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History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret

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History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret

ROBERT R. WEYENETH

LIKE THE FICTIONAL TOWN that harbored a terrible secret in the film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, the city of Centralia, Washington would rather forget an event that occurred there more than 70 years ago. In the movie, which is set in the West during the postwar year of 1945, the townspeople of Black Rock struggle to prevent an outsider from learning that a murder in their community has gone unpunished. In the course of the film, the outsider discovers that a Japanese-American farmer has been killed four years earlier by a leading citizen in a misdirected fit of patriotic anger following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Eerily, this plot echoes events that actually occurred in a small Washington lumber town during another postwar year, 1919. In Centralia shortly after World War I, fervent patriotism and intolerance—both fueled by war-time passions—inspired a violent labor confrontation that killed at least six people. Unlike the unseen killing at Black Rock, however, the so-called Centralia Massacre made national headlines and precipitated a crackdown on radicals across the country. Only in the intervening decades did the painful events of the past become a secret within the community, and an entire chapter of municipal history disappear.

Many details of this historical murder mystery remain unknown and possibly unknowable, but the concern here is not with what happened so

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much as what is remembered in Centralia. How have the bloody and highly politicized events of 1919 shaped public memory? What are the opportunities and difficulties of undertaking a public history project in a community with a secret?¹

My involvement in this story has been as an outsider and is only comparatively recent. During the spring and summer of 1990, I was in western Washington working on a different project. One summer evening after the library had closed, I drove over to Centralia to look for sites associated with the so-called massacre, which I remembered as a dramatic episode in American labor history from my general course of graduate study at Berkeley. I could find nothing. No visitor guide or museum exhibit mentioned the event; no plaques identified significant sites connected with the violence. Talking with local people over the next few months, I realized that the absence of commemoration was intentional, and I found myself disturbed by this effort to ignore, if not obliterate, the past. At first I complained to colleagues, citing Centralia as yet another example of the appalling distortions of local history. I also grumbled about academic historians and their abdication of responsibility for interpreting the past to general audiences. In time, though, fascination supplemented irritation. I grew intrigued by what I came to call the process of historical reconciliation in Centralia. I began to wonder how and why a community would choose to forget its past. I also began ruminating on whether an outsider should try to play a catalytic role. Could a public historian facilitate reconciliation with a problematical past? Was this part of our job description?²

Eventually, I decided to become a *pro bono* consultant in the employ of Clio, and I became a part of the story myself. Through discussions with sympathetic Centralia residents and the staff at the state historic preservation office, I decided to use the process of nominating sites to the National Register of Historic Places as a way to recognize the controversial past and place it squarely in an arena of public discussion. By the end of 1991, two sites had been listed on the National Register. The project stimulated intense local debate and considerable national press attention, as it revealed genuine challenges in undertaking heritage preservation in a place like Centralia.

1. T.H. Breen offers thoughtful observations about public memory and community history in *Imagining the Past* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1989). Breen's explorations in the history of East Hampton, New York illustrate how communities often invent their pasts through the stories they tell themselves about local history. Like East Hampton, many places discover a fictional golden age without the tensions of the present. But in Centralia silence is golden: imagining the past requires selective disremembering as much as nostalgic invention.

2. For a general study of public memory and the process of historical reconciliation in a national context, see Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). See also the issue devoted to "Memory and American History" of *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989).

A Chronology of the Violence and Trial

To appreciate why collective memory is so selective in Centralia, it is necessary to understand something of the town's controversial history. The so-called Centralia Massacre was a violent expression of the first Red Scare, the national crackdown on radicals that began during World War I and continued into the postwar years. On Armistice Day 1919, Centralia witnessed an armed skirmish between members of the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical labor union with a militant reputation, and members of the American Legion, a veterans organization recently formed to promote patriotism and anti-radicalism. To mark the first anniversary of the end of the world war, Centralia's American Legion post scheduled an Armistice Day parade with an unusual agenda: destruction of the local I.W.W. hall. The plan was an open secret in town for several weeks, but unbeknownst to Legion organizers, the I.W.W. decided not to be intimidated and to defend the hall when attacked.³

On the afternoon of November 11, 1919, the parade made its way up the Tower Avenue business corridor and then beyond, to the intersection of Tower and Third, an area of modest boarding houses and workingman's hotels where the I.W.W. operated its union hall. As the marchers reversed direction to return downtown, parading veterans rushed the Roderick Hotel, in which the I.W.W. hall was located. Armed Wobblies—as members of the I.W.W. were known—opened fire from inside the hall, as well as from an adjacent boarding house and the summit of a nearby hill. When the gunfire failed to drive off the legionnaires, Wobblies scattered. Three legionnaires were killed on the street near the Roderick Hotel, and a fourth was shot by a fleeing Wobbly on the outskirts of town. Almost a dozen others were wounded. Subsequently, the contents of the union hall were dragged into the street and set ablaze.⁴

Initially, the violence was reported as an unprovoked act of terrorism on the part of the radical labor union. For weeks after the event, public outrage inspired reprisals against Wobblies in the Northwest and elsewhere. Nationally, hundreds of I.W.W. members were rounded up, and scores of Wobbly halls were raided or destroyed by vigilantes. (Only later did the Centralia Wobblies have a chance to tell their side of the story: that the

3. A detailed and authoritative account of the chronology of events and the much-disputed culpability of the various participants is John McClelland, Jr., *Wobbly War: The Centralia Story* (Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1987), on which this narrative is based. The work is also a good guide to the vast primary literature inspired by the events.

4. Much remains unresolved about the sequence of events, and the details of the chronology are passionately debated even today. One crucial point of contention is who made the first aggressive move as the parade paused outside the I.W.W. hall. Did the legionnaires rush the hall, precipitating the Wobbly response, as is suggested here, or did Wobbly snipers fire first, causing the marchers to break toward the hall? The unknown (and unknowable) details of the events contribute to the persistence of partisan feelings. For a judicious appraisal of these and other contested questions, see McClelland, *Wobbly War*.

incident was a defensive response to the threat of mob violence.) The bloodiest reprisal occurred in Centralia. On the evening of the parade, a group of men entered the city jail in the darkness of a pre-arranged municipal black-out, and a Wobbly prisoner named Wesley Everest was removed from his cell. The mob mistakenly believed it was abducting the local I.W.W. secretary, the presumed architect of the day's violence. The prisoner was taken to a bridge outside of town and hanged.⁵

An integral part of the story was the response of the justice system. No member of the mob that broke into the Centralia jail was ever charged for the lynching of Wesley Everest. The reason was simple. It was commonly assumed that prominent citizens had participated in the lynching. In contrast, Wobbly actions came under close scrutiny from the criminal justice system. In January 1920, the official prosecution began. Eleven Wobblies were tried for the murder of one of the legionnaires in circumstances that made it difficult for the defense to present its case to an impartial jury. For example, uniformed legionnaires were paid to pack the courtroom as spectators, while soldiers camped near the courthouse in view of the jury. In a two-month trial, eight Wobblies were convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to stiff prison terms of between 25 and 40 years. The conviction became a *cause celebre* for the American Left, chiefly through publicists working for the release of the imprisoned men. Remarkably, two years after the trial, seven of the twelve jurors voluntarily repudiated their verdict. Appeals and subsequent investigations swayed public opinion but not state authorities. Eventually, one Wobbly died in prison, six were released in the early 1930s, and the last was freed in 1939.

