one year in which this organization did not have either its executive committee chairman or its president drawn from the BMA's inner circle.⁴¹ Omaha's open shop establishment and the Commercial Club had what amounted to an "interlocking directorate," but it normally went unacknowledged in the press and is discreetly obscured in the recorded minutes of the club's executive committee. Whether or not this arrangement continued into a later era is not clear, but labor spokesmen often asserted that it was the case as late as the 1930s.⁴²

Members of the BMA inner circle had more in common than simply a commitment to impose the open shop in Omaha. While the data is incomplete, many of them belonged to the same country clubs and worked together in common civic endeavors. Twenty members belonged to the Omaha Club, and twenty-one of them belonged to two or more of the city's four most prominent clubs.⁴³ As already suggested, several BMA influentials participated in Ak-Sar-Ben. Thomas A. Fry, who was a Commercial Club director for eleven years, repeatedly was elected president of Ak-Sar-Ben and was chosen its 1902 king, the highest tribute Omaha society could award.⁴⁴ Two other BMA figures also were crowned between 1900 and 1912, and five of them (including Fry) served on Ak-Sar-Ben's board of governors. Others probably participated in its activities.⁴⁵

At the time of the 1903 strike, a weekly society paper with good BMA contacts credited earlier Ak-Sar-Ben involvement with preparing local businessmen for the open shop fight:

The ease with which the businessmen were brought together and the harmony in which they acted is not to be attributed altogether to the questions at issue or the emergency in which they

| OMAHA BUSINESS MEN'S ASSOCIATION INNER CIRCLE | |
|---|--|
| <i>Name</i> | <i>Position and/or Firm</i> |
| Belden, Charles C. | Thompson, Belden & Co. (dry goods) |
| Branch, Elihu D. | Sec., Western Fruit Jobbers Assn. |
| Bruce, Edward E. | Pres. and treas., E. E. Bruce & Co. (wholesale druggist & stationers) |
| Bullard, William C. | Bullard, Hoagland & Benedict (lumber and building material) |
| Byrne, Thomas C. | Pres., Byrne & Hammer Dry Goods Co. |
| Carpenter, J. Frank | Sec., Carpenter Paper Co. (wholesale paper) |
| Clabaugh, George W. | Vice Pres. and sec., Omaha Gas Co. |
| Cole, David | Pres., David Cole Co. (wholesale oysters, celery & poultry); David Cole Creamery Co. |
| Colpretzer, Frank | Pres., Chicago Lumber Yard of Omaha |
| Daniel, Herbert S. | Attorney and city prosecutor |
| Drake, Luther | Pres., Merchants National Bank |
| Fry, Thomas A. | Pres. and treas., Fry Shoe Co. |
| Harte, John H. | Contractor and builder |
| Jardine, Walter S. | Omaha Merchant Express & Transfer Co. |
| Johnson, Frank B. | Sec. and treas., Omaha Printing Co. |
| Johnston, George W. | Pres. and mngr., Johnston Electric Co. |
| Judson, Frank W. | Sec. and mngr., Midland Glass & Paint Co. |
| Kelly, George H. | Sec. and treas., Adams & Kelly (planing mill) |
| Lee, George H. | Pres. and treas., George H. Lee Co. (poultry supplies, incubators & brooders) |
| McVann, Edward J. | Sec., Omaha Grain Exchange |
| Mahoney, Timothy J. | Attorney |
| Martin, Euclid | Pres. and mngr., Parley, Orendorff & Martin Co. (wholesale farm implements) |
| Montgomery, C. C. | Attorney |
| Miller, Rome | Pres., Miller Hotel Co., Millard Hotel Co., & Mills Real Estate Co.) |
| Murphy, Andrew | Andrew Murphy & Sons (blacksmith, wagon builders, carriage painting & automobile repair) |
| Nash, Frederick A. | Pres., Omaha Elec Lt & P Co. |
| O'Brien, David J. | Pres., D. J. O'Brien Co. (candy manufacturer) |
| Rahm, John B. | Vice Pres. and gen. mngr., U.S. Supply Co. (wholesale plumbing supply) |
| Rees, Samuel | Pres., Rees Printing Co. |
| Smith, Arthur C. | Pres., M. E. Smith & Co. (wholesale dry goods) |
| Sunderland, James A. | Pres., Sunderland Bros. Co. (coal, cement, building supply); treas., Sunderland Roofing & Supply Co. |
| Vierling, Adolph J. | Vice Pres. and mngr., Paxton & Vierling Iron Works |
| Wright, William S. | Treas., Wright & Wilhelmy (wholesale hardware) |

