The Man with a Million Names: A Personal Essay on Transit Work

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Abstract

This essay is a scholarly personal narrative about transit work, especially the operation of omnibuses, horse cars, trolleys, and trams in New York City in the nineteenth century. The culminating event is the trolley strike of 1895, the longest in New York history, and the theme is the need for solidarity between transit workers and the riding public, and thus for what is now is called union "Bargaining for the Public Good." In this essay, the author speaks as both a transit worker and an historian.

Keywords

Railroad regulation, the exploitation of animals, the Knights of Labor, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Eugene Debs

If train tracks run through or past your neighborhood you were there the day the first train ran. You ran it or someone like you did. Someone like you died running it on the day of a fatal accident. You or someone like you—a neighbor, an ancestor, a neighbor's ancestor—or me. I am the man with a million names—a railroad man. Was at work the first day a train ran on the streets in a big American city. The biggest city—New York.

We all were there—the Indians who used paths and canoes, not tracks, tunnels, and trains, the fare-payers hoping for a safer ride than in an omnibus, and the investors, who had dragooned the government into letting them hire some of us and charge the rest.

One of my names was Jehu, the omnibus driver. Yes, I'd been the charioteer in the Book of *Kings*. Carried away fleeing soldiers, then joined the battle and threw Queen Jezebel out a palace window. New York crews handled coaches and teams as though they were battling, too. Riders battled back as horse-drawn railroad cars spread through nineteenth-century New York.

As a newspaper complained:

> From the beginning to the end of the journey, Jehu quarrels with the passengers, the passengers with Jehu. There are quarrels about getting out and quarrels about getting in, quarrels about change and about shinplasters. Clergymen in white chokers are obliged to listen to unholy oaths, ladies are disgusted, frightened, and insulted, alarmed children raise their voices and weep. Indignant gentlemen rise to remonstrate with Jehu and are suddenly

> bumped back into their seats, twice as indignant as before, besides being involved in supplementary quarrels with those upon whose corns they have trodden. Thus the omnibus rolls along, a perfect Bedlam on wheels.[1]

More passengers rode on the roof, sharing the wind, rain, and sleet with Jehu. His four- or six-horse buses rattled over Bowery cobblestones and floundered in Broadway mudholes at the rate of two or three per minute.[2]

Then again, I was a bus cleaner paid a few of the 6¼¢ fares for sweeping the carpet and scrubbing the clerestory. Most of the fare money went to the owner of the bus and horses, so Jehu increased our earnings by short-changing passengers, giving them 5¢ against a piece of eight worth 12½. If customers complained, Jehu "put them through" by moving ahead as they alighted. They'd land in a mud puddle after exiting at the rear door that distinguished a bus from a stage. After wiping their brows, they could read who to blame. The first word on the door was always "General," the second, "Washington," "Jackson," or "Lafayette."[3]

The trip up Broadway or the Bowery had been better for the Indians. They took Broadway only as far as the Collect Pond behind City Hall. To leave town, they'd switch to a path along the Bowery and head up the East Side to Harlem. (At high tide, brackish water from the Hudson River seeped into the pond and made West-Side travel flagitious.) Downtown was already a destination. It had wigwams and a cornfield, and the main business was trade in wampum. Most traders lived elsewhere, bringing their money or goods by canoes arriving from the foot of Fulton Street, Brooklyn. Brooklyn's main Indian path followed hard, dry ground up Fulton Street and Flatbush Avenue to the entrepot of the Long Island tribes, their City Hall or Midtown, near Gerritsen Beach in Flatlands facing Jamaica Bay (Figure 1).[4]

Animals had started this network, and the Canarsie, as the Dutch called them, had monetized it. The ride was free and no one ran late or was tossed in the mud. Every able-bodied man was his own Jehu. Greater New York Canoe and Carry, as it might have been called, was a communal, not corporate, enterprise.

The nineteenth century would catch up, thanks to rails. A horse-drawn rail car could carry twice as many as Jehu's coach and no one would have to listen to Jehu. The roadbed would give Dobbin sure footing and the granite rails would give a smooth surface to the wheels. The inventor George Stephenson would furnish this equipment. Bronx landlord Gouverneur Morris, Junior, would soon become the Chairman of the Board of the New York and Harlem Rail-Road, the world's first urban passenger railway. It was a corporate, not communal, enterprise. [5]

Gouverneur Morris, Senior, had inserted several clauses benefiting corporations into the U.S. Constitution, for which he was the chief draftsman, and had done the same for the New York Constitution of 1777. These laws let corporations receive big grants. The corporation known as the

[1] *New York Herald*, 10/2/1864.
[2] Early conditions: Greene (1926).
[3] As in n. 1 above.
[4] Bolton (1922), Map I.
[5] Moore (1833), 4, 9, 20-22. A boosterish "Statement of Facts": S. Durst et al. (1833).

City of New York received one for Manhattan Island and railroads received rights of way. Dislike the terms of your grant? Go to the capital in Albany and sue, vote, or lobby. In this off-stage melodrama, Albany was King. A location or a right of way was Albany's to give, and his alone. Never mind how he got it. The Dutch East India Company had bought it from the Canarsie, who did not think it was vendible. The Dutch told the King of England it was and in 1674 they sold it to him in exchange for rent-free fishing off the English coast. In 1776, Albany became sovereign and glommed on to it.

