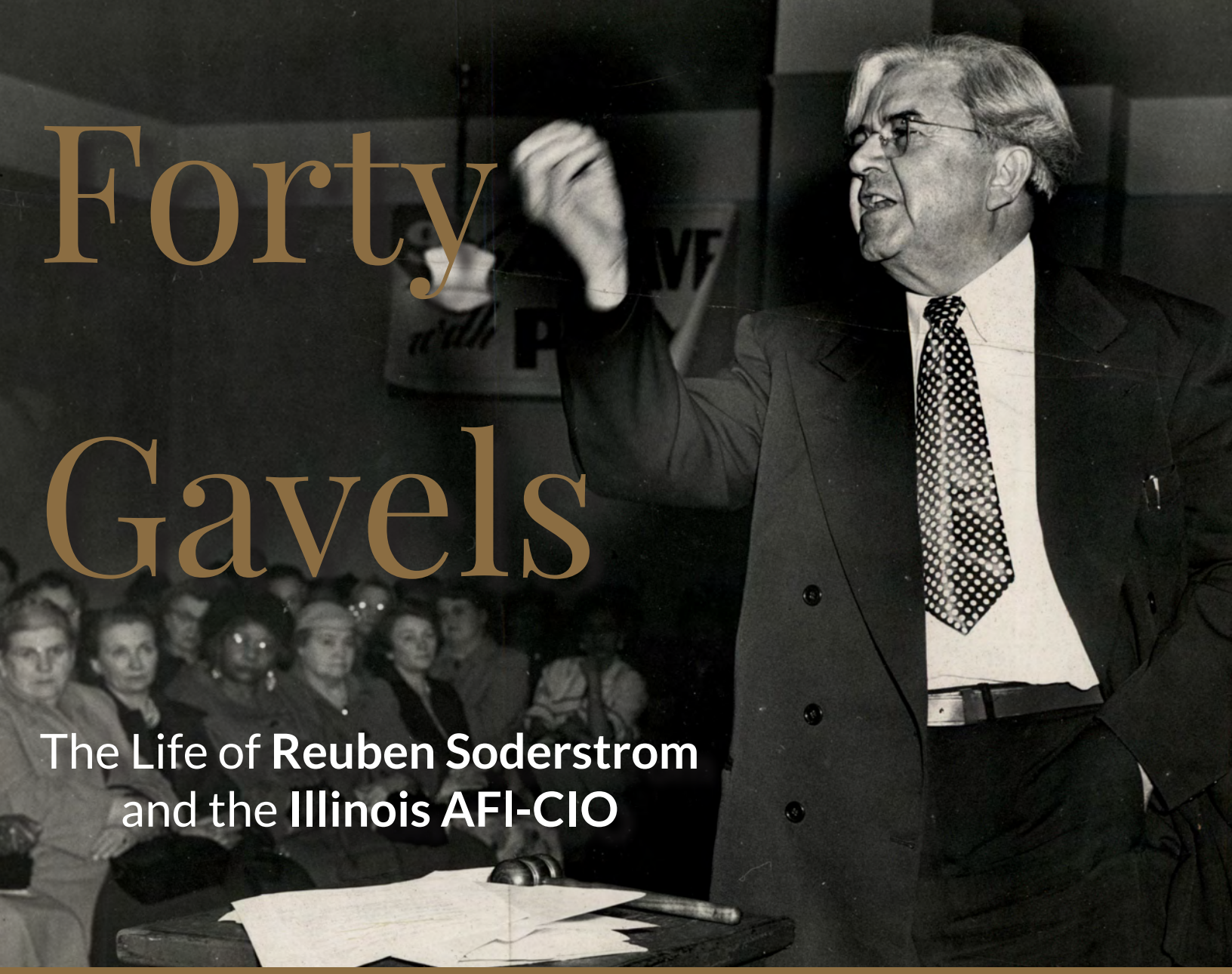

Forty Gavels

The Life of **Reuben Soderstrom** and the **Illinois AFl-CIO**

Volume One

1850–1930

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FORTY GAVELS

The Life of Reuben G. Soderstrom and the Illinois AFL-CIO

Carl W. Soderstrom
Robert W. Soderstrom
Chris M. Stevens
Andrew W. Burt

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Let us fight on! The labor union spirit of justice, right, and humanity inspired this deathless cause. Organized labor intends to fight along lines that are right. As a movement, we are supposed to establish social and economic justice, to establish old-age security, among other things; to abolish low wages and low standards, to abolish poverty, intolerance, misery; to see to it that every person in Illinois is given an equal opportunity to enjoy peace, happiness, success, and security.

- Reuben G. Soderstrom, 1930

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR & CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

We honor and welcome this biography of Reuben Soderstrom, which outlines his many contributions to the labor movement—both in Illinois and nationwide.

In the early years of the last century, the Illinois State Federation of Labor stood out as a progressive beacon and model for many trade unionists as they struggled to improve the wages and working conditions of those toiling long hours in difficult conditions. And as president of the Illinois labor federation from 1930 to 1970, Reuben Soderstrom was the state's guiding light.

When he was a child, Brother Soderstrom worked on a trolley, in a glass factory, and on a linotype press, experiencing firsthand the grueling abuse of child labor. Determined to change the laws that made it legal to put young children to work—and resolute in pushing for safe and healthy workplaces, decent working hours, and retirement security for working women and men—he began his many years of service to America's working people as an elected official of the Illinois House of Representatives. His work there inspired national officeholders across the decades to follow his lead.

On behalf of the twelve and a half million working men and women of the AFL-CIO, the AFL-CIO officers salute Brother Reuben Soderstrom for his life-long dedication to improving the lives of working families and setting an example for us all.

In Solidarity,

Richard L. Trumka
President, AFL-CIO

Elizabeth Shuler
Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO

Tefere Gebre
Executive Vice President, AFL-CIO

THE ILLINOIS AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR & CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

The Illinois AFL-CIO's history is full of strong leaders who gave of their heart and soul to improve conditions for workers. In that illustrious honor roll, it is hard to find a record equal to Reuben Soderstrom.

As the Great Depression was beginning in 1930 and workers were facing record unemployment, with no unemployment insurance, no safety net and no Social Security. Illinois labor turned to Reuben Soderstrom for leadership. He not only led the Illinois AFL during that record decade of union expansion, he also helped shepherd laws through the Illinois State House, like unemployment insurance and old age pension, that became national models.

During World War II he rallied workers for war production with a no-strike pledge. After the war he fought to improve unemployment insurance, workers' compensation and other protections for Illinois workers. He helped unify labor with the merger of the Illinois AFL-CIO Industrial Union Council in 1958. And in his final years, he was still a voice for progress, bringing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders to Illinois AFL-CIO conventions, carrying forward labor's efforts for human equality.

Illinois workers today owe a great debt to Reuben Soderstrom. We hope that all citizens will stop to visit this statute for years to come and draw inspiration from the dedication and selfless spirit to improve humanity that Reuben Soderstrom represented.

Michael T. Carrigan
President, Illinois State AFL-CIO

Timothy E. Drea
Secretary Treasurer, Illinois State AFL-CIO

PREFACE

Carl W. Soderstrom, MD

How many attractive and exciting books celebrate the building of a business, the growth of a thriving economic sector, or chronicle the colorful titans of industry? Too many to count. And how many books have been published that celebrate the working class, laboring people and the leadership that navigated them through the dirty coal mines, dangerous factories, gruesome world wars and into the stability of middle class? Very few. The book you are holding is important because it is an unapologetic celebration of the labor movement, its colorful and committed laboring men and women, and a singular man, my grandfather, Reuben George Soderstrom, who steadfastly and charismatically churned through the decades as their fearless leader.

This book needed to be written because the stories of the great century of American labor are being lost and forgotten. The magnificent brotherhood and unity experienced when workers spoke with a unified voice—in the case of Illinois, over a million of them at once in any given year in this book—and the power and dignity that came from that collective voice is nothing short of awesome. The American worker has lost that sense of purpose and solidarity and perhaps it's time to study it again.

This book also needed to be written to remind Americans about the tremendous sacrifices made by the generations before them through indescribable pain, suffering, exploitation and abuse suffered before effective labor laws and union membership ushered in a new era. Brave men and women walked before us. Enormous numbers of workers died while fueling the great American Industrial Revolution and creating the basis for a young nation's unprecedented growth. The road to decent working conditions and fair labor laws is littered with workers who were brutally maimed, starved, abused or killed on the job. Some of the pages of this book chronicle their suffering in vivid detail and that is intentional; we can never forget the suffering of the men trapped underground amidst the suffocating flames of Cherry Mine, the widows they left behind, or perhaps the horrific disfigurement suffered by the Radium Girls. Reuben Soderstrom was there for all of it and urgently compelled to act. This book is a reminder of the need to speak up, to organize, to believe in the ability to change things for the better through speeches, writings, elections and good government.

It was a marvel to begin unearthing pieces of Reuben's story. In Volume I, we see that he suffered long lonely years as a type of indentured servant in a blacksmith shop, far away from his family in rural Minnesota. He was then sent to travel by himself as a 12-year-old to the faraway industrial city of Streator, Illinois, to work as a trolley car water boy, witnessing on-the-job accidents and living with a distant aunt whose husband was a coal miner. But through a quick mind and keen eye for an interesting newspaper article, he is tutored by John Williams and becomes something of a part-time resident at the local Carnegie library, soon turning his love for words into a career as a linotype operator, joining the union and barnstorming the Midwest. He then wins a seat in the legislature (and loses it and wins it again) before rising as a young star advocating for labor issues big and small. In 1925 he registers an enormous victory by willing the Injunction Limitation Act into passage, which gave Illinois workers the right to peacefully assemble and strike.

In Volume II and beginning in 1930, our protagonist assumes the role of President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor just as the Great Depression blankets the nation with record unemployment. He is 42 years-old and charged with leading a fledgling membership while simultaneously holding his seat in the legislature. The arrival of the New Deal gives great support to the effort he begins to build, including the landmark passage of a pension bill before turning to the foreign threats of fascism and war. He responds by directing his growing ranks into an "arsenal for democracy," refusing to strike during the length of the war

and producing record amounts of material and munitions for the campaign in Europe and the Pacific. He soon turns his attention to the growing rift between the American Federation of Labor and the upstart Congress of Industrial Organizations, both of which are dealt a heavy blow with the national passage of the Taft Hartley bill in 1947.

In Volume III, Reuben presides over unprecedented productivity in labor while playing a national role in the great merger in 1955 between the AFL and the CIO. He then charges into the 1960's as a labor leader of national prominence who is consistently wooed and cajoled by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson for advice and endorsements, no doubt attempting to secure the 1.2 union million votes at Soderstrom's disposal in the swing state of Illinois. The civil rights movement challenges the labor movement in new ways and it's gratifying to have unearthed correspondence and sincere friendship between my grandfather and Martin Luther King, Jr. from these years.

The book includes standalone pieces that represent the 12 pillars of Reuben's life work. These are: Abolishing Child Labor, Workmen's Compensation, Right to Strike, Financial Security, Ending Unemployment, Old Age Pension, Workplace Safety, Women's Rights, Religion, Education, Civil Rights and Family.

On a personal note, I must note the immense pride and joy at seeing all the photos of our family from decades and years past; first and foremost, Reuben of course, but also Mom and Dad, the Merriners, my brothers and sisters. For me, this project has been a study of a great man doing great things. And at a whole other level, it has been a study in a life well-lived with family members and all their dreams and aspirations. To that end, the purple pages in the book are something of a family scrapbook that share the equally impressive story that this semi-orphaned boy from rural Minnesota helped build a large and loving family in his hometown of Streator. It is with a certain amount of pride and also melancholy that I look at all the photos and memories through the decades of loved ones who arrived on the scene, stayed with us a while, and then departed. This book is for you.

Carl W. Soderstrom, MD
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Chairman, Reuben G. Soderstrom Foundation
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2018

PREFACE

Robert W. Soderstrom

In February, 1935, the city hall building in Decatur, Illinois was packed with an overflow crowd of angry, chanting workers who huddled in from the cold, stomped their feet and sang rowdy union songs. They were waiting for a single man to take the stage, my great-grandfather Reuben G. Soderstrom, 46 years-old and President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor.

A few days earlier, a strike by the Ladies Garment Workers of Decatur turned violent when the local police fired tear gas into the crowd of 25 women outside the Decatur Garment company and things got physical; some women were thrown in jail and at least one was hospitalized. The courts responded to the chaos not by issuing an injunction against the aggressive police, but against the brutalized women themselves! The injunction disallowed any future assembly by the working women. The community was livid. Fearful that the tense situation might explode, a local labor leader called the ISFL headquarters in Springfield for help from his statewide president. Soderstrom later shared how he responded:

> I requested him to call a meeting, and call it tonight. Call it in City Hall. "Well," he said, "there's an injunction over there." "That's good," I said, "You call the meeting and make sure that you've got a big crowd. Call it where the police are close because I'd like to defy that injunction!"
>
> So I got over there at eight o'clock and the place was jammed. People were sitting on window sills and hanging out the doors. I gave them a rousing talk on strike matters, inflamed the crowd, and then I finally made up my mind to defy the injunction. I announced from the platform that I was defying that injunction. "I hold that court in contempt, and I hold that injunction in contempt!" I felt that they were going to fight me before I got out of the building!"

The next day the event took a remarkable turn when the injunction-issuing judge personally drove to Springfield to meet with Soderstrom, who successfully lobbied him to drop the injunction and free the jailed women. For the ISFL president it was all in a day's work; advocating for the rights of Illinois workers who would elect him as their fearless leader for 40 years in a row, from 1930 to 1970.

My participation in this book goes back eight years to the invitation of the publisher that I be one of its authors. I refused. A monumental biography requires a commensurate amount of research and writing and I did not have the time. Of-course that answer was not accepted, so I reluctantly committed one Friday a week for a single month; quickly I became fully engrossed by the implausible, arduous, and inspirational journey of my great-grandfather as he propelled himself through the headiest decades of the twentieth century with remarkable prescience, grit and grace. He is a charismatic and relentless protagonist in the consummate American story--one that ultimately saw me spend eight years writing and editing—and unfolds through the three volumes and 1,200 pages that you now hold in your hands.

Within two years I recruited the talented and remarkably productive Andrew Cass Burt to join me and we completed Volume One, standing on the shoulders of Chris Steven's earlier draft. We then dug into Volume Two and saw that it would soon grow into Volume Three. Soon after, the visually talented (and very patient) Kevin Evans joined as our layout artist and contributed mightily to this biography as it is told in photographs and pictures. Guys, it has been a humbling honor and privilege to work with you on a project of such breadth and scope.

If we were to craft a fictional story about one of the great labor leaders in 20th century America, it would go something like this: he would be a child of immigrants and sent away at the age of nine to a blacksmith shop in the icy countryside of Minnesota to work off the family debt. He would then be sent alone as a child to a faraway town—Streator, Illinois—to work as a water boy on the trolley cars and that town, Streator, would be a mere one hour on the railroad line from Chicago, the large, beating heart of a young industrial nation. He would lead his first strike at the age of 13, become involved in local politics and pivot to a job at a small newspaper, where his mental acuity quickly catches the eye of a local intellectual who sponsors his access to the town's Carnegie library, where our young protagonist now becomes enthralled with the writings of Hamilton and Lincoln, self-educating himself through voracious consumption of literature, philosophy and history.

As a 21 year-old he sets the newspaper type for one of the greatest industrial tragedies ever—the Cherry Mine Disaster--which occurs in a neighboring village and kills over 250 men and boys in a underground coal mine inferno, leaving a local population of impoverished widows and fatherless children to struggle without workmen's compensation or death benefits. He then throws himself into the rough and tumble world of local politics and finds himself personally hosting Samuel Gompers on the front porch of his house after the labor great speaks in Streator's City Park, shortly after inspirational visits to the bustling industrial town by other firebrands like Teddy Roosevelt and Mother Jones. As a 32 year-old in 1920, it is not surprising that he then finds himself standing on the back of a flatbed farming truck in Mendota, Illinois, giving side-by-side political speeches with that year's Vice Presidential candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Fortunately we did not need to write this story as fiction because my great-grandfather authored it himself through his own spectacular life journey. In 1918 he was 30 years-old and elected to the statehouse for the first time, where he introduced his contentious Injunction-Limitation Bill (Right for Workers to Assemble) on the session's first day. He was defeated in his re-election bid partly due to that, and also due to his opposition to prohibition (Streator was home to many bottle factories), but he came back—surviving death threats and a sabotaged rear axel under his car--and won again in 1922. He immediately returned to the floor of the statehouse where he pulled a crumpled paper from his suit pocket: an injunction lawsuit that decreed he not visit his mother at her home for fear that he may assemble railroad workers in a strike (she lived near the Santa Fe tracks). Against extraordinary opposition he passed his Injunction Limitation Bill in 1925, partly by breaking with statehouse orthodoxy and enjoining four Negro legislators from Chicago in his bill. And to think that the young man was just getting started.

As a Republican, he broke with his party in 1936 and publicly endorsed Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a rousing speech at a packed house in Chicago Stadium. He was on the right side of history with remarkable accuracy, probably because his commitment was not to party or politics but to people and their needs. Along the way he was a prodigious letter writer, close friend and self-described "co-worker" with luminaries like Jane Addams, Agnes Nestor, Milton Webster, Frances Perkins, Adlai Stevenson, Senators Paul Simon, Everett Dirksen, and Paul Douglas; judicial luminaries like Arthur Goldberg and Abner Mikva; Mayor Richard Daley, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and all Illinois governors. (Each Governor of Illinois had a unique place in his life and the best way to state his relationship with them is "it's complicated." He found them to be maddening dance partners and in Reuben Soderstrom's world, the word "lobbying" the governor can be replaced with cajoling, bullying, sparring, triangulating, pleading, overpowering, publicly shaming, strategizing, sometimes partnering with, and on rare occasion, endorsing).

His election-year support was coveted by Presidential candidates eager to capture Illinois' swing state electoral votes through Soderstrom's endorsement to his 1.3 million-person membership. For that reason he was courted by Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. (Richard Nixon, who lost Illinois by a hair in 1960, was eager to reach out to Soderstrom in 1968). He was

revered among labor leaders and tussled frequently and publicly with John L. Lewis, even when the two greats shared office space for an uncomfortable spell in Springfield.

Of course he practiced a labor trade himself as a card-carrying member for nearly sixty years in the International Typographers' Union, late night work that saw him behind the inky newsprint machine of the Streator Free Press until he was 43 years-old, moonlighting to supplement his day job as a legislator. During the day at the statehouse he was a lion, aggressively advocating for labor bills and creating unique coalitions. After ruinous run-ins with his arch-enemy, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, he personally designed the brilliant Agreed Bills Process, wherein the two opponents hammered out differences before the legislative session, thus guaranteeing smooth sailing for bills on the statehouse floor. As president of the ISFL he committed his Illinois "army of workers" to a no-strike guarantee during World War II and directed them to buy generous amounts of war bonds.

After the war, national AFL president Green appointed Soderstrom to a 10-person committee in Washington DC to help "win the peace" with the formidable task of integrating returning GI's into the American workforce. This appointment was immediately followed by another Washington D.C. appointment to help steer the great national merger between the warring labor factions of the AF of L and the CIO. Soon after, Soderstrom was invited to Philadelphia to help draft the AFL Bill of Rights for all nations, where the historian sees a noticeable and permanent shift in his personal pedagogy toward the broader specter of human rights and world peace.

Immediately following labor's big domestic push to win World War II, he felt outraged and betrayed when Congress passed the Taft-Hartley bill, eviscerating much of unions' negotiating power. The subsequent years were one big barnstorming tour to repeal it; he was unsuccessful. But he forged on in other areas, and in 1952 introduced a comprehensive Civil Rights bill in the Illinois statehouse a full twelve years before LBJ's hallmark bill was approved in Washington. Although Reub's statehouse bill was defeated in 1952, it is inspiring to read the outpouring of support to him from Illinois' African-American labor leaders, Jewish labor leaders and ministers and priests. He was ahead of his time.

Reuben did not always bet right; in both 1949 and 1968 he spent considerable political capital arguing against the "ConCon," an idea to modernize and rewrite the Illinois constitution. And according to my research he may have done well to retire in 1966; his close colleague Paul Douglas had lost his seat in the US Senate and more importantly the Illinois labor movement was roiled with the complicated politics of leadership succession and downstate versus upstate rivalries. However, in the tumultuous political landscape of 1968, our 80 year-old protagonist was more active than ever, producing a formidable amount of writings and speeches across the state. Read the chapters and see for yourself. With his iron-will and unshakeable conviction, he would drive the ship of Illinois labor until the day he died, in 1970.

He revered the United States Constitution--the 13th amendment in particular--the forefathers, and extemporaneously quoted at length from Abraham Lincoln, the Bill of Rights, and poems both popular and obscure. He believed in capitalism, democracy, justice and fairness, family and freedom.

It is remarkably incongruous to acknowledge such a humble man with a book of such opulence and abundance. But the written word was paramount to him and it is our pleasure to hear his voice thunder across these pages. Take a look at one of my favorite parts to assemble: his most memorable quotes in Epilogue I, which are also memorialized in bronze at the statue plaza dedicated to him in Streator, Illinois.

Reuben's public legacy was workers' rights, but his private legacy was family. The purple pages in the book show the growing throng of active relatives around him, all informed by his optimism and care for each other,

a togetherness that has only prospered over the decades through many Soderstrom family reunions, graduations, weddings and births. To that end, I'd like to make a special acknowledgement to my father, Carl W. Soderstrom: Dad, what a special honor it's been to work on this creative endeavor over the years as father and son. You are most like Reuben in your will, charisma, love for people and generous spirit, and as you were fortunate to have him in your life, we too are fortunate to have you in ours.

I wrote the first chapter of this book in the library of the Writers Guild of America, which happened to be close to my residence at the time on Blackburn Avenue in Los Angeles. The historical irony is not lost on me that a book about my great-grandfather, the union leader, was written by me, a union member (Writers Guild of America West), who has walked the picket line and fully understands the vulnerability of a lone contract-employee facing the powerful might of a large corporation. In a more severe and pressing vein, it is my sincere hope and plan that this book finds life in digital form in the Philippines or Pakistan, Honduras or Sierra Leone, where a young laborer there may find kindred spirit, hope and vision from my grandfather's journey. Many of the very same abuses endure, and the fight for human dignity in labor is as urgent as ever.

I would like to thank my wife, Soyun Kim Soderstrom, for her constant support and urging to record and write this great book; I could not have done this without you. And last, my participation and contribution to these three volumes are dedicated to our remarkable daughter: Emma Min Soderstrom, may you go forth into the world with the same inspired conviction and big-hearted hope for humanity as your great great-grandfather Reuben. The future is waiting to be invented.

Robert William Soderstrom
Los Angeles, California
2018

PREFACE

Andrew W. Burt

Forty Gavels, the story of Illinois AFL-CIO President Reuben G. Soderstrom, is possibly the most ambitious biography of any labor leader to date. It is also one of the most in-depth histories of organized labor in America, spanning more than a century and examining its subject in documented, year-by-year detail. The result is a narrative of both a man and a movement. In many ways, Reuben's personal journey mirrors that of the AFL-CIO itself—born of immigrants, forged by hard work and sacrifice, and driven to create a better world for all workers.

For more than forty years, Soderstrom was a pillar of organized labor in Illinois. As president, he steered the Illinois State Federation of Labor through depression, division, and war, ultimately guiding it to unprecedented prosperity and influence. His legislative accomplishments bettered the lives of workers not just in Illinois but across the nation. By the time he was honored as President Emeritus in 1970, Reuben had become one of organized labor's most prolific leaders, leaving a legacy that endures to this day.

Just as important was the vision Reuben articulated for organized labor's role in American life. He was a fierce advocate for the tripartite approach to labor legislation, a practice most clearly reflected in his own "agreed bills" process. He argued passionately for an activist government unafraid to adopt and enforce broad regulations on wages, prices, and hours of labor. All this was grounded in his faith in representative democracy and the instruments of civil society, especially unions. He viewed the AFL (and later the AFL-CIO) as an American institution, a "fifth estate" worthy of the same respect and responsibilities as the judiciary or a free press.

Throughout his career, Reuben judged every action according to a single measure: is it in the best interests of working men and women? His scrupulous nature set him apart from many of his contemporaries. Illinois politics is infamous for its corruption, and labor leaders often share a similar place in the popular imagination. Even if this reputation is more anti-labor spin than fact (as Reuben asserted), it is true that too many too often leveraged their power for personal gain. Soderstrom, however, never succumbed to such temptation, a fact even his fiercest critics acknowledged.

Not that Reuben was without his faults. His reflexive denial of corruption and racism within unions often rendered him blind the truth behind such critiques. He could be famously stubborn, spending political capital on quixotic campaigns like his fight against a revised Illinois constitution. Many interpreted his consistency as rigidity, and decried his policy positions as obsolete. Yet it is many of these same policies, and the broader philosophy of labor from which they were derived, that make Soderstrom a subject worthy of study today. His approaches to labor issues routinely defy modern political labels, and possess a coherence and practicality often missing in today's discussion of the nature and future of organized labor. This work is intended to expand that conversation.

A project of this scope would be impossible without the hard work of many, and I am deeply grateful to all those who lent their time, effort, and talent. I would especially like to thank Dr. Carl Soderstrom, without whom this book would never have been possible. Special thanks as well to my co-authors Robert Soderstrom and Chis Stevens. Collaborating with writers of such caliber has been a professional and personal pleasure. Heartfelt thanks are due to graphic designer Kevin Evans, whose skill and resolve have been indispensable. My deepest gratitude to my family, especially parents Stan and Colleen, for their encouragement and strength. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Dr. Rosanne Chien, for her unfailing love, faith, and

insight. Her support and sacrifice throughout the creation of this work have been invaluable to both it and the author.

"The onward and upward march called Progress that we have long been striving for is about to begin," Reuben wrote at the outset of his presidency, "and the Illinois labor movement should head the parade." This was more than just a prediction; it was a promise. A promise to lead. To never stop fighting or give up hope. To be unafraid of bold solutions. To move forward, step by step, confident in the belief that tomorrow can and will be better than today. It is my sincerest wish that this book can play a role in renewing that promise for a new generation.

Andrew Willis "Cass" Burt
Portland, Oregon
2018

PREFACE

Chris M. Stevens

Reuben G. Soderstrom. The remarkable journey of his life—82 years a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather, 18 years as a state representative, and 40 years as president of organized labor in Illinois—illustrates how effort, ability, and vision propel a person past the visible horizon.

Leaders reach beyond the boundary. They possess the ability to identify the limitations of the environment. Then when those borders hindered or hurt people, "Rube" found a way to improve, or remove the damaging limitation from the daily life of those who toil.

Did Rube look where he was going? Nope. Rube would go where he was looking. The focus forward provided him the ability to reach for the handle on the doors of opportunity while most where still searching for the opening in the wall. Rube, rose to the top of his profession through dogged determination and a dedication to lifelong learning. Not a day went by that Rube failed to learn something new. A voracious reader, lent him the skill of writer. Throughout his years in public life Rube penned many an article and essay. Never once did he shy away from confronting the troubles of the time.

Solution. A word revered by Rube. A man of many words and world class orator, yet, his lifetime reflects tangible achievements. Having been a full-time worker in a blacksmith shop at the age of nine, first-hand experience drove Rube to first and foremost ensure children left the mines, mills and factory floors in order to attend school.

While wearing the reputation as a public servant, elected official and effective leader, Rube's family never sat in the back seat. Not only did he make all but a handful of Sunday family dinners, Rube paid the expenses for his mother and sister following his father's death.

What I have learned on this multi-year journey as a writer? Reuben G. Soderstrom provided a bulk of the legislation and leadership that provide the comfortable life we lead: financial support after the loss of a job, (Unemployment Compensation), Credit Unions in Illinois so working people could get a mortgage, and several other pieces of legislation, social programs and ongoing policies that ensure working people live with dignity.

I also learned my wife Mary offered unending support as 40 Gavels consumed countless hours. She sacrificed a lot of shared time together. And Mary never failed to ensure Doc and I had an ample supply of her incredible homemade fudge.

Join us as we unravel and reveal this remarkable journey that chronicles Reuben's life, friendships, professional peers, and achievements.

Chris M. Stevens
Peoria, Illinois
2018

FOREWORD

Professor Robert A. Bruno

For me, contemplating the life of Reuben G. Soderstrom is like reaffirming a set of sacred vows that have existed since someone realized that one person's labor could be a source of profit for another. His accomplishments are profound and working people in Illinois owe much to the labor-relations foundation that Reuben helped to build.

His life's work is a testament to the contributions that labor unions have made in the development of a democratic state and nation. Against great odds organized labor created the core elements that lifted the material conditions of the masses. Clarence Darrow said it best: "With all their faults, trade unions have done more for humanity than any other organization of men that ever existed. They have done more for decency, for honesty, for education, for the betterment of the race, for the developing of character in men, than any other association of men." And yet, as I engaged with the events of Reuben's illustrious and extraordinary life I was constantly reminded of the irrational and often near manic opposition to unions that characterizes American history.

For example, in the1920s the Chicago Federation of Labor described Illinois Assembly representative Reuben G. Soderstrom as "capable and courageous" for fighting for legislation that protected workers and union organizing rights. His efforts won him the enmity of the Illinois Manufactures' Association, which set out to defeat his re-election in 1926. They failed. Reuben went on to serve sixteen years in the state assembly and another four decades as Illinois' highest-ranking labor official. In those years Illinois and America prospered. But despite Reuben's and labors positive contributions to the country, the vitriolic campaigns against unions never ceased. Today a network of right-wing corporate funded anti-worker groups in Illinois and other states are actively soliciting union members to quit their labor organizations. Union and non-union workers should first consider the record.

During Reuben's leadership tenure, labor in Illinois and across the country transformed America. One of the movements' and Reuben's biggest achievements was the adoption of state worker compensation systems to provide a strong safety net against the life-threatening and daily depilatory aspects of work. The idea of a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work" inspired millions to action and produced work hour restrictions and minimum guarantees against pauper-level earnings. Health and safety statutes were passed so that workers would not risk life and limb as they produced the nation's wealth. Laws to prohibit child labor, defend organizing rights, recognize unions, prohibit forced labor and collectively bargain labor contracts were also among Reuben's and the trade unions' many proudest accomplishments.

Reuben was part of a movement that made it possible for working-class families like mine to buy houses and cars, afford medicine, save for a retirement, take a vacation, send their kids to college, afford holiday gifts, occasionally eat a better cut of meat and purchase a new winter coat. The social progress that Reuben and a generation of labor leaders and workers made possible is breathtaking and undeniable. An American middle class is unimaginable without organized labor. You would think that something so well done and beneficial would be settled practice. But instead Reuben's shared legacy is at risk – not just in Illinois but almost everywhere.

Nearly half a century after Reuben's death, state after state have attempted to roll back worker benefits, collective bargaining rights, and basic worker heath protections. As 2017 began there were seven more anti-labor Right-to-Work states than when Reuben gaveled his last state convention into adjournment. Reuben

understood the hardscrabble world of labor relations and politics but I'm confident he would have viewed this new political reality as a form of insanity.

He was a visionary man who pursued big things. His world included U.S. presidents, civil rights leaders, corporate heads, military chiefs, university presidents (he is the "founding father" of the university school I teach in) and union leaders from Streator, Illinois to Washington, D.C. Reuben was not only an Illinois labor leader; he exemplified the characteristics of what political scientist once called a "national statesman."

Statesman like Reuben could in 1956 lead the Illinois AFL-CIO to endorse Democrat Adlai Stevenson for president, while also supporting William G. Stratton, a Republican, for governor. When asked why the federation split their endorsement Soderstrom explained to the New York Times that it was because the incumbent Stratton had kept his word that there would be no anti-labor legislation in his administration. Hard now to imagine a time when America prospered on the strong back of a large, institutionally recognized labor movement.

In 1943 Rueben pledged the Illinois labor movements' continued defense against fascism abroad. But he also made a promise that rings as relevant today as it did more than three-quarters of a century ago; to stand ready to defend against those at home who are "waging war on the wage earners of America." Crazy and dangerous that what Reuben dedicated his life work to building is now once again up for grabs. But if it was once worth fighting for, it remains so today. If you need a reason to read the story of the son of an immigrant family who at age nine worked in a blacksmith shop and later as a printer and bottle blower before becoming a national leader for America's working class, I couldn't think of a better one.

Robert A. Bruno
Professor of Labor and Employment Relations
Director of the Labor Education Program
School of Labor and Employment Relations
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

FOREWORD

Robert Gibson

My congratulations to Dr. Soderstrom and all his associates on this brilliant work honoring and exploring the legacy of a truly great leader of the labor movement.

A work this impressive and distinguished is usually reserved for military leaders, and politicians, but many labor leaders such as Reuben Soderstrom made more significant contributions to a better life in our nation than all of the others.

I had the privilege of working with Rueb for ten years while he led the Illinois State AFL-CIO. It was a great learning experience, and helped me become a better person as I followed in his footsteps. He was the greatest orator I ever heard—broadcasting his message of fairness, equality, and safety in the workplace. I never tired of listening and watching him rouse and motivate union members as well as non-members to our cause. He was the best.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lend my voice and support to this noble enterprise. I would like to thank you all for your wonderful work on behalf of Illinois workers, and for this wonderful tribute to one of the legends of the American Labor Movements.

Robert G. Gibson
President, Illinois State AFL-CIO, 1979 – 1989

FOREWORD

Jimmie Lansford

As the Mayor of Streator, it is my privilege to welcome this extraordinary book project about Reuben G. Soderstrom, one of Streator's favorite sons who brought more impactful and positive change to Illinois and the nation than any other individual. Streatorites remain steadfastly proud of Reuben's legislative, labor, and social achievements to this day because he is a shining beacon of progress for all of us in Illinois.

In the pages of this book you will see Reuben was a constant presence and true product of our community. As a child laborer, he grew up with our glass factories and trolley cars and then became a linotype operator for the daily newspaper. He educated himself in the Carnegie Library in our town and spent countless afternoons in City Park listening to great political speakers, until one day when he stood up himself. It would be the first of many. Now, the northwest corner of our beautiful City Park is occupied by a commanding bronze statue of Reuben making a speech while clutching his Fortieth Gavel. The twelve eloquent and moving plaques around this plaza can be found in the Epilogue of this mighty book.

We call Streator "A Quiet Surprise on the Prairie" and we invite you to visit the Reuben Soderstrom Statue Plaza as well as the gorgeously renovated Reuben Soderstrom Reading Room in our Carnegie Library. We are proud of Reuben and of all our sons and daughters from Streator who contributed their services for the betterment of mankind. Please come and enjoy our progress!

Jimmie D. Lansford
Mayor of Streator

FOREWORD

Mike Matejka

Labor's story is not often encapsulated into one life—but that epic tale is contained within the Reuben Soderstrom's story.

As the industrializing, steam-driven 19th century moved into the 20th, the United States was a youthful power, emerging from an agrarian economy to a mechanical powerhouse. In doing so, workers were often treated as so many "hands," critical to production but interchangeable and easily discarded, as waves of immigrants came to American shores.