This information is taken from the *Omaha City Directory*, 1909, supplemented with material cited in note 34. The exact abbreviations and wording found in the directory have been used.

found themselves. These men have enjoyed a fine preliminary training in cooperation through that remarkable body known as the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben, before the existence of which men engaged in different lines of work in this city were almost strangers to each other. At the meetings of

the businessmen there has been little need for introductions.⁴⁶

While the society editor may have exaggerated the significance of Ak-Sar-

Ben involvement to the BMA effort, it is true that key figures in the open shop cause were prominent in Omaha social circles and that many of them had associated with one another in a variety of pursuits. Several had worked together at least as early as the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition and continued to do so on projects such as a barge company and the Grain Exchange.⁴⁷ An episode that demonstrates both the social prominence of BMA influentials and their interaction in civic affairs occurred in the wake of the death of John A. Creighton, a prominent local businessman who died in 1907. A memorial meeting was scheduled for the city auditorium, and 272 individuals were seated on the stage. Twenty of these notables were drawn from the BMA inner circle.⁴⁸ Later a committee to arrange a suitable monument for the deceased was expanded from fifty to 100. The expanded list included sixteen open shop influentials.⁴⁹

It seems reasonable to assume that a certain amount of camaraderie developed among some of the BMA figures. While much of it was acted out on the golf course or behind closed doors, there are a few hints in the daily press. In late 1907 J. Frank Carpenter committed suicide at the age of forty-six. Four years earlier he had served on the BMA's arbitration committee. He had been an executive of a large wholesale paper company (owned by his family), a former Commercial Club president (1902), a veteran of the club's board of directors, and generally a very active figure in local business affairs. At his funeral there were twenty-four active and honorary pallbearers. Eight of them were from the BMA inner circle.⁵⁰ Perhaps they had been selected for the Commercial Club or other associations with Carpenter rather than for their BMA ties, but the important consideration was that they were chosen in the first place.⁵¹

One of the most revealing public episodes involving the BMA was a 1909 farewell dinner for Euclid Martin. Retired, he decided to relocate in Los Angeles, where his children lived. The affair in Martin's honor was held at the Commercial Club, and a number of local notables paid tribute to him. T. J. Mahoney and Gurdon Wattles spoke, and in both cases their comments centered around the union evil. Newspaper accounts report that Martin was the acknowledged founder of the BMA, and it was claimed "that since its organization no strike has been won by the unions." Wattles told one anecdote about Martin which shows both the esteem that BMA members had for their former president and something about the mentality of the group. During the 1903 strike, Governor John H. Mickey traveled to Omaha to attempt a mediation of the dispute. He was a devout Methodist, and when he met with the BMA, he apparently suggested

Arthur C. Smith, president of M. E. Smith and Company, an Omaha dry goods wholesaler, was influential in the BMA. His company moved into new buildings (below) on June 15, 1907. (NSHS-054-525a)



that the aroused businessmen join him in prayer! According to Wattles, Martin tore into him, declaring: "There is a time to pray and a time to fight, and this is the time to fight."⁵²

Gilbert Hitchcock, a Democratic congressman and publisher of the *Omaha World-Herald*, also rose to speak at the dinner. While he also paid tribute to the old business leader, he felt obliged, he said, "to strike a discordant note" and defended the labor movement.⁵³ His comments obviously were unwelcome in this audience, but they demonstrate that key elements in the local business community had not enlisted in the open shop cause. In fact, none of the city's three daily newspapers were part of the effort. BMA members were especially bitter about the coverage of the 1903 strike. Apparently only weekly papers were fully in their camp, and two of them sought to exploit their open shop backing.⁵⁴ Other local businesses also shied away from the BMA. As already mentioned, the Union Pacific and the packers were not represented in the BMA's inner circle, nor were any of Omaha's breweries. It is also noteworthy that none of the city's Jewish businessmen were found within those ranks. One of Omaha's largest department stores was owned by the Brandeis family, and while its members were active in a range of local business activities (including the Commercial Club), there is no hint of their involvement in the BMA.⁵⁵