The failure of the justice system to protect the innocent (or punish the guilty) is now generally acknowledged. While leading citizens involved in the lynching went free, Wobblies defending their property were tried and sentenced to the maximum penalties. The Centralia Wobbly trial of 1920 is often likened to other celebrated American court cases in which radicals were unfairly convicted and imprisoned, like Tom Mooney in California (1917), or executed, like Sacco and Vanzetti (1921) in Massachusetts.⁶

5. Unanswered questions here include who turned off the power into the municipal jail, who the members of the mob were, and whether the victim of the lynching, Wesley Everest, was castrated before he was hanged. For a recent, skeptical view that argues the castration story is legend rather than fact, see Tom Copeland, "Wesley Everest, IWW Martyr," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 77 (October 1986), 122–29; also see McClelland, *Wobbly War*, 84–85. The death toll associated with the violence is usually counted as six by including the victim of the antiradical manhunt, a fellow posse member mistakenly killed in the woods in subsequent days. Some modern defenders of the Wobbly role find other mysteries and suggest the death toll may have been higher. These partisans speak about "the disappeared": Wobblies and their sympathizers who left Centralia or were never seen again. In these speculations, much attention centers on the mill furnace, and conspiracy and collaboration theories proliferate.

6. Because this is background to a story about public memory, this summary omits many details and much of the context. For an analysis of the significance of the violence and trial, as well as an assessment of the local context that precipitated the confrontation between the American Legion and the I.W.W., see Robert R. Weyeneth, *Centralia Armistice Day 1919: A Multiple-Property Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places*. See also: Melvyn

The Legacy of Armistice Day 1919

The story did not end with the conviction of the Centralia Wobblies in 1920. The knowledge that public authorities chose to look the other way as citizens sponsored and participated in mob violence placed a cloud over the community that has not yet entirely lifted. In the 1920s, as misgivings began to grow about the justice meted out to the Wobblies, American Legion partisans adopted an increasingly defensive posture. Seeking to justify their actions, the American Legion produced a series of impassioned histories and, in 1924, erected a memorial statue in Centralia that interpreted the violence as a lesson in patriotic vigilance. Comparable memorials were not within the financial means of I.W.W. partisans, but throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Left churned out a steady stream of pamphlets and speeches demanding release of the prisoners. Mysteriously and anonymously, a modest granite marker did come to be placed on the pauper's grave of the lynching victim, Wesley Everest, sometime in the late thirties. In these ways, the ideological confrontation continued after 1919 in a battle for American public opinion and the judgment of history.

In subsequent decades, the painful events of the past were seldom discussed in Centralia. Partisan feeling may have run high, but a collective silence seems to have settled on the town. I have been told that neighbors did not talk about 1919, and that well into the 1950s the public library collected nothing. The subject virtually disappeared from local accounts of municipal history. The county-wide historical museum, a popular destination for school trips and tourist buses, offered no exhibits on the subject by order of its board of directors. Generations of Centralia students grew up unaware that events of national importance occurred in their city. For some time Centralia adolescents might first hear about the events only when they went off to college in another town.⁷ The events of 1919 had not been forgotten; they were just not acknowledged, in the hope they could be forgotten. Ironically, the country's first Armistice Day, an occasion of national remembrance, had become for Centralia a problematical local memory and a day to forget.

Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969); Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene: University of Oregon Books, 1967); Albert F. Gunns, "Ray Becker, the Last Centralia Prisoner," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 59 (April 1968), 88–99; Donald A. MacPhee, "The Centralia Incident and the Pamphleteers," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 62 (July 1971), 110–16. Attorney Tom Copeland is the author of the most recent study, *The Centralia Tragedy of 1919: Elmer Smith and the Wobblies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993). As with the Centralia events, the historical debate over the guilt of Sacco and Vanzetti continues, although the Governor of Massachusetts issued a public apology in 1977, the fiftieth anniversary of their execution.

7. McClelland, *Wobbly War*, 232–38. I have based this and some subsequent observations on evidence drawn from personal interviews and correspondence. Informants will remain unattributed to protect their privacy.

One indication that the climate of opinion is becoming more open than ever before to frank discussion of local history is a booklet published in 1987 by the Centralia School District. This intriguing synopsis was prepared for the city's eighth-graders by two Vietnam veterans who became history teachers in Centralia. The authors saw a parallel between the on-going struggle of Americans to comprehend the Vietnam legacy and their own community's difficulty in confronting its past. They wrote their history not "to open old wounds but to make new generations aware of what happened through a balanced account."⁸

But even recent efforts at heritage promotion in Centralia have tended to ignore the Armistice Day events. In a colorful but innocuous attempt several years ago to advertise itself as "the city of historical murals," Centralia decorated downtown buildings with paintings of quilting bees, pioneer loggers, a train depot, the first church, and other conventional subjects for a western farming and lumbering town. Absent was any reference to the one event in local history with national significance. Heritage preservation has remained a sensitive subject, best approached through selective remembrance.⁹

A Strategy for Historical Reconciliation: The National Register Process

In my self-appointed role as historical gadfly, I hoped that nomination of Centralia sites to the National Register of Historic Places would help close the unfinished story of historical reconciliation in the community. I anticipated that some of the ghosts of 1919 might be exorcised by the public hearings required by the nomination process and the publicity they tend to generate. I reasoned that federal recognition of the historic significance of the Armistice Day violence would stimulate local efforts to identify and preserve its material legacy.¹⁰

The choice of what sites to nominate in Centralia required unusual considerations, given the delicate subject of historic preservation in the town. Questions of balance, fairness, and symmetry arose. I found no site or

8. Ron Breckenridge and Joe Flink, *Centralia Tragedy Remembered: A Textbook Concerning a Local History Event for Centralia Eighth Graders* (Centralia School District #410, 1987).