The New York & Harlem received a Bowery and Fourth Avenue right of way for 30 years. Albany set the speed limit, five miles per hour below Fourteenth Street, but the City could set the fare, which would be only half a piece of eight. One spring day in 1832, the Mayor joined Messrs. Stephenson et al. for a trial run from Fourteenth to Prince Street. Paintings adorned the side of the car, named "Accommodation." (The company had meant to lead with their other car, "Sociable," but its paintings were not finished, so it ran a ways behind, in case of trouble). Curtains, shades, and dividers turned the 30-person car into side-by-side parlors. The side doors and brake pedal were novelties, as was the conductor who rode along a sideboard.[6]

Take a ride! Children and milch cows will keep down the speed below and the car will hold steady on curves thanks to having eight wheels, not four. To demonstrate the brakes, Jehu stopped suddenly and the "Sociable" should have, too, but my nineteenth-century self was in the driver's seat, on informal probation. Shouted "Whoa!"rather than floor the pedal. Only horses suffered in the collision. The passengers adjusted their linen dusters and reached Prince Street in ten minutes. No police assisted or interfered. In 1832, New York had no police.

A banquet after the ride praised coaches on rails, engines on boats, and horse dung carried away by plumbing and sewers rather than streams and tides. Mr. Morris's home—a replica of a French chateau—featured New York's first flush toilet. The City lacked any toilets for riders or pedestrians.

Morris wanted more than plumbing. Run the railroad up the East Side, then across the Harlem River into Morrisania, the family manor. That would draw rural passengers and freight. Then extend the road to Albany. The NY & Harlem could make contact with the Erie Canal and monopolize access to upstate. Next, the railroad could run alongside the canal and steal canal traffic by being ten times as fast as barges. Profits, fame, prosperity, and power—but Morris wanted to reach St. Louis. San Francisco next. That should take only 30 more years.[7]

First, build a viaduct through the hill at Twenty-Eighth Street (And they did. The viaduct is still there.) The horses would be spared the climb and for the first time Jehu and I would work in the dark while more conductors fell beneath the wheels. Next, get an amendment to extend the road past the Thirty-Second Street limit of the grant. Morris owned Morrisania, of course, and his relatives owned much of the rest of the Bronx, so the right of way would be free of charge.

Yes, the chateau would have to go. It stood athwart the right of way, as did a nearby Indian burial ground. Morrisania had been an Indian station, reached by canoe from a branch of the path that

[6] *The Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 11/14/1832, and Stratton (1878), ch. 1.
[7] Hyatt (1898); New York and Harlem Railroad Company (1840).

began at the Bowery. Oysters, mink, and muskrat were the stock in trade, with bullfrogs for lunch. Fresh water came from Wigwam Brook. Now the station would be on the NY & Harlem, selling chicory coffee and ginger nuts. The Morrises had already built the needed bridge. (All pedestrians would now be obliged to buy a train ticket.).[8]

In 1846, Albany made a West-Side grant to the New York & Hudson Railway. This corporation came under the control of a Staten Island ferryman, Cornelius Vanderbilt, who was using steam engines in his riverboats. Soon both roads put steam engines into railway service, so Dobbin and locomotives shared the viaduct. Horses gagged, we did, too, and the City asked Albany for a ban on steam engines, but Albany granted it only up to Forty-Second Street and the NY & Harlem violated the ban for 15 years. After that, Harlem passengers would have to alight at Forty-Second in order to board steam trains. Two-fare zones had begun. Albany let the company dispense with costly, granite railroad ties when it extended the road's grant for 30 years. The era of creosote and cheap, wooden ties had begun, too. Railroads were as expensive to build as they were profitable to operate.

The 1850s brought a wave of roads on both sides of town. This time, Albany insisted that the companies pave the streets beneath the rails and let the City set a lower fare, 5¢, and even let the City repossess the roads. Yet the grants were perpetual and the only fees were vehicle licenses. By 1875, cross-town routes included little Bleecker Street. The Bleecker Street road ran from Fulton Ferry to the West Side via the Bowery and a path to the foot of Gansevoort Street, where Hoboken and Manhattan Indians had fished and traded. Now a trickle of commuters came and went just a block and a half north, at the Fourteenth Street ferry, and made Bleecker the smallest of about 100 New York railroad companies carrying 38 million passengers a year.[9]

I could walk from my tenement home to the Bleecker Street yard in a few minutes. Ideal, except Bleecker Street was the narrowest right-of-way. Dung piled as high as the stoops and caused tetanus. Tetanus fatalities were even worse in stables and near-by slums—maybe as frequent as in military camps during the Civil War, when the rate was one person in 125 every year. In New York today, that would be some 34,000 deaths, about the same as the number as due to Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021. In the car barns, equine influenza was periodic. Every company had a veterinarian, an animal hospital, and that incomprehensible stuff, disinfectant.