The moving forces in the Omaha open shop crusade were neither from the ranks of big business, nor were they particularly cosmopolitan. For the most part they represented established local firms and normally were tied to the Omaha metropolitan area.⁵⁶ When Euclid Martin returned from his first Citizens Industrial Association meeting in 1904, he stated:

We were in no sense representative of the trusts; we have no steel or Standard Oil members. It is more than possible that before long we may have to fight the trusts on the one hand, just as we fight the labor unions on the other.⁵⁷

His probably was not an isolated com-

ment. Omaha businessmen often complained about trusts and railroads (when they were not fuming about unions). But the BMA influentials did not lead their organization into other battles. They were content to use it to fight organized labor — and nothing else.⁵⁸ BMA spokesmen claimed their efforts were a defensive move in the face of extreme provocation. In retrospect such fears may seem unfounded, but they apparently were felt by many who enlisted in open shop ranks during the Progressive Era. Still it should be emphasized that the BMA did not represent the sentiments of all local employers. Many joined, to be sure, some out of conviction or self-interest, others perhaps because of convenience or peer pressure. Its large membership probably obscured a range of employer attitudes toward organized labor.

The BMA was a permanent fixture in Omaha labor relations for more than three decades. Formed in 1903, it played a prominent part in labor disputes that year, and in 1909, 1917, 1935, and 1938-39. It was also given a great deal of credit by organized labor for the passage of a strict anti-picketing law in 1921.⁵⁹ Many unions survived, but the open shop mentality became part and parcel of the local business ethos. When the Teamsters Union finally won a short strike in 1937, one observer later claimed, "It was the first strike victory in the recollection of the oldest Omaha union worker."⁶⁰ Perhaps that was an exaggeration, but it is an indication of how persistent the local anti-union effort had been.

In some respects Omaha's open shop movement seems quite similar to those in other cities which have been studied. Of course, the BMA was a secret organization and much of its past remains hidden. But the identity of more than thirty BMA influentials is known, and an examination of that sample establishes a close connection or "an interlocking directorate" between the Commercial Club and the open shop cause. The anti-union movement in Omaha was led by prominent local

businessmen as was the case in other cities.

Little if any hard evidence, however, connects the largest local firms with the BMA. This may be an important divergence from the experience elsewhere, for recent scholarship on the open shop effort in Minneapolis and San Francisco indicates such participation.⁶¹ Another difference (at least in regard to the situation in San Francisco) may be the fact that the BMA postponed its final defeat until early 1939. But whether the organization itself continued to play a substantive role in the anti-union fight that late is unclear.⁶² Perhaps by then it was only a symbol of the open shop cause. More research on Omaha and other midwestern and western cities not yet studied is warranted. It seems unlikely, however, that such scholarly efforts will find many communities of this size where the open shop cause met with such early success and persisted so long.

NOTES

¹On the open shop movement, see Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Albert K. Steigerwalt, *The National Association of Manufacturers, 1894-1914: A Study in Business Leadership* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Business Studies, 1964); Clarence E. Bonnett, *History of Employers Associations in the United States* (New York: Vantage Press, 1966); Allen M. Wakstein, "The Origins of the Open Shop Movement, 1919-1920," *Journal of American History*, 51 (December 1964), 460-75; "The National Association of Manufacturers and Labor Relations in the 1920s," *Labor History*, 10 (Spring 1969), 163-76; and Doris B. McLaughlin, "The Second Battle of Battle Creek — The Open Shop Movement in the Early Twentieth Century," *Ibid.*, 14 (Summer 1973), 323-39.

