

# Workers Memorial Day commemoration

*Mistaken shoot-out at the Marseilles Dam subject of new historical marker*

By Mike Matejka

Joliet Laborer and Iron Worker “Big Steve” Sutton, 45, lost his life July 19, 1932, during a brutal shoot-out at the Illinois River dam in Marseilles that tragically occurred before news of a labor settlement reached the site. An Illinois State Historical Society marker dedication is scheduled for April 28, 2022 to mark the site.



On July 18, 300-plus unemployed construction workers from Grundy, Will, and LaSalle counties marched on the dam project, which was employing out of state workers. The protestors, desperate for work during the Great Depression, were demanding local hire. 1932 was the depths of the 1930s Great Depression. Illinois Governor Louis Emmerson estimated there were 1 million unemployed Illinois citizens.

There was no Social Security for older Americans, no unemployment insurance. It was the soup kitchen, church pantry, and the backyard garden that fed families. Thousands hopped freights, hoping to find work somewhere. That summer, World War I (1917-1918) veterans by the thousands marched on Washington, D.C. as the “Bonus Army.” Veterans were promised an extra payment in 1945 for their wartime service. The veterans wanted their bonus immediately, hoping the extra cash would recharge the economy. The legislation passed the House but was defeated in the Senate. Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover labeled the veterans as “communists.” President Herbert Hoover’s ordered the veterans driven from the Capitol by U.S. Army troops, led by General Douglas MacArthur.

With little work, Illinois Valley construction workers looked forward to the \$500,000 Illinois River dam project



**“Wounded Man Tells Story of Shooting”:** Carl Zetterberg of Joliet was one of 17 men shot, one of whom died, at the construction site for the Marseilles dam on July 19, 1932. The workers were fired on by out-of-state strikebreakers hired to prevent union steelworkers from organizing.

*ACME Newspictures, Inc. Chicago Tribune.*

(\$1 billion at current rates). Yet when work commenced out-of-state laborers were on the job. New Orleans’ Stephens Brothers and the Miller-Hutchinson companies won the federal contract, importing workers from multiple states. Their hourly rate was 35 cents for Laborers, 40 cents for form builders, 60 or 70 cents for carpenters, and 90 cents for crane operators. The local workers wanted the area prevailing wages, which were 60 cents for Laborers, 70 cents for truck drivers and \$1.625 for crane operators.

Having marched on July 18, the local workers decided to march again the next day. Meanwhile the dam site was fortified, ringed with electric wire lines, and the out-of-state workers armed with rifles, revolvers and clubs. The company’s workers reportedly were told if they heard two whistle blasts they were to gather weapons. As protestors approached the work site

that Tuesday, they met company superintendent Herbert Miller, who was driving into the dam area. Miller began walking toward the job site with two protestors.

Although the discussion was peaceful, Joliet Iron Worker Clifford Anderson, who was walking near Miller, claimed Miller signaled company supervisor J.E. Walters on a railroad car. Anderson said Miller then dropped to the ground and the shooting began. [“Emmerson Gives Figures,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 17, 1932, page 22.]

The company personnel, positioned behind and inside railroad cars, caught the unemployed workers by surprise with their gunfire. “Big Steve” Sutton of Joliet collapsed after bullets pierced a lung and two in his stomach. Twenty one others were wounded and treated, including Cecil Hopton, shot through

the eye; Thomas Chambers was shot and clubbed in the head, others received lacerations and various gunshot wounds. As the shooting continued, company General Superintendent Herbert W. Miller, site superintendent Herbert Miller's father, arrived from Joliet, having reached an agreement with the Laborers and Electricians to hire local workers. LaSalle County sheriff E.J. Welter and the State Police rushed to the scene; the sheriff calmed the situation, seizing rifles, revolver, and ammunition from the job site. All 127 company construction workers were arrested, primarily for their own safety.

A coroner's jury viewed Sutton's body the next day. After a 12 hour hearing and a one hour deliberation, James Collins of Mesa, Arizona was charged with Sutton's death. Held as criminal accessories were Ralph Taylor, Belton, South Carolina; H.E. Page, Dardenell, Arkansas; LaMar Partin, Woodville, Mississippi; Olaf Hoff, Diragua, Wisconsin; Joseph Murry, Alexandria, Louisiana; Harold Staples; New Orleans, Louisiana; and, Leo Dale, Ocean Springs, Mississippi. The company workers were released from jail that night; Joliet Teamsters officer Virgil Floyd urged calm and no retribution against the workers.

**W**ith negotiated assistance from Illinois AFL President and State Representative Reuben Soderstrom and Marseilles banker Sherman Lewis, a union recognition agreement was reached and the out-of-state workers dispatched homeward. The grand jury convened in October, summoning 125 witnesses. Collins faced a manslaughter charge for Sutton's death and assault with a deadly weapon for injuries to two union protesters. Also charged with assault were Herbert Miller, James Walters, Ralph Taylor, LaMar Partin, Olaf Hoff, Harry D. Page, and Leo Dale.

Mary Sutton, Steve Sutton's widow, appeared on October 14, accompanied by her daughter, Mrs. Josephine Svetlezzich. "Steve left home



**Hand-carved frieze celebrating union Local 393, which was established after the Marseilles shootings in 1932.**

that morning in July to look for work" she said. "I did not even know he had gone on to Marseilles. I never got to see him after he was shot."

In 1933 International Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Local 393, now the Laborers International Union of North America Local 393, was founded in Marseilles, a direct result of the dam shooting. The 21 wounded, besides Sutton, Hopton, and Chambers included: Ernest Sons, Marseilles, shot in side; John Wise, Marseilles, left arm and leg gunshot wounds; Estel Wise, Marseilles, gunshot in the neck; Herman Osmus, Lockport, shot in the face and hands; Pat Hughes, Morris, head lacerations; Dave Given, Joliet, gunshot head wounds; Jack Hider, Joliet, buckshot wounds in neck and shoulder; Thomas Beskil, Joliet, chest shotgun wounds Frank Minarch, Morris, bruised; Cart Zetterberg, Joliet, right eyelid and left arm wounded; Jess Thomas, Marseilles, gunshot wounds; Tony Oberito, Joliet, bruises; M. Hayden, Villa Park, lacerations; Elmer Olson, Marseilles, back wounds; Albert Smith, Marseilles, head, back and arm gunshot wounds; Vernon Hammett, Joliet, clubbed; Edward Martin, Joliet, shotgun wounds; Vern Hamilton,

Joliet, shotgun wounds; and Cecil Anderson, Joliet, shotgun wounds.

An Illinois State Historical Society memorial plaque is scheduled for dedication on April 28, 2022, at 5 p.m., at the Illinois River bridge northeast corner. April 28 is "Workers Memorial Day," an AFL-CIO event that began in 1989, remembering those who died from on-the-job accidents or long-term exposures. Speakers are currently being lined up. Cairo's Edward M. Smith, Union Labor Life Insurance Company (ULLICO) CEO and 76th District State Representative Lance Yockney; other invitations are pending. Musicians Bucky Halker from Chicago and Tom Morello ("Rage Against the Machine") have committed to perform; Morello's family has Marseilles roots.

Plaque sponsors include the Union Labor Life Insurance Company, Midwest Region, Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA), LIUNA Local 393, the Illinois Labor History Society, and the Illinois State Historical Society. 

*Mike Matejka is vice-president of the Illinois Labor History Society and a member of the Illinois State Historical Society.*