Horses counted as two-fifths of railroad investments as well as three-quarters of operating costs. They worked only five to six hours a day, six days a week. We worked seven days a week from dawn until dark for a dollar a day, and that was four times what Mr. Morris was paying another of us to lay track. A work gang cost him less than the horses needed for the work.

Breaks were fleeting. At the stable, the crew dawdled for a few minutes as the hostler fetched the horses, the head changer assigned a car, and someone like me fetched it. At the terminal, they alighted, took a drink, brushed their clothes, and let the horses drink from the same pail. Horses

[8] Gouverneur Morris II and other managers: Stern (1935) and the *Papers of the New York & Harlem Rail-way*. His Bronx lands in the nineteenth century: Wells et al. (1927), passim. The house: *Papers of Gouverneur Morris II.*
[9] The ever-growing tangle of railway franchises, leases, and acquisitions: Carman (1919), 1-215. Horses: Tarr and McShane (2008).

had four of the six eyes that would foresee an accident and at night they had the best eyes. The driver would tell them to walk, trot, or canter, but otherwise speed was up to them. The conductor made change and collected fares while dangling over the street on the sideboard. He faced the wind, sun,sleet, and rain, like the driver. Sooner or later he took one fall too many, died, or quit.

Brooklynites fared better. One day on strike won them hourly pay, including 9- or 10-hour workdays. Motivating the strike was fear of the new Brooklyn Bridge. There had been no rush hours before it opened in 1883. Now there were rush hours to and from Manhattan. The lines began sending men home after the morning rush and recalling them in the late afternoon. They also kept the barns and shops open at night. So many cars ran late that they began clocking them—an issue that set off more strikes.

The Brooklyn Knights forced the Atlantic Avenue line and other roads to limit the idle time in the middle of the day to a two-hour unpaid swing and fixed the number of round trips. Some drivers and conductors would still work extra and be paid by the trip, but the contract limited the extra men on each route. Unskilled workers in the stables, barns, and shops would work only 10 hours, and youngsters like me would have specialties—cleaners in the barns, grooms in the stables and the hospital, greasers in the shops, messengers in the shack.

Copies of the contract went up in every workplace, telling everyone from smiths to tow-boys what they were worth:

Smiths $2.75 a day
Smiths' strikers $2
Smiths' firemen $2
Carpenters $2
Drivers $2
Conductors $1.75
Hostlers $1.75 (no more than 20 horses a day)
Hitchers $1.75
Switchmen $1.50
Car cleaners $1.50
Stable-boys $1.25
Tow-boys $1.25 (That should have been me)
Office-boys $1 (That shouldn't)
Extra men 15¢ a trip

An office boy didn't have to post this kind of list. Union leaders did. They were reminding us we were underpaid. The rungs of the ladder were so many that they became bars in a cell.[10]

The big win was seniority. Veterans had their pick of swings and depots, while those in the barns, stables, and shops had their pick of locations and assignments. It became easier to be a family man and have a long career. Since there were senior boys, too, seniority harmonized the workforce and strengthened the Knights, who could not compel workers to cooperate or even join. Senior men collected alms for retired members and their widows. Since carmen were poor, accident-prone,

[10] *Report of the Select Committee* (1895), Exhibits A-K. Other views: Henry (1991), Zarrillo (2014).

and short-lived, no one would insure them.

Seniority and solidarity kept the Knights strong enough to enforce annual contracts, but several features of their organization undermined them. Streetcar men all belonged to the same assembly, but other assemblies included workers of all sorts, even business and professional people. The Knights' Grand Master, Terence Powderly, had never been a transit worker. The Knights eschewed political causes, even laws to provide drivers seats and vestibules, and railroad finance lay beyond their ken. They ignored small matters like the lack of free transfers and big ones like the failure of railroads to pay the City anything but license fees. Hardly any knew that the City could repossess the roads.

That would mean municipal ownership and operation. The labor upsurge of 1886 put these phrases and the word "socialism" in the American political vocabulary, but the Knights had no isms. Strong on the shop floor, they were weak at City Hall and in Albany. Every driver grasped the link between the Brooklyn Bridge and the unpaid swings, but not the Grand Master Workman, who preferred the omnibus. During the Civil War, he had purchased a substitute rather than fight, but most carmen were veterans still fighting draft dodgers, bosses, dudes, strays, and civilians. His policy was for members to resign rather than go on strike.

When the Grand Master invited them to meet some railroad telegraphers, a big group who did not work at barns and yards, the occasion ended in a tiff. The Brooklyn crewmen thought the telegraphers were wearing their Sunday best to a union meeting. They smoked cigars, not pipes; the female telegraphers smoked cigarettes. The males were dudes and the females were not ladies. The Brooklynites did not respect them and would not admit they were jealous. The telegraphers went unrecruited.[11]

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New Yorkers wanted faster, roomier trains, the City wanted more of the profits, and the railroads wanted bigger monopolies. The answer was electric power and a kind of financial piggybacking. Piggybacking may have started in Brooklyn.[12] The big Atlantic Avenue line, which ran from Fulton Ferry to East New York, leased right of way from a toll road on the main Canarsie path, but then it did what no toll keeper or Canarsie ever did, and sublet the right of way for 999 years to another company, the Long Island Railroad. The long term let the LIRR do anything an owner might, except pay taxes. Atlantic received a hunk of LIRR's receipts as rent.