9. Robin Winks has pointed out that places reveal themselves through their decisions about what aspects of local history to commemorate. Among other examples, he points to the courthouse square in Scottsboro, Alabama which is identified by historical markers as the site of the oldest opera house in northeast Alabama, for instance, but not for its role in the notorious case of racial injustice from the 1930s, with which most Americans would associate Scottsboro. See Robin W. Winks, "Regionalism in Comparative Perspective," in William G. Robbins, et al. (eds.), *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1983), 24.

10. More generally, I hoped the undertaking would have an impact outside Centralia by encouraging heritage conservation at labor history sites elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest. I remain intrigued by the idea of a multiple-property nomination to the National Register with a regional scope, organized around the theme of I.W.W. activities in the western United States.

Located prominently in Centralia's town square, *The Sentinel* (1924) offered the official version of the Armistice Day events and a warning about the specter of labor radicalism. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

structure “equally” connected with all sides of the episode and quickly abandoned the idea of a single nomination. The choice became in part a political calculation. I wanted a site from each side of the controversy in order to offer an “even-handed” nomination. I did not want one set of partisans to be able to dismiss my effort with the argument that I was favoring the other.¹¹ Here, though, I encountered the dilemma that few sites associated directly with the Wobbly role survive, whereas there are still a fair number of buildings closely linked with the planning of the raid and the route of the Armistice Day parade. Eventually, I settled on the two pieces of memorial architecture erected in the 1920s and 30s, one by the American Legion and the other by the I.W.W. Each was intensely political and each offered its own version of the bloodshed of Armistice Day. It seemed especially fitting to select two monuments to remembrance in order to inaugurate a debate about public memory.¹²

The Sentinel represents an effort to present in bronze and stone an official version of the Armistice Day events. It is an elaborate memorial to the four slain legionnaires and is ornamented with text whose message celebrates the patriotism of the dead and cautions future generations to be vigilant against the specter of radicalism. One panel of the pedestal characterizes the men and their actions on the day of the tragedy. According to the inscription, the four legionnaires were patriots and veterans (“wearing the uniform of the country they loyally and faithfully served”), who had been slaughtered as innocents (while “on peaceful parade” through the streets of the city). The front panel offers posterity an explanation for what happened and a warning about the future. As to the actual events of Armistice Day, the inscription is a study in ambiguity and perhaps ambivalence: “it was their destiny—rather it was their duty.” The phrasing suggests that the dead men were victims of intractable historical forces beyond their control, but also, paradoxically, active agents in their own right, simply doing the good deed. As though already aware that history might judge them harshly, the convoluted sentiment seeks to excuse their actions as understandable in the general tumult of events, while it tenaciously presents a spirited defense. The inscription on the front panel concludes with an observation directed at posterity: “The highest of us is but a sentry at his post.” If there was any

11. The concept of a multiple-property nomination in a thematic format (in this case a single controversial event) may represent a useful model for recognition of other sites associated with painful recent memories or partisan constituencies.

12. The single extant site associated with the Wobbly role in the events is the gravesite of the lynching victim, Wesley Everest. Other sites directly linked with the Wobbly role have disappeared. The Roderick Hotel (the location of the I.W.W. hall) was replaced in the 1930s and that building survives today in dilapidated condition. The city jail (where the I.W.W. suspects were imprisoned) was torn down for the new city hall in 1921. The original Mellen Street Bridge (the notorious “Hangman’s Bridge” from which Wesley Everest was lynched) was replaced in 1960 with another. In contrast, there are a number of extant sites associated with the effort to suppress Wobbly activity: the Elks Club Rooms in the old Union Loan & Trust Company Building (where the raid on the I.W.W. hall was planned), the Tower Avenue

Placed anonymously in the late 1930s, the modest headstone at the Wesley Everest gravesite in Centralia tersely memorializes the labor martyr's I.W.W. membership and the circumstances of his death. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

ambiguity or ambivalence in the first clause, it is absent here. The message is anxious and tough: be the sentinel, be watchful, be vigilant. It is a fascinating piece of political sculpture. It was dedicated with pomp and circumstance in 1924, on the fifth anniversary of the violence, with the governor of the state and the American Legion's annual convention in attendance. It sits prominently today in Centralia's town square.¹³

In sharp contrast to the elaborate monument in the center of town, the gravesite of Wesley Everest is a study in obscurity, simplicity, and mystery. It is located in a paupers cemetery on the outskirts of Centralia, adjacent today to a private memorial park. The gravesite is marked only by a modest granite headstone, ornamented with the I.W.W. insignia and an inscription that is not without its own political statement: "In Memory of Wesley Everest Killed Nov. 11, 1919 Age 32." The headstone was placed anonymously.

commercial district (the business corridor of Centralia and the route of the Armistice Day parade), and the Grays Harbor County Courthouse in the nearby town of Montesano (where the Wobbly trial was held in 1920). The staff of the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, especially Leonard Garfield and Kay Austin, offered good counsel and solid support of the twin nominations throughout the National Register process.

13. The full text of the front panel reads: "THE SENTINEL It was their destiny—rather it was their duty—the highest of us is but a sentry at his post." The text on the rear panel is dedicated: "To the memory of Ben Casagrande, Warren O. Grimm, Earnest Dale Hubbard, Arthur McElfresh, slain on the streets of Centralia, Washington Armistice Day Nov. 11, 1919 while on peaceful parade wearing the uniform of the country they loyally and faithfully served."

mously sometime in the late 1930s. Everest was the “Joe Hill” of the Armistice Day events. Like the Swedish-born Wobbly who became a labor martyr after his execution by a Utah firing squad in 1915, Wesley Everest emerged as the symbol of labor’s problems in the Pacific Northwest. Within a year of Everest’s death, in 1920, Ralph Chaplin published an account of the violence and trial from the Wobbly perspective entitled *The Centralia Conspiracy*. The front cover was illustrated with a sketch of Everest dangling from a noose, and the pamphlet concluded with a poem comparing Everest’s hanging with the crucifixion and martyrdom of Christ. Twelve years later, in 1932, John Dos Passos imbued the story of Wesley Everest with mythical import, romanticizing Everest as the heroic logger Paul Bunyan and using the Centralia events to close his epic on postwar America, *1919*. Like the sentiments carved in the pedestal of *The Sentinel*, the inscription on Wesley Everest’s headstone makes a political statement. The marker’s unconventional wording gives a date of death but no birth date, suggesting ignorance of a relevant biographical detail but also keen awareness of the man’s politicized death. No reference is made to family members who may have placed the stone, as is often the custom. Instead, the I.W.W. emblem decorates the headstone, declaring that those who placed the marker knew that Everest, like many Wobblies, had found family in the idea of “One Big Union.” Most striking of all—for any headstone, much less one as tersely composed as this—we are told *how* Wesley Everest met his death (“Killed Nov. 11, 1919”), a simple but enormously meaningful epitaph for those who regarded Everest as the martyr of Centralia. The marker is neither imposing nor elaborate, but in its own modest way it is every bit as ideological in content as the cenotaph in the city square.