²For the open shop in Minneapolis and San Francisco, see William Millikan, "In Defense of Business: The Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association Versus Labor During World War I," *Minneapolis History*, 50 (Spring 1986), 2-17; Lois Quam and Peter J. Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town: The Citizens' Alliance in the 1930s," *Ibid.*, 50 (Fall 1986), 105-17; William Issel and Robert W. Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932: Politics, Power, and Urban Development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 82-100; and Robert W. Cherny, "Securing Industrial Freedom: The American Plan in San Francisco," paper read at the Organization of American Historians meeting, Los Angeles, California, April 6, 1984.

³George R. Leighton, "Omaha, Nebraska[:] The Glory is Departed — Part II," *Harpers Magazine*, 177 (July 1938), 326.

⁴Relevant historical treatments on the city include George R. Leighton, "Omaha, Nebraska: The Glory is Departed — Parts I and II," *Harpers Magazine*, 177 (July and August), 113-30, 309-28; Howard P. Chudacoff, "Where Rolls The Dark Missouri Down," *Nebraska History*, 52 (Spring 1971), 1-30; Garneth O. Peterson, "Historical Framework," in *A Comprehensive Program for Historical Preservation in Omaha* (Omaha: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, 1980), 8-73; Lawrence H. Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell, *The Gate City: A History of Omaha* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Company, 1982).

⁵*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 4, 1903.

⁶*Omaha Daily News*, May 24, 1903. It should be noted that others shared this assessment. A. W. Ricker, a Socialist journalist referred to Omaha as "one of the most thoroughly unionized towns in the United States." *Appeal to Reason*, February 14, 1903. Later local labor leaders circulated a statement noting "the fact of our being one of the most thoroughly organized towns in the country." "Circular from Omaha," Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, *Official Journal*, 2 (July 1903), 36. And a local weekly paper stated: "Omaha has been ranked as third or fourth in the list of strong labor union towns." *Examiner*, May 23, 1903. For a brief survey of Omaha labor history, see Bill Pratt, *Omaha in the Making of Nebraska Labor History* (Omaha: Ad Hoc Committee for the Study of Nebraska Labor History, 1981).

⁷One of Omaha's two labor weeklies, the *Workers Gazette*, backed Socialist unionist efforts in this era. Omaha was the site of the Socialist Party's national headquarters in 1903. See Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 147-48.

⁸*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, April 21, 1903.

⁹*Ibid.*, February 6, 1903; March 19, 1903.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, March 31, 1903; April 15, 1903.

¹¹*Ibid.*, April 21, 1903. A labor spokesman had reported on its formation several days previously. *Ibid.*, April 15, 1903.

¹²The 1903 episode, one of the most significant in Omaha's labor history, has been neglected almost entirely by the city's historians. A 1920 reference characterized it as "the biggest scrap the unions of Omaha ever had during all their existence," and a 1935 obituary referred to it as "the general strike of 1903." *Western Laborer*, December 4, 1920; *The Unionist*, March 1, 1935. What follows is a brief survey of a complicated set of labor disputes. For an overview of the early days of the strike, see "Labor Troubles in Omaha," *Illustrated Bee*, May 10, 1903. The CLU head's initial arbitration proposal was tabled but two weeks later was accepted by the CLU's delegates. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 2, 1903.

¹³In June the Central Labor Union claimed that "twenty-one different crafts" were out. "Circular from Omaha," *Official Journal*. On this occasion the labor body referred to the situation as "a general lockout."

¹⁴The local daily press provides a wealth of detail on the legal maneuvers on both sides. Perhaps the most interesting twist was the

waiters' union effort to enjoin the BMA. See *Omaha Daily News*, May 13, 1903. For report on removing deputy status from union members, see *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 11, 1903.

¹⁵*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 6, 11, 1903.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, April 15, 1903; *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 28, 1903.

¹⁷*Omaha Daily News*, June 14, 1903.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, June 13, 1903. Prior to the bricklayers' decision, three other unions — The Inside Electrical Workers, Package Freight Handlers, and the Egg Inspectors and Butter Workers — abandoned their strike. In the case of the latter two organizations, they had engaged in a sympathy strike with the Teamsters Union. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, June 5, 1903.