Electric power was just beginning. A handful of roads drew power from a live rail along the right of way, but this kind of service was much more dangerous than horses. Only 60-odd miles of electric railroad were in service in 1880. A former Edison engineer, Captain Frank Sprague, used poles to draw power from overhead wires down to a motor put in the trucks of railroad cars. No one would go near the power except those raising and lowering the poles. In Manhattan, already a forest of telegraph and telephone wires, Sprague delivered power to the cars through conduits in

[11] The incident and background: Gabler (1886), 259-388, "Kid-Gloved Laborers."
[12] Smith (1958), esp. 2-4, 42, followed by Cudahy (2009), dealing mostly with the Brooklyn Els but describing new technology; Cunningham and de Hart (1977), providing a visual record in their chs. 1-2.

the middle of the street. These trams would need more repair but otherwise matched trolleys. Sprague also invented a controller that let a driver operate all the motors in a consist of several cars. Electric trains would be longer as well as faster than horse cars.

Initial costs would rise, but later costs would fall since electric cars were a third cheaper to run. Horsecars could be converted and enlarged, switches and barns left as they were. Drivers would become motormen, conductors would raise and lower trolley poles, and electricians would join smiths in the shops. Hostlers would move cars, not animals. Investors such as Morris and Vanderbilt would not ask what became of the tow-boys. For me, the nineteenth century would change for the worse. I'd have to scrub crewroom toilets.

All railroad companies feared that others would electrify first, so some tried to buy out competitors. The company being bought would demand that buyers pay it rent or dividends—not a few years' worth, but every year in a 999-year lease, like the LIRR's. Rent receipts appealed to company managers, while dividends appealed to stockholders. Dividends that were guaranteed, as though they were mortgage payments, appealed to the New York and London bankers who were lending to railroads.[13]

To raise these sums, Brooklyn roads watered their stock, a trick devised by Daniel Drew and other financiers who had been cattle drovers. Before they brought their cattle to market at Tompkins Square, drovers watered them, increasing their weight. Wall Street stock was inflated, too, but on paper. The promoters touted the prospects of a new, electrified monopoly, found buyers at high prices, and pocketed the difference. Electrification plus piggybacking made street railroads the most overcapitalized American industry—twice as overcapitalized as steam lines, which were second.

Soon Brooklyn's two dozen street railroads were only four, which formed a Virginia holding company to avoid New York taxes. This combine became the world's largest urban railway, but physically was the smallest. A post office box of a railroad, nicknamed the Virginian, leased another road, the Brooklyn Heights, which had only a half mile of track on Montague Street. The Heights company leased the Atlantic and three other companies, including the Brooklyn City & Newtown, the first to electrify (10% dividends guaranteed). Riders thought the two dozen original companies named after Brooklyn streets and neighborhoods were still taking them to work or church.[14]

Brooklyn Knights found themselves mounting training cars called "skeletons." They took power by rotating a controller, as motormen do today. Putting the controller on the post would attain 20 mph, almost half as fast as today. To save money, the Combine opted for handbrakes, not airbrakes, so a brakeman had to scamper through the train, yanking a brake wheel at the end of each car. In that respect, electric trains resembled modern yard service—cumbersome, chancy, and tiring. When brakes failed, the motorman turned a key and put his engine in reverse. That blew out the motors, so every emergency stop was a cannon shot as passengers went flying against the partition behind the motorman.

[13] See Poor (1868-1924) for references to works on railroad mortgages, lawsuits, and equipment. The financial nexus: Pierce (1953) and Salisbury (1967).
[14] *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), Exhibit S.

Has the trolley wire fallen to the ground? Pick it up with your cap or coat. When the metal entryway is "hot," make sure to apply power only after all passengers have boarded and stepped inside. A burnt-out lamp in the car? Hey, Switch! Put a copper penny in the lamp socket.

Yes, that was me, still doing odd jobs. Just doing them under the trolley wires.

Trolley wires replaced the haylofts in the barns. Five-foot concrete pits under every track turned the barn floor into a hazard. Switchmen and motormen in a hurry might fall into it. Motormen could knock the heads off the electricians and mechanics working there. What happened to the veterinarian who always had spare splints for an injured man?[15]In 1893, the Combine built a barn for a thousand cars at Third Avenue and Fifty-Eighth Street in Sunset Park. A flag, lamp, or hand moving up and down meant "go," moving sideways meant "stop," and a circle meant "reverse." Old barns such as the NY & Harlem buildings on Fourth Avenue could not compete. Men conversed there, horses listened, and cars moved more slowly. The Fourth Avenue site soon became the first Madison Square Garden.