The National Register process proved to be an extremely effective strategy for stimulating public discussion about these two sites and about the historical event generally. The local newspaper, the *Centralia Chronicle*, covered the story extensively and well, largely due to an energetic young reporter who became fascinated by the history. To judge from the press coverage that surrounded the municipal and state review of the nominations in August 1991, there is a considerable public appetite for history. Very quickly this became a national story. The Associated Press picked up the nominations as its Labor Day feature in September 1991. The wire-service text ran across the country with headlines that were essentially a variation on “Town with a secret ends silence on Centralia massacre,” as one paper titled it. The *Centralia Chronicle* ran the Associated Press story with a sentence disassociating itself from the report, under the headline “Light shining on Centralia’s ‘secret’.” Briefly, radio and television crews descended on Centralia to interview residents for their own spots, and National Public Radio used the story as its Veteran’s Day Weekend report in November 1991.¹⁴

14. Hal Spencer, “Centralia Finally Confronting Wobbly Lynching of 1919,” *The Associated Press*, September 1, 1991; “‘Town with a secret’ ends silence on Centralia massacre,” *San*

The quality of journalistic coverage was generally quite good and included sophisticated discussions of history, historical evidence, even the interpretive nature of studying the past. Much of this press interest focused, of course, on the intriguing details of the violence. The story had all the aspects of a great unsolved murder mystery, appropriate perhaps to the television series *Murder, She Wrote*.¹⁵ Most reports tried to describe the crime scene and the evidence and to interview witnesses with conflicting testimony. But there was also a reasonable effort to promote historical understanding by suggesting historical context, characterizing working conditions in northwestern lumber camps, detailing the grievances and politics of the Wobblies. I wish university history courses enjoyed more of that kind of engagement with evidence and interpretation. In a lesson that could appear in a freshmen history text, the Centralia paper set two accounts of the events side by side, asking readers to sort through the conflicting eyewitness evidence and historical interpretations. Perhaps as remarkable as anything, for a Veteran's Day story the Centralia *Chronicle* located and interviewed an 84-year-old resident who recalled that his parents knew the I.W.W. hall was to be attacked and ordered him and his brother to avoid the parade and the downtown that day. I was struck that this powerful testimony was not diluted by printing it alongside an eyewitness account with a different recollection, even on the occasion of the seventy-second anniversary of the events.¹⁶

Government review of the nominations provided both the journalistic story at the local level and an important set of public forums. Because I viewed the preparation of the nominations as part of a strategy of outreach and education, I circulated draft copies for comment to individuals and constituencies I thought would be receptive to the project: members of the labor community, public officials, and citizens with an interest in heritage promotion. I left it to the press and city government to inform people of the two municipal hearings but made an effort to encourage attendance at the state level of review. The Centralia Historical Commission approved the nomination document unanimously, with only three people in the audience: me and two staff members from the state historic preservation office. In a better-publicized, well-attended meeting of the Centralia City Council, the

Francisco *Examiner*, September 2, 1991; "Light shining on Centralia's 'secret,'" Centralia *Chronicle*, August 31, 1991; National Public Radio, *Weekend Edition*, November 10, 1991. See also: "Light finally shines on town's dark secret," [Olympia, Washington] *The Olympian*, September 2, 1991; "Centralians break silence on 'Wobbly' hanging," [Tucson] *Arizona Daily Star*, September 2, 1991; "Centralia confronts its violent labor history," Bellingham [Washington] *Herald*, September 6, 1991.

15. A recent work that approaches an episode of vigilante violence from the perspective of a murder mystery is Harry Farrell, *Swift Justice: Murder and Vengeance in a California Town* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). The two lynchings of 1933 and the climate of opinion in San Jose, California bear some remarkable similarities to the Centralia events; Farrell concludes with a useful chapter of conjecture about the outstanding mysteries in the case.

16. Centralia *Chronicle*, August 8, 1991, September 14, 1991, November 11, 1991, December 30, 1991.

vote for approval was split, 4-2. The State Advisory Council on Historic Preservation approved the nomination package unanimously, although not without a lengthy and at times passionate airing of views. In December 1991 the federal government listed both sites in the National Register as possessing national significance.

Very few Centralia residents chose to voice opposition to the nominations at public meetings, and there was considerable support from citizens who welcomed the project, sometimes by recounting personal efforts to learn about the controversial event as they were growing up. (The most spirited opposition came on two occasions from quite different perspectives: a city council member denounced the anti-Centralia interpretation of the nomination document and, subsequently, a Tacoma Wobbly blasted the same historical interpretation as anti-I.W.W.) The general absence of vocal opposition in Centralia may be rooted in the changing demographics of the community. There are few old-timers left who remember the event from their childhoods, and even though many of the old families still live in town, the community has also become home to a range of newcomers: people fleeing metropolitan housing costs in Seattle, Portland, and even California. These immigrants bring a genuine curiosity about community history, unencumbered by direct involvement in the events. As one newcomer admitted, “when I came here, I didn’t realize this sleepy area had such a ‘hot item’ in its past.” It is also possible that many long-time residents prefer not to express their opinions publicly, in letters to the editor or through statements at government hearings, even though emotions may still run high.

There is some evidence that the process of historical reconciliation is indeed going forward in Centralia. The National Register nominations withstood the scrutiny of three public hearings and extensive commentary in the press. I am not aware that the Centralia *Chronicle* itself took an editorial stand on the nominations, but one of its regular columnists did. Nomination of the two sites would be “an appropriate and symbolic way,” the columnist argued, “to face up to what happened, and to put it in the past” after 72 years. In his view, Centralia had gained a dubious reputation as “one of the last places, at least in the North, where a lynching could go unpunished,” and it was time to face the past “with a more balanced point of view.”¹⁷ As a result of all the publicity, people have approached the county museum in nearby Chehalis with offers to donate artifacts connected with the events of 1919. Whether the board of directors of the museum will eventually permit an exhibit is not yet known—or what the interpretive focus of such a hypothetical display might be.