¹⁹Years later the editor of the *Western Laborer* claimed the 1903 strike "resulted in the complete destruction of more than twenty local unions." *Western Laborer*, June 28, 1919. This claim was probably an exaggeration (at the time he was criticizing another Teamsters Union strike), but several unions, including the Teamsters, were broken up.

²⁰T. J. Mahoney, "Cross-questioned and Cornered as to 'Recognition,'" *American Industries* (July 15, 1903), 5-6. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, September 10, 1903; October 6, 1903; December 12, 1903.

²¹*Omaha Daily News*, December 12, 1903.

²²*Omaha Daily Bee*, December 12, 1903. Parry declined an invitation to talk to a union gathering: "I am much obliged for the invitation, but unfortunately I am booked for a speech at Marshalltown, Ia., Saturday evening," said Mr. Parry, accentuating the words 'much obliged' and 'unfortunately' with a touch of irony." *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, December 11, 1903.

²³*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 13, 1903.

²⁴*Ibid.*, February 25, 1904.

²⁵*Ibid.*, December 1, 1904.

²⁶*Ibid.*, December 5, 1906. In 1906-7, Mahoney was the BMA vice-president. *Omaha City Directory*, 1906, 1907. In March of 1906 he testified against an anti-injunction bill that was being considered by the House Judiciary Committee on behalf of the NAM, the Citizens Industrial Association, and the BMA. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, March 14, 15, 1906.

²⁷Steigerwalt, *National Association of Manufacturers*, 123.

²⁸While the BMA apparently did not take a public position on the strike, one union spokesman claimed that it intervened on the side of the packers: "The Business Men's association has taken a hand in our fight and it now looks as if they are trying to starve us out." The basis of this charge was the refusal of local wholesale houses to sell goods at wholesale prices "for a general relief store for the strikers." Union leaders "were told that they could not buy at wholesale, because the Business Men's Association had warned the wholesalers not to sell to them." *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, July 26, 1904; *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 26, 1904; *Omaha Daily News*, July 27, 1904 (source of quotations). Several years later a local paper stated that the BMA had "helped the packers fight the packing house strikers." *Ibid.*, September 18, 1909.

²⁹Accounts of the 1909 strike are found in Elmo Bryant Phillips, "A History of Street Railways in Nebraska" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation,

University of Nebraska, 1944), 468-76; and Ramona Kollbaum, "The Omaha Streetcar Strike of 1909: Role of Gurdon W. Wattles and the Business Men's Association (Unpublished seminar paper, University of Nebraska at Omaha).

³⁰For brief treatments on Wattles, see Peterson, "Historical Framework," 42-43; and Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, 132-40. Wattles has been considered a key figure in the formation of the BMA. In fact, his name is the only one specifically mentioned. See Chudacoff, "Where Rolls the Dark Missouri Down," 20; Peterson, "Historical Framework," 43; Larsen and Cottrell, *Gate City*, 134. (The latter work states: "In 1903 Wattles organized the Omaha Business Men's Association.") But contemporary evidence that I have seen does not support this conclusion. Wattles was a member, to be sure, and he wrote: "At the time of its organization nearly every business man of any importance in the city of Omaha became a member." Gurdon W. Wattles, *A Crime Against Labor: A Brief History of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railroad Strike* (n.d.), 122. The only mention I have seen in a contemporary source that lends credence to the claim that Wattles was a major figure in the formation of the BMA appeared in a satirical article on the organization in a local labor paper. This piece was reprinted in the *Omaha Excelsior*, August 8, 1903.

³¹*Omaha Daily News*, September 18, 1909.

³²*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, September 29, 1909. One of the BMA executive committee members, Arthur C. Smith, was chosen Ak-Sar-Ben king in 1909. Arvid E. Nelson, Jr., *The Ak-Sar-Ben Story: A Seventy-Year History of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben* (Lincoln: Johnson Publishing Company, 1967), 400.

³³Gurdon Wattles on Sumner Wallace, Oct. 13, 1909, Gurdon W. Wattles Papers, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska.