Losing Dobbin hurt most. Instead of relying on his team to stop during an accident, a driver had to shut off his overhead power switch and cut out his motor. Instead of tugging reins, he had to know how many turns of the brake would stop the car. Instead of three pairs of eyes, he had one. Every motorman and conductor had favorite horses and could often select them, but no motorman had a favorite car. Fenian, Tory, and Skewbald often knew when and where to stop, but General Electric, Thomson-Houston, and Curtis didn't.[16]

Unlike Fenian, GE tired around supper time, when all cars were on the road and the company's dynamos were overtaxed. The crew lost their meal break. Schedule changes cut into meals, too. The Atlantic Avenue run from the Ferry to East New York fell from 38 minutes out and 36 back to 32 both ways, so the company increased daily runs from 5 to 7. No one had time to stop between blocks, as the horses regularly did. Pay shrank because crews had to buy blue uniforms, not just headgear, and clothes wore out faster. Another sartorial worry: man and coat would be scorched if cracked insulation on the trolley pole let current reach the controller by way of the car's metal frame. The shock could throw the driver from the car.[17]

The right of way was lethal, too. In the first two years of electric operation, Brooklyn passenger deaths rose fivefold and fans renamed the city's baseball team, the Superbas, the Trolley Dodgers. New York was no better, but Boston was, whereas Philadelphia and Chicago were worse, death rates that socialists said ran parallel to political corruption. An eight-year-old Philadelphia girl, teddy bear in hand, lost her balance as she darted away from an approaching car. She got clear of the wheels but touched the motor and a rail, dying with a scream and a shudder. A mob formed and attacked the motorman. Mounted police charged to the rescue and sent dozens fleeing to a near-by pharmacy for bandages and other medical supplies.[18]

[15] Dangers of switching or hosteling: Del French (1938), 21-22. Motorman's vs. engineer's work: as implied by Gamst (1980).
[16] *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 260.
[17] *Report of the Select Committee* (1895), 97.
[18] Wolfinger (2016), chs. 1-3, dealing with conditions.

The motorman attended the girl's funeral and explained the accident as a priest stood beside him. A box should have insulated the motor, he said, but the railroad refused to install boxes. They would hamper airflow and make the motors overheat. Better dead motors, he said, than dead girls. The priest gave him communion with the rest.

A young motorman on the Third Avenue Lines—an ex-Philadelphian who knew the roads in both cities—summarized the job:

> The motorman's work was nerve-wracking. Slow-moving, horse-drawn trucks jammed New York streets and to pilot a streetcar through this maze and not fall behind,was a struggle. We had no seats, airbrakes, or cabs and had to stand up all day twisting heavy hand brakes and being fully exposed to the weather. Many's the time I was soaked with driving rain and half frozen from cold. On fair days I went home trembling from all the hours holding the power handle in one hand and the brake in the other, foot jabbing the gong all the while to warn people I was coming. It was a man- killing job.
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> The motormen thoroughly hated the company. As for the conductors, many of them helped themselves freely, with no twinges of conscience, to the fares they took in. There were no pay-as-you-enter cars, and with conductors collecting in the densely packed cars even the army of company "spotters" could not keep tabs on them. The "nickelers" and "short-arm artists," as they were called, were located mostly by bookkeeping. When a run failed to bring in the regular average of receipts the conductorwas fired forthwith for "nickeling."
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> We motormen deeply resented our unnecessarily hard work and exposure to severe weather. We demanded seats, airbrakes, and cabs. The company bosses and engineers assured us that these things were impossible in New York traffic: The seats would make us less alert, the airbrakes would speedily wear out from incessant use, the cabs would obscure our vision, and all three together would make for more accidents.[19]

The Third Avenue Company caught this rookie trying to organize the barns on Eleventh Street and uptown and fired him and his fellows. Ex-motormen were becoming as common as ex-horsecar drivers or teamsters.

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Brooklyn's drivers and motormen did not choose the time, place, or issue of the streetcar strike of 1895. The trolley Combine chose the time by announcing that it was about to default. It could no longer pay its creditors, even after cutting dividends in half during the nine years of union contracts. It had already cut steady work, added swings, and violated a new Albany law setting 10-hour days. The Knights sued and the railroads told the court that the clock ran only when wheels were rolling. The judge seconded this piece of metaphysics and the Knights appealed to Albany in vain.

[19] Foster (1939), 27-8. Man-killing work: Aldrich (2006). "Nickeling": *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 502.

The Knights' leader was James Connelly, a Myrtle Avenue coachman serving as Master Workman of an Assembly of many thousands. Under him were leaders of Coachmen's locals at all the roads belonging to the Combine. Two top labor leaders warned him to halt the wildcat. Powderly's successor, James Sovereign, said try more judges, and America's top railroad leader, Eugene Debs, said wait. First elect Knights to city offices and recruit the pitmen. These leaders thought the Knights needed allies.

That February, Connelly asked to see the books and the Combine said no. He and the local leaders made an offer of fewer swings and a raise of a quarter a day. Executives had all taken pay cuts, the Combine answered, and so should workmen.

Eliminate dividends, said the Knights. The Combine did not reply. The Knights withdrew the demand for a raise but would not accept more swings.

The few independent companies chose the place by compromising on swings. That made the Combine the target.

The Atlantic road chose the issue. It had laid off half its shopmen in the last few months.

When negotiations broke off, Connelly called for a mass meeting in the morning. Just hours earlier, the Atlantic barn chief dismissed the electricians working at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Eighth Street. He said he feared lest they sabotage the cars. The motorman assigned to the late-night mail saw the lock-out, abandoned his train, and walked home through Greenwood Cemetery. The conductor, who had much farther to go, laid out a mattress of mail sacks and went to sleep. That gave me an excuse to lie down beside him.