Without question much remains to be done, just from the standpoint of historic preservation. The building that occupies the site of the old I.W.W. hall could be acquired by a nonprofit group and converted into a Labor

17. Centralia *Chronicle*, August 14, 1991.

History Museum of the Northwest, although Centralia may have too many ghosts for labor to be interested in remembering the site in this way. Other preservation projects could acknowledge the past through nomination of additional Armistice Day sites to the National Register of Historic Places, establishment of an Armistice Day historic district, or preparation of a historic walking tour brochure that retraces the route of the parade and the location of significant historic buildings and events. Some identification of the city intersection where the violence began also seems appropriate. The year 1994 represents the seventy-fifth anniversary of the events, a potentially useful occasion for further efforts at reconciliation. Ultimately, of course, the final chapters in the Centralia story will have to be written by the community itself. They cannot be written by outsiders.¹⁸

The Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret

That's the good news. The strategy of reconciliation inspired publicity and good debate, and it revealed considerable willingness within the community to approach the past openly. But the flurry of Labor Day headlines and television stories probably overstated the reality of reconciliation and acknowledgment. Whether journalists realized it or not, the operative verb in their reports was "confrontation"—with the past and among fellow citizens—rather than reconciliation. For the public historian, the experience illustrated four general difficulties in undertaking historic preservation in a place like Centralia. The observations will probably strike a responsive chord for public historians working elsewhere, because Centralia of course is not unique in being a community with a secret. Other localities have witnessed red scares, mob violence, and miscarriages of justice, not to mention racial and ethnic clashes, venality, and scandal, much of which gets tossed into the amnesia machine of community history. My point is not that Centralia is unique, but that it illustrates the challenges in the propinquitous trenches of local history.

The Power of the Past. For those of us familiar with the bored faces of undergraduates compelled to complete survey courses in American history, it is useful to recall that people who live in communities with secrets know that history matters. For Centralians, the past has power because it is dangerous. They care enough about history to fear it. They expend energy to hide it.

18. From one perspective, the enterprise of public history can be seen as a form of community organizing in which practicing professionals equip resident amateurs with the historical tools for producing meaningful history of good quality. The multiple-property nomination document prepared for this project was designed to allow Centralia citizens to place additional properties associated with the Armistice Day events on the National Register. To date there has been no community interest. For a discussion of another activist approach to labor and community history, see James R. Green, "Workers, Unions, and the Politics of Public History," *The Public Historian* 11 (Fall 1989), 11-38.

The dangers of history were clear to one resident old enough to remember the events of 1919. He read about the National Register nominations and was inspired to write angrily to the local newspaper, "Whoever resurrected the idea of making the Armistice Day Massacre [a site] of historic importance should be committed without further ado." For this citizen, forgetting the past seemed like a completely natural process that should simply be allowed to occur: "It will take a lot of generations before that event is forgotten. Right or wrong, it's best relegated to a burn pile. . . . The Massacre should be quietly lost in the back pages." Some people wanted to believe that the community had already transcended its controversial past. "Time has really healed this wound on the soul of Centralia," a local editor assured a visiting reporter. Here the assumption seemed to be that the collective silence had spawned a form of hard-won equanimity, and that this equilibrium ought to be permitted to continue. From this perspective, dredging up old memories could only be disruptive and destructive. But another Centralia citizen used the analogy of a natural disaster to make his point that this disremembering was an inadequate resolution: "If a meteor hit in 1919 and it left a big pothole out here in the field someplace and people said, 'Where in heck did that meteor land?' and we said, 'What meteor?'—well, they'd think we were fools, right? So we need to say where the meteor hit." For him, "the cover-up was more disastrous to our community than what actually happened."¹⁹

Even those who wanted more illumination of Centralia's controversial history offered cautionary words about the intensity of feelings that might be unleashed by the National Register project. An avid defender of the Wobbly role in the event instructed me to enclose a check for \$1,000 when I submitted the nominations to the city of Centralia: that way the city could afford to keep *The Sentinel* free of the graffiti that were sure to be inspired as a result of the publicity. In his view, the symbolism of the statue and its link with the bloodshed still carried sufficient currency to incite political vandalism. To friends of labor, historic Centralia continued to be something of a metaphor for the modern community. A labor historian sympathetic to the undertaking warned of "very deep waters." He recounted the hostility he had encountered in the town on a recent union march (unconnected with marking the Armistice Day events). While neighboring towns had been warm and friendly, he reported, in Centralia the marchers were greeted by plain clothes police and warnings to get off the main street. A former resident wrote to commend the project but noted that in Centralia newspapers, "editorials and published letters from readers frequently advocate force as a vehicle for problem solving and are consistently anti-labor."

Perhaps the most vivid example of the idea that history is dangerous is the statue commemorating the events in the town square. The creators of *The*

19. *Centralia Chronicle*, September 18, 1991, August 31, 1991; *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, November 10, 1991.

Sentinel intended the bronze figure and the inscriptions of the pedestal to set straight the historical record once and for all. But the statue appears now as a monument quite different from what its makers intended. From the perspective of today, The Sentinel resembles the art and sculpture erected after World War II in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to commemorate the war dead and sing the praises of the worker revolution. While worlds apart in political values, Soviet advocates of official art and the proponents of the Centralia monument shared a common interest in conscripting the memories of the dead for ideological service in the present. As political architecture and an effort at revisionist history, the Centralia cenotaph testifies to a fear that the past has power.

The Ownership of History. Historians may debate fine interpretive points with their peers at professional meetings, but in communities where the past has power, history is contested in a quite different way. Here history inspires passion and possessiveness, and historical debates take on a partisanship rooted in both individual and collective identity. The assumption is that a community or group who were historical participants—authors of the past—enjoy some right of copyright that gives them control over the “fair use” of the past. In Centralia I observed two different claims to ownership of the past. In both instances, ownership was asserted through opposition to the nominations.