³⁴*Omaha Daily News*, September 21, 1909; *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 11, 1903; *Omaha City Directories*, 1904-9. These observations are based on a variety of sources, including Commercial Club executive committee minutes, city directories, local histories, and local newspapers. Kollbaum's "The Omaha Streetcar Strike of 1909" provides some analysis of the 1909 BMA executive committee. Her treatment does not extend beyond the city directories in most cases.

³⁵*Omaha City Directory*, 1909. Both of the printing firms had been unionized earlier. *Western Laborer*, February 15, 1908; February 6, 1909; August 7, 1909.

³⁶For Mahoney, see *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 20, 1917; May 21, 1917; Arthur Cooper Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1917), II, 182-85; Robert W. Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885-1915* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 85. Mahoney was BMA vice-president in 1906 and 1907 and listed as a member of the executive committee in 1909. The other two lawyers were C. C. Montgomery and H. S. Daniel. Montgomery was BMA secretary from 1906 to 1909, and Daniel assumed that post in 1910.

³⁷For Martin, see *Omaha Daily News*, October 20, 1909; *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, October 20, 1909; Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics*, 85.

³⁸*Omaha Excelsior*, July 27, 1907.

³⁹*Omaha Blue Book and Club Directory 1910* (Omaha: Chase Publishing Company, 1910).

⁴⁰For Jardine, see Wakeley, *Omaha*, II, 934-37 (source of quotation); Robert M. Baldwin, *Who's Who in Omaha* (Omaha: Robert M. Baldwin, 1928), 104-5; *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 11, 18, 1903.

⁴¹Computations based on election results reported in Commercial Club executive committee minutes, 1902-10, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce; *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, month of January, 1900-1910. According to club tradition, the chairman of the executive committee was elected president the following year.

⁴²"It has often been charged that the B.M.A. always manages to control a majority of the Chamber's executive board." *The Unionist*, April 6, 1934.

⁴³Computation based on membership lists in *Omaha Blue Book 1910*. For purposes of this calculation, I have noted the following clubs as most prominent: Omaha Club, Omaha Country Club, Field Club, and Happy Hollow Club.

⁴⁴Nelson, *Ak-Sar-Ben Story*, 341. Fry was a joiner par excellence. He belonged to the Omaha Club, Omaha Country Club, Happy Hollow Club, Field Club, University Club, and the Elks. *Omaha Blue Book*, 1910; Wakeley, *Omaha*, II, 549-50.

⁴⁵Nelson, *Ak-Sar-Ben Story*, 346, 348-49 (Arthur C. Smith), 402-6 (Thomas C. Byrne). The Ak-Sar-Ben membership list is unavailable. An episode at the time of the 1909 streetcar strike is revealing. President William Howard Taft visited Omaha on September 20, 1909, and attended a dinner in his honor. Ak-Sar-Ben sponsored the event, and only its members were invited. Out of 150 guests, fifteen of them were BMA influentials. *Omaha Daily Bee*, September 10, 1909. It is possible that others of the BMA were Ak-Sar-Ben members but did not attend this banquet.

⁴⁶*Omaha Excelsior*, May 23, 1903.

⁴⁷In January of 1907 a barge company named the Omaha & Missouri Transportation Company was formed. Ten of the BMA influentials and four local firms headed by BMA figures were among its incorporators. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, January 10, 1907.

⁴⁸*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, February 25, 1907.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, March 7, 1907.

⁵⁰Wakeley, *Omaha*, II, 101-2; *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, December 24, 26, 1907.

⁵¹Carpenter had belonged to the Omaha and Happy Hollow clubs. In 1910 seven of his BMA pallbearers were listed as members of at least one of them. *Omaha Blue Book*, 1910.

⁵²*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, October 20, 1909; *Omaha Daily News*, October 20, 1909. (source of both quotations).

⁵³*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Oct. 20, 1909.

⁵⁴The editor of one of Omaha's weekly papers, *The Examiner*, served as the BMA's press agent during the 1903 strike. *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 21, 1903.

⁵⁵A member of the Brandeis family served on the Commercial Club's board of directors in 1903 and in 1906-9. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, January 1903-9.