Within the 20th century, Americans would face two World Wars, a severe economic depression and finally begin to honestly wrestle with its ignored issues of racial intolerance.

A child of rural immigrants who early started work, Reuben Soderstrom quickly grasped that his situation was not unique, but shared by millions. With a strong moral foundation from his religious family, he became a life-long workers' champion, a visionary with the patience to struggle relentlessly to bring change.

The labor movement in America always fought two battles. One was to organize workers into trade unions, so they could use their concerted power to better conditions. The other front was legislative, changing the legal framework to insure workers' rights. Large enterprises needed to face that combined leverage of organized workers and government vigilance to insure humane treatment.

There are many great union organizers in American history, from "Mother" Jones to Samuel Gompers to John L. Lewis. There are political figures like Robert Wagner, Franklin Roosevelt and Frances Perkins who passed laws to insure decent treatment. Rare is the individual like Soderstrom, who was both a legislator and a labor leader, with deep insight into both systems and the nuances of each.

The hands he shook and discussions he shared is a roll-call of the American century—Samuel Gompers, Eugene V. Debs, "Mother" Jones, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

There are books that document strikes, union organizing and community struggles. Rare is the history of a particular state legislature and a state labor federation over a fifty-year period. This book delivers that story within the framework of Illinois, birthplace to numerous unions, a pioneer in worker legislation and the storied land of many a labor triumph and tragedy.

Reuben Soderstrom not only witnessed these efforts, he lived and breathed them daily. This book will bring an in-depth and thorough treatment to a state labor movement and its long efforts, told through the story of one committed and spirited leader, Reuben Soderstrom.

Mike Matejka
Great Plains Laborers District Council
Vice-President, Illinois Labor History Society

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the eight years it has taken to write these volumes there has been tremendous help from literally hundreds of friends, supporters, staff and family. Sharon Williams gave life to the lifelong dream I had to compile and write the extraordinary story of my grandfather, Reuben G. Soderstrom. The result is three volumes and over one thousand pages that include the written narrative, a pictorial story and original newspaper articles that march through Reuben's colorful career year-by-year, making this work a colorful and comprehensive narrative for casual readers and academic readers alike.

Sharon brought the Illinois AFL-CIO together at the 2008 anniversary of the merger of the ISFL and the CIO and introduced writer Chris Stevens to me and therein started this eight-year journey. Chris brought talent, enthusiasm and dedication to the pages by being the first to venture into the massive scale of the story and tackle the task of writing. That Christmas, my son Robert W. Soderstrom gifted me a full size table top cover of the volumes as an inspirational reminder. It has been front and center on my desk during all of these years. Soon after, he joined the effort to research and write Reuben's story and has contributed formidably for many years as a passionate visionary, editor and historian committed to making a historical biography like no other before it. We then recruited historian Andrew Cass Burt as a professional writer and researcher for more academic input, and his considerable care and effort for many yeas has been nothing short of awesome. As so we have labored on this project as a team for eight years.

A very early inspiration was photographer Vicki Taufer of V Galleries. Vicki is a Morton, Illinois, native who has achieved national and international recognition and enriched this story with exciting photography of Reuben's gavels, badges, plaques and awards – hundreds of them. Her remarkable talent brought Reuben's mementos richly back to life!

President of the Illinois AFL-CIO, Mike Carrigan, and Secretary-Treasurer Tim Drea were instrumental in trusting us with open access to the voluminous archives and stored files and documents of the labor organization. Over thirty file cabinets--four legal drawers deep--of Reuben's letters and correspondence were made fully available to us. We were welcomed at State Conventions, spoke before the delegates and received immense and invaluable support from Mike and Tim. As Reuben's story unfolds, so too does the story of the Illinois Federation of Labor. Without their commitment and full support these volumes could never have come to life.

Thanks to Nick Kaleeba and Jorge Ramirez, the offices of the Chicago Federation of Labor were opened to us and contributed documents, encouragement and photographs. Professor Robert Bruno of the University of Illinois made a major contribution by introducing us to Lew Rossenbaum, who plowed through documents and files for months, making the major discovery of a cache of thousands of photographs by the Burke and Dean Studio in Chicago of labor meetings in the 1960s and 70s. Lew and I spent a day searching through these dusty and forgotten photographic files in the research library of the Chicago campus. We found valuable records of Chicago labor leaders, meetings, committee reports and a treasure trove of photographs of Reuben!

In cleaning the musty, dirt floor basement of Reuben's home at 103 E Lincoln Avenue in Streator, we found all of the ISFL newsletters from 1915 to 1933, many plaques and awards, and hundreds of newspaper headlines and stories, preciously kept in his honor by his loving wife and life partner, Jeanne Shaw Soderstrom. We also found two wooden cross-continent luggage cases full of family heirlooms from Sweden and Scotland.

A most rewarding visit was two full days spent interviewing, visiting and discussing Reuben as told by his close friend, chosen successor and past president of the ISFL, Robert Gibson. Now retired and living in Florida, his stories and recollections brought much into perspective and added real life to his years working with and mentoring under Reuben.

Mike Matejka, a past president of the Illinois Labor History Society, added much insight, facts and historical research to this project. Mike is a walking, talking labor historian and knows where all the history can be found. Mike contributed the side bars and several excerpts to these volumes.

Crystal Schmidt was our first layout artist who inspired much of the original design, including the gavel chapter pages, the gavel collage and all of the working chapter and photo layouts. Reagan Gearhart scanned and recorded thousands of important photos and documents.

Mayor Jimmie Lansford of Streator, Illinois, and the City Council of Streator gave wholehearted and inspiring support by approving a plaza and statue honoring Reuben in the City Park, where my grandfather delivered many speeches decades ago. Jimmie has also helped with establishing a Reuben Soderstrom Seminar room soon to arrive in the Streator Public Library, where Reuben was self-educated.

My father, Carl Soderstrom Sr., spent many hours before his death in 2009 retracing the family's many steps in Streator, Illinois, and giving interviews to me and Chris Stevens and my son Bob about our family history, life in Streator and his life as Reuben's son, his own career and many colorful memories! We miss you, Dad, and wish you could hold this book in your hands.

Also, many citizens of Streator made this book journey rewarding, including Cynthia Maxwell at the Streator Public Library, as well as Mary Lou Anderson and John Gilbert at the Streator Historical Society, where we spent many hours researching and borrowing many pictures to include in the book.

The board at the Streator Public Library have been studious and gracious and contributing to the Reuben G. Soderstrom Seminar Room. There are many others without whose time and expertise we could not have completed this work. Eric Siebenthal, our untiring IT expert, Heather McMaster, our patient computer and IT operator, secretary and jack of all trades. Photo credits are numerous and listed throughout these volumes. Morton Community Bank and Jean and Gordon Honegger provided access to photograph antique desks that comprise the backdrops of many photos in these three volumes.

My brothers Bob and Bill and sister Ginny, who have given their time, effort, photographs and most of all, encouragement at our annual sibling trips with the question "Carl, when will the book be done?" My sister Ginny's recollections from my parents' 50th wedding anniversary booklet have been paraphrased in various parts of the book.

To my five sons, Carl, Bob, Steve, Erik and John and their wonderful families and children, my wife and my many friends, thank you for eight years of encouragement, inspiration and support. May these volumes sit proudly on your bookshelves as a reminder of the inspiring Soderstrom heritage of positively contributing to humanity and moving the world forward.

Lastly, the incredible printing shop Global PSD guided and helped us in numerous ways. Steven Goff is a world-class publisher, printer and project manager. His colleague, Kevin Evans, is a graphical design genius who patiently and methodically designed every single page in this three volume set. What an impressive and

astounding amount of work.

David Raikes, retired member of the Laborers' Local is a bundle of energy, as loyal a man as there is, and his phone calls, inspiration and energy was contagious and propelled me forward.

Many thanks to Jen Eidson and Michael Henry of the Hornbake Library at the University of Maryland. Thanks to Debbie Hamm at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

And so we are deeply grateful to the undying encouragement and tremendous support of our vast and varied team. We did it!

Carl W. Soderstrom, Jr, MD
Co-Author and Publisher, *Forty Gavels*
Peoria, IL, 2018

REUBEN'S PILLARS

Reuben Soderstrom was driven to right the wrongs in life that he encountered and all too often personally experienced. As a state representative and leader of organized labor, Reuben enacted laws and advocated for reforms to improve the lives of working men and women on both the state and national levels. During his long career as a fierce advocate for laboring people, these are the major issues that he tackled—his personal and professional Pillars of Labor.

I. CHILD LABOR

Reuben personally experienced the hardships of child labor. From his beginnings in a blacksmith's shop at the age of nine through his work on Streator's trolley lines and in its glass factories and the local print shop, Soderstrom was—like many children of his generation—deprived of his childhood. Poverty and a deplorable absence of protections were responsible for this sorry state of affairs, and one of Reuben's first acts upon entering public life was to right this pernicious wrong. "Our children are our most precious resource," he later wrote. "It is on them that the future of our nation depends. Planning for progress should be the aim of our lives and of our state and nation."

As a state representative and chairman of the Committee on Education in the Illinois House, Soderstrom won many increases in state funding for education. He worked alongside labor officials in the state and nation to pass crucial child labor protections, finding a powerful ally and leader in President Franklin Roosevelt. These efforts culminated with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1938, which firmly established a minimum working age and set standards for the employment of youths. "Children have been taken out of mills, mines and factories," Reuben triumphantly wrote in the wake of the Act's passage, "And placed in schools where they are given the opportunity to grow into strong, healthy, fine young men and women."

II. WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION

Workmen's compensation is one of the American labor movement's greatest victories. At the dawn of the 20th century, caused by unsafe conditions and costing hundreds of lives, a series of workplace tragedies shocked the country. The resulting public outrage led to the adoption of revolutionary laws ensuring that workers and their families were made whole for harm suffered at work. One of the most horrific of these disasters was the 1909 fire at Cherry Mine, Illinois. Over 271 miners lost their lives in the gruesome event, which garnered national attention. John E. Williams, a Streator native and Reuben's mentor, was called in to help arbitrate a settlement between the mining company and the widows and orphans of Cherry. The agreement he crafted became the basis for the 1912 Illinois Workmen's Compensation Act (WCA), which in turn served as a model for the nation.

Reuben made repeated improvements to the WCA as a state representative, increasing both the amount of compensation and the breadth of coverage. As president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, he established regular, direct negotiations between the ISFL and representatives of industry to make amendments to the WCA. This "agreed bills" process enabled both parties to focus on their common interests. After all, as Reuben noted, the law replaced costly court battles with a system of benefits that was swift and certain—something good for business as well as labor. It also allowed them to unite against a common enemy: private insurance companies, which reaped huge sums off the premiums they charged employers (money injured workers never saw). Still, Soderstrom never backed down in his negotiations with organized business, refusing to accept anything he believed wasn't in labor's best interests. "When a representative of the employer spits in my face," he said, "I never pretend that it's raining. I spit back at him."

III. RIGHT TO STRIKE

Of all the rights labor defended, arguably none was more precious than the right to strike. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, injunctions became the preferred legal weapon used by industry to undermine the right of assembly by aggrieved workers. Court orders issued by a judge, injunctions were originally intended to prevent one person from infringing on the rights of another. But under a series of interpretations by "injunction judges," they morphed into judicial decrees banning boycotts, pickets, sympathy strikes and general assembly. Injunctions were also used to prevent labor leaders from making any contact with striking workers, forbidding them from coming within a set distance of the picket line. This routinely made labor organizers like Soderstrom captives in their own cities. In 1922, he and the Streator Trades and Labor Council even faced the threat of prison for merely publishing a statement in support of a local strike.

In 1925, Reuben courageously led the first successful attempt to roll back the injustice of injunctions in Illinois. His Injunction Limitation Act faced incredible opposition from the powerful JM Glenn and his Illinois Manufacturers' Association. For years, the group had used a powerful mix of cash, intimidation, and exploitation to defeat organized labor's attempts to restrain this judicial abuse. Under Soderstrom's leadership, however, the pro-labor forces of the Illinois General Assembly dramatically (and finally) passed a package of reforms that gained national attention and put Rueben in the spotlight.

IV. FINANCIAL SECURITY

Reuben long recognized the importance of financial security for working Americans, especially the ability to access credit. Without it, a laborer in need of a small loan or payday advance could only turn to the local loan shark, lenders who offered small, short-term, high-interest loans that trapped the borrower in debt.

In 1925, Reuben helped bring affordable lending to workers through the Illinois Credit Union Act. The law created a network of chartered credit unions in Illinois that offered affordable loans for working-class citizens by placing firm limits on loan interests and amounts. It also promoted community ownership by capping the number and value of shares any one person could own. Most importantly, it empowered workers to take control of their own finances; as Reuben said, "You can make a banker out of anybody if he has the opportunity and intelligence to become one."

V. UNEMPLOYMENT

Reuben called unemployment "the cause of all economic trouble…the only real trouble that I've been confronted with during my entire 40 years." As leader of the Illinois State Federation of Labor through the Great Depression, he faced this threat at its peak; by 1933 one out of every four laborers was unemployed. Protest and hunger swept the nation as banks collapsed, businesses closed, and communities were gutted. Reuben's Streator was no exception; nearly 4,000 men and their families were forced to beg for food and scavenge coal for warmth. Even the city's interurban rail couldn't afford to run.

President Soderstrom supported several measures to help ease the pain of unemployment, including unemployment insurance and relief, retraining programs, and the industry codes of President Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act. In depressed economic times, he was a life-long proponent of spreading work across more laborers through a six-hour, five-day work week, arguing that the government could stimulate both employment and consumption while creating gratitude and self-worth for marginalized workers. Decades after the Great Depression, Soderstrom continued the fight against labor's greatest foe, a struggle which led to such labor achievements as the weekend, a minimum wage, overtime pay,

unemployment insurance, and more. No matter the unemployment rate, Reuben unwaveringly heeded AFL founder Samuel Gompers's maxim that "as long as there is one person seeking work and unable to find it, the hours of labor are too long!"

VI. OLD-AGE PENSIONS

Reuben's struggle for the respectful treatment of the elderly, regardless of their wealth or station, was rooted in the experiences and values of his own family. Soderstrom's native Sweden had created the world's first universal public pension system in 1913 and for over a decade he led the fight to create a similar system in Illinois. To Reuben, pensions were not a fiscal issue but a moral one. He forcefully argued that government had both the right and the responsibility to "put a greater value on human flesh than on the dollar" by abolishing the county poorhouse and erecting in its place a pension system that allowed the elderly to live out their final years at home. "The silver lace of old age touches me more deeply than the flash and color of youth," he said, "I claim the right to die comfortably is just as desirable in the hearts of men and women as the right to live prosperously." For years, he reliably introduced and unsuccessfully argued for passage of his Old-Age Pension bill in Illinois House.

That changed in January of 1935, when President Roosevelt brought his Social Security proposal before the US Congress. Its offer to match state expenditures with national funds breathed new life and urgency into Reuben's bill, which he successfully leveraged to line up support in both the General Assembly and the Governor's mansion. His actions came at a price, earning him enemies in the Republican party who would eventually cost him his legislative seat. Still, Soderstrom never regretted his actions. The Illinois Old Age Pension Act, which went into effect in 1936, was his crowning legislative achievement, enabling countless Illinois citizens to live out their lives with dignity.

VII. WORKPLACE SAFETY

To Reuben, access to a safe and secure working environment was a laborer's right. His mentor, John E. Williams, had begun to improve workers' safety in the wake of the Cherry Mine Disaster of 1909. Similarly, Soderstrom helped further Illinois safety legislation in the aftermath of another devastating workplace tragedy: the Radium Girls of Ottawa, Illinois. The female workers of the Radium Dial Company sued after discovering they had been knowingly poisoned by their employer, leaving them with an array of grotesque and debilitating illnesses. Unable to plead ignorance, the company argued that the law, as written, could not hold them accountable. Astonishingly, the Illinois Supreme Court agreed in a decision issued on April 17, 1935—a date Illinois labor would later call "Black Wednesday."

Outraged, Soderstrom called on legislators of both parties to right this wrong. He oversaw passage of a new Occupational Disease Act that would prevent tragedies like those the radium girls faced from occurring again. As with the Workmen's Compensation Act, he used his invented "agreed bills" process to negotiate directly with his counterparts in the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, continually improving the law. His efforts did not stop there. During World War II, he used his position on various state safety committees to increase employee training, set higher factory and equipment standards, and protect work-hour limitations to prevent worker fatigue. In the post-war era, Soderstrom was repeatedly called to Washington to serve on committees advising the President on national safety standards and practices.

VIII. WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The story of women at work in America is rife with tales of discrimination, scapegoating, and abuse. Early American "factory girls" were routinely targets of mistreatment, working far longer than their male

counterparts for considerably less pay. Eventually, many of these working women organized and began pushing for legislation limiting the number of hours they could be forced to work. In 1893, Jane Addams of Hull House and the Illinois State Federation of Labor succeeded in passing an Eight Hour Women's Act. Their success prompted the businesses of Illinois to organize; the resulting Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA) undid the law and quickly became a menace to all unions in the state.

In the 1920s, Reuben combined efforts with the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) to try to undo the work of the IMA. In 1937, they finally succeeded with the passage of a new Women's Eight Hour law, an event Reuben declared "takes Illinois out of the class of low-standard states and places it high in the ranks of progressive states in relation to working women." The progressive women's movement celebrated the victory with feasts, speeches, and celebration. Ironically, this achievement eventually became a target of the 1960's feminist movement, which viewed it as discriminatory and a barrier to women's professional advancement. Still, even that turn of events was a testament to how powerfully and permanently the Women's Eight Hour Act impacted the lives of working women within Illinois and beyond.

IX. RELIGION

Soderstrom's commitment to Judeo-Christian principles permeated every aspect of his leadership of Illinois labor. His connection to faith can be traced back to his father, a Lutheran minister who came to America from Sweden in search of religious freedom. The values he instilled in Reuben drove him to maintain a relentless pursuit of fairness, justice, and equality of opportunity for all people. As president, Reub befriended and enrolled a variety of priests, preachers, rabbis, and ministers to testify in support of labor legislation before the Illinois General Assembly and to speak at the annual labor conventions. He forged a deep and lifelong bond with his Jewish friends in Illinois, including several rabbis and Jewish trade unionists in Chicago. Soderstrom felt a kinship with the religious figures he worked alongside. "Reub felt his job was like a priest caring for his flock," one friend later explained. "You have to believe in yourself; you have to believe in what you're doing, or it won't work."

Reuben spoke frequently about how biblical values had inspired the labor movement. No doubt he saw the union movement in the example of the carpenter of Nazareth, and was inspired by the idea that seemingly ordinary men and women, united by the principles of justice and compassion, had the power to change the world. "The similarity between the philosophy of the churches and the philosophy of organized labor is striking," he said. "Closer unity between labor leaders and religious leaders has done more to humanize and civilize the human-race than all the statesmen and warriors combined."

X. EDUCATION

Education was an intensely personal subject for Reuben. Deprived of formal schooling, he was largely self-taught from the age of nine onward. While most children were walking to the schoolhouse, Reuben was already hard at work in the blacksmith's shop, on the rail lines, at the glass factory and, eventually, in the print shop. It was there at the age of fourteen that he met labor writer and mentor John E. Williams, who developed a curriculum of self-study that would forever change the boy's life. For the next several years Soderstrom spent almost every off-work hour at the Streator Public Library, poring over books on topics ranging from classical history to progressive economics. He maintained this academic discipline into his early adulthood, visiting public libraries in every city to which his work took him.

As a legislator and labor leader, Reuben worked to ensure that everyone, no matter their income, age, or previous experience, could have access to public education and all its tools. He also helped fund the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois, known today as the School of Labor and

Employment Relations. Today, the school is one of the nation's premier centers of labor education, research, and outreach—all possible only because of the vision, dedication and values of Reuben G. Soderstrom.

XI. CIVIL RIGHTS

The organized labor and civil rights movements are linked by a common history, morality, and mission—a connection Reuben was quick to recognize and celebrate. He was deeply opposed to discrimination and believed in the need to take action against it. In 1961, he helped pass the Fair Employment Practices Act in Illinois, making it illegal for employers to deny a job to anyone because of race, color, religion, national origin, or ancestry. He forged friendships with several civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy, both of whom he invited to address the Illinois AFL-CIO.

In 1953, Soderstrom was honored for his commitment to civil rights by the Jewish Labor Committee of Chicago, which praised him for his efforts "in establishing equality of opportunity for all people." "The American Federation of Labor has long adhered to the fundamental principle laid down by our forefathers—that all men are created equal," Reuben said in his acceptance speech. "Regardless of race or religion we address each other as brothers. Discrimination against any person because of his or her race or creed is wrong, because discrimination itself is wrong."

XII. FAMILY

Each week Reuben circulated around the state of Illinois, from Springfield to Chicago and many points in between, but without fail he always came home to his family in Streator. Many of Reuben's legislative victories and labor policies were driven by a commitment to the values of family. He imbued the primacy of family into bills like the Old Age Pension Act, the "One Day Rest in Seven" bill, the Women's Eight-Hour Act, pensions for widows, and Workmen's Compensation. He set out in life to keep families together, and his labor policies flowed from that principle.

It can be surmised that Reuben's role within his family—energetic, supportive and reliably strong—was his own creation. As the years progressed, Reuben's family grew to include multiple generations, all informed by the great compassion, energy, close-knit togetherness and strength of his making. He would be amazed and touched to see that his grandchildren, Carl, Ginny, Bob and Bill, have created a greater Soderstrom family that has married and multiplied over the decades since he died. Reuben's big-hearted love for family is alive and well.

ERA I
1850-1884

SWEDISH HERITAGE

IN THIS ERA

The Soderstrom and Cederholm families emigrate from Sweden to America in search of religious freedom and economic opportunity. John Soderstrom, Reuben's father, finds work as a cobbler and preacher, while Reuben's mother, Anna Soderstrom, becomes a housemaid and nanny. The two meet and marry in Waverly, Minnesota, on October 16, 1884.

> "Even as a nine-year-child, he showed the generous heart of his father and the sturdy spirit of his mother, sharing buckets of fresh-caught Minnesota walleye with friends after long mornings spent fanning coals and turning iron in a dark and dusty blacksmith shop to work off the family debt. It was this compassionate spirit and indomitable will that forged one of the seminal figures of the great American labor movement of the twentieth century."

CHAPTER 1
1850 - 1884

FROM GOTHENBURG, SWEDEN TO GRANDY, MINNESOTA

INTRODUCTION

Reuben George Soderstrom was born on March 10, 1888, on a small farm west of Waverly, Minnesota, to two proud but impoverished Swedish immigrants, John and Anna Soderstrom. He was the second of six children, one of whom died in infancy. The Soderstroms would not stay in Waverly, or anywhere, for very long; the family moved six times in Reuben's first nine years of life. "Home" during this period ranged from brick farmhouses to church basements to crowded apartments serving as house, business, and nursing home. The family suffered crop failures, poverty, and infant death on more than one occasion. Despite these losses, neither John nor Anna appeared to regret their emigration to the United States, holding firm in their belief in the American Dream—the idea, as Reuben later wrote, that "each and every person can rise to any position that his merits entitle him to rise to, unhampered and free of any class distinction."[1]

Chronicling the life of Reuben Soderstrom, we are forever indebted to a deeply affectionate, 1974 self-published scrapbook and biography titled *Reuben G. Soderstrom*, penned by Reub's younger sister, Olga Soderstrom Hodgson. Following Reuben's death in 1970 and at the urging of Reuben's first grandson, Carl W. Soderstrom, J., Olga wrote 23 memorable, detail-filled pages chronicling first-person accounts of Reuben's life—particularly his childhood—that otherwise would have been lost. She writes:

> People often ask me what moved him, what things in his life made him choose to devote his life to the labor movement. I believe I have answered this in telling of his early life. He knew poverty, firsthand, he experienced child labor. He knew the loneliness of separation from his family at such an early age. These were his formative years, and they were not happy ones.[2]

As a result, the opening pages of this book rest on Olga's manuscript and will quote it liberally, as it speaks of the family's early years with accuracy and color. Informed by this manuscript, first take a look at Reuben's parents and the arduous journeys both took from Sweden to America for a new life full of risk, loss, love and hope. The story of Reuben G. Soderstrom is the story of his immigrant parents, the story of farmers and laborers, and the story of America itself.

JOHN SODERSTROMS, REUBEN'S FATHER

The Soderstrom Family

As Olga tells us, "It was Dad who encouraged the family to come to America. In Sweden when a boy reached twenty-one years of age, he had to submit to compulsory military service. This Dad opposed, he was a sincere conscientious objector, and did not want any part of the military. If Dad had lived to see America adopt the compulsory military conscription, he would have been most unhappy."[3] In addition to conscription, many onerous class distinctions beset the Soderstroms' native Sweden. Beginning in 1827, the Swedish government

passed countrywide laws redistributing village farmland that had been openly tilled for generations, destroying the traditional character of Swedish life. Many Swedish farmers, including those who lived along the southern streams (the *soder strom*) of the Småland province were forced to become *torpare*, or tenant farmers, relying on meager gains from tiny plots to see them through the brutal winters.[4]

Life for the Soderstroms was hard. In good years, meals consisted of potato pancakes, fried turnips, soured milk, and bits of pike, perch, or pickled herring. But repeated crop failures, combined with a population explosion driven by "peace, vaccine, and potatoes," wrought famines that lasted years and killed countless thousands.[5] In these times, impoverished farm families relied on starvation recipes like *barkbrod*, a bread made of flour mixed with bark and roots, to mask the hunger.[6]

John Soderstrom's family experienced inequities in their spiritual life as well. The *Svenska kyrkan*, the official Swedish Lutheran Church, strongly favored employers and the ruling class, demanding that parishioners pay "pew rentals." The more a family could afford, the closer to the front they sat, their status increasing with every row. Those who could not afford to pay had to sit or stand in the rear, publicly designating them as poor farmers or laborers. In response, the Free Church (*frikykororelsen*) and many revivalist movements broke away, stressing social reform and religious freedom.[7] These congregations were often led by pastors who were self-made scholars, driven by the firm conviction that the Word of God was free for all who chose to accept His teachings.

John Soderstrom was one of these pastors. Born in 1846, he spent considerable time and effort studying the Bible; he embraced a religious life by his late teens. Even at this young age, John displayed the qualities that would come to define him: a gentle heart, dedication to his Lutheran faith, belief in moral service to the less fortunate, and an optimism that could at times override his better judgment. These attributes would also infuse him with a chronic restlessness throughout his (and Reuben's) life. A natural seeker born into the role of the eldest and only son, he would spend his life providing great warmth and emotional support to his family, but little financial security.

Heeding the wishes of his father and mother, Anders and Catherine Soderstrom, teenaged John apprenticed with a skilled cobbler after showing no interest in joining the family tradition as a tailor. John watched the family finances dwindle year after year, and by the 1860s, only the *kyrkoherde* (local clergy) could afford his father's tailoring skills. A cobbler, however, could usually find work, and indeed throughout his life John would repeatedly fall back on this skill as his one reliable source of meager income.

By his late teens, however, John had already moved from cobbling to clergy. While his calling may have satisfied his intellectual and religious passions, it paid virtually nothing. Even in flourishing free churches, the lack of pew rent and relative poverty of the congregation meant pastors subsisted on little to no pay. This did not faze John; never in his life did he actively solicit money for his preaching. At the same time, however, John's father was struggling harder than ever to support his family, which now numbered seven. The year 1867 proved to be particularly devastating for Sweden, as a wet summer rotted the crops and precipitated a nation-wide famine.[8] It was at this time that many Swedish families, including the Soderstroms, looked to a faraway land for hope—America.

The American Dream

In America, John knew, there was wealth. Earlier waves of Swedish immigrants had written home with excitement, describing the New World's "Earthly delights." Frequently read and passed among families, these letters, *amerikabrev,* even made it into local newspapers. America, it appeared, offered all the imagination could entertain. There was also religious freedom, especially important to the young preacher and pacifist who

objected to the mandatory 30 days' annual military duty required of all Swedish men. As Reuben later wrote, "The thoughts of the Lowly Nazarene have come closer to assuming reality in America than in any other country in the world."[9] And so the Soderstroms joined an impoverished, ragtag sea of immigrants that flooded the ports of America's eastern seaboard. Olga recounts:

> John Frederick Soderstrom, Reub's dad, came to America with his father Anders and his mother in about 1867. Other members of this family coming to America at this time were sisters Emma and Sophie. The Soderstrom family, when they left Sweden in 1867, brought very few belongings with them. One thing, though, they did take along was an old French Vuillaume Violin, which was carried by Reub's grandfather on the boat.
>
> Dad (John Soderstrom) and his parents settled in Chicago. His sister, Sophie, went to Streator…Grandfather Anders, his wife, son John and Emma settled on Foster Ave. in Chicago, Ill. Grandpa Anders was a tailor and worked at his trade…Andrew Lind, who later married Emma Lind, stayed in Chicago. Son-in-law Andrew Lind and Reub's dad, John, started a business, they had a shoe store on the corner of LaSalle Street and North Avenue in Chicago, and continued in this business until they were burned out by the Great Chicago Fire in 1871.[10]

After Stockholm, Chicago boasted the second largest concentration of Swedish people in the world. Although the Soderstroms' destination was not unique among immigrants—Illinois was the largest destination for immigrants outside New York—their skill set was. One quarter of those arriving in America were laborers, but clothiers and cobblers, in contrast, constituted less than one percent, and Anders soon found work as a tailor.[11] Although mass production (partly the result of supplying the army during the Civil War) limited demand for handcrafted wares, John built a clientele of laborers by repairing workmen's boots. Within a few years, John and Andrew had built a decent business. But John's main desire had always been to preach. Seeking a life beyond the Swedish neighborhood of LaSalle Street (where even the newspapers were Swedish), he began trading labor for English lessons.

But unbeknownst to John—an immigrant in his 20s in bustling Chicago—his future wife was just a child back in Sweden, part of a family about to embark on its own arduous journey to the new world.

ANNA CEDERHOLM, REUBEN'S MOTHER

The Cederholm Family

Anna Gustafa Eriksson was born on September 5, 1866, in northern Sweden. Her father died in the years that followed, and her mother Martha was quickly remarried to Carl Cederholm, who took young Anna as his own daughter. In 1872, Martha bore a son, Eric, and also adopted a son named Oscar. Although forged from necessity and tragedy, the Cederholm family was very close knit, and the values that sustained it—stoicism, self-sufficiency, and adaptability—would make Anna the anchor of her own family through the trials they would later face in America.

Immediately following Anna's birth, Sweden descended into famine as the rain and rot of the previous year turned into devastating drought. This disaster was further complicated by an outbreak of Cholera that ravaged the North throughout the 1860s—an inhospitable place for a newborn.[12]

The Cederholms lived in Jämtland, a north-central Swedish province. The Jämts had always been fiercely independent. Formerly a peasant republic with its own law, currency and parliament, the region traditionally rejected the hierarchy and inequity that had defined the rest of Sweden. Its churches had existed without pew order, and the people had long respected "no other rank except age and life-time."[13] Despite five hundred

years of Norwegian domination and subsequent Swedish control, the Jämts continued to resist modernity and industry. However, not even they could keep out the influences of "land reform" that had affected Sweden's peasant farmers, reducing many—including Carl—to *statare*, landless workers paid in kind (*stat*) for their toil on the *fralsejord* (large estates owned by the nobility).[14]

Daily Life

To ease the hunger, Carl Cederholm supplemented the grain, milk, and potatoes from the short farming season with wild fish and game. The herring, rabbit, elk and reindeer that he prepared himself helped sustain the family through the long winter. He also cut and sold timber, using long wooden skis to trek across the frozen landscape. Martha and Anna labored as well, turning tanned hides and fur into pants, boots, jackets, and breeches, while the money from logging provided wool and cotton for shirts and caps. These were incredibly important in a land where the sun would dip below the horizon for months on end, and exposed skin could catch frostbite in minutes. In the summer they picked wild lingonberries and maintained a garden of turnips, carrots, peas and cabbage. All these would be pickled, preserved and stored in the root cellar Carl had built.

Though the family could work twenty-hour days in the summertime, life also held its share of fun and joy. Anna and Eric both attended the local *folkskolen*, or primary school. Anna would spend much of her childhood sledding, skating and skiing with her sister and best friend Olga. Athletic and adventurous, she would ski for hours, and routinely challenged and beat the local boys in skating races. Once, while racing an elder schoolboy on unsteady ice, Anna cut too close to open water, the ice cracking underneath. Falling in could mean death in minutes, but instead of slowing, Anna charged even faster as water splayed from her skates. She gained a reputation for fearlessness.

Festivals also punctuated the tough year with fleeting moments of fun and celebration. Months of pickled herring and turnip and pepper soup finally ended with fresh crops for the Midsummer festival, with hand-sewn holiday outfits to honor the occasion. Winter was filled with joyous gatherings, complete with gingerbread biscuits (*lussekatter*) and games like almond in the *risgryngrot* pudding, which foretold a girl's marriage. Christmas Eve brought with it smorgasbords, lye-soaked cod (*lutfisk*), and *frestelse*, a potato casserole with anchovies and cream.

But without land of his own, Carl had no way to improve his family's status or prospects. Like the Soderstroms fifteen years prior, the Cederholms were unable to buy land in Sweden; they too had thrilled at tales in the *amerikabrev*. Unlike the "first wave" of immigrants in the 1860s that included Anders and John, however, more recent Swedish immigrants settled not in Illinois but in the upper Midwest. Their letters referred to it as the "Delarna of America" after the province in central Sweden, and there was the tantalizing promise of land. The Homestead Act of 1862 offered applicants up to 160 acres of undeveloped land west of the Mississippi River, a seeming impossibility to the peasant farmers of Sweden. A farmer, Carl decided that this was where he could buy land and build an inheritance for his son and a home for his family. Year by year, he saved whatever he could until finally, in 1882, he and his family joined nearly a half million other Swedes in the second great wave of immigration to America.[15]

JOURNEY TO AMERICA

From Sweden

Olga writes, "Mother came to America when she was sixteen years old. She came with her mother and step-father (her father having died in Sweden) and brother Eric in 1882."[16] Travel to the new world was not a

single journey but several, stretching across countries, oceans and continents by buggy, boat and train. Families could take only what could personally carry. Each traveler typically carried a satchel containing a set of clothes, some food (mostly *knackebrod*, a type of Swedish flatbread) and a few prized possessions. Anna's mother kept her church shoes and a good dress, Anna a locket from her best friend.

Like the Soderstroms fifteen years earlier, the Cederholms made their way to Gothenburg, the largest seaport in Sweden. In 1867, the Soderstroms had traveled the roughly 30 miles from nearby Akerby to the city of Vaxjo in a horse-drawn carriage crowded with others fleeing the famine. From there a train took them 150 miles west to the Kettegat bay. In 1888, the Cederholms made most of their 500-mile trek south by train, sleeping on hard wooden benches as they traveled through mountains, marshes, forests and fields.