The conductor awoke that morning to a sunny, motionless yard. Trains were moving only on a Coney Island excursion line that ran alongside the property. All the cars were nearly empty. The Assistant Superintendent on duty at Atlantic headquarters began to wonder why he had not received his mail, but a telegram to Fifth Avenue produced neither mail, men, nor mules.

The Assistant Superintendent reported to his superior, and the General Superintendent strode into City Hall and interrupted the Mayor's tardy breakfast. Were no crews operating? asked his Honor. A few, but when they took their teams or trolleys down the road the switches were unmanned. I was one of a hundred switchmen who refused to work. (Nobody else was working. Why me?)

Some crews improvised. One went back to a barn in East New York, found the gate locked, and left the car at the conductor's house, a few blocks away. The driver rode the team of horses to his home in Ridgewood, Queens and put them in the back yard. Stable boys gave their animals the run of the yards in front of the barns and shops—dangerous places to find a tussock of grass on a workday.

Soon superintendents from other lines were sharing breakfast and news: When they ordered their electricians to man cars, the men refused. The engineers in the power plants needed to stay at their posts, and the tow-boys were untrained. The companies had kept their highest and lowest paid at the price of losing their operatives.

The Mayor summoned the Chief of Police, who did not yet know what to do, but the Atlantic General Superintendent did: The roads would recruit scabs by messenger, telegraph, and the occasional phone. Railroad counsel arrived, too, to remind the Mayor of the section of the penal code imposing a three-year sentence for throwing stones at railroad cars. Would the Mayor allow car conductors to carry pistols and make citizen's arrests? No, said the Mayor, who termed this "egregious," but decided to hire 500 special officers to supplement his police department of a thousand. They would all come from the civil service lists for police and fireman. When the lists provided only 117 recruits, he shook his head. Hundreds of others on the lists had neighbors who were motormen. The pay was only 2¢ an hour higher than a motorman's and the weather was turning snowy.[20]

For two days, the Combine ran only one of their lines, the route from Red Hook to Fulton Ferry. They ran about five lines for the rest of the first week. Traffic and clashes increased after that as pickets outside the companies' downtown offices rousted some scabs, dragooned others, and, the lawyers complained, even bribed some. Police alone were riding the cars. Housewives stepped outside to curse them and boys threw ice balls with rocks in the middle. Soon every car had a patrolman, so men on the beat ended up with too many blocks to cover. That made it easy to reach the tracks undetected and wreck switches or pile debris. Switchmen helped.[21]

Cars heading for the barn near the Gowanus Canal seldom reached it. Horses cut loose by the attackers trotted down to the Canal, drank their fill, and plodded back to the stables, hungry, only to be turned away. The companies needed fewer of them now. They made their next stop in Red Hook's glue factories.

When the weather improved, strikers took to the rooftops to hurl stones demolishing trolley poles and their wives threw china from the second story to demolish car windows and frames. Boys on the street taunted the crews, "Dead scabs tell no tales." Efforts to rifle the donation cans put on street corners by the Knights all failed. The union put locks on the cans and opened them only at headquarters.

The Knights' leaders called for peace but could not calm big working-class neighborhoods such as Ridgewood, Brownsville, and Greenpoint. Men threw cobblestones at the police guarding a barn or depot, the police gave chase, and the assailants mostly outran them.There were seldom enough paddy wagons for all those being caught, and the few who were transported were not worth the trouble it took to arraign them—cops taken off the street, witnesses in hiding, judges disinclined to jail voters. The stand-off frustrated both sides, partly because a few independent lines were running better than normal (as were the steam railroads), and partly because the leaders of the Knights prevented arson and looting. Poor neighborhoods were partly helping the strikers, partly trying to help themselves, often ignoring the strike, and seldom scabbing.

Railroad receipts were down three quarters and the Knights, who had no strike fund—or rather, no resignation fund—were running out of nickels and dimes to disburse to their neediest members. The police were tired, the newspapers were bored, and the two sides resigned themselves to a

[20] *Brooklyn Citizen,* 1/23/1895.
[21] *Harper's Weekly*, 2/2/1895.

snowy stalemate. Then the police chased a sympathizer into a Ridgewood home where the Knights were meeting and arrested dozens. The German-American press compelled the downtown papers to report the story, and the Mayor took the trouble to explain that the frontdoor to the house had not been locked. His men had not broken in.

Connelly pressed the Mayor for arbitration. Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers told the press that they recommended this procedure, and so did Sovereign. The Mayor contacted the companies and told them the union would accept some unpaid swings. In return, the arbitrators should condemn the companies for violating their Albany grants, which obliged them to serve the public.[22] That would pressure the companies to make concessions. The companies rebuffed the Mayor. Swings were theirs to determine, the Brotherhood was a mere observer, and besides, Vanderbilt had never let a union control swings.

A blizzard killed horses and kept the strike alive.