⁵⁶My characterization of the moving forces behind the BMA is somewhat speculative, in part due to the nature of the available sources. Since no BMA records have been uncovered, it is risky to claim that any local businessman was not a member. Wattles writes, "At the time of its organization nearly every business man of any importance in the city of Omaha became a member," and I have no reason to doubt that assertion. Wattles, *Crime Against Labor*, 122. Further research and analysis should make it possible to refine this characterization somewhat, and Robert Merton's "cosmopolitans and locals" conceptualization may prove applicable. See Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1957). Larger firms may have played a more important role in the open shop movements in Minneapolis and San Francisco than they did in Omaha. See Quam and Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town," 106; Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 96. The most detailed treatment of the open shop organization in either city is found in Cherny, "Securing 'Industrial Freedom.'" It should be noted that Omaha labor spokesmen sometimes charged that the Union Pacific played a major part in the BMA. Euclid Martin denied that it had any role in 1903. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, May 12, 1903. In 1930 the charge was reiterated when the railroad had a new terminal built in Omaha with open shop contractors. *The Unionist*, April 4, 1930.

⁵⁷*Omaha Evening World-Herald*, February 25, 1904.

⁵⁸In this article I have avoided the thicket of Omaha politics in the Progressive Era and after. Another possible network for some of BMA inner circle members, however, involved Tom Dennison's political machine. Omaha was a "boss" town from the early twentieth century until the early 1930s. Dennison seemingly ran the show from behind the scenes, and Leighton wrote that he "act[ed] as the agent" for "a handful of Omaha business men who dominated the local economy." Leighton, "Omaha, Nebraska — Part II," 314. While T. J. Mahoney was a public opponent of Dennison, it is not clear that was the case with all BMA influentials. (For Mahoney's involvement in anti-machine activities, see "Movement is Begun to Purify Omaha," *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, January 12, 1904.) One businessman who later developed a close work-

ing relationship with Dennison was Frank B. Johnson. Though he was a member of the BMA executive committee in 1909, it is not known whether he maintained his BMA ties later when he began to work closely with the machine. For discussion on Dennison and Johnson, see Orville D. Menard, "Tom Dennison . . . The Rogue Who Ruled Omaha," *Omaha Magazine*, 3 (March 1978), 13-20. Another local businessman who apparently had a relationship with Dennison at least by 1914 was Gurdon Wattles, whom I have not included in the BMA sample for the reason stated in note 30. According to a private detective's report, "There is a concealed but well defined connection between the Traction Co. and Dennison." Special Report, Kansas City Investigator No. 10, January 5, 1914, Victor Rosewater Correspondence, Box No. 1927, Reel 3, Omaha Public Library. I am indebted to Orville D. Menard for this reference and his insights on the Johnson-Dennison relationship.

⁵⁹This summary is based upon unpublished research of the author.

⁶⁰Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1975), 200.

⁶¹Quam and Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town," 106; Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 96; Cherny, "Securing 'Industrial Freedom.'"

⁶²In San Francisco the Industrial Association was beaten in 1934. The Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance also suffered a serious setback during the 1934 Teamsters' Union strike but remained a force in labor relations for several more years. It is noteworthy, however, that the hosiery workers in Minneapolis were able to obtain a contract with the Strutwear Knitting Company providing for a closed shop in mid-1937. Quam and Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town," 117. In Omaha, on the other hand, the Teamsters won a short strike in 1937, but the big showdown in the trucking industry did not occur until 1938-39. Then, after a twenty-two-week shutdown, the major local trucking firms signed a closed shop agreement with the Teamsters. The labor movement viewed this development as a major victory over the trucking firms, and the BMA and its official paper proclaimed: "It is ironic that the infamous, secret so-called Omaha Business Men's Association began its wrecking career as the result of a teamsters' strike here in the early 1900s, and now receives what may easily prove its deathblow as the result of a truckers' lockout some thirty-eight years later." *The Unionist*, February 10, 1939. The BMA survived another decade as an organization, and then its remnants merged into the Nebraska Small Business Men's Association. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, January 8, 1949.