Port cities like Gothenburg would have been alien to those raised in the Swedish countryside. Rural dialects such as Anne's Jämska were replaced with Swedish, which had been taught in school but rarely used. Vendors hawked coarse boiled crayfish and potato pancakes up and down the Kungsportsavenyn, a world-class central avenue built in the 1860s and 70s that led to a beautifully landscaped park in the city center. People of all lands and stations filled the streets as boats clogged the harbor, passing to their final destination.

To England

Swedish immigrants could not travel directly from Gothenburg to New York. First they had to journey by boat to Hull, England. Although not the longest part of the journey, this was full of dangers posed not only by the famously fierce waters of the North Sea but from the wider world they were about to enter. Travelers were no longer kinsmen but suspicious foreigners, at best a nuisance and at worst potential source of disease, crime and poverty. Once docked, authorities herded foreign passengers into crowded streetcars to take the them to "immigrant hotels," often under police escort. Dark and dreary, Hull filled many homesick travelers with foreboding. "The buildings looked big and gray," recounted immigrant Irja Laaksonen after her stay in the city. "In fact, everything looked gray. Even the cobblestones in the street appeared very big and gray."[17]

From Hull, transmigrants would traverse the English Midlands by rail to Liverpool. Travelers were crammed in trains, often with no room to sit during the long trip. Upon arrival they often found themselves immediate targets for robbery and grift. "Mancatchers" fleeced emigrant pockets through trickery, theft, and outright thuggery. Disease posed an even greater danger, threatening to end a family's journey before it had truly begun. Port Sanitary Authorities boarded all ships, and passengers showing signs of illness were separated from their families and thrown into isolation hospitals. Often, impoverished travelers would have no choice but to leave their loved ones behind, armed only with the distant hope that they might somehow be reunited in the New World. "I promised that we would wait for him…he would only be taken ashore to have his throat swabbed," wrote one migrant mother of her last words to her ill son before the authorities took him away. "I followed him with my eyes for as long as I could, and then I cried—yes, I cried as I sailed…it is terrible to be separated from a child so brutally and to have to send him away from me with a lie!"[18]

One can imagine Carl Cederholm guiding his small family through the strange, noisy crowd of peddlers, beggars, fraudulent ticket scalpers, food vendors, and thieves; seeing foreign garments and hearing English for the first time; witnessing the loading and unloading of strange cargo while pushing through the dockside crowds in search of the boat to America.

On Sea

After waiting a week in the hectic port, migrants would finally board a ship for America. Mid-century immigrants such as the Soderstroms typically traveled by sail, while the Cederholms and other late-century

migrants took steamboats, traveling on the lower "tween decks" between the main deck and the cargo hold. Ventilation holes allowed water to seep in and too few portholes made the tween deck dark and dank. The massive boilers created a humid, hostile environment. With the only toilets up on deck (one allotted for every 100 migrants) travelers often turned to buckets tucked in corners for relief, creating an awful stench. "They came in steerage," Olga writes of the Cederholms' trip, "and Mother said it was terrible. They were crowded in the bottom of the ship. It was unsanitary—not nearly enough food and they were fed mostly soup."[19]

The Cederholms were allotted an eighteen inch by six feet bunk, stacked four high in the family section up to six high in common steerage. The top bunk was the most prized, as rampant seasickness ensured the bottom bunks were almost constantly soiled with vomit. Passengers brought their own bedding, usually a coarse blanket and a straw pillow stitched from used sail canvas purchased for a shilling. They also provided their own wares; two to three shillings would buy a tin wash basin, cup, mug, plate, and utensils. The Cederholms both competed for and shared food, bunks, and toilets with people they didn't know, people who spoke unfamiliar languages.

Two meals a day were held in the walkway between berths, with tables lowered from the ceiling to create a space so narrow two adults could not pass at once. Passengers dipped their cups in a bucket of thin soup or stew, with every fifth or sixth man receiving a loaf of hard white bread to share. Adults were issued a cup of coffee at breakfast (occasionally children were given cocoa) and were allowed three quarts of water per day. After meals, wares were "cleaned" in communal basins that quickly filled with trash and detritus.

The weeks-long journey was often treacherous and the conditions were miserable. Many passengers died of disease, and even more suffered through trench mouth, lice, and body ulcers. Storms, rough water, and mechanical failure also added to the danger. At night, men were allowed on deck to drink smuggled liquor while women stayed below, watching the children as they traded songs and stories from their homelands. All had suffered through similar inequities of religious suppression and property disenfranchisement; all dreamed of a future life in America.

Arriving in America

In 1882, Carl and Martha Cederholm arrived with their family at Castle Garden, America's first immigrant receiving center (later supplanted by Ellis Island in 1892). The circular, sandstone fort in Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan had been in operation since 1855 and was by far the most dominant US port; over 70% the nearly 300,000 annual immigrants to enter the United States came through New York City.[20] It was originally intended to be a safe harbor for newcomers, protecting them from swindlers and offering honest information and currency exchange. As the years passed, however, the castle had become rife with corruption and incompetence.

Although they were not in the majority, the Cederholms still had many compatriots; Swedes were the fourth-largest migrant group during this period after Germans, Irish and British.[21] This position, however, made them particularly vulnerable. Runners were rampant, offering their "services" to Swedes who, lost in a sea of German and English, trusted their kinsmen's offer to help sell their goods, exchange their money, and find work. Most often, the goods were stolen, the cash counterfeit, and the work close to indentured servitude.

The immigration process of entering nineteenth century America smacked of overcrowding, inequality, and abuse. Not all arrivals were required to endure the inspection process; first and second class passengers went through a cursory examination on-ship. Other medical and legal inspections were reserved for those traveling in the lower decks. Only after immigrants could prove that their papers were in order and that they were in good health would they finally be allowed to take their first brave steps on New World soil.

NEW LIFE IN THE NEW WORLD

The Cederholm Homestead

The Cederholms continued to Chicago and then straight on to Minnesota. The state government there was friendly to Swedish immigration, with Hans Mattson, a Swedish immigrant and Civil War Colonel, serving as Secretary of State. Carl Cederholm had learned that those able (and willing) to make the journey could purchase land for $1.25 an acre. In addition to the $100 fee to transport his family of four from Gothenburg to Chicago, Carl had saved enough money to buy land, seed, tools, one dairy cow, and the timber necessary to build a cabin. After spending the first month in a one-bedroom apartment, the Cederholm family finally purchased a homestead near Grandy. With the help of his son Eric, Carl immediately began building a small cabin. According to Olga:

> They settled in a Swedish settlement in Isanti Co. near Grandy, Minn. Here they built a log cabin…built on eighty acres of farm land which they cleared of trees and brush…The log cabin Grandma and Grandpa built consisted of two small rooms downstairs and an unfinished attic. The meals were prepared and eaten in the summer kitchen (when it was added), but to begin with were prepared in the kitchen of the log cabin (one of the small rooms), the other small room was a bedroom.[22]

The two-story, two-room structure with unfinished floors was properly sealed to help the family withstand the negative-twenty-degree winter nights. By August of 1882, Carl was ready to plant his first crop of winter wheat and dig a root cellar into the side of the hill. Anna and her mother, meanwhile, gathered herbs and fruit for the winter months and planted a vegetable garden. In their second year, the family continued to build, dividing the second story into bedrooms and adding a proper kitchen with a cast-iron stove. They also added a chicken coop for a newly acquired rooster and five hens.

Before long, the Cederholms lived off the land; livestock produced wool, cheese, eggs, and the occasional meal, while gardens provided vegetables to be canned and pickled. Hunting kept the family flush with white-tailed deer, pheasant, and turkey; fishing yielded walleye, trout, and largemouth bass. Forests offered varied fruits for jams and preserves, as well as herbs. Surrounded by fellow Swedish immigrants, they spoke their (near) native language and celebrated familiar festivals like *midsommerafton* (midsummer festival) and *atta Maja* (to May) in traditional fashion.

There was, however, one key difference between the Cederholms' old and new lives: Carl now owned his own land and labor. He could sell his wheat, invest in next year's crops, and make improvements to his home. He had already begun dreaming of purchasing the 80-acre lot adjacent to his own.

John Soderstrom Weds Anna Cederholm

While Anna Cederholm journeyed with her family from Jämtland to Minnesota, John Soderstrom was also on the move. In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire consumed four square miles of Chicago, devouring all wooden buildings in its path—including the cobbling shop John shared with his brother-in-law, Andy Lind. Instead of staying behind to rebuild on the ashes, John was pulled to a more pacific life of farming and preaching in the Minnesota countryside that resembled his native Småland in Sweden. It was there, as the pastor of a Swedish Lutheran Mission Church in St. Paul, that John met and married his first wife, Louise, in 1873. John certainly loved her; no matter where he lived, he made sure to hang a thirty-inch portrait of her in the household parlor for the rest of his life.[23] Sadly, their marriage was cut short by disease; beautiful but frail, the

young Louise died of tuberculosis in 1883, leaving the 37-year-old Soderstrom widowed and childless.

At about the same time, Anna Cederholm had begun work as a housemaid and nanny for an affluent family in St. Paul while her father built up the farm near Granby. "After arriving in the United States, they stopped in St. Paul, Minn. Mother went to work here, immediately, as a hired girl," Olga writes. "Her salary was five cents a week…Mother often talked of how hard she had to work as a hired girl and how little she was paid. While in St. Paul, she attended the Swedish Lutheran Mission Church and there she met our dad who was pastor of the church."[24]

Here the twisting paths of these two hardscrabble, indomitable immigrant families intersected and merged into a central narrative forward; at age 38, John Soderstrom, recent widower and pastor of a small congregation, met Anna Cederholm, age 18, a newly arrived immigrant and housemaid who attended his parish with the family that employed her. After a brief courtship over communal dinners, church events, and conversation, they married on October 16, 1884.

A happy event, perhaps, but the scandal of a 38-year-old pastor marrying an 18-year-old parishioner was too much for the church to handle. Protests grew within the congregation. The couple was soon on the move, equipped only with John's naïve optimism and Anna's determination to find a stable and fulfilling life.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

SWEDISH CHRISTMAS

The traditional Swedish Christmas celebration starts the first Sunday in December, with the lighting of a candle to mark the beginning of Advent. Each Sunday until Christmas, the family lights another candle in anticipation of the holiday. Early Swedish immigrants like the Soderstroms and Cederholms would begin their preparations early, laying a golden carpet of straw throughout the home (both to keep out drafts and provide a bed for visitors) and adorning a wooden candle holder with colored paper and apples.

By end of the 19th century, subsequent immigrants brought new practices from the homeland which soon became part of the American-Swedish tradition. During the festival of St. Lucia on December 13, young girls dress in white with candles in their hair, and everyone sings traditional Christmas carols. The weekend before Christmas the family cuts down a spruce tree to decorate. Two days before Christmas Eve they decorate it with goat-shaped *pepparkakor* (gingerbread biscuits), strings of popcorn and red berries, and lit candles. Prayers are typically offered, followed by a host of carols.

Perhaps the most famous seasonal icon is the *jultomte*, or Christmas gnome. Originally created by the famous illustrator Jenny Nystrom and inspired by Viktor Rydberg's "Little Vigg's Adventures on Christmas Eve," the red-hatted, white-bearded, elf-like creature is a mixture of Santa Claus and the traditional Swedish *tomte*, or house spirit. Like his larger red-suited cousin, the *jultomte* comes at Christmastime to deliver presents to all the good boys and girls. Other figures include the *julbok*, a goat-like figure fashioned out of straw.

The height of celebration is the Christmas Eve feast, or *julafton*. The family shares a *julbord*, or Christmas buffet, filled with all kinds of traditional foods purchased at the local *julmarknad* (Christmas Market). *Lutfisk*, a traditional dish made by soaking dried whitefish in water and lye for weeks until it reaches a jellylike consistency, is a particular delight. There are all types of cheeses and sausages, as well as cold cuts such as thinly sliced deer and duck breast, smoked eel, and wild game. *Julskinka*, the Christmas Ham, is a particular delight, as are desserts like *risgrynsgröt* (rice porridge) and sweet biscuits. *Glogg*, a mulled wine with cinnamon, vanilla, ginger, cloves and honey, is the drink of choice. After the feast, a local friend or family member dressed as the *jultomte* typically enters the home to give treats to the children.

The family awakes early on Christmas morning for the *julotta*, or candle lighting ceremony, at the local church. After service, the family returns to a smaller meal such as deviled eggs and sweet biscuits. The celebration does not end with Christmas Day, however; a Swedish family celebrates another twelve days of Christmas! The season finally closes with a *julgransplundering* party on January 9 with a traditional dance around the tree.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

SWEDISH IMMIGRANT LETTERS

The following letters provide a glimpse into the hope and despair that greeted Swedish immigrants in America at the turn of the century. Their journeys are similar to those of the Soderstroms and Cederholms — two Swedish families motivated by religious freedom and the opportunity to be independent landowners. For that reason, we cite liberally from their source, the invaluable and insightful book *Letters from the Promised Land: Swedes in America, 1840-1914* by H. Arnold Barton.

Times were hard in America in the mid-1890s and newly arrived immigrants, being in general the last hired and the first fired, suffered in particular. The Swedes, however, did not usually give open vent to anger, frustration, or despair in their letters home. If hard pressed, they might not write at all; or if they did, they most often continued to express a dogged cheerfulness. This letter from a new Swedish migrant to Minnesota is one such example:

27 August 1893, Graceville

Dear Sister,

I must send some word so that you will know we are alive. I and John Wretabacken are at present out in the country, around two hundred miles from Minneapolis. We are working for a farmer and get $1.75 a day and food. Now we are with Irishman, a real right believer, you know. There are so many prayers morning and evening and when we eat. John is all right now, he can make the sign of the cross and say "Ave Maria" etc. as good as St. Stephen in Weldon. He does this because he is head over heels in love with one of the unbelievably beautiful daughters of the house. It doesn't take on me. I read my "Gamla Gud med en nodtorftig spis" and sing "Den korta stund jag vandrar har," and so forth. Yes, the days are long enough out here. We have to work from sunup right to sundown and then crawl up onto some haystack and contemplate the lovely August moonlight (until one falls into the arms of Morpheus). It is still a good thing to have work. For as you maybe have heard times are unusually bad here now. Thousands upon thousands are going without work, most of them without money. A terrible lot of tramps go around here and get food for themselves by stealing pigs, chickens, potatoes, and the like. We hope the times will soon be good again so that milk and honey will once again ow in Uncle Sam's land...[25]

Another Swede writes home from Utah: Mount Pleasant, Utah, 14 December 1879:

Since today is the third Sunday in Advent, Christmas is drawing near and I may wish you a joyful Christmas and a good and happy New Year. These holidays, which are so much celebrated and so looked forward to by the young people in Sweden, are not much observed in America and are celebrated almost alone by Scandinavians and Germans. So if Christmas or New Years Day comes on a weekday, you will see among the Americans that their shops are open to the whole day and the miners and loggers go to work as usual, and the only change in their diet is a turkey and a drink of liquor. But what can you do about it? We eat wheat bread every day; pork, beef, chicken, eggs, butter, cheese, milk and beer are everyday food. When we consider the old Swedish custom of living high, wide, and handsome for a few days, with fine bread, fish, and rice pudding, and then after two or three days going back to the usual coarse fare, this just to play tricks on your stomach and appetite. The children here enjoy themselves as usual at Christmas, the youngest with a few small toys for Christmas presents and the older ones with snowballs and dances, sleigh rides, and so on.[26]

From her journey to Canda in 1908, Mrs. Hulda Belin of Rockford, Illinois or in Smaland, later recalled:

So the train continued on and we were in Michigan, U.S.A., and then into Minnesota's snowy wastes. The train made a stop and off of the train climbed a youth; he was tall and gangly, eighteen or nineteen years old, and you could see he was Swedish. Not a person was to be seen at the stop, that little square wooden house. He stood there alone and as though lost. He had no overcoat and it was cold. No one was in sight to meet him and no dwelling houses were to be seen. Then the train went on and he stood there alone. I have often wondered what his fate was.[27]

From the diary entry of "M.M.," North Dakota (year of emigration not indicated):

I am a woman, born in Varmland, and belonged to the poor class. I had to go out and earn my bread already at the age of eight. Most of what I did was to look after children. Had to get up at four o'clock in the morning with the others. Seldom got anything to eat or drink before eight o'clock, for the coffee mixed with rye was thought dangerous to the health. I got rotten herring and potatoes, served out in small amounts so that I would not have the chance to eat myself sick. That was my usual fare. In particular a corporate of the crown and his wife, who I was with for two summers, distinguished themselves by their stinginess and cruelty. From the military on land and sea protect us, dear Lord! Poor conscripts who have to serve as slaves under such wretches!

I did not have time to go to school very much. I had to learn the catechism, naturally, and that I had to do during the time I was watching the cows or some child. But I was not allowed to neglect Sunday school, for they wanted to drill into us poor people certain biblical passages, such as "Be godly and let us be contented," and so forth. Meanwhile the rich heard, "if your sins were red as blood, yet would they be white as snow," etc. So passed the days of my childhood and I got far enough along so that I was considered worthy of being admitted to holy communion, which is supposed to be a turning point in a person's life. But whichever way I turned things, the future looked just as dark. Still I had to struggle along five more years before I could be considered a proper hired girl and get any wage. And what a wage! And what work! No hope of saving anything in case of illness, but rather I could see the poorhouse waiting for me in the distance.

Then one day, I was then in my seventeenth year, the hour of freedom struck. I got a ticket from my two brothers, who had managed to get to America, after living through a childhood like mine. I was soon ready to travel, my few possessions were packed in a bundle; my New Testament, which I had gotten from the pastor, a bad report card from school, one krona in money which two kind women gave me. Thus prepared, I set off with a light heart for the fatherland so I have no wish ever to return to Sweden, and I do not believe many Swedish Americans can stay there for long either. Would be best to get the Chinese to emigrate to Sweden. I remember when I was at missionary meetings in Sweden, how they cried and complained over the poor Chinese and his poor soul, and gave substantial contributions to improve his condition. Best to chase out your poor countrymen and take in the dear Chinese instead.[28]

It was not only in America that the immigrant was plagued by sharp dealing "runners," according to this compliant in Hemlandet from a Chicago Swede back from a visit to Sweden:

Chicago, October 25, 1868

...At the stations in Sweden we were grievously beset by lieutenants of emigration agents, and in Gothenburg the situation was deplorable, to put it mildly. What a fine thing it would be if this nuisance were done away with! I want to warn everybody who intends to emigrate not to take any stock in these agents, who talk and make promises as though they were angels of light, but do not know the least thing about what they

promise...

A. Hult[29]

A Mr. Sahlstrom sends advice for prospective emigrants to the newspaper Nerikes Allahanda (reprinted in Hemlandet, 19 November 1867):

In Sweden it is customary to enhance the price of an article purchased or sold by indulging in a drink of liquor; this is never thought of here even if the bargain involves hundreds of thousands of riksdaler. In Sweden it is the custom to serve guests at least coffee, tea or the like; in this country it is also customary to serve the very best, but only at meals. In Sweden every person bears the stamp of his profession or occupation, which can never be mistaken; here it is difficult to distinguish a banker or a grocer in a group of working people. In Sweden even a man's life is taxed, if he possesses nothing else taxable; but here the person himself is not taxed. Instead rather heavy taxes are assessed on land and necessaries of life as well as on expensive furniture and vehicles. The latter form may have certain advantages, but probably does little to discourage luxury…

I do not write this to wound or defame, but with the sincere wish that my dear native land either might become one of the American states or that America's laws and advantages, its good customs and manners, might be grafted onto Sweden.[30]

From a small Swedish Settlement in Illinois:

Dear Pastor Jonson,

The Swedes around here humbly beg you to be kind enough to come to us, for C.A. Carlsson's wife has had two children, a son and a daughter, Olof Peter Nelson has a son, so there are three Christian children. We are sixteen Swedes, we will pay ten dollars for the trip, for it is very hard to travel with the small children. If you could come the first Sunday after Trinity, it would be real fine for all of us if we could hear a sermon on Saturday, but if you can't come on Sunday you are welcome the week after any day you want; but now we are waiting for an answer as soon as you get this letter. We will meet you in Henry, whatever day you set out we will meet at three o'clock. You come by train from Johnson to Henry, we will meet it with a wagon at three in the afternoon. God's peace be with us all.

Signed by S. Nelson
My address S. Nelson, Henry, Marshall Co., Illinois[31]

Another Swedish immigrant, writing to his mother, described the hard life of a Swedish preacher:

…Tomorrow is a church Sunday, when we hope to get in to the service. Oh, could I but hear really powerful and encouraging words then. Pastor Scheleen, poor man, has a very hard time of it. He has a little patch of land fifteen or sixteen miles from Manhattan and a small house, which I suppose the little Swedish congregation there built for him, although they are all poor Swedes. And he has only one cow and one horse and his wife is very sickly besides. They have no children but have adopted a little girl. The last time I talked with him, I don't know how it came up, but I said I had such a longing to see all my people in Sweden again. He said then, "Yes, I am sure my wife would get well again if we could go to Sweden. But it is no fun to go there so poor." Poor people, I felt so sorry for them![32]

A letter from Virginian immigrant Olof Brink dated September 3, 1865:

Dearest Cousin Olof, Swede Bend, Iowa:

I will now write a few lines to you, my dear friend and cousin, and in my loneliness tell you how I am faring.

I thank God that I am in good health. I have at last come to America after strange experiences. We arrived at New York without a penny, and I knew of no way to continue our journey, as there was no employment in sight. But then a Swedish gentleman put in his appearance and offered us employment. He was well dressed and extremely kind and offered to accompany us and find employment for us at a place three, and at the most four, hours' journey from Iowa (Iowa was my destination). Accordingly, it would be an easy matter to get there. Instead of keeping his promise he brought us to the southern states. We arrived first at Richmond, where the war had wrought devastation, thence by canal for forty miles, to our destination. In New York he had promised that food, lodging, bedclothes, and a physician's services would be furnished free of cost in addition to monthly wages of thirteen dollars for myself and eight dollars for my wife. But instead I received ten dollars and my wife two. We are twelve Swedes, including men, women and children and receive less than twelve cans of buttermilk per day, corn meal for pancakes in place of bread, and a small amount of pork. This is our daily allowance.

We work hard all day, at night sleep on a hard brick floor, and an hour before sunrise begin work. Yes, the slaves are freed, but we are treated almost like slaves. I do not see any possibility of myself and mind holding out until I have earned enough to leave. I fear that before that time comes I will be unable to stand on my feet, even if I should be alive. Now, dear cousin, I pray you, if you possibly can, to do something to help us out of this precarious misery, fraud, and slavery. Help us, my dear friend, if you know of any way. [33]

Largely through letters from one of the Pinke Lake settlers to his father near Kisa, Ostergotland, Peter Cassel, a prosperous local farmer and miller, became interested in America. In 1845 he and a group of twenty-one relatives and neighbors established the New Sweden settlement in southeastern Iowa. Cassel's letters were printed in newspapers and published in book form. Coming from an experienced farmer, they arouse great interest among the Swedish peasantry:

Post Office, Jefferson County, Iowa Territory, United State of America, February 9, 1846

Friends and Countrymen:

In accordance with our promise on our departure from Sweden we are sending you a few lines to tell you how and where we are situated at present. After a fortunate voyage of eight weeks between Gothenburg and New York we arrived at this place the 16th of last August. We are under heavy obligations to Captain Nissen for the promptitude with which he satisfied our desires and the attentiveness with which he always ministered to our welfare and needs. We also had the pleasure of hearing him expound the Word of God in rich measure, not only at the regular morning worship every Sunday but also with a reverent prayer every morning…

The ease of making a living here and the increasing prosperity of the farmers, year by year and day by day, exceeds anything we anticipated. If only half of the work expended on the soil in the fatherland were utilized here, the yield would reach the wildest imagination; but the American farmer, content with enough to give him a living and comfort, confines himself to plowing, planting, and harvesting. Timbered land is broken with a yoke of oxen, the expense being $1.50 per tunnland. The hard prairie requires four yoke of oxen and $3.50 per tunnland. There is not a single stone on the surface but small hills almost in every case contain at a depth of four or five feet limestone and sand stone, so there is never a lack of stone for building purposes. Coal is found nearly everywhere along rivers and creeks. A yoke of oxen is worth from twenty-five to thirty-

five dollars and a cow ten to twelve dollars…

Freedom and equality are the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the United States. There is no such thing as class distinction here, no counts, barons, lords, or lordly estates. The one is as good as another, and everyone lives in the unrestricted enjoyment of personal liberty. A Swedish bonde, raised under oppression and accustomed to poverty and want, here finds himself elevated to a new world, as it were, where all his former hazy ideas of a society conforming more closely to nature's laws are suddenly made real and he enjoys a satisfaction in life that he has never before experienced. There are no beggars here and there never can be so long as the people are ruled by the spirit that prevails now. I have yet to see a lock on a door in this neighborhood. When people leave their houses everything is left unlocked, even though they expect to be away several days, yes even months. Their houses can be entered by anybody, but I have never heard of theft.[34]

A woman who had left the Janssonists wrote:

If anyone should possibly want to come over and they could get some help with money for the journey, they could quickly repay it here. Oh! How happy I would be if I had with me my boys and girls who stayed behind in Sweden; I could dance with joy to my grave and be sure that they would soon earn enough here to assure themselves of a carefree old age. Many greetings to you all. God be with you.

So wishes your loving sister,

Christina Kallstrom[35]

ERA II
1885-1905

CHILDHOOD DENIED

IN THIS ERA

Reuben is born on March 10, 1888, in Waverley, Minnesota, the second of six children. At the age of 9, he is sent to work in a blacksmith's shop in nearby Hancock, Minnesota, to help pay off family debts. In 1901, his family sends him to the coal mining town of Streator, Illinois, where he works on the trolley lines and in the glass factories, steadily saving his earnings and sending them home until the family has enough money to join him. In 1902, the Soderstroms arrive in Streator, where they move into a simple house near the railroad tracks.

In 1904, Reuben leaves the glass factory to become a printer's devil at the *Streator Independent Times*. There he meets John E. Williams, a noted labor leader and intellectual who assumes responsibility for Reuben's education. He develops a curriculum for Reuben and pays for his first library card, instructing him on labor principles, history, and economics. In 1905, Reuben meets Jeanne Shaw.

> "People often ask me what moved him, what things in his life made him choose to devote his life to the labor movement. I believe I have answered this in the telling of his early life. He knew poverty firsthand. He experienced child labor. He knew the loneliness of separation from his family at an early age. These were his formative years, and they were not happy ones."
>
> *-Olga Soderstrom Hodgson on her brother Reuben Soderstrom, 1974*

CHAPTER 2
1885 - 1900

CHILD BLACKSMITH

A FAMILY ADRIFT IN MINNESOTA

Newlyweds John and Anna Soderstrom did not receive a warm welcome from their parish. Olga reports that "Mother said being a preacher's wife at the age of eighteen was difficult. For one thing the congregation resented, more or less, the December-May marriage, Dad was 38, Mother 18. However, they continued the present status until after son Paul was born."[36]

One year later, in 1886, John was pushed out of his St. Paul pulpit and traveled with his wife and baby to Red Wing, Minnesota, where he became pastor at a small stone Lutheran church. The move from the robust Swedish community in St. Paul to sleepy Red Wing was most certainly a demotion. They lived in the ground-level quarters of the Church with their first child, one-year-old Paul.

But that was just a way station. Like many immigrants to America, John had dreams of owning land. Investing nearly every dollar they had, John bought a small plot of land, planted modest crops, and trusted in providence. But while Reuben's father may have been a faithful pastor, he was not an expert farmer. As Olga writes:

> Preaching was not the best paid profession in those days, so Dad found it necessary to farm, along with his preaching, in order to provide adequately for his family. Dad, I presume, was an average farmer, but like many farmers had crop failures. This caused him to move frequently, hoping to find better farms, so he became quite a rover…Dad continued to preach, but he would also repair shoes to try to supplement his income, since crops continued to be failures.[37]

It was into these impoverished, uncertain conditions that John and Anna had their second son, Reuben, on the cold, windswept plains of Waverly, Minnesota, on March 10, 1888. Like his siblings before and after, he received an Old Testament name from his pastor father.

From the outset, Reub's life was beset by instability. By the fall of Reub's first year, his father's crop had failed, and the family moved for the third time in two years—this time to a small house in Woodland Township. It was during these years that Reuben's brother Lafe (birth name Levi) was born in 1890. In 1892 the Soderstroms moved again to a small farm in Delano where, to the family's delight, Anna gave birth to her first girl, the precious Ruth. But before the year's end, the tiny child died of whooping cough, a loss that left all bereft. Reuben watched helplessly as the family lovingly buried a tiny wooden casket amidst his father's prayers and his mother's tears.

John responded the only way he knew how—he ran away, this time to Cokato township, where he built a beautiful brick home surrounded by graceful elms. Misfortune soon followed. Within a year, complications with Anna's fifth pregnancy cursed little Joseph, a "blue baby," with a heart defect that left him forever frail. John faced yet another crop failure soon after, forcing him to sell the farm and move his family into a small house in the center of town.

Still, young Reuben found joy amidst the poverty and tragedy. As a child he was hard-headed but happy, with a serious nature that could quickly give way to playfulness. He loved the outdoors, spending the hours fishing local lakes and exploring the virgin Minnesota wilderness with his brothers. Yet he never had interest in games or swimming or sports. He had a quick temper, a trait his older brother Paul loved to exploit. As Olga recounts, "He [Paul] was mischievous and one time tormented Reub whose temper was quick. Reub was chopping wood at the time and started chasing Paul with axe in hand."[38]

But young Reuben could turn just as quickly toward tender affection. He was incredibly close to and protective of his younger siblings, and was his mother's seeming favorite. This was perhaps because she saw so much of herself in him. "Reub was like mother," Olga writes, "he dominated every situation…But, like Dad, he was good and kind and generous."[39] Reuben was his mother's child, a naturally forceful personality, infused with his father's compassion and Lutheran ethos—a unique cauldron for a singular calling as a great leader of labor.

Daily chores were a staple of his early life. Anna often dispatched her gaggle of boys to fetch berries, kindling, or water, before tucking all three into a single bed at night. The three Soderstrom boys also spent a great deal of time at the Lutheran church, carrying out simple duties and attending summer picnics where the Swedish language and food were staples (Reuben grew up in a bilingual household, and was himself fluent in both Swedish and English). John's Sunday sermon to the small congregation was the week's highlight, spoken in Swedish—a moment for which he studied all the other days of the week. It was a celebration of the Bible's colorful stories and parables, as well as nourishment in the hard times that his congregation endured in the 1800s central Minnesota.

Perhaps the happiest event of Reub's early childhood was the birth of his baby sister Olga in October of 1897. Jubilation overtook the tiny household as, after years of loss and heartache, the family finally welcomed the arrival of a healthy baby girl. About her own birth, Olga writes:

> I was born at about 6:30am and Mother said Reub was so happy. When he came down in the A.M. and saw me, he climbed over her and just wanted to stay there with me. All the family wanted a girl, and there I was, an answer to their prayers. Dad particularly was so happy—he wanted a girl so very much, so I was indeed a welcome addition to the family. Mother wanted to call me Ruth, but friends and neighbors talked her out of it. They said she would disturb the rest of my dead sister. So I was given Olga by my Mother, Rebacka by my Dad, and the boys (gave me) Emmajeen, so my brothers gave me this name.[40]

Reuben's only sister, loving biographer and life-long friend, Olga Rebacka Emmajeen Soderstrom, had arrived.

A LIFE OF WORK

A Blacksmith's Boy

Reuben's childhood innocence, however, was soon brought to an abrupt end. The bundle of joy that was a baby sister increased the family's financial hardships. Now too poor to afford any farmland, Reub's parents did all they could to make ends meet. In addition to preaching, John worked as a cobbler on the ground floor while Anna converted the lower level into a convalescent home for a few ill and infirm "patients." Yet John's charitable nature continued to undermine the family's fiscal stability. He would often not charge his poor clients even for the leather he used in their repairs. "I've never known anyone like him," Olga later wrote, "so kind, so patient, so understanding, and far too generous for his own good."[41] As for preaching, he ministered mainly to small, poor congregations of farmers, widowers, and travelers unable to feed themselves, much less

donate to the church.

And the number of poor and destitute continued to grow; the great Economic Panic of 1893 had turned into a depression that devastated the country. In that year alone, over 15,000 companies sank into bankruptcy and over 500 banks failed. Unemployment in the United States reached over ten percent, and the loans to speculative farmers like John exploded to 74% interest.[42] By 1898, the combined forces of crop failure, economic depression, and idealism had broken the family's finances. In a state of desperation, John made the heartbreaking decision to sell one of his children into hard labor. Normally, this tragedy would befall the oldest child, but Paul, at twelve, was "a problem child and difficult to manage."[43] So it was in the winter of 1897-1898 that nine-year-old Reuben was sent away to serve as a helper to a blacksmith in Hancock, a small town over a hundred miles away. Olga writes:

> Times were tough, seemed we were always in a state of financial depression, so when Reub was nine years old he went to Hancock, Minnesota to work in a blacksmith shop. There he operated the levers of the blowers which fanned the coals and made them burn hotter for the blacksmith. He also learned to repair wagon wheels, such as taking the steel rims off the wheels to repair the spokes and the then replace the rims. For this labor he received five cents a day and his board and room.[44]

It is conceivable that John viewed this work as an opportunity for his young son. Blacksmith helpers, after all, often graduated to apprenticeships, and a smith's trade could be profitable work, bringing in an average of $15 per week.[45] By placing his son in the care and learning of an accomplished tradesman, John may have been preparing his son for a better life. Or, perhaps, the family was simply desperate for any kind of extra income.

Whatever the reason, it is truly heartbreaking to imagine the view from little Reub's eyes as the horse drawn mail cart lurched out of Cokato in 1898, his family receding from sight—the two brothers he fished with, the little baby sister he loved so much, his parents. The daily ache he felt for his missing family as he toiled away in servitude most certainly formed the great empathy he later exhibited for child laborers, and more broadly, for laboring families missing loved ones to excessive work hours, injury, illness or death.

Although unconscionable by modern standards, child labor was very much a part of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American life (at least for its poor), and it would become a large part of Reub's formative experience. At the time Reuben was sent away, more than one-fifth of the nation's children aged 10 to 14 were cast into the world of work.[46] By the 1890s many states including Illinois had some laws regulating child labor, but they were often limited in coverage and nearly impossible to enforce. It wasn't until the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938—national legislation informed by Illinois practices championed by Reuben—that employment of those under the age of 16 during school hours was banned outright.

Life as a blacksmith's boy was grueling. Reub labored long, strenuous hours, and likely slept in a small cot in the dark shop itself amidst the iron tools and ever-glowing coals. Waking up before dawn, he would break the ice in his water bucket and stoke the fire in the forge, adding buckets of charcoal and pumping the heavy bellows until his small arms were smeared by the dirt and heat. His job was to keep the forge hot while the smith and his striker worked. He also had their tools at the ready for their work, particularly for the striker, who pounded out impurities in the metal. Days would also be filled with chores like cutting timber and making charcoal. He routinely worked six days a week and sent his monthly earnings back to his family. While he probably attended the local school for remedial lessons, he would have had to return quickly to the shop. Most of his early learning likely took place by evening candlelight.