Then another headline: The police raided the Knights' East New York headquarters at Odd Fellows Hall. Many Knights belonged to this fraternal society for helping the poor and burying the dead. The police captain interrogated them; the Knights displayed embossed credentials in faith, hope, and charity; and the captain found only one militant, a Patriarch Militant who was a Republican. The captain withdrew but returned two days later in plain clothes and clubbed Fellows. They fled, credentials in hand, and the police gave chase, only to be pelted from upper windows. Several officers drew their pistols, but the detective in charge ordered them to stop. The witnesses would be too many and too tearful in court.

Just one officer fired, wounding a man recognized as a stone-thrower. The victim began to fall out of a second-story window but a woman in an apron retrieved him. The witnesses weremany, and when the weather changed again Brooklynites stepped outside and stoned the lone policemen riding the horsecars. Cops and scabs both fled. The horses would take the car to the next turn-out, where a switchman was waiting. These animals ended up at the independent lines or at the glue factories. Either way, the switchman earned a dollar. I'll help you, Switch, and take two bits.

Even the Mayor's backers were besieging him. They wanted action, and so did the Combine. It was summoning hundreds of new scabs from New Jersey, Philadelphia, and even Boston, and wanted these men protected. Send the militia! The Mayor concurred, but hundreds more scabs came first, in Jersey-City furniture vans that lighters brought to the Fulton Ferry. After tumbling out, they bullied their way through the downtown pickets and rode empty cars headed to barns throughout Brooklyn. The pickets in East New York greeted them by breaking their noses and blackening their eyes. Some retreated to company headquarters downtown and demanded what may be the first New York instance of hazardous duty pay. Others reached the barns, slept in cars, and waited for troops to arrive. Days later, a brigade did. The commander dispatched his infantry to 40 barns, depots, and powerhouses.

This General, a Brooklynite and a veteran of Bull Run, had organized much-admired reunions of Northern and Southern veterans. Now he would reconcile capital and labor. First, appeal to the

[22] Loughran (2016), dealing with torts as well as breaches of contract.

patriotism of veteran strikers by shouldering arms and waving the flag. Next, secure arbitrators who might be trusted and must be heeded. To placate the companies, protect as well as occupy their property. His plan was heart-felt. He hated civil strife among Kings County voters.

The companies declined his offer and enjoined him to protect the scabs as well as the barns and yards.

The General did not despair. There was much good will, even around Brooklyn's biggest yard, on the edge of Weeksville, the only Black neighborhood. For days, the troops played tit for tat with the pickets that gathered next door on the playing fields of the St. John's Home for Boys.The foe gathered at dusk, distributed ladders and wire cutters, and dispersed to cut the power lines leading out of the yard. They reassembled in the morning and marched up and down the fields, singing, as boys watched from the Home. (The clerestory of the home's church was a likely coign of vantage.) The troops would march out, disperse them, and go to lunch. The worst of it was the Superintendent's moving the cars at night while soldiers were sleeping in them. The commanding officer arrested the Superintendent and after that the cars stayed put. There were fewer and fewer fit to sleep in.

Brownsville was less decorous. At first, women in the crowds stuck lemons on the soldiers' bayonets or cut brass buttons off their coats. Lowered bayonets dispersed them, but when they returned a few days later, a lieutenant ordered his sentries to aim at the males. The marchers kept coming, some sentries fired in a panic, and a marcher fell dead. Fog rolled in and bayonets thrusting out of the murk terrified passers-by. The General prevented the troops from stabbing anyone to death, but warning shots fired in the fog wounded passers-by as well as protestors.

Headlines, headlines: Traffic declined and the companies asked the Mayor for another brigade. He hesitated. Total troops would number 7,500, more than the 5,000-odd strikers. Then the Knights announced that imported scabs had fled tothe Odd Fellows for help. The companies were holding others hostage. The Knights requested writs of habeas corpus for these men, the police failed to find them, and the newspapers ridiculed the Mayor. He yielded to the demand for more troops, this time cavalry.

As the reinforcements paraded down Fulton Street, stone-throwers hit more horses than men, then retreated before the troopers could draw their swords. There was no such burlesque in Greenpoint, then a slum comparable to New York's worst, which was in Manhattan at the undeveloped north end of Central Park. The cavalry were protecting wagons carrying rails when upstairs windows flew open and women flung bricks. There was no china to spare, but the women poured boiling oil on troopers who rode up to the windows to remonstrate. The cavalry reformed and trotted down the center of the street, out of range, while cursing these Italian and German foreigners. When a few pedestrians appeared, the troops drew their sabers and charged. Greenpoint's ruts and alleys let the pedestrians escape.[23]

The Knights thought poorly of the enemy's horsemanship. Troopers earned $1.25, the same as tow-boys and greasers, but sympathized less with the strikers than police.

[23] *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 363.

By now, the authorities had arrested and released hundreds and killed a dozen or two. The strikers had not killed any police or soldiers, but dozens of troopers had fallen from their mounts to the cobblestones. More harmful was the advent of spring weather. Scabs aplenty brought service halfway back, and the electricians and pitmen, who had never stopped working, restored more of the fleet. The strike collapsed in April.