The view of what might be called old-line residents was evident in the opinions of public officials and private citizens who opposed “dredging up” the past. One member of the city council who was particularly vocal in her opposition to placement of the sites on the National Register complained, “This is pretty dark stuff about Centralia.” She argued that the interpretation in the nomination document was slanted to make the city look bad. She threatened to have her constituents turn out at the state review board to block the nomination.²⁰

In fact, no Centralia resident spoke in opposition when the next public meeting convened. Instead, a passionate denunciation came from an unexpected quarter. I had anticipated the old-line view and opposition from the keepers of Centralia’s image; I did not anticipate misgivings from a 20-year member of the I.W.W. who had made the trip from Tacoma to wonder why the nomination was necessary, to object to the interpretation and research in the document (I had not embraced the I.W.W. party line), and ultimately to question my motives in the project (she feared commercialization of the Wesley Everest gravesite, which she regarded as a labor shrine).

Ironically, her primary objection focused on an issue about which I had struggled hard to steer an even-handed course: the name that has come to identify the events of 1919. It is not widely understood that “Centralia Massacre” is a partisan term for the events of November 11, 1919. The term

20. Centralia *Chronicle*, August 14, 1991.

gained currency in the national press soon afterwards, when anti-radical sentiment was high. Pamphleteers on the Right seized on the term because it made their case simply and vividly: four parading veterans were slaughtered on the streets of Centralia, promiscuously and ruthlessly. It was a massacre from the perspective of the American Legion. Pamphleteers on the Left had less success in the ensuing semantic campaigns. They tried “Centralia Incident,” “Armistice Day Tragedy,” “Centralia Conspiracy,” and “Centralia Horror,” but none fired the imagination like Centralia Massacre.

In an effort to steer a neutral course in the nomination package, I had jettisoned the term “Centralia Massacre” for the phrase “Centralia Armistice Day Riot of 1919.” My I.W.W. critic pointed out that “riot” wasn’t much of an improvement, in her opinion, since a “noisy, violent outbreak of disorder” didn’t describe a planned attack by leading citizens on a handful of union members. It was a conspiracy and should be identified as such, she argued. A fascinating semantic discussion followed about (a) the utility of employing the historic term since it had taken on a life of its own and (b) whether changing the name altered the history of the event. The discussion was perceptive and stimulating. Unfortunately, the advisory council devised a rather prosaic, bureaucratic resolution. Those who have reason to look up the nomination will find it filed as “The Centralia Armistice Day 1919 Multiple-Property Documentation Form.”

Attempts to characterize the National Register project were as much assertions of ownership as efforts to affix a suitable name. As the story unfolded, the project and the historical interpretation in the nomination document were variously (and paradoxically) labeled anti-Centralia, anti-Wobbly, and pro-labor. People of all political stripes and opinions tried to cast the project in a negative light as a way to dismiss it. In the end, these were fighting words rooted in a desire to own and control the past, not simply disagreements about the nuances of a historical interpretation.

The Legitimacy of Public History in the Labor Community. Something else struck me about the concerns expressed by the I.W.W. member in her denunciation of the nomination. She was suspicious about the whole process. Although I had solicited her comments on the draft nomination during the planning phase and she spoke at the state review proceedings at my invitation, it was clear that this individual, as she admitted at the meeting, did not really know what the National Register of Historic Places was. She feared the worst. “Is someone planning to dig Wesley Everest up?” she wanted to know.²¹ In part her suspicions may have been connected with the specific circumstances of the local legacy. Partisan feelings have been kept alive so long because of the unpunished lynching, the dubious conditions of

21. *Centralia Chronicle*, August 24, 1991.

the Wobbly trial, and the subsequent decades of silence. From her perspective, why should there suddenly be a formal effort to remember the past? What was going on?

The attitude of suspicion about the National Register, though, is connected to a broader point that transcends local circumstance. Public history, and historic preservation in particular, lack legitimacy within the labor community.²² After all, unions and working people are not the traditional constituencies of the preservation movement or the heritage bureaucracy. Historic preservation is perceived as elitist and irrelevant. Preservationists have preferred historic sites that were aesthetically pleasing, conveniently celebratory, and blandly patriotic to those that reflect controversy or trouble the conscience.²³ Often, of course, the latter are places associated with conditions and events in American labor history. While a new agenda of inclusiveness and a commitment to diversity seem, finally, to have attracted notice among movers and shakers in the preservation movement, the traditional image persists in the public mind. For those who would like to see more social history infuse the National Register and a broader social agenda inspire the preservation movement, it is clear that more needs to be done to reach a wide audience.²⁴

Public historians reaching out to nontraditional constituencies must also contend with the dilemma that heritage has become a bureaucratic process. As such it remains mysterious and arcane to anyone who does not work for a heritage agency or a historical consulting firm. Even the relatively simple functioning of the National Register of Historic Places confounds and intimidates, and most Americans regularly equate a listing on the National Register with a publicly owned historic site. During the review process on the Centralia nominations, for example, it was clear that even members of the local historical commission were unfamiliar with the purposes, requirements, and consequences of a National Register listing. The heritage bureaucracy is a boon to professional consultants who can make a living by interpreting regulations to clients, but its complexities also frustrate and disenfranchise many people to whom preservation should be making its appeal.

The Mirror Effect. Even citizens who expressed dismay at how the events of 1919 had been neglected in Centralia—and who professed a desire to

22. I should note that labor historians at the regional labor history association were quite supportive of the Centralia nominations.

23. A similar point is offered about historical markers and recent publications in "roadside history" by Robin W. Winks, "Public Historiography," *The Public Historian* 14 (Summer 1992), 93-105.

24. The National Park Service is embarking on a three-year planning study designed to add new units to the National Park System associated with American labor history. If implemented properly and funded adequately, the project should give considerable visibility and impetus to historic preservation efforts within the labor community.

look into the dark corners of community history—have had trouble accepting the past on its own terms. When local revisionists have researched the events of 1919, most have discovered a mirror: reflections of themselves and modern situations, rather than historical participants and historical circumstances. Let me mention a couple of examples.