There is scant historical material concerning Reuben's life in Hancock, and little record of him recollecting

his time there. We know nothing about the family he lived with or how long he had to toil, isolated from his parents, brothers, and sister. What we do know is that it was a time of his life he had no desire to revisit. During all of his later trips to Minnesota, reliving fond memories and visiting with relatives in Cokato and elsewhere, he never made a visit to Hancock.

Sent to Streator

Despite Reuben's sacrifice, by the winter of 1900 the Soderstrom family was still in much the same condition: warm, giving, and poor. The congregation of John's Swedish church helped the Soderstroms in any way they could, but the family's financial troubles continued to mount, and by January of 1901 John again had to make a difficult choice. Olga writes:

> Times continued to be financially bad. Dad wrote of his troubles to his sister Sophie in Streator, Illinois. She in turn wrote that she felt there would be opportunities in Streator for work for Reuben. Streator had the coal mines, glass factories, and was building or I should say laying tracks for street cars. It was a thriving community at the time…
>
> So at the age of twelve, Reub came to Streator to live with Aunt Sophie and to work…Reub's first job in Streator was as a water boy for the gang that was laying the street car tracks. He worked from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. and received $3.00 per week. The work week was Monday through Saturday. Child labor existed everywhere as there were no child labor laws.[47]

Once again, Reuben was sent away, this time seemingly for good. He had no idea if he would ever return home to play in familiar fields, or sleep in his old bed (he wouldn't). As he boarded the train that would take him once and for all from his beloved Minnesota, anxiety almost certainly overwhelmed him, threatening to drown him in alternating waves of anger and despair. Peering out the dirty window, he waved furiously to his family, watching intently as the train pulled him away, etching their faces into his memory as he steeled himself for the unknown.

Reuben was moving again, and the timing was destiny. As America lurched into the 1900s on a horse-drawn carriage, no one could imagine the awesome might of the century's impending population explosions, global disruptions, or the colossal industrialization that would become hallmarks of a nation in transition. Twelve-year-old Reuben Soderstrom was about to enter that fray, and Streator, Illinois was a fortuitous microcosm of America itself.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

FARMING IN THE LATE 1800s

Farmers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were becoming less like Rueben's grandparents, who used their land primarily to feed and produce for their families, and more like modern entrepreneurs, selling single crops for increasing profit. Improved transportation and internationalization meant American farmers could sell wheat across the world, and they did. Over 160,500 miles of American railroad created a booming nationwide domestic market, while steamships helped farmers earn over a third of their profits overseas.[48]

While profoundly different than traditional agriculture, the "startup" farms of this time were also part of an industry that was smaller and more competitive than today. Compared to modern agribusiness, in 1890 more than twice as many farmers were tending farms less than a third of the size of current ones.[49] There was also no shortage of land; the government had been selling land for as little as $1.25 per acre since the Homestead Act of 1862. Cheap available land was one of the defining elements of 19th century America. Rapid market acceleration, low land cost, and potential for windfall profit made farming in the late 19th century an exciting but volatile business.

This was especially true in Minnesota. By the time of their arrival, the Soderstroms' adopted home had become the leading wheat-producing state in the nation, accounting for nearly 15% of the nation's total wheat output[50]. There was money to be made, and John Soderstrom bought a field and seed. The move was risky on several fronts. Like many would-be farmers, John did not have great experience tending crops. He was a preacher and cobbler by trade, his father a tailor. And while land was cheap, the money necessary to start a farm was not. The only kind of loan a new farmer like John could receive would have carried an interest rate of anywhere from eight to twenty percent.[51] Price volatility and economic instability also posed considerable challenges; major depressions racked the country from 1873-1878, and would again from 1893-1897.

Most importantly, John couldn't control the weather; major hailstorms and unfamiliar climes contributed to multiple crop failures, ruining the fields John had so carefully labored to tend for many months. The loss of an entire year's income was devastating for John and his family, driving them ever deeper into debt. It was a vicious cycle that would eventually drive young Reuben away from his family and into the dark world of child labor.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

BLACKSMITHING

Rural communities in 19th century America relied on local blacksmiths to build and repair everything from latches and hinges to wagon wheels to any and all equipment used on the farm. It was a trade that required both intelligence and strength. The ideal smith was "a mighty man of brawn and sinew; steadfast, honest and industrious."[52] At the same time he was expected to be scholarly, always keeping up with the latest tools and techniques.

It was also relatively solitary and independent work; while most manufacturing work relied on teams, the country smith ran his own shop on his own terms. That didn't mean he worked entirely on his own, however. A blacksmith usually was assisted by helpers, young boys (often the smith's own sons) who intended to be future blacksmiths themselves. "For the blacksmith," writes historian Aldren Watson, "in spite of all his fine equipment and a binful of charcoal, couldn't have forged anything much more elaborate than a few pairs of small butterfly hinges without a helper."[53] The work was quite demanding. For up to 10 hours a day, the most junior helpers would operate the bellows, which fed air to the forge, keeping the fire hot enough to for the smith to mold the "black" iron into shape. They often lived in the shop itself, waking before dawn to stoke the forge fire. After fanning the flames they would distill charcoal for fuel.

The key helper was the "striker," who gave the hardest blows at the smith's command. With the assistance of his helper, a blacksmith used tongs to heat metal in the forge until it reached a temperature of around 1700 °F. He would then place the metal against the anvil and direct the work of his striker, who would hammer the metal with a heavy sledge. This process, called "drawing out," would increase the length or width of the metal. Using a variety of tools specifically designed for the task, the smith would then cut, punch, bend and shape the metal into any shape desired. The work was grueling, hot, loud, smoky and dangerous. After a few years, a striker could graduate to apprenticeship, learning all the techniques and tricks of the trade. He would also learn how to make his own tools: tongs, hammers, chisels, punches, bending forks and cleavers, among others.

CHAPTER 3
1901

REUBEN ARRIVES IN STREATOR

REUBEN FINDS HIS HOME

The remarkable story of Reuben G. Soderstrom is also the story of the town he made home: Streator, Illinois. The bustling, cosmopolitan, close-knit, and enterprising, and ethnically diverse turn-of-the-century town was inexorably linked to the labor movement, and would indelibly shape Reuben. As he later explained:

> One had to be born in or come into an industrial community such as the city of Streator in order to catch the atmosphere necessary to lead labor. There isn't any question about that. The contribution which the community makes is tremendous in the development of someone who has a flair for that type of activity. And Streator was just suited for that…It's a very cosmopolitan sort of a community where they say that seventeen tongues are spoken daily in that city.[54]

Industrial and ethnically diverse, Streator became the experiential genesis for many of Reuben's landmark achievements in labor; it is the place where he found personal happiness, stability, and opportunity. For these reasons it is worthwhile take a brief moment to become acquainted with the colorful city that formed the man.

Worthy S. Streator and Col. Plumb

80 miles southwest of Chicago on the Kankakee railroad line, Streator originated in the early nineteenth century as a small village named "Hardscrabble." John O'Neill, owner of the town's first general store, painted the word above his front door and the name stuck.[55] After the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in 1861, the town officially changed its name to "Unionville" in a show of northern solidarity, though it continued to be known by its original name ("Scrabble" for short).[56] Throughout these early years, it remained a small, relatively unknown settlement along the hazy humidity of the Vermilion River.

All that changed, however, with a single discovReery. Around 1865, a five-foot thick/six-mile wide vein of coal drew widespread attention. Worthy S. Streator, a retired physician from Cleveland, Ohio, caught word of the carbon-rich deposit and immediately formed the Vermillion Coal Company. The company purchased 3,000 acres and sent its business manager, Colonel Ralph Plumb, to survey the area and oversee construction.[57]

A Civil War veteran and famous Ohio abolitionist, Plumb had once spent 84 days in jail for his association with a group which had forcibly seized a runaway slave from U.S. Marshals and smuggled him into Canada.[58] After incorporating various settlements and shantytowns into the city of Streator (newly named in honor of Dr. Streator), Col. Plumb was unanimously elected the city's first Mayor. He was responsible for the city's first railroad, built and donated a high school, and constructed the city's first opera house.[59] Citing Plumb's example as inspiration, Andrew Carnegie financed the building and stocking of the Streator Public Library, a magnificent structure with Ionic columns and oak staircases. It opened on January 30, 1903, in a grand public ceremony likely attended by a fourteen year-old Reuben Soderstrom, who milled about in the crowd

and celebrated Streator's national significance as a recipient of Carnegie's philanthropy. The library opening would be Plumb's final public appearance; he died three months later at age 87, but the grand building would endure as the primary space for Reuben's impressive self-education on all matters historical, philosophical, and American.[60]

Streator grew rapidly. By 1877, it was an industrious city of over 6,000 with "handsome residences" replacing the "waste of ten years ago."[61] Hearing rumors of well-paid work, immigrants came to Streator by the trainload. The first immigrants came primarily from the British Isles of England, Scotland and Wales, with successive groups coming from Eastern Europe and Italy.[62]

By the time Reuben arrived in 1901, the city had nearly doubled to over 10,000 residents. With new ethnicities came new faiths. Churches from over a dozen traditions populated the city, including the onion-domed St. Casimir, originally a gift from the Czar of Russia to the Chicago World Fair in 1893, and St. Stephen's, the oldest Catholic Slovak Church in America.[63] Culturally diverse and full of wealth and opportunity, Streator was fast becoming "in business importance among the best towns and cities in the country."[64]

"You Load Sixteen Tons, and What Do You Get?"

The "official" story of Streator is one of enterprise, hard work, opportunity and success—the American Dream that so many immigrant families, including Reuben's, came to pursue. The truth behind these initial facts, however, is much more complex, beginning with Dr. Streator and Col. Plumb. In addition to being a retired physician, Dr. Streator was a railroad magnate who, alongside the great "robber barons" of the Gilded Age, made his fortune by leveraging connections born of social privilege to monopolize vital lines of transport. He was first introduced to the lucrative trade of natural recourse extraction when he built the Oil Creek Railroad connecting Pennsylvanian oil fields to the industrial center of Corry.[65] Ralph Plumb, meanwhile, was—according to historian Allan Peskin—a get-rich-quick schemer who "While campaigning down the Sandy Valley…had apparently been looking as hard for signs of oil as for sins of rebels."[66] Shortly before coming to Streator, Plumb had enlisted the help of then-congressman and future President James Garfield in an elaborate and deceptive plan to "tap the riches" of Kentucky (complete with hidden buyers and agents dressed in disguise). The scheme fell apart when no oil was discovered. Undeterred, Col. Plumb tried his luck again in Illinois. Peskin writes:

> After his disappointing Kentucky oil venture, Plumb had settled on an isolated Illinois trading-post called Scrabble as the place to make his fortune. Scrabble was sitting on top of a rich but neglected coal field and Plumb was determined to tap that wealth. He enlisted Dr. Worthy S. Streator, a prominent Cleveland railroad promoter who was an intimate friend of Garfield's through his membership in the Quintickle Club, to be the president of the new Vermillion Coal Company. Scrabble was re-baptized as Streator, Illinois, and mining operations were began.
>
> Both Plumb and Streator wanted their friend Garfield to get in on the ground floor of what promised to be a very good thing, and in February Plumb "cordially invited" both Garfield and [Ohio Representative Robert] Schenck to come in. Ten thousand dollars worth of stock was set aside for each of them and, as Plumb expansively said, "you are at liberty to consult your own convenience about the time of paying it." In return, Plumb had one small request. Unless a railroad ran by the mines, the coal could not reach the market. It would cost at least $80,000 to build a spur to the Illinois Central, but if the projected American Central could be induced to "bend their lines" to Streator, Plumb's problem would be solved cheaply. He hoped that Garfield and Schenck would suggest this possibility to the road's managers and he hinted that "if by your influence the Am. Central supplies our necessity the company will feel very kindly towards you both I am sure."

> The message seemed clear enough: Garfield and Schenck were expected to sell their influence for $10,000 worth of free stock apiece...Garfield, however, was unable to meet the payments and had to give up his stock. Plumb advised Dr. Streator…to place the stock "where its influence will do us the most good."[67]

In the wake of Garfield's withdrawal, Streator made arrangements with the Fox River Line and sent Plumb to oversee development of the land the company had purchased. To entice workers, Plumb laced steamship offices and railroad depots with rumors of the town's wealth and opportunity. Such notices reached Reuben's Aunt Sophie, already a Streator resident, who, in turn, conveyed the message of increased business to her brother, John. Plumb's plan worked. Soon young Reub was one of thousands forming the sea of immigrants making the pilgrimage to Streator in search of work.

Under the weight of these new arrivals, "Scrabble soon had to 'scrabble away' and give place to Streator."[68] It was this new company town that elected a Board of Trustees, who in turn unanimously elected the company manager, Plumb, as Mayor.

Plumb may have lived in Streator, but the man for whom it was named never visited. In fact, those who gained most from the mineral wealth of Streator never set foot in the city. Reuben later referred to them as "absentee owners" who shared in nothing of the life of Streator except the profit.[69] Life was miserable for many of the city's working poor. The coal miners who constituted the backbone of the city worked long days in dangerous conditions for little pay. As Dale Bennett describes in his study of the Streator labor movement:

> The mine shafts in Streator varied from 50 to 150 feet in depth. Ground water trickled into the shafts—bringing rats, mud, and stagnant water. Methane gas was another potential hazard…The coal miner needed, most of all, a strong back; mental agility was a secondary condition of employment. He kissed his wife good-bye every morning never knowing if it would be the last time for such a display of tenderness in his harsh world. He lived in a house owned by the coal company. Yet he must have felt there was some way out of this drab existence.[70]

To make matters worse, half of a miner's pay was in "scrip"—notes only honored only at company stores.[71] With this near monopoly on sales, stores owned by these mining companies could charge exorbitant prices, forcing many miners to incur ever-increasing debt to their employer, a vicious cycle famously lamented by singer Merle Travis:

> You load sixteen tons, and what do you get?
> Another day older and deeper in debt.
> Saint Peter, don't you call me, 'cause I can't go
> I sold my soul to the company store.

As successive waves of immigrants arrived, the neighborhoods of Streator developed distinct ethnic boundaries. The poorest lived in Shanty Town north of Prairie Creek. To the West on the river was Dog Town. The area between Main and Hickory served as Bulldog Alley. West of the High School sat Twister Hill, named after the German glass blowers. Meanwhile, Bung Town, between Park and Bronson, was the entertainment district, with offerings equal to its name.[72] To an indebted, disenfranchised, and deeply divided population, this wasn't the wealthy city of Streator; it was still every inch the hard, tough town of Scrabble.

Streator in 1900: Immigrants at Work

Like many working towns in America at the turn of the century, Streator both benefitted and suffered from

the wealthy capitalists behind its growth. Undoubtedly, figures like Plumb and Streator employed cronyism and company scrip to further their own interests. Yet these men also did great things for the people of Streator; the public works commissioned by Plumb were essential to Reuben's future, including the Plumb Opera House and the Streator Public Library, not to mention the bustling atmosphere of business and labor, mining and work. In the words of John Williams, a figure soon to loom large in our story:

> Streator is not a beautiful city. It is a town in the making; not yet a finished product. Its wealth and energies are devoted to deepening and broadening the foundations of its industrial life, rather than smoothing out the wrinkles of toil from its face or adorning itself with the fruits of its labor. It is still in its iron age; its golden age is yet to come…
>
> Streator is still a town of workers and workingmen. It is still in the making; and although its sense of beauty is growing, and evidences of it may be seen in its parks, streets, fine homes and well kept lawns…it is unfinished…It has not a long past but has an immense future.[73]

Work defined the town and its people. The hunger for labor, skilled and unskilled alike, drew together disparate peoples—German glassblowers, British miners, Italian bricklayers, and strong backs from all over eastern and northern Europe. They were Catholic, Orthodox, and every stripe of Protestant. While their religious and cultural differences often divided them, their common economic condition united them; laboring long days to support their families, lining up together to receive their paychecks, and sharing parks, libraries, and theaters.

By 1900, the growing city was an easy place to find work. Fourteen mines produced coal daily, providing thousands of jobs. Glass factories belched out thousands of bottles a day, exporting their product across the country. Brick and tile works employed hundreds to kiln-bake bricks, and five great railroad systems with more than 45,000 miles of track shipped materials in and out of Streator across the entire United States.[74]

TWELVE YEAR-OLD REUBEN ARRIVES

In January of 1901, Reuben took the train from Cokato, Minnesota to Streator, Illinois by way of Chicago. He traveled with a small knapsack stuffed with a few personal belongings and bread and cheese packed lovingly by his mother. The sights of the heavy industry and the noisy neighborhoods of Chicago must have been astonishing for the 12 year-old. He traveled unaccompanied, sharing seats with strangers and navigating the chaotic connections in Chicago armed with nothing more than his satchel and a hand-me-down jacket.

Although he had moved several times already—Waverly, Woodland, Cokato, and Hancock—Streator was quite different from the Scandinavian townships of rural Minnesota. On the platform in Streator, he was greeted by his Aunt Sophie, whom he was meeting for the first time. Sophie's first husband, a printer by the name of Carlson, had died of tuberculosis a few years prior. Widowed and caring for her three-year-old daughter, Annie, Sophie remarried a coal miner named August, who worked fourteen hours a day to meet his tonnage, for which he was paid $4 a day. Reuben's arrival—especially his muscle—was welcome; with a full family to support, even a $1 a week contribution from a child laborer like Reuben could make a difference. For Reuben, his aunt's household was simply the next in a long line of quarters during his itinerant childhood, and his next base from which to go out and work.

A Trolley Line Waterboy

Rub wasted little time. "Reub's first job in Streator was as a water boy for the gang that was laying the street car tracks," writes Olga. "He worked from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. and received $3.00 per week. The

workweek was Monday through Saturday. Child labor existed everywhere as there were no child labor laws."[75] Day in and day out, Reuben hauled water barrels from the supply wagon to the line for the work crews, delivering drink to the workmen. Track crews worked six days a week, but Reuben would start hours before, placing barrels every fifty yards along the entire stretch of the day's work.

Work on the trolley lines was brutal. No doubt, twelve year-old Reuben witnessed horrific accidents, like the severing of arms and legs when workers slipped between moving cars. Often, working children were recruited for dangerous tasks that included narrow spaces between or under the cars, or small crevices that required small hands. They were routinely injured, maimed, and permanently deformed. The workday included relentless physical commands and demands—"Boy! Get these buckets down 'ere now I said!"—and the conditions were compounded by constant presence of rain, mud, steel, and steam.

The boys Reuben worked alongside were products of hard, unfair circumstances. Like him, most had left school to help support their families or pay off debts. Some were orphans or runaways, hiding in shantytowns in the woods along the Vermillion River. They spent their free time (and earnings) more like the men they worked with than the boys they were, drinking five cent beers, playing poker, and fighting in Bung Town. By the time Reuben arrived there were "67 saloons, 25 gambling houses, and several houses of ill repute" ready to help workers spend what little they had.[76]

Working here, Reuben certainly became streetwise with his pocketbook, mind, and fists. He avoided the saloons, but soon took a passionate interest in one of Streator's most popular pastimes: boxing. Reuben's adopted home was well-known for prizefighting; Billy Myer, the "Streator Cyclone," was one of the best fighters of his day, earning his hometown a well-deserved rough reputation. Golden-age greats like Bob Fitzsimmons and Jim Corbett came to fight, drawing fans from far and wide. As Streator historian Paula Angle writes, "Promoters constructed boxing rings in the countryside near railroad tracks, spread news of coming fights, and arranged for special trains."[77] Although disapproved of by many (including, probably, Reub's own pacifist father), laboring men largely agreed with pugilists like John L. Sullivan who argued "Every young man from fifteen to twenty-one years of age should be taught the manly art of self-defense, in order to protect himself against any bought or tough who might undertake to waylay him on the highway."[78] Reuben took this advice to heart, learning the "manly art" soon after coming to Streator. The lessons didn't go to waste; Reub existed in a world full of petty crime, hard labor, and fisticuffs.

Long hours in the factories and mines of Streator brought chronic bronchial problems to both child and adult workers, not to mention typhus and tuberculosis. Lack of medical care meant common injury could easily turn to infection and death. Hardly a week went by without Reuben seeing or hearing of a serious injury or fatality in the local mines or rail yards. It is no accident that one of the future titans of the American labor movement experienced these gruesome conditions first hand, regularly witnessing a maimed worker entering church on crutches after a long convalescence, hearing Sophie's husband talk of the damp danger of the mines, or seeing a fellow child worker lose an arm between trolley wheels and steel track. Scenes such as these filled young Reub with an anger he had to work to master, even as he refused to forget. "As Reub grew older he learned to control his temper," Olga tells us. "He rebelled silently about conditions as they were, about children working so hard in sweat shops, about miners being practically slaves in the mines and about work in general as it existed as he grew up, and determined that he sure was going to try and do something about all these things."[79]

Visiting Luminaries in Streator's City Park

Still, the city of Streator in 1900 was a thing of fascination and beauty to young Reuben, filled with lights, excitement, and attractions, from the refurbished Opera House presentations of "Way Down East" and "The

Royal Box" to the introduction of the city's first car, an event that "attracted more attention than a circus."[80] The city soon attracted personal visits and public speeches from luminaries such as Clarence Darrow, Eugene Debs, and of course Samuel Gompers. According to Reuben:

> All of the unions that were inexistent at that time seemed to have some sort of a local in the city of Streator, and all of that information—Samuel Gompers, the great leader of the American Federation of Labor, came there a number of times, too…it was that type of community and so many labor officials came to the city of Streator in those early days. The tendency was to pay some attention to what they were doing, and I, of course, was enthused by it—by what they had in mind.[81]

By the Presidential election of 1900, Streator was viewed as such an important center that both Vice-Presidential candidates Adlai Stevenson (Democrat) and Theodore Roosevelt (Republican) made campaign stops in the bustling city that October. The awesome current of national politics flowed right to the town square, and the impact on Reuben was profound. Roosevelt's visit was a particularly extravagant affair, celebrated in the city's park with a parade of 5,000 marchers and over 20,000 spectators.[82] The park was festooned with red, white, and blue banners, and townspeople from many neighboring villages walked or rode horses through the brisk winter weather to hear the great man speak. He spoke forcefully of the need for American expansion abroad and reform at home, his words packed with optimism and urgency. It was a speech that portended Roosevelt's progressive "Bull Moose" party of 1912, which Reuben would enthusiastically join.

Streator enthralled Reuben. Here he was exposed to a broader conversation and consciousness that he had never known in the farmland of Minnesota. Streator's outsized importance was the direct result of Gilded Age Industrialism and the nation's movement into the new and exciting century. America was an immense, bulky society in the noisy throes of momentous transition, and Streator—and Reuben—were at its center. As 1901 came to a close, our young protagonist found himself surrounded by the swirl of trolley cars, hard labor, and vibrant debate argued in foreign tongues over vibrant ideas, and he would waste no time becoming an active participant in the middle of it all.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

MINERS IN STREATOR

Upon arriving in Streator in 1901, Reuben boarded with his Aunt Sophie's family, whose fortunes were tightly bound with the city's mining industry. Sophie's first husband died in a mining accident, and her second husband, August Johnson, was also a miner who brought the misery of the mine home with him every day in the form of filthy clothes and boots, horrific stories, and meager income. Still, Streator's substantial vein of coal was vital to their livelihood, providing paychecks to those willing to risk their lives to mine it.

Mining was one of the most dangerous occupations of the late 1800s. Working conditions were dreadful; miners would descend into deep, dark shafts to toil amidst the mud, standing water, and rats. Mules were lowered underground to pull coal carts through dark tunnels illuminated by dangerous kerosene lanterns attached to the miners' caps. The wooden frames that supported the shafts creaked ceaselessly beneath the burden, a constant reminder of the risk of collapse. Coal dust and methane gas poisoned the air, killing miners either quickly in fiery explosions or slowly through lung disease. All this made mining "absolutely unparalleled in terms of the dangers involved."[83]

Coal miners in Streator were not paid by the hours they worked but by the coal they produced. At day's end, miners brought chunks of the black ore to the surface to be sifted through a crudely built metal lattice. Only larger pieces were "weighed and paid;" smaller pieces that fell through into the company's barrel were deemed too small for compensation and kept without payment to the miner. Understandably, the size of the gaps in the lattice was a subject of heated and sometimes violent debate between the miners and the company. Miners were also required to pay for their own equipment, from lamp oil to blasting powder.

Mining companies routinely exploited child labor, using young boys to squeeze into tight spaces unreachable by full-grown men to gather coal. Overseers would act like slave drivers, kicking them into line. John Williams, Reuben's mentor in Streator, was one of these boys. As he later recalled, "I entered the mines at an early age and with reluctance remained there with a dread, at times amounting to a loathing, and escaped at the first favorable opportunity."[84] If a boy or a miner was injured or killed, neither he nor his family had recourse or support. Above ground, many youngsters were employed as "breaker boys," chipping impurities out of the rock amidst the deafening machinery and air thick with coal dust.

Despite these monumentally unfair conditions, the promise of ready work drew miners to Streator by the thousands, increasing the city's population nearly tenfold in just over 30 years.[85] The first immigrants were predominantly from the British Isles, miners who brought with them a tradition of organized labor. As Reuben detailed, "The influence of unionizing—the original influence—came from the people from the British Isles."[86] Of course, the mine operators were fiercely opposed to unionization, refusing to even speak with anyone elected to represent workers. They insisted on individual contracts with no arbitration.

But Streator miners immediately pushed back, organizing as early as 1873. It wasn't easy; for thirty years several organizations attempted to unify miners both locally and nationally. The Miners Protective and Benevolent Association (MPBA) was the first, seeking disability insurance and widower's pensions. After early setbacks, the MBPA successfully led a strike in 1877. The modest concessions belied the larger fact the miners had successfully utilized a primitive version of collective bargaining.

This led to the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers (NFMML), which fought to create a "national scale" for miners in 1886. Setting a standard fee per ton would level the playing field, preventing

operators form lowering wages in the name of "competition" while freeing local unions to focus on improving work conditions. Although ultimately unsuccessful, this coordinated effort helped connect Streator to unions across the region, and within a few years the Miners Progressive Union (MPU) had organized most of northern Illinois.

In 1889—twelve years prior to Reuben's arrival in Streator—the MPU led a major strike that resulted in not only increased wages but breaking the CW&V monopoly when it was forced to accept terms successfully negotiated with other mines. That year also saw the creation of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which finally united all mining unions, including Streator's.

Part of the miners' success in Streator was due to the extraordinary character of leading figures on both sides who valued moderation and compromise. As labor leader John Williams wrote, "the perplexing question of wages has not been so troublesome in Streator as in some other mining districts…many credit their employers with the desire to pay as much for mining as is safe in the face of outside competition."[87] The willingness of mine owners like Colonel Plumb to accept arbitration and respect unions as valid partners was crucial in creating positive change. This led to astonishing events like the negotiations of 1889, in which Plumb selected Williams to represent his interests, while the miners selected mine operator Colonel Rend to represent theirs!

Still, an ugliness pervaded these early struggles. The 1889 strike resulted in riots, beatings, and arrests. Racial discrimination was rampant, as successive waves of immigration brought Slavic, Italian, and Hungarian workers who were often scapegoated by those from the Isles. Such ethnic animosity was just as much of a threat to organized labor as any employer; an 1894 strike, for example, was defeated when British miners turned on Hungarian miners.[88] The worst violence was visited upon strikebreakers, who were often from minority communities and desperate for work. In one of Streator's darkest chapters, "blacklegs" who continued mining during the strike were murdered in cold blood by their coworkers, who laced their sandwiches with arsenic salt.[89]

The greatest threat to miners, however, remained the work itself. In 1909, a mere eight years after Reuben's arrival in Streator and only nineteen miles away, the horrors of mining would blast on to the pages of national newspapers with the disaster in Cherry, Illinois, where 259 men and boys would die in the underground inferno known as the Cherry Mine Disaster. It was an event that would burn bright in the young mind of Reuben Soderstrom and in the evolution of Illinois workplace rights, conditions, and compensation.

CHAPTER 4
1902-1903

BOTTLE FACTORY WORK AND REUBEN'S FIRST STRIKE

LIFE IN THE GLASS FACTORY

After a year of long hours and hard labor in Streator, thirteen-year-old Reuben had managed to save himself a tidy sum of over $35.00, a lot of money in 1902. But he would never get to enjoy the fruits of his labor. That year, Reub's dad wrote in desperation to his son that he had no money for taxes. For his family's sake, Reuben sent his full savings to Minnesota to pay his father's tax bill.[90]

By this point Reub had left the trolley tracks and begun work in Streator's famous glass factories, which flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the region's fuel supply, central location, and an abundance of St. Peter's Sandstone, a form of high-grade silica.[91] "Streator has very few equals and no superiors in the United States as a location for glass making," declared American Bottle Company President MW Jack.[92] He was not alone in this assessment; Streator soon became a major bottling capital, with three important plants making all manner of bottles, jars, and plate glass.

In the era before mechanization, glass production in Streator depended on highly skilled German blowers and their carefully guarded twisting method of glass production. Streator's German "twisters" made anywhere from $7.00 to as much as $15.00 a day, dwarfing the $2.00 to $3.00 earned by a local miner. This made the glass blowers the elite of Streator's working class, the "Kings of the Drag."[93] Boy helpers like Reuben, however, earned a fraction of what the twisters made. The work for them was brutal; Olga writes:

> Now Reub had changed jobs and had a job in the bottle factory in Streator and here he earned sixty-five cents a day…Reuben worked the night shift and carried bottles from the shop to the layers. He worked ten hours a day and six days a week. There was no work on Sundays and no stores were ever open on Sundays.
>
> Reub often spoke of how tired he was after ten hours of work. He walked home along the railroad tracks and he'd be so tired his lunch pail would hang so low it would bump along the rails. Conditions in the factory were bad, from the hot furnaces and hot bottles. Ventilation was very poor and there were no safety laws or toilets or wash rooms, so you went home blistered and always dirty. He worked under these conditions for three years.[94]

Reuben had a quick temper, which probably landed him in trouble more than once at work. But he was a model tenant at home; he attended church regularly with his Aunt Sophie's scrupulously pious family, and got along particularly well with his cousin Annie, who worked as a seamstress at a tailor shop. She taught Reub to play the guitar, and the two of them would play together for the Salvation Army, at church, fairs, and even on street corners. Still, it was a cold, stern household, far removed from the warmth he'd known at home.

A FAMILY REUNITED

The Soderstroms Come To Streator

By the fall of 1902, Reuben had grown from a rural youth to a street-savvy, hard-working, and politically aware young adult. He had made this journey largely on his own, without immediate family or formal schooling. He was strong, smart, and above all independent. But back in Minnesota, his family missed him. Olga describes, "Mother reached the point where she could not, or would not, tolerate this separation from Reub—and she was determined on this move, that we must go to Streator."[95] It must have come as a delightful surprise and partial shock to Reuben when he received a letter from his mother reporting the sale of their Minnesota property and imminent move to Streator. Olga continues:

> In October of 1902, we moved. I was five years old and remember the train ride well, the bench seats, eating our lunch of sandwiches on the train, the not too clean coach and the black smoke from the engine. We first came to Chicago en route from Cokato, Minn [sic]…I do remember Chicago. The cobble streets, the horses pulling the street cars; I remember that they changed teams of horses en route to Auntie Lind's home.[96]

Aunt Emma Lind was John Soderstrom's sister, and she oversaw a boisterous, happy household. She ran a boarding house featuring twenty-five cent meals, a candy counter, and a shoe repair shop in the basement for her husband, Andrew. Along with her father (who lived with them), Emma had eleven children, though she lost six to illnesses. All the Linds were talented musicians, and loved to play for guests like the Soderstroms. "They were such a happy out-going family," Olga remembered. "So much musical talent, so happy-go-lucky, so different from Aunt Sophie, where the home was solemn, sad and so religious."[97]

After a short stay with the Linds, the Soderstroms finally made their way by rail to their new hometown of Streator. For Reuben, now 14, it must have been pure elation. He was joined in his new, dynamic city by his mother, father, older brother Paul, and younger siblings Lafe, Joe, and Olga. He and Aunt Sophie met the rural Minnesotans at the Streator Depot with a welcoming smile and bouquet of wild flowers, and immediately gave them a tour of the town's colorful neighborhoods as they walked home.

Building A New Home

Reunited at last, the Soderstrom family immediately began their search for a home. Olga writes:

> When we landed in Streator, Mother said we had Eight Hundred Dollars after selling all our belongings in Minnesota. Mother was determined that this money was to buy a home—it was to be the full payment—no more mortgages and no more losing our home.
>
> We lived with Aunt Sophie until a house was found. One was, but it was on the wrong side of the tracks. It was in need of repairs—it had no water—just a well, no foundation, and was a two-story house with four rooms down and three rooms upstairs. Dad had his bedroom upstairs and two things we did bring from Minnesota were Dad's organ and his desk which had a roll top…
>
> One upstairs room was used for closet and storage. The three boys, Paul, Reub and Lafe, slept in one bed, and downstairs, Mother, Joseph and I slept in one bed. Half of the kitchen was made into a shoe shop so Dad could get at his trade and there was a little Swedish Mission Church just up the street from us and Dad would serve as pastor. We bought our furniture second hand…and I remember we had two carpets—wall to wall—Mother used one in the summer and the other in the winter…We used the well to preserve food. We'd place it in the well which kept it cold…
>
> One thing Reuben hated was wash day. No electric washers in those days, and our wash machine was one you

> could stand or sit and work, like a hand car. Pull the top lever with your hand and push with your foot. Some machines worked with a wheel that you turned. When Reub came home for lunch, he'd have to work this machine…[98]

The Soderstrom household was a mere 30 feet from the train tracks; the sights and sounds of the massive metal cars rocking and rolling through town were awesome. The coal cars provided a welcome target; pieces of coal that fell from the heaping mounds in the hopper cars were quickly put to use in the family's stove. When the train stopped, it became the covert target of neighborhood boys clambering up the side to toss a few valuable chunks of fuel down to co-conspirators before being chased away by gruff train hands.

Energetic and industrious, Reuben also took care of the house. With his younger brother Lafe, he installed gas and water lines for a new furnace, stove, kitchen sink, and indoor bathroom. Reuben also built the front porch, dug a partial basement, and installed a concrete foundation and sidewalk. Reuben protected the house, too, waking in the middle of one particular night to the smell of smoke from his father's kerosene heater; Reub smashed a window and kicked the lantern outside before it set the house on fire.