One of the last casualties was a union motorman's wife. He had been on strike for weeks and then returned to work on the Flatbush Avenue line. She was bringing him supper when some women accosted her, shouting "Scab's wife!" A rock struck her in the temple and knocked her senseless. When she awoke, she had lost her shoes as well as her dinner. She walked a mile through the slush to a hospital and nearly died there. Her husband quit for good, after 18 years with the Atlantic Company.[24]

The Grand Master Workman declared that the Brooklyn assembly should never have gone on strike. The Brooklyn Board of Aldermen announced that the railways had violated their grants. Albany would decide what next.

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Albany convened a committee, the Combine declared bankruptcy, and a federal judge ordered it to cut labor costs. All crews became extra and all shopmen returned to the ten-hour day. The Extra Board was the only timetable men were to consult. The Combine agreed to the Mayor's request to keep scabs from replacing any Brooklyn man who had stayed on the job, and also agreed to rehire any strikers who were not union officers. Perhaps 10% of the strikers returned permanently. Connelly was one and he fought in vain to increase the total.[25]

Labor costs, the committee learned, caused the strike. The President of the Atlantic explained it this way: One day he and Vanderbilt went to the store to buy tea for their wives. They paid the same price. Vanderbilt did not have to pay more because he ran the biggest road in New York. The Atlantic should not have to pay more for drivers because it was part of the biggest road in Brooklyn. There was one price for tea, and there should be one price for men.

Why not prevent unions? asked a state senator. A company lawyer answered that all employees would soon sign a contract of a new and better kind. First, they must submit to an examination showing they were not short-sighted or fitful and to an investigation showing they had never been discharged for cause or convicted of a crime. Then they must agree to resign, "if dissatisfied with his wages or with the services required of him."[26]

Legislators who thought of "coarse, incompetent" crews told company officials that hooliganism, not unionism, was the trouble. Why not oblige motormen to obtain licenses, the same as electricians or pilots? A license would not only prohibit strikes but foster sobriety. Boston had begun licensing motormen. Government instructors trained, tested, and observed them. New York should not go too far, the lawmakers said, and turn motormen into civil servants, as though they

[24] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* 2/1/1895.
[25] *Brooklyn Standard Union,* 8/8/1895.
[26] *Brooklyn Citizen,* 2/10/1895.

were municipal firemen or letter carriers employed by the federal government.

The companies demurred. One official said, "Why not license the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker?" Could illiterate teamsters make good motormen? asked a State Senator.[27]

The President of the North Second Street Line answered that most motormen had been horsecar drivers. Poor drivers became poor motormen, but some good drivers did, too. The mental effort required by the new equipment overtaxed them. The employers' desideratum was a man capable of this effort, not a licensee. The President was right: A century later, college grads did not make better motormen or more likely scabs.

One lawmaker hit on the answer to scabbing—compulsory arbitration. No, said company officials. The arbitrators would not understand the exigencies of the railroad business, unless, of course, the arbitrators were former railroad lawyers, accountants, or executives.

No one asked Connelly his opinion. Some of the Knights' leaders were in hiding and Sovereign was not subpoenaed.

Brooklyn's trouble was not contracts, unions, hooligans, or arbitrators. The Knights failed to mobilize riders. Many sympathized. Women and children did more for the strike than men did, and neighbors did more than the public. Police did less against it than troopers from upstate. Prejudiced though it was, the Brooklyn press did more than the press in New York, and the Brooklyn Board of Aldermen had been the only public body to urge Albany to revoke the railroad grants. The Knights did not enroll or lead these potential supporters. For example, they did not correct the aldermen who said the grants did not allow motors to replace horses. The chief issue was safe, uninterrupted service, not motive power. Failure to provide good service was a tort—an actionable wrong.

The union had not expected the strike to become an uprising led by wives plus children, crews without switchmen, police deserting one side without joining the other, and politicians doing the same, but in reverse. Part of the public had unwittingly decided to treat the railroad as their property, to use or despoil as they liked. The arrival of the militia nullified but confirmed this decision.

The law and the courts were weak but working people and the railroad companies were both strong. The people knew how to use sabotage because the railroad was a parade of damaged and ill-repaired equipment. They knew how to use stealth because avoiding supervisors was second-nature. They knew the lay of the land and the infrastructure because they traveled it. Crowds made them anonymous and they were glad to be because many needed to be incognito. Then they were bold. No horse turned traitor and no man should.

A century later, we can envy these qualities, but feel dissatisfied. Communal spirit accompanied organizational weakness and spontaneity tended to exclude planning. Extralegal action lacked any legal counterpart and self-defense was inchoate. Even the anonymity of the strike was unsatisfying.

[27] *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 249; so also 437.

Some kind of celebrity would have helped. Yet I liked this melee and so do New Yorkers who have never heard of it. Eighteen Ninety-Five became part of their subconscious. The people had taken command. Damage had been slight and deaths few, save for the operations of the cavalry and the provocations of the police. Such an eruption had never happened in Brooklyn. It could never be undone. Something like it happened again, in the summer of 2020.

The rails belonged to the people and so did I. I have a million names. So do you. It's 1832 today or 2020, so we can start over. We can follow Debs' advice and stop traffic when the time is right.

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