One local business leader has been quite interested in acknowledging the controversial history of Centralia as part of his efforts to promote heritage tourism (and sales at an antique mall and nearby factory outlet). He finds the booster image of Centralia as “the city of historical murals” distorting and has offered an exterior wall of a downtown building for a mural about the Wobblies, but no one has yet taken up the offer. To his way of thinking, the tragedies of 1919 need to be paired with a more celebratory chapter in local history, the story of the African American who founded Centralia in the nineteenth century. This perspective permits him to see community history as unfolding from tolerant beginnings rich with opportunities, and the intolerance and bloodshed of 1919 become a historical aberration rather than a defining moment in community identity. It’s a clever interpretive juxtaposition rooted in real reflection about local history and a genuine interest in talking about the Massacre as a part of local heritage. (He is a transplanted Californian with only a recent connection to the community.) Not long ago, in conjunction with the city, he printed a brochure entitled “History Lives on in Centralia: The Northwest’s Vintage Shopping Center,” which prominently featured a short history of the “Centralia Massacre,” with a map that includes the National Register sites among other points of historic interest. The text of the brochure speaks of the National Register listings as rekindling, rather than resolving, the historical controversy, a point that emphasizes the continuing “mystery” that surrounds the “disputed” event. Conversation reveals, though, that this Centralian is committed to what might be called a “happy face” view of the value of the past. He wants history to have a message but not a message of despair. He has no time for what the events of 1919 say about intolerance and injustice nor analogies with the present in this vein.

The more positive assessment of the Wobblies has been possible among local revisionists because the Wobblies are viewed as the victims rather than the perpetrators of the violence. But the revisionist view often strips the Wobblies of their historical reality. I’ve heard any number of conversations in which the I.W.W. is characterized as just another trade union, working to reform industrial conditions in tough times. Absent in these discussions is any real understanding of the philosophy or tactics of the I.W.W. or the historical context in which Wobblies operated. In addition, a curious sense of personal identification seems to explain the appeal of Wesley Everest for the rugged individualists of Lewis County, Washington. Several Centralia citizens imagine they see evidence of their own modern libertarian politics in Everest’s life.

In this and other ways, the past is being celebrated through a process of de-radicalizing the Wobblies to make them fit for modern consumption. Ironically, those who know something of the union's genuine radicalism are likely to be on the other side of the controversy, retrospectively applauding the attempt at suppression in 1919. (Here could be one reason for the continued resistance to remembrance: communist paranoia may be too recent a national memory for Centralia to welcome commemoration of a bunch of northwestern Wobblies—even though the National Register process was going forward as the Communist Party was struggling to survive in the Soviet Union.) Scholars like Carlos Schwantes argue that historians have been too fascinated by the role of radicalism and violence in the labor history of the Pacific Northwest, but in the case of Centralia, this is the essence of the story.²⁵ To de-radicalize the Wobblies is to miss the point about why the Centralia marchers (and later the mob) responded as they did and why the Red Scare was a national phenomenon, not confined to western Washington.

Reverberations

As the National Register hearings were running their course in the public arena in the summer of 1991, a related effort at historical reconciliation was quietly underway elsewhere. It came to a head early in 1992 when a controversy erupted over whether the city should permit a pro-labor plaque to be placed in the town square next to the legionnaire statue. The designer of the proposed plaque was a student at Centralia High School who had researched the events of 1919 as a class project and then entered a statewide "History Day" contest, in which she was selected as one of ten winners. Prize-winners were to receive marble markers related to their history papers, courtesy of a Seattle monument maker, and the Centralia student offered hers to the city. The city council voted to accept the gift in January 1992, and a fire storm of protest followed, making the student and her design the object of considerable controversy. As the debate has cooled, the student herself has been recognized by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution for her accomplishments in historical research and even crowned Miss Lewis County for 1993.²⁶

The controversy focused on both the content and the proposed location for the plaque. The design featured a hangman's rope noose, a hand holding a claw hammer, and text describing the importance of unions in securing gains for workers. The student intended to be provocative, using the noose

25. Carlos A. Schwantes, "The Pacific Northwest Working Class and its Institutions: An Historiographical Essay," in David H. Stratton and George A. Frykman (eds.), *The Changing Pacific Northwest* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1988), 117-28.

26. Centralia *Chronicle*, January 22, 1992, January 29, 1992, April 24, 1992, April 26, 1993; Minutes of the Centralia Historical Commission, October 9, 1991.

to suggest vigilante violence and the hand with hammer to represent American workers, but the symbolism was both muddled and inflammatory. Her critics maintained that the image of the noose was obnoxious and in poor taste. Although the name of the lynching victim appeared nowhere on the proposed plaque, the noose was widely interpreted as an attempt to memorialize Wesley Everest. Why honor “somebody that cold-bloodedly killed a veteran?” one citizen wanted to know. In an unusual minority opinion, a member of the local historical commission announced that he liked the noose because the mob should have hanged more of the Wobblies. The claw hammer was less controversial than the noose, but it too was criticized in the press. A claw hammer is the tool of a carpenter, one resident pointed out. The lumberjacks and millworkers of western Washington would have used the “double-bitted ax, the ‘misery whip,’ the pike pole and the peavey. Would we want visitors to think we don’t know that?” he wondered.²⁷

The wording on the plaque also came in for criticism. Citizens complained that the text was ahistorical, misleading, and inaccurate, and professional historians would probably agree. The wording implied that World War I represented a watershed in American labor history and that the impact of the Centralia Massacre had been to secure for workers “an 8 hour day, Social Security, Worker’s Compensation, Occupational Health and Safety, and Job Security”—gains that came much later or, in the case of job security, have never been attained. In her defense, the prose was so poorly written it was difficult to know what was actually intended.²⁸

The proper location for the marker attracted as much attention as the inflammatory images and the ahistorical text. Because the student wanted to stimulate public discussion, she urged that her plaque be placed prominently in the town square, next to the memorial to the slain legionnaires. The local historical commission had attempted to locate the plaque on the outskirts of town at the Wesley Everest gravesite, but the city council overruled this choice and ratified the student’s preference. (Some suggested that the plaque belonged at a site associated with the actual violence, like the demolished I.W.W. hall or the site of the bridge used for the lynching, or even hidden away at the high school where the young artist was a student.) Many agreed with the citizen who argued that the location near The Sentinel helped visitors to “see that there are two sides to this story,” but objections to this civic prominence were numerous. Although the pro-labor

27. The quotes can be found in the *Centralia Chronicle*, February 12, 1992, January 31, 1992; see also the issues of January 22, 1992, January 28, 1992, February 4, 1992.