While Reuben continued his job in the glass factory at the beginning of 1903, his father began working at Lloyd's Shoe Store for $10 a week. But John soon quit and opened his own shop in the basement of a saloon at the corner of Main and Park. He also resumed preaching at the local Lutheran Church. "Reub used to carry a hot lunch to Dad everyday, as he, of course, came home everyday for his own lunch," Olga fondly remembered. "I remember after school I'd have to go to Dad and get twenty-five cents for which I'd buy meat for the next day…Dad used to give us a penny and we'd stop at Hill Brothers Ice Cream Parlor and get either a penny ice cream cone or a penny's worth of scrap candy—the crumbs of candy left in the tray when the larger pieces had been sold."[99]

Reub's brothers soon found work as well. Eldest brother Paul went to work at Ted Taylor's bicycle shop, maturing into an excellent mechanic. Reub's younger brother Lafe, meanwhile, developed a love for the earth and worked for a gardener in the summer. Still, the family's income continued to be undermined by their father's good intentions and itinerant, wistful ways. It was at this point that Reuben finally confronted his father; Olga writes:

> Many times Reub had to pay Dad's leather bills. Dad was so kind and generous—often put soles and heels on shoes for people who never paid for them. Dad would never bill them. They were poor and he felt that if they had had the money they would have paid him. He used to have a safe, too—for what purpose, I could never guess, for there was never any money in it….At times, Reub also had to pay the rent for the shop…When Dad first opened his own shop downtown, he again became restless and wanted to leave Streator. Reub was about fourteen years old and one day went down to Dad's shop. He said he talked to him for more than an hour, and counseled him against this constant roaming. Dad was past sixty years old, and nothing could be gained by moving. Dad took Reub's advice and we stayed in Streator."[100]

It was then that the Soderstrom family experienced a touchstone moment; fourteen-year old Reuben overruled his own father and became the family leader. Not only had he forged an original path in a new and exciting town, he worked under extraordinary conditions to pay the household bills and taxes, with an unusual strength and courage that inspired his family to follow him all the way to Streator. Though the family's second son, he was the one who took charge, putting a conclusive end to their itinerancy. Streator was home, and it was here that Reuben Soderstrom first assumed his role as a leader.

REUBEN'S FIRST STRIKE

On May 1, 1903, the boys at the Streator Bottle Company went on strike. Undoubtedly, 14-year-old Reuben Soderstrom was in the middle of the mix, experiencing the impact of organized labor for the first time. Reuben and his coworkers, boys 12 to 16 years of age, performed all manner of tasks, from keeping the furnaces stoked to operating as "pickers" who picked cooled bottles and placed them into shipping cartons, which they carried to a loading dock. The work could be backbreaking; as Bennett notes, "There was a great deal of human labor and drudgery required to produce bottles."[101] For this work the boys received at most 75 cents per day—a miserly amount.

Demanding a higher wage, the boys walked out. Although their strike was primarily about pay, it had an ethnic dimension as well. The boys, mostly native-born Americans, were also protesting the loss their jobs to unskilled adult Italian co-workers when production was slow. Not only were the Italians given their jobs, the boys asserted, they were paid 25 cents more per hour for the same work.

Of course, the Italian wage advantage was nothing compared to the salary of the German glass blowers. The artisan twisters averaged eight times what the Italians earned for their normal work.[102] Unlike the boys and Italians, who were at the bottom rung of the laboring classes in Streator, the Germans were strongly organized. The Green Glass Blowers of America was a particularly strong group in Streator, which had hosted the organization's 1896 convention.[103] As a condition of their employment, the blowers required that their sons serve as their helpers and learn the craft. This further worsened relations within the factory, which was split between Italian men, German families, and a rag-tag army of native-born boys, of which Reuben was a member.[104]

Outrage over these disparities drove the boys to form a committee to present formal grievances to Superintendent Evans of the Streator Bottle Company. At the heart of their demands was a 20 cent per day wage increase. There is no historical record of the boys' actual meetings amongst themselves, likely held in walks home after exhausting days of work or in the shade of trees along the Vermillion River far out of earshot. Whatever the process, one must admire the gumption of these children as they stood across the street from the bottle factory on May 1—the day immediately following payday—as they were jeered by some workers, ignored by others, and respected by none. For the first time in Reuben's life he stood up for workplace principle, and it is no small coincidence that this burgeoning self-confidence immediately followed his principled confrontation regarding family stability with his father months earlier.
Superintendent Evans' response was dismissive, replying that the boys could "stay out and play" without their strike ever affecting production. He said he was fully aware of the wage difference between the boys and the Italians, but that the latter were full-grown men with families to support. He further argued that the boys, unlike the immigrant Italians, had the opportunity to become high-earning glass blowers someday, provided they "behave themselves."[105]

The motley group of boys must have wandered town, committed to neither school nor work. They must have strategized, plotted, and stewed about their predicament. Perhaps there was a charter and rules, or a club that most likely devolved at some point to sandlot baseball. At home, they may have been supported or disciplined. Ultimately, the strike lasted less than a week. The boys begrudgingly returned to work without a single concession. They had no underlying union structure or leadership to hold the line against Superintendent Evans. Further, their strike was ill-timed. Glass work was seasonal; factories generally operated from September until June, when the furnaces were relined.[106]

Although it ended in failure, the strike taught Reuben some valuable lessons. First, it demonstrated the importance of solidarity. Had all the workers struck, there might have been a chance for success; without such support the movement was doomed to fail. Further, racial divisions at the factory were toxic and portended many challenges ahead in the American labor movement. Lastly, he learned successful strikers must be armed

with patience and prepared for sacrifice and long struggle.

But mechanization was rapidly changing the glass industry. 1903 also saw the invention of the automatic bottle-making machine, a device making blowers increasingly expendable.[107] The "boys strike" of May was quickly followed by a strike by the skilled blowers that August. Like the boys, the blowers soon went back to work, unable to gain any compromise.[108] But Reuben's eyes and ears were now open to the world of labor and management, and to the value of solidarity, patience, and strategy. As 1904 began, a series of changes would soon expose him to a more positive, powerful, and practiced type of organized labor, and a man who would become one of the most important influences in young Reuben's life.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

GLASS BLOWING

The "Twisters," expert German glass blowers, were famous for their spinning method of bottle making which resulted in no mold line. Twisting glass was a fascinating, artful process. A blower would start with an iron pipe ranging in size from eight to twenty feet, depending on the desired size of the bottle. He would dip the end into molten glass, then sway the mass while blowing into the pipe until a basic bottle shape emerged. Experienced blowers could twist sixteen pounds of molten glass to create five-gallon jugs. Others assisted blowers in the process; gatherers collected the molten glass from the cauldron on the end of the tube, while "snap-up boys" snapped the bottles off after they'd been blown. Helpers would then carry the bottles to a tempering room to cool.

This skill paid handsomely; twisters in a city like Streator earned $7 to $15 dollars a day in 1900. Expert blowers could make as much as $25 a day, far exceeding the $2 to $4 the average miner made. Twisters were also paid in gold, unlike the miners who were typically paid half their wages in company scrip. This made Twisters the elite of the working class, and the money they brought in could fuel a town's economy.

Although well-paid, Twisters suffered from poor work conditions. The intense heat of the furnace covered the workers in sweat, while heavy smoke and fumes brought chronic bronchial problems. Workers (especially the snap-up boys) cut and burned themselves on the hot glass, and the lack of decent medical care meant these injuries often lead to infection and even death.

Glass blowing played a major role in the life of Streator. By 1900 the glass industry was the second largest employer in the city, right behind coal mining.[109] One of the world's largest deposits of St. Peter's sandstone sat just 16 miles north in Ottawa, and the abundance of coal provided easy fuel for the furnaces. Soon, German artisans flooded the town, bringing their skill and salaries with them. This money helped turn Streator into a "wide open town." By 1898 there were "67 saloons, 25 gambling houses, and several houses of ill repute awaiting the bottle blowers' pay checks."[110]

The importance of glass blowers as a class made them of great interest to organized labor. In 1896, the Green Glass Blowers of America held their national convention in Streator in affiliation with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Samuel Gompers himself came to address the convention on the virtues of being a union man. Glass blowing craft unions were traditionally strong; however, only a small percentage of all industry employees were organized. The unskilled laborers, mostly young boys and Italian immigrants who performed menial tasks at the plant, had no union to represent them. They received no support from the artisan blowers, who preferred that their own boys be used as helpers so their glass-blowing skill could be passed down. These workers were more likely to turn on each other than unite in common cause, resulting in a series of failed strikes.

In 1902, Edward Jones of Streator was elected president of the United Glass Workers of America, a union with the expressed objective of organizing unskilled workmen throughout the United States. As one of the largest locals in the country, the glass blowers of Streator held considerable influence over union action nationwide. In 1906, the union engaged in a series of strikes to improve pay and conditions.

Their actions came too late, however, as changes in technology undermined the influence of the blowers. At the turn of the century, Michael Owens (himself a glass blower) invented a bottle-making machine that revolutionized the industry. By 1903 his Owens Bottle Machine Company had created an industrial device

which could produce four bottles per second. The disintegration of the glassblowing trade was rapid. As historian Daniel Rodgers notes, "In 1896 the entire output of bottles, jars, and window glass was made by gangs of skilled men and boy helpers, who gathered, blew and shaped the glass by hand. Twenty years later half the jar and bottle blowers were gone, and the window glass workers were rapidly being replaced with automatic or semiautomatic machines."[111]

The final blow came with the 1918 passage of the Volstead Act, enforcing the prohibition of alcohol. With no more beer bottles to make, the remaining glass blowers lost their jobs, and the "kings of the working class" disappeared forever from the streets of Streator.

PILLAR I

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: CHILD LABOR IN AMERICA

The devastating economic hardships of the nineteenth century forced many American families to put their young children to work, and the Soderstroms were no exception. Reuben spent his childhood in blacksmith shops, trolly tracks, and filthy factories, all to send meager money home to his impoverished parents. As a boy in Streator, he worked amid the danger of rolling cars on the rail lines, the blazing furnaces of local glass factories, and the loud print shops of the local newspaper. For Reuben the child, there was scant evidence of workplace safety or childhood education.

Reuben's tragic childhood was not uncommon. By the turn of the twentieth century, one out of every five children in the United States aged 10 to 14—over 1.75 million in total—were earning their own living.[112] Industrialization presented factory work involving simple, repetitive tasks, and manufacturers lowered costs even further by hiring children for these jobs. Young and desperate, children were hired at low wages to work in dangerous conditions. Many industries came to rely on this labor; in some states more than one out of every four textile workers was under the age of sixteen.[113] For many, factory toil at such an age "crippled the soul of the child at the time that it was just opening itself" to the wonders of life.[114]

The horrors of child labor can be glimpsed in the Lewis Hine photographs placed on these pages. One of America's seminal photojournalists, Hine was born in Wisconsin and became an ardent recorder of the American child labor market and workplace conditions in the early 1900s. In 1908, he became the photographer for the National Child Labor Committee in New York, and spent a decade aiding their lobbying to influence legislative changes.

Hine's photographs show the alarming number of amputations children suffered from their work on trolley lines, railroad cars, and underground mining carts. Because of their dexterity, children often were ordered to scamper across cars and often fell to the tracks. One of Hine's subjects, 14-year-old Frank Monongah, is pictured on these pages; he lost both legs when he slipped onto the tracks in the damp darkness of a West Virginia mine in front of an oncoming cart. In 1904, another Hine subject, 11-year-old Neil Gallagher, lost a leg when it was crushed between two railroad cars; he stayed in the hospital for nine weeks and was uneducated and unemployable when he left, hoping to find work in a pool hall.

The "breaker boys," also captured here by Hine's seemingly omnipresent lens, spent interminable days hunched over bins of coal in crude stools breaking impurities from coal lumps with their hands, hammers, and chisels. Their efficiency was monitored by taskmasters, who were also photographed, armed with thick wooden rods. Other children were relegated to coal companies' underground tunnels to squeeze through tight places or pull carts as if they were mules. And if the kids did not suffer death or amputation, they were subjected to severe dust and early onset of miner's lung. Their lives were over before they began. Many children worked in the coal mines of Streator, Illinois.

One can only imagine the undocumented, off-the-job horrors also endured by these children. Living in a man's world, they were subjected to physical abuse, salary abuse, and sometime sexual abuse. The Dickensian conditions of their lives included shantytowns, railroad cars, thievery and street brawls. Often, child workers

spoke different languages than each other and their taskmasters. Fluent in both Swedish and English, Reuben adapted to the multiple languages of his constantly changing workplaces, and there is no doubt that his daily survival included phrases of Italian or German and even Scottish colloquialisms.

LEGALIZED EXPLOITATION

So what were governments across the United States doing to outlaw the child labor market? Sadly, the answer was often very little. Many state officials personally benefitted from the child labor, and openly flouted what meager protections existed to save money. Governor Braxton Comer of Alabama, for example, evaded the 12-year-old minimum age law in his state by putting his child laborers' younger siblings—some as young as six—to work in his Avondale textile mill, placing all their wages on a single paycheck to make it appear as if the eldest child earned a fair wage. Mother Jones savagely attacked such moral and religious hypocrisy, writing that the "brutal governor" perpetrated such abuse while acting as "a pillar of the First Methodist Church in Birmingham. On Sundays he gets up and sings 'O Lord, will you have another star for my crown when I get there?'"[115] In Reuben's Illinois, legislation meant to protect working women and children precipitated the creation of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA), the Illinois Federation's greatest foe, which saw the law quickly repealed.[116]

Child protection advocates took their cause to the national level, and by 1916 Congress passed and President Wilson signed the Keating-Owen Act into law, which established federal minimum-age requirements for work. But while Congress sought child protections in law, business interests worked to undo them in court. Under direction of the conservative Chief Justice White, the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions undermining many pro-labor laws, including child protection acts. In 1918, it declared the Keating-Owen Act unconstitutional in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, stating that Congress could not regulate the manufacture of goods, even if those goods were sold across state lines (a decision later reversed). In a stinging dissent, the famous Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ridiculed the majority's tortured reasoning that congress had the right to prohibit "evil" goods—such as liquor or prostitution—but not "evil" processes, declaring:

> If there is any matter upon which the civilized countries have agreed—far more unanimously than they have with regard to intoxicants and some other matters over which this country is now emotionally aroused—it is the evil of premature and excessive child labor…this Court always had disavowed the right to intrude its judgment upon questions of policy or morals. It is not for this Court to pronounce when prohibition is necessary to regulation if it ever may be necessary--to say that it is permissible as against strong drink but not as against the product of ruined lives.[117]

Congress then tried taxing factories and mines that employed children in the Revenue Act of 1919. Again the Supreme Court ruled Congress's actions unconstitutional, stating in *Bailey V. Drexel Furniture Company* that taxes could not be used to regulate employers (another decision abandoned by later courts).

Eventually Congress sought to bypass the obstructionist court altogether and proposed a constitutional amendment giving Congress the power to regulate child labor for those under the age of sixteen. Factory owners demonized the move, wildly charging in the pages of the pro-business *Manufacturers' Record* that:

> This proposed amendment is fathered by socialists, communists and Bolshevists. They are the active workers in its favor. They look forward to its adoption as giving them the power to nationalize the children of the land and bring about in this country the exact conditions which prevail in Russia…If adopted, this amendment would be the greatest thing ever done in America in behalf of the activities of hell. It would make millions of young people under eighteen years of age idlers in brain and body, and thus make them the devils' best workshop. It would destroy the initiative and self-reliance and manhood and womanhood of all the coming generations."[118]

Thanks in part to such characterizations, the Child Labor Amendment was only ratified by 28 states and never became law.

While owners tried to cast child labor as a character-building bulwark against "idleness," their own actions indicated otherwise. It was poverty, not industriousness, that forced families like the Soderstroms to send their children off to work. Owners wouldn't dare sentence their own daughters and sons to such a fate, sending them instead for the schooling they so fiercely denied other children. They justified such blatant hypocrisy by claiming that they were actually acting on the children's best interests, sparing them from the corrosive effects education could have on those fated to a life of labor. "There is such a thing as too much education for working people sometimes," explained one New England mill manager in his testimony on the issue before the US Senate Committee on the Relations Between Labor and Capital. "I have seen cases where young people are spoiled for labor by a little too much refinement."[119] As ISFL President John Walker noted in response to the IMA's attacks on the child labor amendment:

> There are a great many men who are manufacturers in Illinois who are decent, broad-minded, well-informed and generous, but the average manufacturer is not much different from other men, and as it is to his immediate interest financially to get cheap labor and high profits, to have the kind of labor he can exploit most easily and in the greatest measure, and as child labor has always been the most desirable kind for those purposes, that is the thing that influences the selfish manufacturer. He is in business to make money.[120]

This money came at a heavy price, often paid in disease and disfigurement. A 1923 study of working children under the age of eighteen in Illinois found over 4,655 injuries, 4,160 cases of temporary disablement, 455 permanent disablements, and 40 deaths.[121] Children lucky enough to avoid injury still suffered; child labor victims were left physically stunted and underdeveloped. "One learns not to judge the ages of working children by their physical appearance," the muckraking journalist John Spargo wrote in his child labor expose *The Bitter Cry of Children*, "for they are usually behind other children in height, weight, and girth of chest—often as much as two or three years…In textile mill towns like Biddeford, Me., Manchester, N.H, Fall River and Lawrence, Mass., I have seen many such children, who, if they were twelve or fourteen according to their certificates and the companies' registers, were not more than ten or twelve in reality."[122]

"CREATING A NEW DAY FOR AMERICAN CHILDREN"

In light of this, it is not surprising that many of the most forceful advocates for child labor reform were themselves products of that very environment. Illinois State Federation of Labor President John Walker had worked alongside his father in the coal mines since the age of nine or ten, as had labor leader John Williams. Williams later recalled working there with a "dread at times amounting to loathing."[123] As a teenager he banded together with other young men from the pits to form a "study group," discussing their readings and topics of the day. Williams would later use this model to form an education program for children who, like him, had been denied a traditional education. Williams assigned readings from classical literature to contemporary economics, and arranged borrowing from private libraries.[124]

Reuben began his education as one of Williams' students. Like Williams, Reub's experience had shaped his views on child labor. Although he did not speak much on his personal experience, his sister Olga described Reuben's time as a "victim of the child labor market."[125] In the Streator glass factory where he worked:

> Conditions were bad. Workers would fight, air was polluted from smoke, workers were burned from the hot furnaces and hot bottles. Ventilation was very poor and there were no safety laws or toilets or wash rooms, so you went home blistered and dirty…he rebelled silently about conditions as they were, about children working

> so hard in sweatshops…and determined that he sure was going to try and do something about all these things.[126]

Reuben would grow to become a strong defender of children's rights. "Our children are our most precious resource," he later wrote. "It is on them that the future of our nation depends. Planning for progress should be the aim of our lives and of our state and nation."[127] As a state representative who served as Chairman of the Education Committee in the Illinois House, Soderstrom called for and won many increases in state funding for education. He worked alongside labor officials in the state and nation to pass crucial child labor protections, finding a powerful ally in President Franklin Roosevelt. After seeing his first attempt at ending child labor reversed when the Supreme Court overturned the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, Roosevelt and his supporters finally succeeded with passing the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1938. Defining child labor as "the employment of children under sixteen, or the employment of children under eighteen in occupations designated as hazardous by the Children's Bureau" the FLSA, still in effect today, was the first national legislation to set lasting minimum ages and standards for the employment of youths.[128]

At last the children of the United States would be protected from dangerous adult work. Reuben celebrated the bill's passage in his Labor Day Message of 1939, declaring "Children have been taken out of mills, mines and factories and placed in schools where they are given the opportunity to grow into strong, healthy, fine young men and women."[129] Reuben and his compatriots, many themselves the product of child exploitation, had succeeded in creating a new day for American children.

CHAPTER 5
1904-1905

FROM PRINTER'S DEVIL TO APPRENTICE

REUBEN THE DEVIL

"Mother had ambitions for her children," Olga writes. "She was real anxious to get Reub out of the bottle factory. Bottle factory workers were a rough group and usually heavy drinkers in those days, so she was determined that the boys should have a trade."[130]

Reub's preacher father shared similar concerns. Soon after arriving in Streator, he insisted that Reuben leave the glass factory for an environment more suited for his son. "My father was a very thoughtful sort of person and had been in the ministry," Reuben said in a wide-ranging 1958 interview with Professor Derber at the University of Illinois, "And he thought that the environment of a glass plant wasn't suitable to the growth and development of his son. He said that I either had to return to school or get into some sort of activity where there was an opportunity for education and training. So, not wanting to go back to school, I got myself a place in the print shop."[131]

Actually, it was Reuben's mother who found him his new job. Outgoing and amiable, Anna had made many friends during her first few months in Streator. She knew printers enjoyed a reputation as thinkers and scholars. An apprentice in a print shop was not just working a job or learning a trade; he was receiving an education. As M. Nicholson, a printer from Cincinnati, explained, "Conversation in the composing room was of great aid to the beginner, for he could hear arguments, disputes, sometimes a brief lecture on almost every question from spelling, punctuation, history, on and through to law, medicine, theology and other more or less occult topics."[132]

This was the education Anna wanted for her promising son, and she set out to make it a reality. Olga remembers that "Soon she [Anna] talked to a friend, Walter Boxendale, who was a printer on one of the Streator papers, to see if he would help Reub get a job there."[133] He did, and Reub became a printer's assistant, or "devil," at the *Streator Independent Times*.

At $3 a week, it was a significant pay cut. Unbeknownst to Anna, the working conditions were also dangerous; toxic lead fumes often lead to tuberculosis (nicknamed "printer's disease") and the heavy machinery could easily take a finger or a hand. Yet these hazards gave birth to one of the profession's great (and for Reuben, influential) creations: The International Typographical Union, or ITU. In this cauldron of ideas, machines, and men, Reuben became both a union member and a scholar; where the miner worked with coal and the twisters worked with glass, the printers worked with ideas, discourse, and words. It was in the 1904 newsroom of the Streator Independent Times where Reuben was propelled into a life of leadership by this fortuitous confluence of labor and letters.

A "Poor-Boy's School"

Reuben, like all introduced to the print shop, started as a simple assistant or—in shop parlance—a "devil." A devil like Reuben worked long days that began before dawn and often lasted long past sunset. As Soderstrom later described, "My work consisted at the outset of the lighting of the fire in the old cannon stove in the

morning, sweeping the floor, setting heads occasionally, and feeding the flat bed press all afternoon, while the daily edition of the Independent-Times was run off."[134] He'd typically stay past the 5:00 P.M. closing to prepare for the following day. If the press broke down or paper jammed production, Reub stayed late until the problem was fixed. Soon, he became responsible for the maintenance and repair of the paper's two linotypes, both of which were complex and cantankerous.

Technical skills were valuable, but the real education for a devil like Reuben was in the composing room, where the printers discussed the news of the day. As a child laborer he had exhibited diligence and physical endurance, but the print shop was the first venue for his mind. This was Reuben's school; as he described in this 1958 interview:

> Well, the print shop itself is a poor-boy's school. If a person has a retentive mind, and fortunately I had that, it's possible to pick up an enormous amount of information—not with respect to the philosophers of the past, perhaps, but current information that happens to be presently appearing in the public press; and the people employed in the print shops, while they are not college trained, are at least well-informed, and information is a very good substitute for education.[135]

Reuben walked into that Streator print shop with an enormous curiosity for the events of the day. It must have been heaven on earth for the boy to find a job that utilized his mind as much as his muscles. By late 1904, the foreman of the composing room invited the quick-minded Reub to become an apprentice linotype operator, an offer he accepted. He devoured the news of the day, memorizing entire articles as he typed them into the machine, which he recited to his family in the evenings over supper, including stories about President Teddy Roosevelt in Washington DC, the Wright brothers' flight using a petrol engine at Kitty Hawk, or the Thanksgiving Day snowstorm game between Fielding Yost's Michigan and Amos Alonzo Stagg's Chicago Maroon (Michigan won 28-0). Reuben witnessed the life of the newspaper, watched the back and forth between writers and editors, and learned what made for an effective, compelling story.

By the age of 15, Reuben had become a fixture at the press. "Of course, everybody in the office knew Reub," writer and Soderstrom interviewer Walter Myers later wrote. "The hand compositors, pressmen, foremen, editor, reporters and special writers were his intimate friends."[136] One writer, however, took a particular interest in Reuben and his abilities: 51-year-old John Williams, legendary leader, scholar, and in-house columnist at the Times. Reuben became his apprentice, a relationship which would have the single greatest impact on Reuben's life course.

A Mentor

In 1904, John Williams was well-known throughout the Midwest as an arbiter, labor leader, and columnist for the *Streator Independent Times*. He also wrote for various magazines and papers, including his weekly column "Francis of Fabius" (which took its name from the Fabian Society, a British organization that helped organize that nation's Labour Party in 1906).[137]

Like Reuben, Williams was a product of child labor. Born in Wales in 1853, he moved with his family to America in search of a better life, but he instead found himself—at the age of twelve—working in the mines alongside his father. He despised the "drudgery of the mines," and saw education as the best means of escape. In 1871 at age eighteen, Williams moved to Streator and began a program of self-education by borrowing books from the private libraries of prominent citizens and reading into the night after twelve-hour days in the mines. At nineteen, Williams sought out others like himself, creating a study group with twelve of his peers to examine the issues of the day, especially the betterment of the working class. "John Williams' quest for education was not a selfish venture," writes Dale Bennett in his examination of the leader. "He desired not

only self-betterment, but the betterment of all society."[138]

So it is no surprise that the seasoned Williams soon became impressed with the character of the curious boy who set his weekly columns in the print shop. The 51 year-old Williams soon took on 15 year-old Reuben as an informal pupil. Bennett tells us:

> Williams liked the young apprentice and encouraged him to pursue a program of self-education similar to that which Williams had pursued so many years before. Williams told Soderstrom that he ought to read the classics of literature and economics. Williams arranged for Soderstrom to borrow books from the private libraries of people in the community so that he could benefit from all the resources available. From time to time Williams would question Soderstrom about his reading and discuss the material that he had read.[139]

In a 1958 interview, Reuben told historian Milton Derber:

> John Williams was a great man…The man was brilliant, and he liked people that could discuss matters with him. He used to come up with his column for the newspaper and there would be some point in there—something he would point up—and I was interested in [it] and I'd discuss that with him…"why don't you go down to the library and get this book and get that book," and he had a list of them. I read every one of them that he pointed out, so I didn't waste any time in my reading. It was stuff that was really helpful to me.[140]

An education commenced. Williams designed an ambitious curriculum for Reuben, which the young student eagerly devoured during daily visits to Streator's grand Carnegie library, where he would pick up another book on Williams' list or to read regional newspapers. Under his guidance, Reub read works by labor leaders like John Mitchell, economics professors like Richard Ely, and progressive legislators such as William U'Ren and James W. Sullivan. Williams also encouraged Reuben to read the daily newspapers from Chicago, especially the editorial pages. Reuben read them all, from established papers like The Sun Times to the often xenophobic Chicago Tribune to the Chicago Daily News and Chicago Daily Herald.

Reub also read the works of the up-and-coming "muckrakers," reform-oriented investigative journalists who exposed abuse, fraud and scandal. The most famous of these, Upton Sinclair, wouldn't write his famous work *The Jungle*, on the horrid conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants, until 1906. But Ray Baker's *Right to Work*, published in 1903, paved the way by shedding light on coal mine conditions, coal strikes, and non-striking workers. Reuben also used the library pass Williams procured for him to check out anything else of interest. "Whatever early education I think that I came by," Reuben later said, "I was indebted to the library of the city of Streator, because on the shelves of that library I was able to secure…the rather heavy type reading before I had attained the age of twenty."[141]

Perhaps most impactful for Reuben was Williams' invitation to attend the "Sunday Evening Forums," informal salons created by Williams for collegial debate over matters of the day. As manager of the Plumb Opera house, Williams hosted weekly lectures on the old wooden stage by inviting academics and politicians to speak. The events were open to all for 25 cents. As Reuben related, "We had folks come there that were famous ministers and famous priests and also famous rabbis. Clarence Darrow appeared many times and I had the privilege of hearing him."[142] One can imagine the smoky air and cramped quarters of the small opera house as men filled every seat to attend Williams' events.

Reub soaked up these speeches like a sponge, and he spent hours with Williams exploring details of how to improve government and the workplace. Soon Reub began writing his own thoughts for the first time. He quickly grasped the weight of words or the turn of a phrase. During their regular meetings, Williams reviewed Reuben's work and encouraged him to write more, cultivating the boy's keen intellect and quick tongue.

The lessons Reuben learned under Williams' tutelage would last a lifetime. Years later, Reuben would maintain that it was Williams who was responsible for sparking his interest in labor relations and encouraged him to become active in the labor movement. "I got to know him pretty well," said Reub, "and it was John E. Williams who wanted me to get into economic activity because he thought there was a chance to do something worthwhile, explaining all the time, of course, that you can't expect any appreciation and darned little credit for this type of service, but men in that field are so badly needed."[143]

OF HEARTH AND HOME

During these years, Reuben's personal life changed as quickly as his professional life. His family added new members, lost others, and became closely interwoven in the daily rhythm of Streator's bustling streets. Reuben, meanwhile, would soon meet the other person who would change him in a more profoundly personal way than Williams ever could.

Family Matters

Guests were a large part of Soderstrom family life. Some were Chicago relatives who traveled the 80 miles via train to visit Streator. Reub's grandfather, Anders Soderstrom, was one of the most frequent. Grandpa Soderstrom lived in Chicago with Aunt Emma Lind. Olga fondly recounted his visits. "He was a grand old gentleman," she later said of him. "He used to make acorn dolls and acorn pipes for we kids."[144] Sometimes other members of the boisterous Lind family would show up to visit. The guests were always a breath of fresh air in the Soderstrom house. Often, the Soderstrom family would make its way to Aunt Sophie Johnston's house. Though somber, she still knew how to entertain guests. "I remember eating meals with Auntie Johnston," wrote Olga. "What a table she would set; so much variety and if you didn't take a second helping, Aunt Sophie was insulted."[145]

Often family visitors would bring "adopted" members, including Reub's new "cousin" Tina. Olga explains, "Aunt Emma, like our Dad, wanted to help homeless girls so Tina was adopted by our grandparents, probably not legally, was nevertheless very much part of the family, and she visited us in Streator on several occasions. She too had a happy personality."[146] As Olga noted, the Linds weren't the only ones to take in those without a home. "In Minnesota, Dad and Mother always had a homeless girl in their home or one who needed help. So it was when we settled in Streator, we had Nettie Johnson living with us for several years. She found work with a wealthy family by the name of Barlow, but our home was her home."[147]

The brothers Soderstrom were growing up quickly. Reuben's work and study had an impact on his family, especially on his younger brother Lafe, who was undoubtedly captivated by Reuben's suppertime reports from the newspaper print shop. In June of 1905, 15-year-old Lafe moved to nearby Minonk to begin work as a printer's devil. Like Reuben, Lafe would eventually complete his apprenticeship as a linotype operator and gain membership in the ITU.

Meanwhile, Reub's rambunctious older brother Paul continued to thrive as a mechanic. "Automobiles were just coming in and he would work on cars as well as bikes," Olga recounts. "I remember he'd come home at lunch on every type of bike--huge one-wheel ones, sometimes a bike with a small wheel in the front and a huge wheel in the back, like you'd see circus riders use."[148]

Of course, working on cars and bikes was exciting for the thrill-seeking Paul. The Streator Motor Company was established in 1905 to build the "Halladay Auto."[149] They needed testers to drive a heavily loaded, stripped down version of the car for 500 miles at high speed, and Paul soon signed on to drive alongside

daredevils like future World War I Ace Eddie Rickenbacker and the Fisher brothers.[150] The work was dangerous. The dirt track on the north end of Bloomington Street was bumpy and wet and the new automobiles were unpredictable and dirty. But by all reports, Paul would return home muddy, greasy and happy.

Reuben's little brother Joe, sister Olga, and mother kept the home and practiced English; little Olga spoke only Swedish when she first moved to Streator. Reuben's father continued as a cobbler and preacher, acting as the peacemaker and conscience of the family. "He was the kindest man that ever lived" Reuben remembered.[151] Olga concurs, writing, "I remember Dad as the most patient man…[he] never raised his voice, he was angelic."[152] About his mother, Reuben said "Well, she is of course the mother, probably more practical than father, don't you see? And had the responsibility of raising the family."[153] Olga was more direct. "In our family, Mother dominated completely."[154]

As teenagers, Paul, Reuben, and Lafe collected a mismatched group of friends from the glass factory, print shop, bike shop, and the mines. In the bustling, small city, teenage immigrant boys from Italy, Scotland, and Sweden most likely bumped into each other fishing on the Vermillion River, hunting for mushrooms in the woods or competing for candy at Hill Brothers. There were baseball games, brawls, and bike races on muddy streets against trolley cars that carried sneaky, non-paying boy passengers.

Close to City Park, the Soderstrom's small house near the railroad tracks was a natural gathering place for Reuben's friends. At Reub's encouragement, the group started weekly poker nights, but his attempt to hold the game at his house did not end well; Anna chased them all out of the house. According to Olga, Rub "had some friends up in his room and they were playing cards. Mother caught them and she had a stove poker in her hands and chased them out of the house and she destroyed the cards."[155]

In the summer of 1905, the family went to the first Streator Chautauqua together. A ten-day traveling tent show providing intellectual uplift as well as entertainment, the "adult education" event had spread across the country since its start at Chautauqua Lake in New York State in 1874. The Streator version was an affair to remember; "The Villa Park grounds…were enclosed with a wire fence, lights were strung in, and a tent seating 1500 was erected," writes Streator historian Paula Angle. "By the opening date…fifty families had put up their own tents as temporary living quarters…Indeed the enthusiasm had become so great that a 'permanent' auditorium of wood, seating nearly 2,000 persons, was later built."[156]

Here families like the Soderstroms enjoyed a festive atmosphere filled with music, games and nature talks. Local children like Joe and Olga attended demonstrations to make crafts, while housewives such as Anna joined in cooking lessons offering special recipes. Reuben and Lafe, likely at the urging of John Williams, attended a lecture by famed socialist and labor leader Eugene V. Debs simply titled "Social Problems." The boys braved record rains under the crowded tent to hear Debs inveigh against Rockefeller and Carnegie and call for a more equitable distribution of wealth.[157]

These were good years for Reuben. He was surrounded by family and busy as a typesetter, student, and adventurous friend. He was happier than he'd been his entire life, and it is appropriate that as a 17-year-old in the summer of 1905, he would meet the love of his life.

Reuben Meets Jeanne Shaw

Jeanne Shaw rejected Reuben on his first attempt to court her at the Hill Brothers Confectionary; it was only after repeated attempts that she agreed to a date. It is most likely they met each other there with a gaggle of other teenagers on a weekend night, when most residents of the town went walking on Main Street under the

new street lamps. Before long, however, Reub was spending most of his time outside of work with Jeanne. They wiled away Saturday afternoons together, sharing popsicles in the park and seeing plays like "A Fight For Love" at the Plumb Opera House, and attending dances like the Elks Ball.[158]

Born in Scotland, Jeanne had emigrated to the United States with her parents when she was a child. She quickly procured work in Streator as a telephone operator, often working nights and weekends at the switchboard connecting calls to residences or placing long distance calls to Chicago or Urbana.

A "date" for Reuben and Jeanne was typically a long walk or a chaperoned visit to the porch of Jeanne's home, therefore making it public for all to see. Reuben, proud of his appearance and new suit, would avoid the muddy streets and walk the wooden plank sidewalks to see Jeanne, or wait to walk her home from her operator job. Full of the vitality and knowledge that would become his lifelong characteristics, young Reuben most likely talked a lot during his outings with the Scottish Jeanne, and she was undoubtedly attracted to his curiosity, confidence, and energy. Some correspondence from the time shows him to be quite smitten with her, and there's no doubt that he often plucked some wildflowers for her or surprised her with candy or a soda.

Jeanne was a good match for the brainy Reuben. She was smart and independent, supportive yet unafraid to speak her mind. "There was nothing shy about Jeanne," recalled Olga.[159] In her Reuben had found a partner who could match him in conviction and care. As Reuben later described her, "She was a grand person…[who] encouraged me in most of the things I did, and maybe my severest critic…she was very proud and glad to have me engaged in this type of [labor] activity."[160] Although strong in spirit, Jeanne suffered from poor health, suffering from a persistent and life-threatening struggle with asthma.

In addition to her Scottish beauty and wit, Jeanne had other essential qualities that made her an excellent companion for young Reuben: she was adventurous, stoic, and could endure radical changes of fortune without losing faith. He most certainly appreciated her resilience, support, quick wit and fortitude. As we will see, she maintained a life of her own while encouraging him in his political career. These qualities would be important for their blossoming relationship, because soon they would endure long periods of separation as Reub began his years barnstorming the great cities of the Midwest.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

A DEMANDING CURRICULUM

John Williams did not go easy on young Reuben; he filled the young student's days with a rich, challenging list of authors and works. The writers Williams assigned had rich lives and complex ideas, and were revolutionaries in their respective fields. First on William's list was *Organized Labor* by John Mitchell. Mitchell, the orphaned son of a miner, was born and raised in Braidwood, Illinois, a short distance from Streator. He had been a member of the Knights of Labor before joining the UMWA, eventually becoming its president. He led a successful strike of anthracite coal miners in 1902, securing higher pay and shorter hours. President Theodore Roosevelt, who participated in the negotiations, later described Mitchell as "cool, calm, self-controlled, and polite…he shows himself the mental equal, if not the superior" of the mine owners.[161] Mitchell was universally viewed as a skilled negotiator and labor theorist, and his willingness to compromise and pragmatic approach earned him friends in the press and political establishment (as well as enemies within his UMWA). In his writings, Mitchell examined the problems and promises of organized labor, arguing the necessity of unions for the moral and material advancement of workers. He strongly advocated for trade unionism (as opposed to the industry-wide unionism advocated by the Knights of labor) and made a compelling case for union-only shops.[162]

William's list for Reuben also included books by Richard T. Ely, Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin. He argued for a strong, activist government unafraid to play a powerful role in social and economic affairs.[163] Ely was also deeply motivated by his faith, and his work is infused with the mission of the social gospel.[164] His writings, which included *Elementary Principles of Economics*, *The Labor Movement in America*, *Monopolies and Trusts*, and *Outlines of Economics*, espoused support for progressive reforms such as the minimum wage, workman's compensation, child labor laws, and unemployment insurance.

To Mitchell and Ely, Williams soon added essays and writings from progressive political minds such as William U'Ren and James W. Sullivan. Sullivan's book, *Direct Legislation by the Citizenship Through the Initiative and Referendum*, detailed the power of direct democracy in addressing the pervasive influence of corruption and cronyism.[165] U'Ren, a populist Oregonian politician, worked hard on reforms to his state's political process. In making the case for what he termed the "three legs" of direct democracy—Initiative, Referendum, and Recall—U'Ren became one of the first reformers to unite labor unions and farming interests.[166] By 1902 U'Ren succeeded in amending the state constitution to include his "Initiatives and Referendum" reform.

All told, William's reading list was both demanding and illuminating for the young student. Including books on the Founding Fathers, Lincoln, and the Greek philosophers, Reuben's reading list—coupled with his daily presence in the newsroom of the Streator Independent Times—created a unique education that far exceeded the standard classroom fare of the day.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

THE INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHICAL UNION

One of the oldest and most distinguished unions, the International Typographical Union (ITU) worked hard to maintain the rights and dignity of its membership. First formed in the 1850s, the ITU held that a printer's work was not just an occupation; it was his property—his "situation"—and the union ensured his access to it.[167] As Reuben himself wrote, "The union contract is a substantial property right—a worker's title to his job."[168]

To maintain this right, the ITU established an elaborate guild-like structure that harkened back to the early religious scribes of the Dark Ages. Union print houses, nicknamed "chapels," had limitations on how many apprentices could be employed at any time; all apprentices and journeymen were required to be card-carrying union members. All of this was enforced by the chapel's "father" or "chairman."[169]

In the 1880's, the introduction of the linotype—a machine that created an actual "line-of-type"—put many typesetters out of work. Unemployment of printers in some states exceeded 20 percent.[170] Some publishers further claimed that the linotype eliminated the need for apprenticeship, and that operators could become experts in a matter of days. But instead of opposing the introduction of these machines, the ITU instead accepted them and unionized their operators. The union demanded that operators be trained not just in a narrow specialization or function of the machine, but in the craft as a whole.

While some industries had reduced workers to the role of mechanical caretakers, the ITU ensured that their apprentices were trained in a way that maintained their versatility and independence. It was this world of news, machines, and ideas—existing at the intersection of labor unions and public discourse—that the 14-year-old Reuben Soderstrom enthusiastically embraced. He had found the trade that he would practice for decades to come.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

ILLINOIS LABOR IN 1905

Through his reading, Reub began to develop a sense of universal principles of fairness and equality in the workplace. He also gained an awareness of problems within the labor movement. One of the biggest challenges for unions was corruption within leadership, also known as "bossism." In nearby Chicago, one such labor boss, Martin "Skinny" Madden, "took corruption to heights no one ever thought possible."[171] As the leader of the Chicago Building Trades Council, Madden had built an empire of graft, and was known as "a devil incarnate…[the] personification of graft, violence, and intimidation."[172] When the Chicago Federation of Labor was formed in 1903, he used his power and influence to get himself elected president.

Although the labor movement was fractured in its leadership, its base was connecting in important ways. Laborers from different sectors coalesced around the issues of working conditions, hours and safety. The rights of women and children began to draw particular attention. In 1904, a group of reformers organized the National Child Labor Committee to expose the plight of child laborers who worked in clothing mills. In Chicago, a group of educated women led by the illustrious Jane Addams established a residential facility, Hull House, to bring about both neighborhood and social reform. Hull House conducted educational classes on site and worked hard to provide people with opportunities to improve their lives. Pioneering women like Alice Hamilton, a University of Michigan Medical School graduate who later studied bacteriology at Johns Hopkins Medical School, lent their abilities to Hull House. Others, like Northwestern University Law student Florence Kelley, actually moved into the house. Hamilton and Kelley would later help to establish the Woman's Trade Union League, an organization charged in part with educating women about the advantages of trade union membership.[173] These women's organizations developed a close synergy with the larger labor movement. The Woman's Trade Union League was fully supported by the American Federation of Labor. Likewise, many unions were organized at Hull House. Both the AFL and the WTUL aggressively worked to pass and enforce eight-hour laws protecting women in factories.[174] Kelley became the first chief factory inspector for the state, touring plants and reporting unsafe working conditions. She eventually established the National Consumers League.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

THE LINOTYPE

Built in the mid-1880s by German immigrant Ottmer Mergenthaler, the linotype was a machine so revolutionary that Thomas Edison once called it the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Traditional printing relied on individual "typesetters," workers who composed moveable type by hand for each page. The linotype, in contrast, produced an entire line of metal type (a line-o'-type) at once. At the heart of this process were matrices, or molds, for letter forms stored in the machine's magazine. The linotype operator used a 90-character keyboard to assemble the correct matrices, creating a mold for the full line. Molten metal was then poured into that mold, producing a hot metal "slug." This process of "hot metal" typesetting greatly reduced the production time and manpower required to produce a printed page.

Despite many moving parts, the heat required for melting the lead, tin, and antimony used for the slug prevented the use of oil as a lubricant. The high temperature would burn the oil and cause considerable smoke. Graphite powder acted as a replacement, but operators soon found the addition of just a small amount of oil sped the process substantially. The wrong amount, however, could turn the mixture pasty and lodge a "slug" in the machine. An operator would then have to disassemble the machine to dislodge the slug.

The arrival of the linotype was initially disruptive for printers; roughly two printers were eliminated with the introduction of each machine.[175] Unlike the Owens Bottling Machine, however, the linotype did not make craftsmen obsolete. Since the linotype operator had to first read then type the copy to form the words of the article, each operator had to possess excellent memory, spelling and grammatical skill. Printers as a profession were thus not replaced but transformed, adapting to the new technology.

ERA III
1906-1913

YOUNG ADULTHOOD

IN THIS ERA

Reuben begins his journey across the Midwest, traveling from city to city as part of his printer's apprenticeship. In 1906, he moves with his brothers Paul and Lafe to Chicago, Illinois. Paul becomes a mechanic, while Reuben's younger brother Lafe follows Reuben into the printing trade. The following year, Reuben moves to Madison, Wisconsin, where he witnesses the progressive movement of Senator Robert La Follette. In 1909, he moves again, this time to St. Louis, where he officially becomes a journeyman in the International Typographical Union. He returns to Streator and joins Local 328 alongside his brother Lafe. The two are elected to serve on the union's Executive Committee, and Reuben is nominated to represent them on the Streator Trades and Labor Council. Lafe soon leaves for Chicago and Reuben remains in Streator. In 1913, he is elected president of both ITU Local 328 and the Streator Trades and Labor Council.

Meanwhile, a series of tragedies beset the Soderstrom family. Reuben's brother Joe in dies in 1907, followed by sister-in-law Clara in 1911 and father John in the spring of 1912. Sadness turns to celebration, however, when Reuben marries Jeanne Shaw in December of that year. In 1913, Jeanne becomes pregnant with their first child.

> "In those days, a printer was not really considered bona fide—his education was not considered complete and he was not accepted by his fellows—until he had done some wandering…The tales of travel related by the veteran tramps glittered with romance and were listened to with eager ears by the novice, who was filled with a longing for adventure."
>
> *– John Edward Hicks, "Adventures of a Tramp Printer," 1950*

CHAPTER 6
1906-1908

THE BARNSTORMING YEARS

THE CRACKLE OF THE NEW CENTURY

Reuben began 1906 with a sense of excitement and ambition, his trademark optimism reflecting the mood of the nation. From its art and literature to the progressive politics that followed the Gilded Age, the United States was growing by leaps and bounds. He soon set out from the Streator train depot to experience the crackle of the new century in cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and Madison, working as a barnstorming linotype operator with eyes and ears wide open.

A Young America

The America of 1906 was fast-paced, and 18-year-old Reuben wasted no energy slipping into the quick current of the times. He was in many ways a reflection of the growing nation, home to many different cultures, religions, and traditions tied together by love of country. "Patriotism was a real thing in those days," Olga writes. "There was a real feeling by everyone for love of country, and we had pride in being Americans. It was so much a personal thing, because it was a personal expression of love for our country. Patriotism was not legislated like today, like saying the pledge at every meeting…it becomes so commonplace that it loses its meaning. In the old days, it was something special, almost like a prayer."[176]

The American melting pot produced new advances in art, literature, and technology. Authors such as Jack London, Alice Hegan Rice, and Owen Wister told distinctly American tales of wilderness, passion, and transformation. "Happiness novels" (forerunners of modern romance novels) dominated book sales, appearing alongside investigative works like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, published that year. Painters like Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington captured American life on canvas, while architect Frank Lloyd Wright perfected the iconic "Prairie House" in Chicago. Automobile sales swept the nation, prompting 15 states to post speed limits of 20 miles per hour by 1906. This new mode of transportation spurred new fashions, from caps with goggles and linen dusters for men to shorter skirts for women to accommodate stepping into cars and trolleys. Man flew for the first time at Kitty Hawk; industrialization and mass distribution made the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs the most read books outside of the Bible.

American politics had also taken a positive turn in the form of the new president. Teddy Roosevelt had a reputation as a man of action, resigning from his post as Assistant Secretary of the Navy at the start of the Spanish-American War to form the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, popularly known as the "Rough Riders." As a New York City police commissioner and state governor, he made a name for himself by fighting corruption and reforming government. This earned him more than a few enemies, who engineered his spot as McKinley's running mate in 1900 as a way to rid themselves of him. Their plans backfired when McKinley's assassination in September 1901 led to Roosevelt's swearing in as the 26th President of the United States.

Reuben Soderstrom was an early and ardent admirer of Teddy Roosevelt. At 42, Roosevelt was America's youngest President, and his term in office was largely defined by his maverick spirit and intellectual vigor. He was known to read two or three books a week, and wrote over 150,000 letters and twenty volume's worth of

books during his lifetime. Even more importantly for the nation, Roosevelt was the first progressive President. Early in his career he had read and was greatly affected by muckraker Jacob Riis's How the Other Half Lives, which exposed the condition of New York City's impoverished. He believed deeply that those who had benefited financially from a free society had an obligation to give back to it. "We demand that big business give the American people a square deal!" Roosevelt announced in 1902. He soon began breaking big-business trusts, establishing clear standards of purity for food and medicines, and working with unions like the United Mine Workers of America. By 1906, Roosevelt was well into a second term he had decisively won two years prior.

Brimming with new ideas, powerful leaders and luminaries, and infused with deep patriotism, America in 1906 was a world full of potential and possibility. It seemed especially so to the teenage Reuben, whose tutelage under John Williams had made him increasingly aware of a much bigger world just outside, just beyond his reach. For the first time since he called Streator home, Reub yearned for the road.

Reuben the Reporter, Editor, and Linotypist

At the print shop, Reuben quickly moved beyond setting type. He started to write for the *Streator Independent Times.* It was Mrs. Fred Leroy, the paper's editor and "a very remarkable lady," who first gave Reub this opportunity. "Once in a while when she ran out of subject matters for the editorial column, she'd come down and ask me to write the editorial that day, and so I'd sit down and do it." Reuben later recounted. "I always had something current that was interesting for the public to read, and I could do that work very well. Folks have said that I'm a good speaker, but I think that I'm a better writer."[177]

It was about this time that Reuben began to work as a reporter as well. He covered prize fights, which flourished in the region after Governor Yates ordered the closing of all professional fight clubs in Chicago.[178] This was not only a huge responsibility but a thrill for the young man who had gotten into more than a few fights himself on the factory floor. At that time, fights that didn't end with a knockout had no official winner or loser; it was instead left to reporters like Reub, who called the fights based on their own opinion and experience. Reub followed every block and blow with rapt attention, and often produced columns without a byline or extra compensation. The chance to see his words in print and call the fight was its own reward.

Of course, Reub continued to spend most of his day glistening with sweat as he worked the linotype machine. He ran back and forth into the loud press room to see the broadsheets roll off the press to be rapidly cut and folded. It was Reuben's work as a linotype operator that provided the lion's share of his family's income, and he made enough to buy them some nice items. As Olga remembered:

I had seen a fake fur coat that I wanted so badly. I asked Mother if I could have it, she said to ask Reub. I remember I went to where he worked, he was running the linotype machine there and he was working right in front of the shop. Both the machine and Reub were in full view right behind the huge glass pane window that made up the store front. I went in, and I remember he put his arms around me and I asked him for the coat. He took his purse out, gave me the ten dollars, and I went home a happy girl.[179]

Celebrations In Streator

1906 was indeed a happy time for the Soderstrom family. "Christmas, New Years, the Fourth of July and Labor Day were always times of big celebration," Olga remembered fondly. Of the winter holidays, she said:

> Dad was the one that made Christmas a real occasion…he would decorate the Christmas tree and little gifts would be put under the tree. No electric lights in those days, but candles (such a fire hazard) would be put on

> the tree and lighted. We always received our gifts on Christmas Eve after we came home from church. Dad would string popcorn to wind around the tree. The Swedish custom for giving gifts was to come and leave the gifts at your door, knock and then hurry away.
>
> New Year's too was a big occasion. Mother entered into this spirit, and prepared many special foods, such as pig feet pickled in brine along with pork and heart, and tongue. Also we had head cheese which was jelled and could be sliced. There would be home-made bread, cake and pie all set out on the table and each could eat at will. The boys always had guests with them.[180]

Reuben's guest that year was his pretty Scottish girlfriend Jeanne, with whom he would spend his free time, if and when they could find it. Reub worked from first light to close, and Jeanne routinely worked as a telephone operator until ten at night during the week and past midnight on the weekends. Still, Reub made a point to be there, waiting for her when she got off work so he could walk her home. They spent many celebrations together, including the Fourth of July, a very big event in those early days. "Aunt Emma Lind and Grandpa would come down on the Fourth of July from Chicago," Olga tells us, "and Auntie Lind would give me a quarter, which was a lot in those days. Flags were always flown on the Fourth…there would be parades, speeches, carnivals in town and activities for all."[181]

Despite his happiness in Streator, Reub was engrossed by the wider world just outside. He knew he had to travel, and it was here, among the flags and celebration, that Reub finally broke the news to Jeanne: he was going to be a barnstormer.

BARNSTORMING THE MIDWEST

To become fully admitted to the International Typographical Union (ITU), Reub spent the next several years barnstorming the Midwest, learning the trade in different shops and taking his education in labor to a whole new level. In every city he encountered new ideas, inventions, and leaders, each of whom had a unique vision for America. But Reuben would always return to Streator to visit his parents, brothers and sister Olga.

"Owning the Job"

In the world of newspaper printing, barnstorming, also known as tramp printing, involved traveling members and apprentices of the ITU who traveled to multiple, often distant newspaper print houses ("barns") to run the linotype machines. Barnstorming was not only encouraged but expected of young printers, and allowed young printers such as Reuben to adopt and share new techniques in new towns. Barnstormers substituted for veteran printers, who got valuable time to step away from their jobs without losing them (similar to modern vacation time). Most importantly, the entire practice reinforced the radical idea that a printer owned his job regardless of where he practiced it. As Reuben explained:

> The printers are free, they can select a substitute. If there's a substitute around, you don't even have to consult the authority in the composing room. If you walked into a print shop and you carried a card and I knew you were a competent printer, I could say, "Well, represent my job. Sit down here and go to work until I come back." And that's all there is to it. You sit down and go to work. There's no need to consult anybody but me. And you can stay there until I come back.[182]

And therein laid the unmatched power of the ITU, one of the finest and best organized unions in the country; if a typographer owned his job, then the union contract was the all-important proof of ownership. According to Reuben such a contract was a worker's property, with "a personal value as real as a deed to a house or a title to a car."[183] Eager for a deed of his own, Reub set out on the road.

The Brothers Soderstrom Hit Chicago

In 1906, Reub boarded the train at the Streator depot and moved to Chicago. Nearly inseparable, his brothers Lafe and Paul moved with him, waving goodbye to their parents and younger siblings Joe and Olga as the train pulled out of Streator depot. In Chicago, the three happy brothers shared a room in their Aunt Emma Lind's well-occupied apartment which, in addition to the brothers, included cousin Jenna, the adopted Tina and old Grandpa Anders Soderstrom. The lively family spent nights around the piano in the parlor singing songs. Paul soon found work as an automobile mechanic, and Lafe continued his apprenticeship in a small print shop.

Living together in bustle and grandness of the nation's "second city," the Soderstrom boys soon concocted dreams to match. Aged 20, 18, and 16, (Paul, Reub and Lafe, respectively) the young men must have had the time of their lives walking the streets of the big city, paying to see boxing fights, reading newspapers in the shoe shine shops, drinking ale on the corner, or dodging draft horses and trolley cars on the streets. Reub tried to convince his brothers to live off his salary so they could save their money and go into business together, but he would never get them to agree.[184] Still, the brothers grew exceptionally close, and they soon settled into their respective roles. Reuben was the responsible center, feet planted firmly to the ground while planning for tomorrow. Lafe was the adoring younger brother who aspired to be just like Reuben, and eventually became Reub's right hand man. Paul, meanwhile, inherited both his mother's willfulness and his father's insatiable sense of wonder. He never liked to stay in any place, job, or relationship for long, and loved any thrill he could get his hands on; to him, it was pure excitement to see automobiles adopted on the streets of Chicago.

Although 80 miles from Streator, Reub maintained close connections with his friends and family there. He was missed, and Olga's postcard shows the affection and longing she had for her energetic and care-taking older brother. Reuben continued to support his family and sent most of his earnings home to his father, who was still cobbling and preaching. He also corresponded with his mentor, John Williams, who now helped direct Reub's growth from a distance. Reub obtained a Chicago Public Library card and, as before, stopped by daily to check out newspapers and books on a wide variety of subjects.

Thanks to Williams's considerable efforts, Reub the teenager was able to attend the Illinois State Federation of Labor (ISFL) convention—held that year in Streator—as an invited local guest. It is with great poignancy that Reuben's long and illustrious career at Illinois labor conventions was commenced by his mentor's sponsorship for a meeting that happened to take place that year in his hometown. Reuben must have proudly attended that convention in a new suit (or a hand-me-down from Paul), where he saw the delegates elect Edwin R. Wright as president of the ISFL. This must have been a thrill for Reub because Wright was president of Reuben's own 3,100 member-strong Chicago Typographical Local #16. Wright had recently gained national acclaim for his leadership during an ITU strike earlier that year, for which he was attacked by the anti-union Judge Holdom with injunction, jail, and heavy fines.[185] During the convention, Williams introduced the young barnstormer to President Wright in the smoke-filled hallways following one of the convention's marathon sessions. Reuben, beaming with enthusiasm, proudly shook hands with Edwin Wright, the man who held the title that Reuben himself would someday assume: President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor.

A Terrible Loss

In January 1907, Reuben's happiness was brought to a sudden halt with the death of baby brother Joe, aged 11. Born a "blue baby," Joseph was "very frail all of his short life."[186] Childhood death was a sadly familiar at that time, and infant mortality had already visited the Soderstrom family with the death of Reub's baby sister

Ruth back in Minnesota. Still, Joe was no baby; in 1906 he was well past eleven years old. "Little Joe" had survived poverty, disease and many moves to new households. With the older brothers gone, he grew especially close to his mother, Anna. He was her "little man," her joy.

It was particularly devastating for Anna, then, when Joe developed a fever and rasping cough in the first week of 1907. As the weeks passed, Anna watched helplessly as her child's fever climbed above 104 degrees, sending him into crushing headaches and fits of delirium. After nearly a month of excruciating pain, little Joseph Soderstrom died of Typhoid fever in his bed at home in Streator, near the end of a cold dark January in Streator. In a sense, the fever took two lives that day. "My mother never really got over Joseph's death," Olga recounted. "We used to walk to the cemetery (about two or three miles) three or four times a week, and Dad took me…about every Sunday."[187] From that day forward, Anna never fully recaptured her adventurous spirit.

Paul, Reuben and Lafe had lost their kid brother. A spell had been broken; the happy dreams of the last year in Chicago were vaporized as they carried the small casket through the Streator graveyard, witnessed only by the tall, naked trees against the blue grey sky and a small group of Swedish Lutheran parishioners. Most likely, John Soderstrom stoically delivered the miserable task of standing in front of the shivering group to read from his well-worn Bible while Reub and his brothers consoled their mother and Olga.

As the family's provider and protector, Reub took the loss especially hard and turned his grief into action. He soon left Chicago, and found work at a print shop in Madison, Wisconsin. For the first time since childhood, Reub was alone again; there would be neither family nor friends, no Friday nights singing, no playing cards. Isolated, Reub threw himself completely into his work and studies. He took any work he could, including covering local politicians, speakers, and a local Chautauqua, where he first heard the booming orations of a controversial, populist politician.

MADISON, WISCONSIN AND FIGHTIN' BOB LA FOLLETTE

With a proud tradition of unions and a history of progressive politics, Madison was the capital not only of Wisconsin but of the Midwest's broader labor movement. It was also the adopted hometown of one of the nation's most recognizable progressive leaders, Robert M. La Follette. A US Senator since 1906, the legislator had previously served as Governor, championing the rights of local farmers, small businessmen and workers throughout his political career. "Fightin' Bob" tirelessly argued for government as a check against the power of corporate business and publicly opposed the prosecution of labor leaders, including the well-known socialist Eugene V. Debs. In addition to being a deft and principled politician, La Follette was a powerful and pugnacious orator who mesmerized and mobilized his audiences.

In the spring of 1907, Reub became transfixed by La Follette, who had just transitioned from Wisconsin governor to US Senator. The connection was partly biographical; like Reub, La Follette had supported his family financially since adolescence, running the family farm while finding time for self-education. Reub also identified with the senator's energy and tenacity. In his 1900 campaign for Governor, La Follette gave over "208 speeches in 61 counties—sometimes 10 or 15 in one day." The Senator's words echoed John William's teachings on direct democracy, business regulation, and workmen's compensation. The Madison print shop where Reub worked always posted notice of when and where the Senator would speak, and soon Reub traveled by train to Milwaukee to attend his events. As Reuben became more active in the shop's union, the members of his Local nominated him to attend all of La Follette's speeches, paying for Reub to travel throughout the state to record and report on the Senator's appearances. The more Reuben learned about the dynamic politician, the more he embraced his political beliefs and philosophy.

Breathing in the cold Wisconsin air and standing in crowds amidst men in tweed overcoats and hats, Reuben studied La Follette's fiery and formidable speaking skills. He paid attention to the Senator's captivating presence, dramatic pauses, repetitive themes and thunderous conclusions. Reub most likely agreed with this assessment from The Milwaukee Journal:

> Disgust, hope, honor, avarice, despair, love, anger, all the passions of man, he paints in strong words and still stronger gestures. This may sound like exaggeration—but into the most commonplace of his word paintings he throws the energy of a man apparently fully impressed with the whole force and truth of his statements. He never wearies and he will not allow audiences to weary. He carries his subject and his hearers both, and compels the latter to listen, if he cannot compel them to endorse what he may say. Near the conclusion of his speech, as he folds his arms across his chest with the air of a man who has done all that can be done, and in a quiet and impressive way delivers his peroration, there is a wonderful change. It is a change that does not detract from your opinion of the orator, but rather aids it. You realize then that he has been speaking a long time. He has tired you out, but you did not know it before. However, he does not seem to have become weary himself. As he bows for the last time and withdraws he seems as fresh as ever. You are impressed with the belief that the man is a sort of steam engine. He is iron in the sense that iron conveys the idea of endurance.[188]

Eighteen year-old Reuben was personal witness to one of the great thinkers and orators in American history, and the man's personal presence and political positions gave a young laboring man a lot to reflect upon.

Back Home Again

Reub remained the rock of his family, sending home money to help them out. He and he alone paid for little Joe's funeral. His visits to Streator were a joy for Olga: "When Reub was away those few years, when he'd come home I'd run to meet him as he walked down the tracks, and he would always have fifty cents in his hand to give me."[189] Although his brothers still lived in Chicago, some weekends Lafe would travel home and the brothers would catch up. They'd talk about work and labor, but it would soon turn to conversations like how Tommy Burns won a decision in a 20-round fight with Philadelphia Jack O'Brien that summer for the heavyweight boxing crown.

While he loved his family, Reub also came home for the chance to spend time with Jeanne. Both of them practical, stalwart, and more than a little stubborn, the couple had accepted the necessity of separation. Still, they stole time together whenever they could. They'd stroll down the city streets, sharing whatever hours they could before Jeanne went to work. Often the sweethearts would stop for a treat at the Hill Brothers confectionery store, famous for its golden brown peppermint lozenges with the cream-colored stripes. That summer, Reub escorted her to the grand opening of the local Majestic Theater to watch a traveling vaudeville show including musicians and live magicians. They were thrilled at Herbert Germaine and his aerial diving show of gymnasts and rebound artists, and amazed by the stage imitations of Bessie Browning.

In October of 1908, Reuben returned home, but again, he couldn't stay long because his apprenticeship was not yet complete; he had more than a year's worth of barnstorming work ahead of him. Still, Reub took the time to spend the difficult holidays (the first since Joe's death) together with his family. He picked up work at Andy Anderson's small print shop, operating and maintaining the machines. Inspired by the ISFL convention in Streator, he grew more involved with his local union and labor activity. He also began attending the early morning Streator Trades and Labor Council meetings on the last Sunday of every month, listening closely.

Reub's brothers were back in Chicago and he felt their absence keenly. In 1908, Reuben spent a short amount of time in Chicago, where he worked alongside Lafe in a print shop. The two brothers became especially close, sharing not only a trade but a passion for labor issues. They met for dinner most nights and spent hours

discussing work rules and pay scales. Before long, Lafe started researching in the library alongside his brother, and they developed a natural rhythm, with Reub leading the way and Lafe ready at his side. At their Local meetings, Reub gave short speeches about current issues in their shop.

Reuben Travels To St. Louis

As 1909 dawned, Reub decided to complete his apprenticeship in the Midwest's other great city, St. Louis, where he could work in a print shop equipped with the most modern linotype machines. Once again, he left Paul and Lafe in Chicago and headed south.

Sitting on the Mississippi River and filled with storehouses, railroad lines, and breweries, St. Louis was the "Gateway to the West" and attracted all sorts of activity, legitimate and illicit alike. Hundreds of steamboats brought tourists to the docks while massive barges carried goods of all types south to New Orleans or north to Chicago. All this led to a population boom; in the last ten years St. Louis had grown by over 100,000 residents, many of them black Americans willing to work for low wages. The migration brought with it innovations like rag-time jazz, and famous musicians like piano player Scott Joplin would spend years in the city in the early 1900s, writing and performing hits like "The Entertainer" at local clubs such as the Rosebud Café in Chestnut Hill. The population boom also brought poverty and tension. Impoverished and ostracized, new arrivals helped fill the streets of the city's Red Light District, while the city's "dogtown" was a barren refuge for the dispossessed, like the Tamm Avenue home for Jewish orphans.

Walking the dirty but colorful streets in St. Louis, Reuben felt the strong current of an America beyond the Midwest, stretching down the Mississippi River to the South and New Orleans. The river culture of cargo and barges was much different from Chicago's web of rails, with a population almost as big and twice as chaotic. His mind must have reeled as he sat in an open-air bar, drinking Anheuser Busch's Bavarian lager, Budweiser, from a thick glass bottle that came from a factory in Streator, where it was possibly crated by one of the boys he had gone on strike with a few years earlier. In a moment like that, Reuben likely felt the overwhelmingly grand American experiment that he was living, from his immigrant parents to his hometown factories to his apprenticeship specifically to labor broadly to a racially charged river city.

A simmering unrest flowed through America's "Fourth City," which made it a natural home for organized labor. A significant number of strikes and lockouts filled the air with the electricity of union strife. While labor struggles often involved a proposed increase in wages, local owners forced an almost equal number of strikes with demands for wage reductions. Many of the small breweries and businesses still demanded that potential employees sign contracts stating they would not join a union if hired. Such a prerequisite for employment endured despite the United States Supreme Court ruling against such "Yellow Dog" contracts. Many non-English speaking immigrants didn't know their rights were being violated and owners readily used linguistic and cultural barriers to keep workers isolated and unorganized.

Just a few years before Reuben's arrival, St. Louis played home to a bitter streetcar workers' strike. The event was marked by violence when a mob attempted to bomb the company car barns at Easton and Prairie avenues, endangering the lives of over 150 strikebreakers, 50 policemen, and "citizen's posse" that repeatedly attacked the striking workers. Several died in the riots before the Suburban Road Company reached an amicable settlement with the strikers after nearly a month of violence.[190]

For a 21-year-old Reuben, all this made St. Louis a dynamic, engaging and dangerous place. Working the night-shift in a local print shop, he spent the next nine months exploring his new home. He most likely was a voyeuristic tourist to the city's raucous nightlife, enjoying the games and music it offered. He could be reminded of his car enthusiast brother Paul when he watched the stock car races at the fairgrounds, where

Packards, Buicks, and Pope-Toledo's approached speeds of 60 miles per hour.

Nightlife and race cars weren't the only things turning heads in St. Louis. Girls at the time started wearing "hobble skirts"—long, tight skirts that the St. Louis police captain attacked as "an impediment to locomotion" because they forced traffic police to stop minding wagons and cars to help the poor women across the street, while "mashers" held up traffic watching the women get on and off the streetcars. Another police sergeant huffed that a girl "with any modesty would discard such a skirt unless she enjoys being molested."[191] The St. Louis police were also charged with patrolling the city's first newly opened public bathhouse at the corner of 10th and Carr. The red brick and glazed-tile structure had two tubs and eight showers for ladies, and one tub and twenty-two showers for men. The spot was so popular that patrolmen had to be assigned to "keep order among the unwashed waiting their turn."[192]

Of course, it wasn't all fun and games for Reuben. He continued his studies at the Crunden Branch Library on Cass Avenue, reading scholarly papers, Greek philosophy, and the four major daily city newspapers. The Carnegie-financed facility had acquired several fine private collections over the years and offered its services free to all. The ornate chandeliers and intricate molding throughout reminded him of the grand Carnegie library in Streator where he spent so many glorious hours charging through John Williams' syllabus. And when he couldn't find something at his local library on Cass Avenue, Reub would visit the nearby St. Louis University Library.

Reuben also attended local union meetings during his time in St. Louis. As in Madison and Chicago, Reub would occasionally speak on work-related activities concerning the local shops where he worked. Often these shops reported on their status and conditions, and it was expected that apprentices such as Reuben be involved.

But the excitement and adventure of tramp printing his way across the Midwest must have begun to fade as Reub looked homeward. He had paid his dues as an apprentice and picked up a flurry of work skills and street smarts from the colorful troika of Midwestern cities he inhabited. In a way, it was his own rough-and-ready college education. But Streator was home. His aging parents were there. His siblings were there. Jeanne was there.

He was coming home.

CHAPTER 7
1909-1910

FROM JOURNEYMAN TO COUNCILMAN

HOMECOMING

In 1909, Reuben G. Soderstrom officially became a journeyman in the International Typographers Union (ITU), joining St. Louis Local number 8.

It was a momentous achievement for the poor immigrant boy from Minnesota. He was now a union man with a union membership card—a card he would carry proudly in his wallet for the rest of life, and a trade he would practice for decades to come. He most likely celebrated the glorious occasion with his fellow initiates on a warm spring evening, perhaps riding the trolley car through St. Louis' Francis Park and gazing upward at the city's first highway bridge, completed in 1909, that spanned the mighty Mississippi. En route to the rowdy beer halls of America's great river city, they may have walked past the grand Jefferson Hotel and viewed the dazzling chandeliers in the lobby from the sidewalk windows after being shooed away by the doormen.

Walking home, Reuben—a lifelong student of Lincoln—most certainly stopped at St. Louis' handsome Old Courthouse, where Dred Scott sued for his freedom in 1847 and where an anti-slave rally inspired St. Louis to become a free city. After spending four years on the road in other cities like Madison and Chicago, Reuben certainly saw his fellow ITU-initiates continue life as journeyman "tramp printers," traveling the country from job to job. But he knew there was only one place for him, and he was soon boarding the Chicago, Peoria & St. Louis Railroad, homeward bound.