28. The student’s text read: “During WWI the revolution of the labor unions took place in America and all around the world. Incidents like the Centralia Massacre touched the way of life all across the country, helping to bring about changes that would transform our economy forever into the world power we know it as today. Because people in the unions believed in, and were willing to die for, the right of equality between the working class and their employers, the dream that they shared of an 8 hour day, Social Security, Worker’s Compensation, Occupa-

message of the plaque mentioned neither the I.W.W. nor Wesley Everest, it was understood in some quarters to be a memorial to reds and killers. It was disrespectful to the memory of the slain legionnaires; it rehabilitated the reputation of a bunch of Bolsheviks while insulting “respectable” labor unions; and it memorialized someone who “got what he had coming to him.”²⁹

Despite the muddled symbolism and misleading prose, some citizens thought a pro-labor plaque was a good idea. “If Centralia is ever to live down the *shame* of the massacre, it must put aside the past and give proper recognition to Everest and the Wobblies. They have their place in this town’s history. . . . What’s it going to be, Centralia or Lynchville?” one asked, pointing to the silence about the unpunished lynching of 1919. After a month of heated debate in its pages, the *Centralia Chronicle* suggested a consensus plaque for the town square that was “carefully and diplomatically worded, limited to known facts only.” The editorial tactfully implied that it was time to abandon the student proposal.³⁰

In the controversy over the plaque, the community responded as it had with the National Register nominations, with a degree of official openness and support, affirmations about the need for historical reconciliation, but also strong emotions about the dangers of the past. At the least, this lively debate illustrated that historical markers matter. It’s a simple point, but perhaps one worth making for those of us who scoff at the quality of markers on our travels across the country (my family calls them “hysterical markers”). It is clear that in a place where the past has power, a debate over the design of a commemorative plaque can be rooted in deep feelings about the ownership of history and community identity. And in a society where many citizens view history as irrelevant to the conduct of public affairs—where the past seems to provide only an entertaining collection of factoids for parlor games and television shows—it is useful to be reminded about struggles to stamp meaning on the past. In addition, one must marvel at how an effort of the caliber of the student’s could get as far as it did. Perhaps the serious consideration it received was a reflection of a genuine desire to live up to the national headlines that had promised Centralia was “confronting its secret past.” It would be ironic indeed if the community imagined itself backed into a corner by the National Register process and felt compelled to acknowledge its dark past through this flawed commemoration. For public historians, the debate also raised questions about the process of evaluation

tional Health and Safety, and Job Security, has been accomplished, and in fact is now a reality in the lives of their children.” For a sketch of the text and twin images, as well as commentary, see *Centralia Chronicle*, January 27, 1992, January 30, 1992, and February 7, 1992. A regional history organization has expressed interest in rewording the plaque.

29. The quotes can be found in the *Centralia Chronicle*, February 11, 1992, February 4, 1992, February 12, 1992. See also the issues of February 15, 1992, February 18, 1992.

30. *Centralia Chronicle*, February 19, 1992, February 25, 1992.

and the nature of quality control at “History Day” gatherings across the country, a subject that might be explored fruitfully with a national sample.

One response to the plaque controversy, though, suggested that some segments in the community were hunkering down, in anticipation of further assaults on the commemorative meaning of the town square. In the spring of 1993, the setting for *The Sentinel* was redesigned in a rather significant way. Through construction of the “Freedom Walk,” a broad concrete promenade that linked the statue in the midst of the park-like square with the street, *The Sentinel* was given even more prominence than before. Placed along the promenade was a granite tablet that announced the Freedom Walk was a county-wide memorial to the men and women who had died in all American wars since World War I. On one level, the new construction represented an appropriate and perhaps overdue recognition of the veterans of Lewis County, Washington. Within the context of community history and recent debates, though, the Freedom Walk can also be seen as an imaginative effort to de-politicize the symbolism of a controversial public space. From this perspective the memorial walkway represented an attempt to renew the legitimacy of *The Sentinel* by associating it with the patriotic sacrifices of other wars. Instead of commemorating a problematical episode of urban violence, the statue celebrated twentieth-century patriotism generally. As a consequence, it is now difficult to argue, as the high school student did, that “the other side” ought to be marked in the interests of “historical balance,” since the message proclaimed from the square can be characterized as apolitical rather than partisan. In effect the town square has been transformed from contested terrain into patriotic ground. One has to be careful not to read too much into a project like the veterans walkway, but it does seem clear that much of the recent debate in Centralia about the past has centered on meanings, symbols, and ways to construe civic identity. In this light, the new Freedom Walk suggests that the journey toward historical reconciliation remains unfinished.

In a story like this, one comes to wonder eventually about the issue of collective responsibility for historical burdens. Many outsiders who learn about the violence of 1919 in Centralia talk in these terms. Some are even moved to draw far-fetched analogies to comprehend the historical significance. The Seattle reporter who gathered interviews for the National Public Radio story on the National Register nominations, for example, became intrigued by the problem of guilt and atonement and wondered about the usefulness of an analogy between the Holocaust and Centralia. Another has suggested an analogy with modern Vienna, where in 1988, government mounted elaborate historical markers to remind citizens and visitors about Austrian collaboration with Nazis fifty years previously. Centralia is certainly not Vienna, and the so-called Massacre was emphatically not the Holocaust. But the point is that outsiders (and many residents) seem to want something from Centralia that it is not prepared to supply: a public apology

for the unpunished mob violence, an expression of remorse for the decades of silence, an acknowledgment simply of what happened in 1919. While Centralia today may not wish to be linked with the historical events that occurred there, the past has a habit of surviving. Even in totalitarian societies where official efforts are made to rewrite the historical record, the past resurrects itself, sometimes in unexpected ways. Cities may not be able to erase their pasts, but they do have some choice in how the historical legacy is interpreted. It is this act of interpretation that helps define the identity of a community, for residents and outsiders alike.

There may be room for optimism about the process of historical reconciliation in Centralia—not because of what is happening in Centralia, but because of what has happened in other communities with dark pasts that seem to be able to acknowledge their histories. In 1992, Salem, Massachusetts marked the 300th anniversary of the witchcraft trials that hanged 19 people and crushed one to death. Among other forms of commemoration was an effort to educate visitors about persecution and injustice. The National Civil Rights Museum that opened in 1991 in Memphis in the motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated also suggests a path for Centralia to consider. A dark chapter in Memphis history has provided a forum for an important set of exhibits on the civil rights movement. Part of the local story in Centralia is how community history fits into the national pattern. The Armistice Day violence was an expression of the Red Scare that coincided with wartime fears of subversion and that continued into the postwar years. The events are a powerful illustration of the ways wartime passions can go awry and create conditions where violence, prejudice, and vindictiveness prevail. If the experiences of Salem and Memphis are any guide, perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Centralia events is the lesson it could offer Americans about the utility of nonviolence, tolerance, and justice in a diverse society. It is hard to imagine a more timely or positive message for the late twentieth century.