Home Again

In the river city of Peoria, midway between St. Louis and Chicago, Reuben switched to the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (CB&Q) Railroad to Streator. When he arrived, the ladies of his life, girlfriend Jeanne and sister Olga, stood beaming on the Streator platform with grand hats decorated is large, inexpensive feathers. They celebrated, marching arm-in-arm to the five-cent Sunday matinee at the Lyric Theater, where the afternoon show included three reels of good pictures, plus a Mildred & Price 90-minute vaudeville show. On nights like these, Reub and Jeanne walked Olga home before making their way back to Jeanne's parents' house to sit on the front porch and tell stories about the sights and sounds of faraway St. Louis.

Reuben found Streator bustling with commerce and labor, but found life at home a bit different and flat. Little Joseph's death the year before still hung over the family. Mother Anne dealt with the loss by "taking ill" for several days, not truly sick but seeking escape. As Olga remembered:

> Mother was ill so often and all through my childhood school days, it was a problem because I lost so much, being absent because she was ill. And until I was in [nurse] training, I didn't realize so much of it was an act…She once told me that she had six children and never had a vacation, so she felt she was entitled to time off and she'd go to bed ill…Dad never became excited by Mother's illnesses. In retrospect, I know he understood her better than I did.[193]

Clearly suffering from depression, Anne Soderstrom's strength and spark had left her. Her eldest, Paul, had stayed in Chicago and recently married Clara Simpco—young, beautiful, and pregnant with their first child. He had moved out of the auto shop and started work as a chauffeur for a wealthy family in downtown Chicago. Father John, meanwhile, spent most of his days repairing shoes at his cobbler shop, beginning work at 6:30 A.M. and sometimes not returning until 10:00 PM. Sunday was his only day home, and he'd frequently spent it studying the bible and attending church. He was not actively preaching at this time because the Mission Church had closed; he started on as a parishioner in a Baptist church instead.[194]

Despite the losses and leavings, the family did welcome some new faces. The Bottoms, a neighboring family, grew to be regular fixtures at the house. "Maw" Bottom became a companion for Anna, while her daughters became Olga's closest playmates. Often, John would take them along whenever he took Olga to church or a show, or to the cemetery to visit her brother's grave.

But the family highlight for Reub was his brother Lafe, who had returned from Chicago and was active in the local labor scene. Though Reuben had joined his brother as a member of ITU Streator Local 328, there was a lot for him to catch up on, and Lafe was the closest thing he had to an energetic twin, thinker, actor and doer.

THE LABOR MOVEMENT

Labor in Streator...

Although Reub followed Streator's labor happenings in St. Louis, Lafe was in town witnessing the tumult daily. Sitting in the grandstand of the huge Streator Fair Grounds to see Streator take on Racine in baseball, on a muddy field during a muggy day, Lafe reported to Reub that workers of all stripes and trades were under attack. Trolley electricians' wages were stagnant, and track laborers had also seen their wages go flat while suffering increasing abuse at the hands of their foremen. Most severely, Lafe reported, local workers in Streator's famed glass factories had been forced to accept a forty percent pay cut.

Reub learned that this had led to two very different strikes. On April 29, 1909, 30 Italian laborers laying the McKinley Interurban Line staged a strike against the Illinois Light and Traction Company (ILTC), the same company Reub carried water for in his childhood. Strikers sought a 25-cent increase in their $1.50 10-hour daily wage, as well as limitations on the control foremen had over their workers. As non-unionized Italian immigrants speaking little English, the laborers had little public or trade council support, which the company used to its advantage. The next day the superintendent brought in twenty-five Negro workers from LaSalle to act as "strike breakers," working in place of the striking Italians. The Italian strikers gathered at the gate and physically blocked the Negro strike breakers from entering the workplace. In retaliation, the superintendent instructed the police to escort the breakers in to the construction…and then the superintendent fired all the striking Italians. The Negro laborers completed the work. To add insult to injury, the superintendent paid the Negro laborers $1.75 per day—exactly the amount the Italians wished was their new wage.[195] Racial tensions were at an all-time high.

This was in sharp contrast to what happened to the electricians of Local 236 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) when they staged their strike against ILTC the following month. Seeking a\ four-cent per hour wage increase, the electricians negotiated with Company President McQuinn right up to the day their contract expired on June 2. When McQuinn refused to sign an agreement because some of the men involved were motormen, the motormen responded by retuning their cars to the company barn at noon that day and joined with the electricians.

The ever-active Streator Trades and Labor Council held an emergency meeting that night and elected six

delegates to present two contracts to management the next day, one for electricians and one for motormen. After some changes—most notably the withdrawal of the foreman from the IBEW—management agreed to the union's terms. However, importantly and unfairly, the company included a "successor clause" stating future owners would not be bound either to the contract or to recognition of the IBEW as an authorized representative.[196]

Reub was about to enter the thicket of Streator labor politics. And as the financial cornerstone of the family, he first picked up temporary work at Andy Anderson's print shop, quickly followed by a prestigious job as typographer for the *Streator Free Press*. There he would read the news, write the news, and soon…make the news.

Labor in Illinois and the Midwest…

The Streator strikes of 1909 demonstrated the competing powers of labor and management. Successful protests like the Electrician's strike were characterized by strong unionization, cross-trade solidarity, and public support. Strikes conducted by non-unionized workers without broader support, like the track laborer's strike, inevitably failed. As a result, business owners in Streator, Illinois, and beyond worked hard to prevent the undeniable empowerment of unionization.

Nowhere was this truer than in the mining industry, which was rich with workers of different cultures, languages, and faiths. However, despite the need for solidarity, the United Mine Workers Union in 1909-1910 was characterized by increasing internal chaos. At the center of the storm was a man Reuben would soon come to know and love: John Walker. A disciple of UMWA President John Mitchell, Walker had quickly risen from the Illinois mines to become President of the Illinois UMWA in 1905. When Mitchell retired in 1908, many (including Walker himself) believed he would replace the outgoing president. However, Walker lost the election by a narrow margin to UMWA Vice President John L. Lewis. Walker believed Lewis had fraudulently manipulated the election, and spent the next several years opposing Lewis' efforts to centralize power. Lewis in turn tried to undermine Walker, threatening to undo the economic benefits and security of Illinois miners in the process. Despite these attempts, Walker secured a new sweeping contract for Illinois miners in 1910 that solidified his reputation as a powerful labor leader and drove Lewis to defeat.[197]

The Chicago and Illinois labor movement likewise made steps to reorganize and reform. In addition to Walker in the UMWA, the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) had found strong new leadership in John Fitzpatrick. Elected President in 1906, Fitzpatrick promised both to clean up the corruption of the "Skinny" Madden regime and organize many more workers. He soon delivered, recruiting thousands of steelworkers and meatpackers into the unions. He also had led the CFL to provide support for the Chicago Federation of Teachers, one of the first attempts in the country to unionize teachers. He also waged war on Chicago's political corruption, making headlines in July of 1910 by exposing illegal gambling rackets under police protection.[198]

…In the Nation and Abroad

Dramatic change wasn't limited to the Midwest. The shift to an industrial economy had quickly transformed the American workforce. By 1910, 8.3 million Americans worked in manufacturing, a 41% increase since 1900.[199] Roughly 90% of male American industrial wage workers, meanwhile, earned less than $1,000 per year (roughly $25,396 in 2015 dollars).[200] Even with fathers working full time, many families lived in poverty.

This shift was felt not only in the United States. In Reuben's native Sweden, recession and employer lockouts resulted in a nation-wide "general strike." Although viewed by many Swedish union leaders as a last resort,

more radical and socialist labor elements were spoiling for the fight, hoping it would bring about a "great leap forward towards socialism."[201] It did not end well; the month-long general strike cost owners roughly 25 million Swedish kronor, but the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen*) lost more than half its membership, and Social Democratic Party suffered heavy political losses. There is no doubt that while 21-year-old Reuben G. Soderstrom rolled and read the news at the Streator Free Press, he keenly observed the socialist undertow of the labor movement and began parsing its humane spirit from its operational challenges.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, the local trolley workers' union went on strike when their call for a 3-cent increase in hourly wages was met by the Philadelphia Rapid Transit company (PRT) with a company-controlled "union," firing 173 workers, and hiring replacements from New York City. When the (widely unpopular) PRT refused to negotiate, workers across the city held their own "general strike," grinding the life of the city to a halt.

Unlike the general strike in Sweden, however, the Philadelphia efforts enjoyed broad support. Across the United States, local organizations including the Streator Labor Council—perhaps swayed by speeches by the Brothers Soderstrom—voted to send money to the city of brotherly love in support of the strike. By March 5th thousands throughout the city blocked the tracks and built makeshift bunkers to protect themselves as the protests descended into violence. Mobs set trolley cars on fire and threw bricks at the police, who responded by firing into the crowd. According to the New York Literary Digest, "Within four days 3 persons were killed, 375 injured, 500 arrested, 7 cars were burned, 841 cars were wrecked or disabled, and the company lost $100,000, while its business loss is figured at $300,000."[202] Ultimately, the PRT relented, handing labor a major victory.

Important legislative landmarks accompanied success on the ground. In Washington, on July 2, 1909, Congress passed the 16th Amendment, creating a progressive income tax. The amendment's opponents, who had hoped to kill a similar Democratic income tax bill, watched in numb horror as the incredibly popular proposal swept the nation. Within a few short years, the unthinkable happened—3/4 of the states approved the amendment, leaving anti-labor forces to suffer one of the worst self-inflicted wounds in US Political history.

REUBEN ENTERS THE FRAY

Cherry Mine Reform

While large national and international events dominated the presses for much of 1909, by year's end all other stories were overshadowed by the tragedy at Cherry Mine. The November 13 coal mine fire that took the lives of over 250 men and boys in this sleepy mining town just outside Streator captured the nation's attention for a variety of reasons. Americans were riveted by the painfully detailed accounts of the tragedy, from the letters of those facing death below to the fate of their loved ones abandoned above. As author and historian Karen Tintori wrote in her riveting account of the event, "Death touched nearly every home in Cherry, Illinois. Hundreds of women were widowed. Nearly five hundred children were orphaned. Just weeks before Thanksgiving they were plunged into despair and destitution, with no food or fuel in homes suddenly robbed of men."[203]

When the members of the Trades and Labor Council met for their regularly scheduled meeting the day after Cherry, the mood was one of despair and mourning. Everyone in the room had a personal connection to someone who worked in the mines. They voted to send notice to all union members of the new workplace safety law scheduled to take effect January 1, 1910, promising vigilance and a renewed push for further reform.

Even more important was the creation of the Cherry Commission, which included members from the UMWA, the Red Cross, the Illinois Coal Operators Association and the Illinois State Board of Control. The commission was vice-chaired by none other than John Williams, Reuben's mentor. Williams' compassionate and tireless effort not only brought security to the widows of Cherry; it led to a major victory for Illinois labor—the state's first workman's compensation act. In the words of one historian, "During this period John E. Williams made his most notable contribution to industrial relations. These contributions were not made solely to Streator, but to the entire nation."[204] As Reuben later noted with pride and admiration, "It was John E. Williams who got in touch with the Chicago Milwaukee Railroad people, who own that mine, and encouraged them to help set up the workman's compensation act in the state of Illinois. He also coaxed them into paying the funeral expenses and to set aside a fund for the education of the orphans of these children whose fathers died in that Cherry Mine disaster.John E. Williams was a great man."[205] William's work was groundbreaking, helping to pass compensation laws whose impact would eventually be felt across country.

Councilmen Soderstrom

The tragedy at Cherry Mine moved Reuben personally. He became an active member of Streator ITU Local 328, and displaying an intellect and oratorical skill that quickly earned him attention. On January 7, 1910, Reuben marked a major milestone in his political life when he was elected alongside his brother Lafe to serve on the ITU Local's Executive Committee. Reub was further nominated as the Local's delegate to the Trades and Labor Council. These were incredibly influential postings as the ITU, while small in membership, was one of the strongest unions in the city.

The brothers Soderstrom were officially installed as elected officers of Local 328 on February 4, 1910. An ascending labor leader, Reuben planned to not just to lead but to rally and inspire, and he soon began writing what would be his first of many labor editorials. His first documented literary contribution as a labor official was to a recurring *Daily Free Press* column titled "Among Wage Workers: News of Interest to Working Men and Women." It was published on February 11, 1910, and focused on the philanthropy of ITU members. He stressed the power of collective action, citing the example of the 15-cent per month per capita collection which resulted in the $26,000 library addition to the Printers' Home in Colorado Springs, Colorado.[206]

Reuben also relentlessly pressed for action from the union floor, speaking powerfully on the inadequacy of proposed legal reforms. At the ITU's February meeting, Reub called out legislators for creating reforms without funding or support. He decried Illinois Department of Factory Inspection Chief Davies getting only 25 deputies to police the entire state. At later meetings speeches on topics ranging from the indignity of county "poor houses" and the need for dignified work, to the importance of pensions and adequate compensation made him a popular figure within the local labor movement. Lafe, though less of a speaker, also thrived in the union leadership and soon became the local's Sergeant-at-Arms. Just as in Chicago, Lafe was Reub's right hand man, his confidant and most trusted ally.

Seasons of Streator

While Reuben spent most of his professional life in 1909-1910 finding his voice as a labor leader, his personal life and relationships blossomed at a breakneck pace. From the autumn of 1909 through the spring and summer of 1910, both Reub and his city of Streator shared and endured turns of joy, heartbreak and hopefulness that foreshadowed greater challenges to come.

Reuben's world in the autumn of 1909 revolved largely around his loved ones. He continued to be his family's primary means of support, both financially and emotionally. One person, however, held a special

place in Reuben's life and heart—Jeanne. Despite a lengthy courtship, Reuben still treasured his teenage sweetheart. That autumn they did almost everything together, from attending shows like the Darrow & Mitchell comedy act to viewing the total lunar eclipse of October 27. Picking her up after work, Reub strolled through City Park with Jeanne on his arm, watching silently as the moon slowly disappeared. They sat mesmerized in the darkness, saying little and simply enjoying each other's quiet company, until the moon reappeared in the early morning sky. According to Reuben, it was on the walk home that night he decided he'd found his lifelong partner.

The happiness and tranquility of autumn would not last long, however. The tragedy at Cherry mine was only the start of what became a cold, dark winter. Freezing rainstorms in early December blanketed the Midwest in ice. To complicate matters, the extreme cold slowed coal mining a great deal, reducing tonnage and depleting local supplies. By early January, Greeley school, which consumed a ton of coal a day, had to close due to the shortage. The miners themselves were the hardest hit; their paychecks were based on tonnage, smaller paychecks resulted as fuel prices skyrocketed. The harsh winter attacked workers' health as well as their livelihood. Exhausted and weakened, those in the glass factories and mines experienced increasing lung problems, especially tuberculosis. The constant abuse from hot molten glass fibers and coal dust took a devastating toll, leading to TB mortality rates far above the national average. Black lung and Whooping Cough also spread throughout the region, devastating families.

The harsh times did not leave the Soderstrom family untouched. It was around this time that Grandpa Soderstrom passed away at the age of 88. Sadder still, Paul's infant son, only four months old, was also a victim of the long winter. Paul and wife Clara brought the body from Chicago to Streator for burial in the early months of 1910. Sadly, it was just the first of many deeply personal losses Reub's brother would suffer over the next few years.

Unaware of tragedies to come, Reuben remained energized and optimistic. In his columns and as a Trade Council Delegate, Reub worked tirelessly, reaching out to labor and connecting it to the broader community. To a talented young man brimming with enthusiasm and ambition, however, that community started to feel small. Like his father, Reub still possessed a restless spirit, and a major city like Chicago held great appeal. Reub was still full of wanderlust, and as 1910 came to a close Reub set his eyes on yet another move.

PILLAR II

WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION: CHERRY MINE

THE TRAGEDY AT CHERRY MINE

Workmen's compensation—the idea that workers and their families should be made whole for harm suffered at work—is a familiar feature of the modern American workplace. It wasn't always that way; at the start of the twentieth century, laborers who were injured on the job had little recourse. Unable to work during their recovery, they often endured poverty and starvation. A worker disfigured by their injuries fared even worse; nothing prevented an employer whose dangerous conditions led to the loss of a hand or leg from simply casting the maimed aside like so much trash. If a worker was killed on the job, those who depended on his paycheck found themselves instantly destitute. Unprotected, too many widows and orphans had to make sacrifices to survive that left them battered and broken. For over a century the American public, though broadly sympathetic, did little to change situation.

This deplorable state of affairs finally began to change at the dawn of the twentieth century, when a series of high-profile industrial tragedies stirred the public consciousness. Of these, perhaps none was more impactful, or dramatic, than the terror at Cherry Mine. The horrors the Illinois miners, many of them Streator residents, suffered on November 13, 1909, ultimately resulted in one of the nation's first—and arguably its most important—Workmen's Compensation Act.

Of all the trials and losses labor faced in 1909, few shook it so deeply or forged its resolve as profoundly as the tragedy at Cherry Mine. In an instant, an unthinkable, wholly preventable disaster cost hundreds of hard-working men and boys their lives, leaving thousands of widows and orphans in its wake. The horror it caused drew worldwide attention, turning this tiny mining community a few miles northwest of Streator into a macabre spectacle that attracted thousands.

Yet through the veil of death and bereavement, small signs of hope could be seen. Heroes who gave their lives became martyrs, galvanizing the public and inspiring reform. The tragedy shined a light on the terrible conditions working men and children who had long labored in the darkness of the mines. Most importantly, lasting change—slow and painful as it was—was made possible through the concerted, relentless efforts of energetic reformers like John Williams and his compatriots in labor. The tireless efforts of these men resulted in new laws for worker protection and compensation, along with the belated enforcement of long neglected legal protections. The losses at Cherry also drove a young Reuben into labor leadership for the first time, pushing him to fight ever harder for the rights of workers and their families.

The City of Cherry

Cherry was a fairly typical mining town; just seven blocks long and five blocks wide, its life began and ended with the use of its local mine. It was a "company town," built by the St. Paul Coal Company to for a singular purpose—to attract and house miners. The company, buoyed by the mine's nearly inexhaustible supply of high-quality bituminous coal, invested over $200,000 in the town and mine itself. City designs called for a park, school, bank and several general stores. They also built a first-class train station, and on June 21, 1905,

they offered 120 acres and reduced train fair rates to attract potential buyers for an auction of town lots predicted to sell out by noon.[207]

A successful mining community didn't simply house and feed the miners; it had to cater to their needs as well. That included entertainment; seventeen of Cherry's thirty-five businesses were saloons. More than simply a place to drink, saloons were social centers for miners, providing the creature comforts of home away from the needs and pulls of family. As one miner said:

> A saloon is the only decent place we fellows have to go. We have a newspaper to read, another fellow to argue with, and we can put our feet on the table and eat all the free lunch we want. We have a blooming fine fiddler who plays for us—say, wot's a fellow livin' for, all work?[208]

Like Streator, Cherry was a melting pot. Italian, German, Russian, Lithuanian, Swedish, and a host of other tongues kept neighbors isolated and nearby communities wary. Local farmers grumbled that "we would have been a heap better off if they had never been brought here."[209] Native miners also weren't fond of their foreign counterparts, who were often willing work longer and endure more dangerous conditions for less pay. As one miner put it, "No American would work as hard as they did because the foreigners didn't have any sense."[210]

While Cherry was like other company towns in many ways, the mine's wealth set it apart in a few key respects. The quality and accessibility of local coal meant miners in Cherry could work year-round, keeping them out of the debt that often crushed other communities. Also, unlike the cheap identical houses produced for most company towns, the homes of Cherry were built from one hundred and twenty different designs. This gave Cherry a uniqueness and architectural quality most such towns never enjoyed. The only exception was Steele Street, where the poorest miners lived. Steele would later be known as "Widows Row," after all but four of the street's fathers, husbands, and sons died in the disaster.

A Day Unlike Any Other

The morning of Saturday, November 13 started like any other. Reporting to the Streator Free Press early that morning, Reuben may have seen the sizable group of miners from Streator, including mine manager John Bundy, making their way to the mines of Cherry. There Bundy's men joined a workforce of over 500 men and boys from all corners of life. Many of these had come from across the globe, filling the cramped tunnels with voices speaking a dozen different languages. Together they rode the hulking metal cage over four hundred and eighty-six feet to deposits hidden deep below.

The work was hard, with miners crouched for hours on end, faces smeared black and lungs filled by air fouled with dust as they hacked at the inky streams of "black diamond." It was also dangerous; accidents and even deaths in mining were so common that the men and their families had become numb to the loss. As one miner's wife put it "A natural death is such a strange thing here that when one hears that So-and-So is dead, they ask at once, 'When was he killed?'"[211] Another miner compared leaving for work every morning with going off to war. "You never step on that cage without wondering if you're going to come back or not. Being a miner is just like going into battle. There is always this fear of the mine."[212] Between accidents, the wearying work and the disease that came with it, the average miner was lucky to make it to fifty.

Still, Cherry Mine was said to be safer than most. The town sat atop a nearly inexhaustible supply of bituminous coal of unrivaled quality, and the St. Paul Coal Company had built Illinois' largest mine to tap it. "The equipment of the Cherry Mine was supposed to be the equal or superior of that of any other mine in the state," the Chicago Daily Tribune later reported. "The tower and all upper works were of steel and were constructed on a magnificent scale."[213]

It was to be year-round and state-of-the-art, complete with concrete foundations and engine, boiler, and fan houses all made of brick and stone. The boxcar alone cost $10,000, while the tipple, where mine cars were emptied of their coal, was rated by its engineer as one of the world's safest. It even had electric lighting, the hallmark of modernity.

Except, like much at Cherry Mine, things weren't all working as they were supposed to. The electric lights that were supposed to illuminate the lower shafts of the mine had been broken for nearly a month. Superintendent James Steele had made repeated requests for replacement wiring, but had yet to hear back. Instead, miners labored under a series of kerosene lamps strung along the rock face to provide light, while some miners relied on small torches on the front of their helmets fueled by a slick grease nicknamed "sunshine." Those kerosene lamps hung low; so far down that they were mere inches above the hay cars brought down to feed the forty plus mules use to move the coal-filled cars along the tracks. After lunch that day six bales of hay were sent down to the second level stables, but instead of taking it directly from the cage to the mules, operator Alexander Rosenjack and his assistants left the hay near the air shaft while they emptied a nearby cart instead.

It is unclear what set the hay on fire; it could have been a leak from the kerosene lamps, an accidental touch from a miner's open helmet flame, or both. What is certain is that once that small flame was fed by the open air from the shaft, it burned hard and quick. Trying unsuccessfully to extinguish it, Alex dumped the smoldering mass down the sump in the main shaft, hoping the water collected at the bottom would kill the fire. Instead, the burning bales hung up on the next level; almost an hour passed before anyone signaled a problem. By the time they did, it was already too late. Any attempt to stem the fire only fanned the flames, incinerating the wooden stairs and ladders that were the only means of escape. To starve the fire, those topside tried shutting down the fans, which succeeded only in cutting off oxygen to the trapped miners while allowing the "black damp," a deadly mix of carbon dioxide and nitrogen, to fill the mine.

As the fire raged, the tunnels became thick with smoke, causing many to panic. Overpowered by terror, miners fought the chaos and each other to reach the ladders out. Shouts and warnings gave way to screams as men's throats became seared by the smoke and crushed their chests, sucking out all the air. The furnace-like heat drove some to desperate action, running blindly into the smoke and flames, never to return.

Heroes and Martyrs

The whistle finally blew just after 3:00pm to signal a problem. Knowing the sound of the "hazard whistle," the entire town ran to the mine to discover less than half of the work force had crawled their way to the surface. With terrified children clinging to their skirts, women wept and wailed as they looked desperately for their husbands and sons.

A few men made it out, with skin scorched, hands cracked and bleeding. One of them, manager Bundy, wasted no time in rallying to save his fellow men. His voice hoarse from smoke, Bundy called for volunteers to dive back into the mine. Those who had just clawed their way out didn't hesitate; there were more volunteers than places on the cage. Despite the pleas from friends and family, a dozen men leapt on the platform and descended into the fiery pit in search of survivors. It was an act of unbridled bravery that inspired all who saw it. As newspaper accounts later reported:

> In the annals of the world's heroic deeds few achievements are recorded more glorious than those accomplished by the eleven rescuers at the St. Paul mine…Six times they were lowered into the burning mine. Leaving the cage they penetrated into the body of the mine, lifted up the miners as they found them, and sent them to the

top, some in the cage, and many, one by one, up the air shaft bound singly in chairs.[214]

The rescuers faced a hellish mess. The air was too thick with smoke to see, causing disorientation and making it nearly impossible to breathe. The stench of burnt flesh stung their noses as they crawled over a carpet of burnt bodies to grab those still breathing and bring them back to the cage. Once full, they'd ring the gong signaling to those topside that they were ready to return with more souls for the makeshift hospital set up outside.

Again and again the volunteers plunged into the mine, bringing up more survivors each time. Driven by will and adrenaline, they pushed past their exhaustion and fear to make one more trip, save one more life. With each return the crowd pressed forward, anxious to see if a husband, son or father was one of the wretches pulled from the inferno. On their seventh journey down, however, the rope went limp, with no signal from the rescue party.

The cage operator Crowley hesitated, worried he might leave the party stranded if he pulled the lift too quick or too early. As the minutes passed with no signal, those around him started clamoring for him to pull the cage, but Crowley seemed paralyzed with uncertainty. By the time he relented it was too late. As the Chicago Tribune described:

> It had been four minutes, but no signal had been sent. The engineers, however, dared wait no longer. The car came up fast, but faster came the burst of flame. The cage and the flame came together to the level of the ground. But no one stepped from the cage. Ten of the eleven heroes already were dead. The eleventh, Tom Flood, still breathing, was dragged from the heap. He was able to articulate a little. "The flame caught us," he gasped. Then he, too, was dead.[215]

Disaster Felt Around the World

Word reached Streator by late afternoon, and people flooded their local churches to offer assistance. The final news was a nightmare. In total 259 of the miners and the 12 rescuers—more than half the workforce—had died, 46 of them Streator natives. Hearts breaking with grief, families made the journey to keep vigil at the mine, clinging to the ever-diminishing hope that they would see their loved ones again. For the majority, that last unbearable reunion would be as their husband, father or child was loaded onto one of the bread trucks that pressed into service to help carry the dead to a local storehouse that served as a makeshift morgue. In the words of the Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette:

> Cherry mine to-night is a scene of grief and terror. Women and children are moaning and crying in the streets. Many wives whose husbands did not return from the fiery tomb are crazed with grief. Every family in the stricken town has felt the blow of the calamity.[216]

Meanwhile, the scene at the disaster assumed a gaudy, almost circus-like atmosphere. News of the tragedy had spread, with the Italian, French, and Russian governments dispatching consuls for support. Onlookers and curiosity-seekers arrived by the trainload. The Chicago Daily Tribune set the number at 20,000 in all.[217] Complete with food vendors and spectators sporting their Sunday best, they descended like locusts, buying up all the local food and goods, leaving the already bereft mining families to starve. Mayor Connelly of Cherry made a desperate plea for help. "We need aid and plenty of it, and it must be forthcoming quickly or there will be great suffering among the destitute families of the miners," he wrote. "If the weather becomes very cold, the suffering will be terrible."

Hope was briefly kindled when, eight days after the after the fire, 21 survivors were brought to the surface

after having built a makeshift wall to protect themselves from the poisonous gas. Among them was George Eddy, a Streator native. A night laborer who was not working when the fires started, George ran to the mine when he heard the alarm and had been trapped while saving others. Like his compatriots, half-dead from hunger and dehydration, George believed he would not make it out alive. Sharing a single notebook and pencil, the men had written goodbye letters to their wives and children in the hopes that at least their bodies may be found. George wrote:

> Dear wife and children,
>
> I write these few lines to you and I think it will be for the last time. I have tried to get out twice but was driven back, there seems to be no hope for us, I come down this shaft yesterday to help save the men's lives. I hoped the men I got out was saved. Well Elizabeth if I am found dead take me to Streator to bury and move back. Keep Esther and Florence and Jennie together as much as you can, I hope they will not forget their father so I will bid you all good bye and God bless you all.

Many of those still waiting on word of their men took heart at the discovery, filled with the hope that George and his party would be the first of many rescues. Unfortunately, they were the last to make it out alive. As the weeks passed, families of the miners still unaccounted for insisted on keeping the air shafts open in case any other trapped miners had survived. This became increasingly difficult as dumping thousands of gallons of water down the shafts failed to extinguish what had become a roaring fire. The November 28 decision to close off the shafts with concrete in order to starve the fire drew huge protests. The sheriff, his deputies, and two companies of the Illinois National Guard's sixth regiment struggled to keep order as throngs of miners and their families mad with despair tried to push through the line. Some tried to prevent their loved ones from possibly being buried alive, while others attempted to dive down the shaft themselves to be buried along with them.

Work at Cherry would not resume until February. Two and a half months after the fire, crews opened the mine and pumped water from the third level, revealing dozens more bodies. Five miners who survived the disaster volunteered to clear the rubble, removing the bodies of the dead as they were brought to the top.
Sadly, the tragedy continued to take lives long after the terrible events of the day as many family members proved unable to come with the loss. Margret Bredinski, whose story spread through the presses, was one such example:

> Margaret Bredinski of Kewanee, who lost two brothers in the Cherry mine disaster, has disappeared. Relatives who have made an unsuccessful search for her for a week believe her mind is unbalanced by her misfortune and that she is wandering in the country between Kewanee and Cherry. All her savings of six years had been entrusted to a lost brother, who is believed to have carried the money on his person, having feared to deposit it anywhere.[218]

Aftermath

Though horrific, the Cherry mine disaster was merely the most poignant example of the much broader problems of workmen's safety and compensation. Cherry was in fact only the nation's third largest mining disaster; a 1907 explosion in the mines of Monogah, West Virginia had killed 362, while a 1913 explosion in Dawson, New Mexico would claim another 263 lives. On December 23, less than six weeks after Cherry, a gas explosion touched off by the flame of an open lamp killed eight more men at the Herrin, Illinois Muddy Coal and Iron Co. More than 18,000 miners had been killed in the United States in the last ten years alone. Although mining was universally dangerous, it was clear that the lack of worker protections made mining in the United States especially so. The mortality rate in the US was four times higher than in Europe, where

regulations were far stronger.

In the aftermath of Cherry, a generous public did all it could to ease the pain. The Chicago Tribune began a relief campaign fund, publishing daily lists of contributions:

> FOR THE SUFFERERS: THE TRIBUNE will receive subscriptions for the immediate and temporary relief of the families of the victims of the Cherry mine disaster. The sums subscribed will be delivered to the Red Cross or any other fit organization as soon as possible. But THE TRIBUNE is prepared to send relief today. Subscriptions in whole or in part taken up by the churches this morning cannot be put to better use than the care of those who were dependent upon the dead miners. THE TRIBUNE subscribes $1,000.[219]

Montgomery Ward & Co. gave $500 in cash and sold $1,800 worth of supplies to relief fund managers at cost. The Tribune also sent 250 loaves of bread and 100 pounds of sausage for the starving families, and sent shipments of clothes and shoes to 175 women, children and infants.

Still, as generous as this aid was, it was not equal to the task at hand. In the days after the fire Illinois UMWA president Duncan McDonald tallied 200 probable widows and nearly 1,000 probable orphans. As he reported:

> Almost two-thirds of the missing men leave widows. Each of these widows has from one to three children. I saw one woman who has nine children, all under twelve years old. She has not enough money to pay for a week's provisions. In a month from now, the distress of these people will be pitiable.[220]

The sheer number of dead, widowed and orphaned in Cherry forced the nation and its leaders to take action on what had been a longstanding but previously ignored problem. President Taft recommended that Congress create a federal bureau of mines to review mining practices and regulation. In Illinois, a new workplace safety law went into effect January 1, 1910, requiring extensive restructuring of the work environment. It mandated every furnace or forge, receptacle of molten metal or corrosive fluid, electrical apparatus or system of power transmission, and all power-driven machinery to be "located as to not endanger employees, or else the dangers must be enclosed and the workers protected." Businesses also had to provide 500 cubic feet of air for each worker, plus fresh air without any harmful drafts. Any business that failed to comply faced a fine of no less than $10 and not more than $50 for a first offense. Second and subsequent offenses brought fines in the amount of $25 to $200. Over 4,771 facilities were inspected the following year.

The effects of the Cherry mine disaster would reach far beyond this initial legislation, however. Amid the call for increased safety measures from the UMWA, mines operated by the LaSalle County Carbon Coal Company in Union, LaSalle, Rockwell and Jonesville would eventually include water pipes installed down the shafts, a telephone system, and all electric lights with no torches or open flames. Attempts were also made to limit the workday to more reasonable hours. The state legislature passed a law mandating a ten-hour workday starting July 1, 1911, which the Chancellor of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Judge Richard J. Tuthill, later ruled the law unconstitutional. However, a similar law establishing a ten-hour day for women was ultimately upheld by the Illinois Supreme Court.

Other protective laws which had been ignored prior to Cherry mine were now finally enforced. Chief among these were child labor laws. One of the saddest scenes in the aftermath of Cherry mine was the recovery of the young boys who had worked sifting coal in the mine, their burnt, lifeless forms a sad reminder of lives taken before their time. Although Illinois had passed child labor laws in 1903 and 1904 that prevented boys under the age of sixteen from working in the mines, it was believed that over fifteen hundred children still worked under false affidavits. Chief state inspector Edgar T. Davies made a renewed push in the wake of Cherry mine

to remove anyone under sixteen from the mines.

Of all the laws to follow in the wake of the tragedy at Cherry Mine, however, none had a greater impact on Illinois (and Reuben) than the Worker's Compensation Law. Forged by Soderstrom's mentor John E. Williams, this Act, which fundamentally changed the relationship between employers and their workers with respect to safety, would serve as the bedrock for one of Reuben's pillars of labor.

THE WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION ACT

Origins

The modern workmen's compensation movement began in Prussia (modern-day Germany) in the 1880s.[221] This progressive innovation drew worldwide attention, and in 1897 the United Kingdom followed suit with an act of its own.[222] Before long, many prominent American leaders began clamoring for the passage of similar laws in the United States, asserting a worker's right to their life and livelihood was equal to, if not superseded by, an owner's right to their property. As the progressive President Theodore Roosevelt argued:

> We believe in property rights normally, and in the long run property rights and human rights coincide; but when they are at variance we are for human rights first and for property rights second…If one of the machines owned by an employer is damaged, the employer has to pay for the damage; and if the man who runs it is hurt, it is just as much the duty of the employer to compensate him as it is to repair the machine. In each case those who use the product will in the end, and quite properly, pay for the damage.[223]

Despite this growing enthusiasm, compensation legislation advanced little in the US during the first decade of the twentieth century. That all changed in 1911, when ten states, including Illinois, passed their own Workmen's Compensation Acts. While the Prairie State was not the first—that honor went to Wisconsin, which signed its act into law two months before the Illinois Assembly passed its own—Illinois's Workmen's Compensation Act was arguably the most important, as the state was the most populous and industrialized of all those affected.[224] Further, like Wisconsin's Act, the Illinois law was based on the unprecedented agreement between the widows of Cherry Mine and its operators, a deal arbitrated by Reuben's mentor John Williams. This agreement, born out of tragedy and forged through dialogue, helped to redefine the relationship between workers and employers with respect to workplace safety and formed one of Reuben's pillars of Labor.

Manufacturers Attack Compensation For Injured, Widows

The struggle for workmen's compensation was not an easy one; industrialists across the country used their considerable money and influence to resist all efforts at reform. Fred Wilcox, Chair of Wisconsin's Industrial Commission, later described it as a "bitter and prolonged campaign" marred by "caustic, heated criticism" on behalf of the nation's employers.[225] The battle was especially pitched in Illinois, where the powerful Manufacturers' Association controlled the legislative landscape. They characterized such legislation as a well-intentioned road to moral reprobation. The speech given by LC Blanding, Assistant Secretary of the Moline Plower Company, at a meeting of the Association's Tri-City chapter was a typical example of the manufacturers' rhetoric:

> Workmen's compensation presents a perplexing problem…Reports of operation of workmen's compensation acts in Germany and elsewhere show that at the outset an attempt was made to observe and follow within reason its essential requisites; yet from year to year following adoption, more and more latitude has been followed, until now it no longer is a system for providing benefits to those properly entitled to receive them, but become an enormous octopus sapping alike the character and manhood of the people and feeding on the

vitality of the nation.[226]

Workers, Blanding continued, were prone to "seek something for nothing," and were aided in this endeavor by so-called advocates who were compelled not by compassion or justice but by the intense desire to "give away other people's money." He continued (apparently without irony) to explain at length the heroic risk that businessmen took by profiting from "hazardous lines of industry…the savings of a lifetime can be wiped out by a single catastrophe." By "imposing unnecessary obligations" like workmen's compensation, he warned, "the incentive for continuing the business is gone."[227] Arguments against workmen's compensation often took a moralistic, scolding tone. Employers viewed efforts to make them legally accountable for the safety of their employees as foreign and antithetical to American values. Labor historian Philip Dray explains:

> Early nineteenth-century law governing the relationship between employer and employee had been colored by the ideology of free labor. A hiring was an agreement between independent entities. Employees took the risk of injury as part of this "contract," while employers accepted the blame only in instances of extreme company negligence, and then usually with paltry restitution to victims or their survivors…Injured workers might be cared for in union hospitals or compensated by brotherhood funds, or even by irregular funds kept for such purposes by employers, but lawsuits seeking substantial awards had the challenge of proving employer negligence. This was extremely difficult, as potential witnesses to an accident were usually themselves employees and were often intimidated by the prospect of testifying against those who paid their wages.[228]

As Dray notes, attempts by workers and their families to sue rarely succeeded. In practice, the employer (legally defined as the "master") was almost never found responsible for injuries suffered by the worker ("servant"). Masters routinely avoided culpability by claiming injury and death was an "ordinary hazard" of the profession, or, when necessary, by blaming another employee for the accident (the "fellow servant" defense). Even if a servant could prove the master was at fault, all an employer had to do was prove that the worker knew of their negligence. If a miner went to work knowing that the mine's operator failed to meet legal safety standards, for example, then the operator could not be held responsible when those violations lead to that miner getting maimed or killed! In the rare instances where a servant successfully sued, their lawyer, who almost always worked on contingency, received 25%-50% of the amount recovered.[229]

The courtroom protection employers enjoyed extended beyond civil suits. Early American workmen's compensation laws in Montana (1909) and New York (1910) were declared unconstitutional by the Court of Appeals under the 14th Amendment. The New York ruling on March 24, 1911, drew national attention twice; conservative interests initially cheered the decision when it first came down, crowing "It appears that in this State, at least, there is a fundamental law with guarantees and safeguards which may not be abolished except by the regular process of constitutional amendment."[230] Those voices were mute the following day, however, when New York again made national news, this time for a horrific fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire which killed 146 workers. As the New York Joint Labor Conference of Workmen's Compensation wrote following the tragedy:

> The holocaust of March 25 has stirred public feeling to the depths because of its dramatic circumstances and because of the large number of lives which were snuffed out within a single hour," But it should not be forgotten that workers are being slaughtered in smaller numbers and in a less public manner every day…Nor should it be forgotten that the Court of Appeals of this state has just wiped off the statute books a law, admittedly just and beneficent, which would have assured compensation for economic loss to persons injured, and to the families of persons killed at their work, and whose indirect effect would have been to make it unprofitable for employers to permit dangerous conditions to exist in their places of employment.[231]

Cherry Mine Arbitration

Like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York, the tragedy at Cherry Mine galvanized public opinion in Illinois. In the wake of the disaster, the Governor called for the creation of the Cherry Commission, which included members from the UMWA, the Red Cross, the Illinois Coal Operators Association and the Illinois State Board of Control. The commission was vice-chaired by none other than Reuben's mentor, John Williams.

As their investigation continued, Williams grew increasingly concerned about the welfare and protection of those the tragedy left behind. Several of the widows of Cherry mine had filed lawsuits against the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad (which owned the company that operated the mine), and many more would need assistance for months and years to come. Their suits, however, had little chance of success under the current law. Even in the unlikely event of a favorable ruling, the widows were unlikely to receive payment, as their rewards would likely force the operators into bankruptcy. In search of a just and permanent solution, John took it upon himself to arbitrate a joint settlement on behalf of the widows of Cherry, pushing both the mine and the law to recognize the principle of workmen's compensation in the process. It was a role for which Williams—a former miner turned businessman who had successfully arbitrated a previous coal strike in 1889—was uniquely qualified.

Over the course of the next several months, Williams shuttled back and forth between the mining company, the widows and orphans, state officials, and union leaders to slowly build consensus. Progress did not come easy; Albert Earling, the president of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad, originally held firm at $250,000, half of what Williams believed was needed. Meanwhile, some within United Mine Workers—distrustful of Earling and hungry for a public trial—were less than enthused by William's efforts. One of his bitterest struggles was against one of the miners' own lawyers, Seymour Stedman, whose actions he feared would jeopardize the entire bargain. He wrote to the counselor:

> Shall it now be said that is failed in the Cherry case? Shall the reactionary employer be able to point to Cherry and say "I told you so. The working men are unappreciative, ungrateful and thankless?" Shall we justify the critics of President Earling who predicted that any man would get the worst of it who tried fair dealing in a personal injury case?[232]

Stedman responded in a scathing letter personally attacking Williams for seven pages. It read in part:

> Mr. AJ Earling must smile in his sleeve at your naïve expression, especially when he considers how easily his company is being relieved of the whole affair and that the stockholders will not materially suffer...You say you were "led to enter this affair as a mediator to settle a precedent." You flatter yourself. You have been a tool in the hands of the company…[233]

Stedman's caricature of Earling was hardly fair or accurate; by all accounts he was unaware of the safety conditions at the mine, and sought the settlement for moral as much as financial reasons. "No one could have gone to Cherry in its hour of disaster without being profoundly impressed with the futility of mere legal remedies," he later wrote. "No corporation worthy of receiving from the State the right to transact its business could have closed its treasury in the presence of hunger and destitution simply because no legal responsibility rested upon it to furnish food and clothing. At such an hour as that the question of legal rights and duties become insignificant as compared with the impelling call of humanity."[234]

Ultimately, Williams convinced Earling of the need for a more sweeping agreement. Using the English Workman's Compensation Act of 1906, which placed compensation at three times the deceased employee's annual salary, as a model, John persuaded to the president to accept a $400,000 settlement in the fall of 1910.

This, combined with donations from the Red Cross, the United Mine Workers, the State of Illinois, and others, came to nearly $850,000 in total funds. In addition to an initial payment of $300 to $500, widows with families would be given a monthly stipend of $20 plus $5 per child until they came of working age (14). In all, it is estimated that each victim's family received an average of $3,261.72.[235]

The Williams settlement generated interest in other businesses. After all, the idea of a voluntary contract between a company and its workers establishing pre-determined payouts for workplace injuries made financial sense for employers as well as employees, as it shielded them from expensive litigation.[236] Later that year the International Harvester Company, with 25,000 employees, offered an indemnity contract with its employees based on the Cherry arbitration.[237] In 1911, the General Assembly adopted the Cherry Mine agreement as the basis for the Illinois Workmen's Compensation Act. The new law, which went into effect on May 1, 1912, made voluntary to avoid the constitutional troubles of the New York and Montana acts, radically redefined the relationship between employers and employees with regard to workplace safety. Public officials and the press largely hailed the legislation as groundbreaking; as an editorial from *The Rock Island Argus and Daily Union* explained:

> The new workmen's compensation act is ranked as the greatest piece of industrial legislation ever passed at Springfield. It applies to specified hazardous employments, and it is made optional both with employers and employees. Employers electing not to come under the act forego the common law defenses of assumption of risk, fellow servant and contributory negligence. The death compensation is four times the annual earnings of the employee; graduated compensation is provided for injuries. If any employee is completely disabled, he receives one-half his average wage for the first eight years of his disability. Afterward he gets a life compensation equal to 5 percent of the death benefit, but not less than $10 a month.[238]

There is no question that the Cherry Mine arbitration and subsequent Illinois Workmen's Compensation Act were fundamental achievements for unions both, within the state and nationally. They were also foundational to Soderstrom's understanding of the needs and priorities of organized labor. Years later, Reuben would help make the law mandatory, and expand its scope to include all occupations.

While the Compensation Act was a valued first step towards the recognition of the principle that the employer, not the employee, bore responsibility for a safe working environment, labor sought more than simple repayment. "What workingmen desire and demand," wrote UMWA President John Mitchell in his call for passage of the Workmen's Compensation Act, "is not so much compensation as prevention of injury."[239] That struggle—the fight for a work environment safe from danger and disease—would lead to the formation of yet another of Reuben's pillars of labor: workplace safety.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

WIDOWS OF CHERRY

The protection of widows and workers' families was perhaps the single most significant positive result to come from the horrible tragedy. Unable to support families on their own, the widows of miners were left with few options. Faced with the specter of the county poor house, many widows looked to remarriage as the best way to provide for their children. More business arrangements than couplings, these unions were quite common in the wake of a tragedy, and Cherry mine was no exception. Upon word of the tragedy, Cherry Mayor Connelly's office was flooded with offers from landed gentlemen seeking widows for "companionship" and children for work. Like solicitations for any good, these requests were complete with desired traits, attributes and ages. The letter from Kansas farmer H. Sanford was a typical example:

> If you will pick out a widow with two or three children that are good looking and smart children and their mother is an American and she can sing so as her children can learn to sing and play, I would take them if she will do the work, as I haven't any family and I love children. I have a good house and 160 acres farm, and if she will do what is right I'll send the children to school and clothe her and the children, treat them all just like they were my own and love her too. I want her for companionship and to help me do the work. We own our own farm, and would give a deserving woman a good home. I am not particular about the ages of the children, only would like for one to be ten to twelve years old, so they could milk two or three cows. We only milk one now, but with that much family we would have to have more milk and butter. So give one of them a chance for a good home. We have an eight room house; the dining room is fourteen by twenty. So we would get along fine. I hope to get a favorable reply.[240]

Of course, men weren't the only ones seeking to complete their families by adopting the victims of the Cherry tragedy. Women likewise saw potential mutually beneficial arrangements to be struck, as the letter from this Missouri woman attests:

> I am 45 years old and unmarried. I live at home, in the country, and I would like to get two small boys to come and live with me. I will be a mother to them and will see that they get every advantage in education and youthful training. I write this letter because I think maybe there are some bereaved families in Cherry who can afford to give up two of their children. The mothers can see them whenever they wish.[241]

Although they might seem awkward by today's standards, these solicitations aren't far removed from ones found on dating sites today. Just like modern seekers, the posters of these letters and those who answered them were looking for partners based on mutual compatibility and common interest. Instead of using computer algorithms, these men and women relied on local authorities (in this case the Mayor) to ensure that the requests were seen by their most compatible match.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

LETTERS FROM THE DAMNED

Trapped, starving, and running out of air, the dozens trapped in Cherry mine following the fire knew they had little chance of escape. Alive for days and with little to do but await death, many of the men wrote last wills, letters to loved ones, and accounts of their last moments. Some of these letters survived, and were later painstakingly collected by author and historian Karen Tintori in her book *Trapped: The 1909 Cherry Mine Disaster*.

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In Mine of Cherry, Ill on Sunday, 14, Nov 1909

Dear Erminia and Son:

Now being half past one P.M. I am very hungry but suffering much more from thirst. Dear Erminia, am very sure that my last hour has struck and never will leave this grave, I beg of you not to think longer of my death for I feel I will have an easy death. You will write to my unfortuned mother and brothers and tell them of my sad death. I have nothing more to say, only that to educate my dear child the best you can, and when he grows you may tell him that he had an honest father. Would like to say hoping to see you again but I must say goodbye forever, last kisses from your Antenore.[242]

———

Dear wife and Children,

I am now writing just before we all go. I know Maggie you will be in an awful state. I have been thinking of you Mag and the children. I loved my children and my wife, But if it is God's wish for us to go, God knows what is best. It is five o'clock Sunday morning when I am writing. Maggie I am praying to God and my Saviour.

Good-Bye wife and children, be good to the children Maggie.
Please give all the folks at home my best wishes.
Maggie I wish you and the children to attend church and live good christen lives, believe in God Maggie.

From your loving husband,

Tom White[243]

———

Dear Wife,

I am still living yet this is five o'clock Sunday morning, but we have poor hope as the black damp is getting the best of us there is twenty one of us all together here dear wife don't grieve we will meet again, God bless you and believe in him. He will take care of you, I gess we will meet in a better land, when you get over this let them know at home, that all is dear, God bless you,

Your loving husband,

John Lorimer[244]

———

15 November 1909 Monday

Dear Sister-in-Law,

It is 7p.m. Monday. There is no hope that I will come out, up until now we are like rats in a trap. Many times we have searched for a way to save ourselves. It was useless, the smoke was too hot, we were obliged to retreat always.

Write to my bereaved parents, and tell them about our end. When they will find my corpse, I pray you have me buried beside my brother, as we unfortunately will have the same death. If you have the band at my funeral, pay for it at my expense. You know my business, do as if it were yours, so that my parents will have a memento of me.

I send my best regards to you and your children. Send regards to my dear parents, brother and sisters. Regards to the members of the lodge to which I belong.

With tears in my eyes, I tell you for a short time,

Your affectionate brother-in-law,

Salvatore Pigati[245]

———-

November 14, 1909

Dear Wife and Family,

I write these few lines to let you know that we was alive at this time and if we are found dead, try to keep the family together and use your best judgment about what you can do for them for I may not see any of you again so good-bye and God Bless you all.

From your loving Husband and Father,

Walter Waite[246]

———

On Sunday, 15 minutes after 11 o'clock, there were in the last entry70 of us men, and now we are only 30. The rest died. I am still alive and waiting, my dear wife, for God to come. I bequeath my wife $200; the funeral expenses $100, and to the girl, my daughter, $200. So my dear wife, we are still living a little bit, but we are suffocating. You do as you know best and live as you can with God.

(Unsigned, found on the body of John Leptak)[247]

CHAPTER 8
1911-1913

FROM FREE SPIRIT TO FATHER

TWO LIVES: AT HOME AND AWAY

Reuben began 1911 with a renewed sense of optimism and vigor. Reub's role on the Streator Trades and Labor Assembly put him in close contact with "many remarkable people" of the age. "It was my privilege to meet people like old John Hunter, known as Dad Hunter rather affectionately, and William Ryan who were the first officers of the Illinois Coal Miners, District #12," he later explained. "I also had the privilege of meeting John Mitchell, who was the greatest of them all…In that sort of environment I became interested of course extensively in labor activities and particularly in the possibility of correcting the evils of industry by legislation."[248]

For Reub, these possibilities stirred not just excitement but ambition. Although his role in the Streator labor movement had greatly increased over the past year, Reuben still saw his career leading him elsewhere. He'd spent most of his adult life in big cities like St. Louis and Madison. Chicago held particular appeal, home to both "big labor" and a considerable number of his own family.

Still, Reuben was torn; he loved his adopted hometown and those in it even more. His parents, sister, and brother still lived in the small house they'd bought all those years ago. The building itself was a labor of love; Reub had spent years and sweat working alongside Lafe to make the house a home for their family. Most importantly, Streator had Jeanne. Straightforward and stalwart, she had stood by Reuben through all his travels. Still, she was no pushover, and anything but shy, and Reub knew he could not keep her waiting forever. A choice was coming soon—between the small town or big city, family man or the bachelor life. It was a choice the 23-year-old Reub would put off as long as he could.

The Changing Face of Streator

Much like Reuben himself, the city of Streator was struggling through a major transition. Over the last several years the city had transformed from the mining town of Reub's childhood into a modern city of industry. As the Streator historian Dale Lee Bennett writes, "Coal mining was rapidly declining as an employer of labor…the glass industry, shale products, and miscellaneous manufacturing companies employed many of the former miners, while others went to the mines in southern Illinois. The glass industry became the primary employer of labor by 1912."[249]

The increase in factory work furthered Streator's union character, and strengthened its reputation as a model labor town. One hundred miles outside of Chicago, it was close enough to the nation's "Second City" to provide easy access to national leaders, speakers and events. At the same time, Streator was far enough out to claim a regional significance of its own. By 1911, Streator had become the "front line" in the conflict between capital and labor.

To be sure, the city's labor situation was far from ideal. Streator workers faced multiple fights, and lost their fair share. While the IBEW, glass workers, and miners had waged successful strikes, unorganized workers like

the track laborers had seen theirs broken. The management practice of importing immigrant and black laborers as strikebreakers also fed racial tensions. Streator often split along cultural and ethnic lines. "There was still no true solidarity among the different ethnic groups," Streator historian Bennett notes. "The old animosities were still directed towards the non-English-speaking people by the English speaking people of the city."[250] Streator and its neighboring towns experienced all kinds of inter-racial violence, from white on black to "old" vs. "new" immigrants to "new-on-new" attacks like the skirmishes between Italian and Polish workers. Intra-labor tensions also simmered between skilled and unskilled professions.

The question of whether non-skilled laborers could possibly share the same interests (and respect) of skilled labor also divided Streator, as it had the national movement since its very beginning. On one side sat the American Federation of Labor, with leaders like Sam Gompers and most of his skilled craftsmen rejecting the notion of industrial unions. On the other sat more radical thinkers and organizers like Eugene Debs, advocating industry-wide unions to represent workers who, though unskilled, were legion in number.

These divisions were less visible in Streator, however. Ethnic animosities, while present, had declined in recent years as immigration slowed and salaries equalized (largely due to the end of the German "twisters"). Unlike larger and more stratified industrial centers such as Chicago and Philadelphia—where the out-sized influence of industry had increasingly made radical action the only union option—the largely egalitarian Streator had gained a reputation for moderation and successful compromise. Labor success in Streator hinged on compromise between a number of constituencies. Skilled and unskilled labor, different ethnicities, and even local owners had developed a series of alliances that held together more often than not. Again from Bennett:

> Streator, the home of the great labor peacemaker John E. Williams, had had a very moderate labor movement. The leaders of the movement always urged moderation rather than militancy…This moderate approach to conflicts, which coal miners had displayed earlier in the town's labor movement, continued to be the labor ideology…The concept of collective action practiced by the factory worker, tradesman, and others was not seriously questioned by the majority of the town's population.[251]

Chicago Calling

Streator's importance had conflicting effects on its emerging leaders like Reuben and Lafe. On the one hand, it gave them an importance, access and relevance they otherwise would have been unable to achieve this early in their political life. Reub had now served on the ITU executive committee alongside his brother Lafe for over a year, and had acted as a delegate on the Streator Labor Council for nearly as long. During this time, Reub had written and spoken on behalf of labor in columns and speeches, helping to gain public support for working men and women. He was fast gaining a reputation as a powerful advocate.

At the same time, their quick elevation attracted the brothers to the national arena of Chicago like moths to a flame. As 1911 dawned, Reuben and his brother enjoyed rapidly rising profiles; even as the brothers joined the ITU's first annual meeting in their new home at Wissen Hall, they were considering another move back to Chicago. Lafe soon did so, moving back in with their Aunt Emma Lind that spring.

Reuben would resist the urge a while longer, holding out through the summer. His family played a factor. The Soderstrom household, however, was much quieter. With Joe's death and his other brothers Lafe, and Paul living with his cousins in Chicago, Reuben now had more family in that city than in Streator. He also had Jeanne to consider. She was now a night supervisor for the Central Union Telephone Company. After years of separation, she and Reuben were finally living in the same city, and spent almost all of their free moments together. For Reuben to be unmarried at his age was not unusual; the median marrying age for men at the time was 25 (it was not until the 1950s that the male marrying age would drop below 23).[252] Still, they

had not married despite a courtship of over 6 years. Many men of the time postponed marriage until they could support a family, and this may have been a factor in Reuben's decision. It may have also played a role in his temptation to leave for a bigger paycheck in an even bigger city.

In the end, however, it was likely Reuben's restless nature that played the deciding role. Throughout his life, Reub had never sat still. From his childhood travels through his years as a journeyman laborer, Reub had learned never to stop moving, never to stay in one place for too long. His boundless and inquisitive nature had taken him from the shores of the Mississippi to the wilds of Wisconsin, and now it called him once again to the bright lights of Chicago. Unable to resist the call, in September of that year Reub left Streator to work as a linotype operator and shop foreman in Chicago.

TRAGEDY AND TROUBLE

Reuben´s decision to return to Chicago in the fall of 1911 may have also been based in part on a recent death in the family. Soon after the passing of his first child, Reub´s brother Paul lost his wife in the summer of 1911. Isolated and far from home, the grieving brother may have needed his stalwart sibling more than ever. Reunited in tragedy, Reub, Paul and Lafe would need one another in the coming months as the troubles they faced multiplied, culminating in a life-altering loss for them all.

A Frail Beauty

Life had not been easy for Paul Soderstrom and his wife, Clara Simpco. Their firstborn son died after only four months in 1910. Still, the couple was overjoyed when daughter Lorraine Olga Marie was born on January 19, 1911. However, the restless Paul had never been able to hold a job for long, and their lack of a steady income took its toll on the young mother's health. Reub took his sister Olga up to Chicago to see their new niece just four days after her birth. Upon arrival, she was shocked at the poor living conditions they found: "I remember going into the apartment in Chicago and someone was boiling a chicken and it smelled awful, like it was spoiled. Clara was real ill, expenses were high and Paul needed financial help, which Reub, the old standby, gave him."[253]

Clara's illness left her unable to care for their child, and two weeks later mother Anna went to Chicago to bring the baby back to Streator. Relying heavily on their neighbor "Maw" Bottom, the whole Soderstrom family helped care for the newborn. That Easter, Clara came to Streator as well. Her arrival made a strong impression on Olga: "I can remember seeing her get out of the hack (a horse drawn carriage)…She had a huge straw hat with lilacs around the crown, it was snowing and the lilacs just peeked out of the snow and made a beautiful picture. Clara was a beautiful lady and she was so frail."[254]

Unfortunately, the sojourn in Streator did not improve her health. Clara was soon diagnosed with tuberculosis. By May her sister Edwina, a Franciscan nun, came and placed her in the hospital to avoid putting the whole family at risk. Clara passed away in June, the third funeral for the Soderstrom house in two years. Reub, the constant provider, financed all of these funerals.

Clara's passing left Paul bereft and beside himself with grief. Unable to care for himself let alone a young child, Paul left young Lorraine in the strong hands of his mother Anna. Finally, after grieving the untimely death of her darling baby Joe for so long, Anna once again had a child in the house to nurture and care for. With characteristic fortitude, Reub's mother took to raising young Lorraine as if she was her own.

Labor Under Attack

1912 proved to be a year of setbacks for labor as well. On January 4, 1912, Reuben returned to Streator to listen to one of his inspirations, Senator "Fighting Bob" La Follette, speak at the Plumb Opera House. Though weakened by food poisoning, the senator passionately excoriated bro-business politicians who "were working for and serving the special interests." Reub listened with rapt attention as La Follette railed against the supposed servants of the people "who ignored the interests of the people and were working solely for personal gain," and called for people to "rise in arms and do away with the old method of selecting political bosses."[255] La Follette was particularly angry over price schemes like the 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff that manipulated prices to benefit Northeastern industry at the expense of Midwestern farmers.

Corrupt legislators weren't labor's greatest foe in government, however. That honor went to the court system, which continued to hammer labor throughout the year, delivering a series of setbacks in its attempt to undo popular reform. In April of 1911, the Illinois Supreme Court struck down the Tanner Act. Named after the former Governor of Illinois who was the first executive in US history to exercise militia power in defense of American labor, the act had barred companies from using replacement workers to break a strike. Illinois UMWA President had especially harsh words for the court's actions at the following Illinois Miners' convention, telling the crowd, "A coterie of judicial jackals betrayed the common people of our common wealth, prostituted themselves and the high offices they hold, and paid them, the money interests, their thirty pieces of silver for the job they gave them, by rendering this infamous judgment on the constitutionality of the law, which they set aside."[256]

The most insidious weapon the court employed against labor, however, was the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and the issuance of injunctions. Perverting a law meant to prevent powerful industrialists from unfairly colluding, the conservative judges used the anti-corruption law to issue injunctions that prevented unions and officers from interfering with business in any way—including striking. The most infamous example of this abuse was Gompers v. Buck's Stove and Range Co., in which the company, in the midst of a strike, obtained a sweeping injunction forbidding a boycott. When the AFL placed the company on its "unfair list," Associate Justice Daniel Wright sentenced its leadership—Samuel Gompers, John Mitchell and Frank Morrison—to prison. When he was overturned by the Supreme Court, the vindictive judge had the men tried for contempt again in 1912, found them guilty and again sentenced them to prison.

Injunctions against union officials emerged in almost every labor conflict. It seemed every time workers went on strike, a judge would issue an order barring union officials from distributing written materials or speaking to workers, and preventing them even from being within 100 feet of the business or its property. The "injunction judges" could even count the sitting President, William Taft, in their number. As a judge on the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, Taft had upheld the use of injunctions to stop strikes, and had declared "secondary boycotts" illegal. If unions and their leadership were to have any hope of survival, they had to find a way to effectively combat big business's hold on the courts and the Presidency.

The first step toward reclamation of the presidency occurred in Chicago at the Republican National Convention of 1912, where former President Theodore Roosevelt challenged Taft for the nomination. The floor fight turned ugly, as supporters of Roosevelt felt Taft's control of the Republican National Committee had unfairly given him undemocratic power over the nomination process. Throughout the proceedings Roosevelt supporters kept chanting "choo choo" to mock Taft and his supporters for "railroading" the process. Despite winning more primary votes, it became clear to Roosevelt that Taft would capture the nomination, so he withdrew his name and asked his delegates not to vote at the convention. Refusing to give up, Roosevelt then announced the formation of the Progressive Party.

Strong As A Bull Moose

Although shaped by and around the dynamic personality of Roosevelt, the ideas behind the Progressive movement could be traced to the very founding of the Republican Party. By 1900, powerful twin impulses that had spurred the anti-slavery movement coalesced into two factions within the party. The first, to make men "free," had developed into the conservative wing. Pro-business and laissez-faire, this group saw government as an oppressor, an evil necessary only inasmuch as it secured rights of life, liberty and (especially) property. They viewed unions as impediments, the "slave masters" of the modern age seeking to destroy "free" labor.

The second impulse, to make the world "better" and all men "brothers," had by 1900 forged the progressive wing. Motivated by the gulf between the world they knew and the one they knew could be, these Republicans carried on the "unfinished work" of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, endeavoring to progress towards a more perfect union. In this view, government and unions were powerful protections, tools to help build a "new and nobler commonwealth."[257]

The most famous of these latter Republicans was undoubtedly Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt had long been the forceful and outspoken voice of "progressives," and attempts to silence him by high-ranking conservatives had only made him stronger. They removed him from the powerful governorship of New York by making him Vice President (an office John Adams ruefully described as "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived"), only to see him become President upon the assassination of McKinley. Incredibly popular, Roosevelt inspired countless young men and women, including Reuben. "He (Reuben) was a loyal follower of Teddy Roosevelt," recounted his sister Olga.[258]

When the conservative wing of the Republican Party denied Roosevelt the nomination, his decision to form a new party was met with rapturous excitement by his fans. Declaring himself "fit as a bull moose," the vigorous Roosevelt developed a platform for his "Bull Moose" Party that resonated with working men like Reuben. It called for:

> —An active and powerful federal government empowered to regulate business, protect the environment, and make public investments in transportation, health care, and education.
>
> —Progressive fiscal policies, protecting domestic industry, advocating banking regulation, instituting an inheritance tax and ratifying the graduated income tax.
>
> —An end to political corruption through greater transparency, the registration of lobbyists, and the barring of political appointments to federal office.
>
> —Expanding rights through women's suffrage, promoting immigration and ending child labor.
>
> —Support of Labor through worker protections, the creation of a Department of Labor, a minimum wage, an eight-hour work day, weekends, and the protection of unions. It particularly singled out injunctions, stating "We believe the issuance of injunctions in cases arising out of labor disputes should be prohibited when such injunctions would not apply when no labor disputes existed."[259]

Unfortunately, the party failed to gather enough support from traditional Democratic voters, who unified behind their candidate, Woodrow Wilson, and retook the White House. The principles behind the party, however, strongly influenced the Democrats, who over time adopted many of the progressive movement's ideas as their own.

A Titanic Loss

On April 15, 1912, the passenger liner RMS Titanic sank on her maiden voyage, after colliding with an iceberg south of Newfoundland on her maiden voyage. Olga remembered her father taking the loss particularly hard, becoming greatly depressed after hearing of the loss of over 1,500 lives. The fact that John Soderstrom could become so distraught over the deaths of those he did not know was not surprising to his family. All who knew him described him as having an almost superhuman capacity for love, empathy, and gentleness. Reuben may have never been able to rely on his father (at least financially), but he had always loved him deeply. He took extra care when visiting Streator that March to celebrate his 24th birthday to visit with the increasingly frail man, who had become so weak he could barely breathe or speak For hours they simply sat together, sharing each other's company and communicating without words.

It was the last time together that they would ever have. On April 29, 1912, John Soderstrom passed away at the age of 66. Of all the wounds the family had suffered, this was by far the deepest. A lifetime later, Olga still remembered:

> Funerals in those days were from the home—huge crepes were placed on the doors. I remember, Dad was laid out in the parlor; corpses were embalmed in the home. I, inquisitive I suppose, went in the parlor, not realizing what I would see. There was my precious father with tubes, it seemed all over and blood draining in a bucket on the floor. I wish I had never seen all this, for this vivid picture has remained with me all my life.[260]

In the space of a few years, the 46-year-old Anna had lost a son, granddaughter, daughter-in law and now her husband. She fell into a deep depression. She also feared how the family would manage. John had never believed in insurance, and never had any. He didn't leave behind even enough money to pay for the funeral.

DECISION POINT

The shock of his father's death shook Reub to the core. Faced with his own mortality, Reub was now forced to choose. He'd spent the last several years straddling two worlds. One life was firmly planted in Streator, with a family, girl, and positions of responsibility. In the other, he was a bachelor in the big city, living carefree and exploring the Chicago life with his brothers. Now, those two worlds had crashed straight into each other, and Reub could no longer put off the choice.

In the end, it was never a question of which life he'd choose. Reuben came to the family's rescue. Although not the oldest, Reuben had in many ways long been the head of the household, and he soon assumed responsibility of the family and its affairs. He immediately returned home from Chicago and would never again leave his adopted home. He resumed his situation at Andy Anderson's print shop. Anna helped by doing practical nursing, occasionally bringing patients into the home. "Maw" Bottom would care for little Lorraine when Anna worked, while Olga would care of her after school.

To help make ends meet, Olga took a job at the dime store working Saturdays, and weekdays in the summer for 75 cents per day. The family also converted their house into two three-room apartments, one upstairs and one downstairs. They'd rent one apartment out and live in the other. With finances stabilized, Reub turned his attention to his family's personal needs.

Reuben Marries Jeanne Shaw

Reub's first challenge would be Olga who, like himself years earlier, wanted to quit school and start working. Now on the other side of the table, Reuben refused and insisted that she finish high school. He was proud of his little sister's education, and spared no expense to make sure she continued. When Olga became the first in

her family to graduate from eighth grade that year, Reub presented her with a beautiful watch. It was only years later that Olga realized the sacrifices Reub had made. "Except for Reub, I never would have got to go to high school…Most brothers would have said that I should go to work and lift, or at least help lift, the burden of supporting the family after Dad's death. But Reub was anxious for me to go to high school, even though he was the support of our family, Lorraine, Mother and me."[261]

After tending to the needs of the family, Reuben turned his attention to securing his own. Reuben and Jeanne may not have had a torrid affair, but their relationship had proven strong and sustaining. Over the last seven years they had remained true to each other, whether minutes away or miles apart. Both intelligent, independent, and stoic, they had long suited each other well. In Jeanne, Reub had found the love told of in the popular song of the day, "Till the Sands of the Desert Grow Cold"

> Till the sands of the desert grow cold
> And their infinite numbers are told…
> Till the mysteries of Heaven unfold,
> And the story of judgment is told,
> I'll turn, love, to thee,
> My shrine thou shalt be.[262]

With characteristic straightforwardness, Reuben took Jeanne aside as he walked her to work on Sunday, November 30, 1912 and asked her, simply, if she would like to get married. Unfazed, Jeanne agreed, but told him she'd need time to prepare. Reuben replied, "Let's do it Tuesday since you don't work."

So it was that on Tuesday, December 2, 1912, Reuben took off early from work and married Jeanne Shaw in her family's living room at 4:30 in the afternoon, with only Reuben's sister Olga as a witness. A few weeks later, they quietly celebrated their first Christmas together as husband and wife.

Reuben soon settled into married life. He and Jeanne started 1913 renting the second floor of Anna's home for $5 a week. Of course, Reub's true intent was to look after his newly widowed mother, and his sister and niece. As the head of the household, he insisted Olga stay in school (eighth grade was the last year of mandatory schooling at the time) and paid for all her school expenses. Jeanne, for her part, continued to serve as a night shift supervisor, so Reub often spent evenings at the library.

Professionally, Reuben began assuming an even larger role in the local labor scene. He spent many evenings at various union activities as a Council delegate. After successfully mediating a series of internal disputes, Reuben had gained a reputation as a savvy negotiator, and continued to speak out at union meetings. His regular columns also helped to bring the concerns of labor to the broader public.

The Streator Trolley Strike

One of Reuben's (and labor's) greatest challenges that year came in the form of the Streator Trolley Strike. By May 1913, the Public Service Company had bought the Illinois Light and Traction Trolley Line. The existing agreement was set to expire at Midnight on May 14, and the new owners refused to recognize previous agreements or the unions themselves. This, according to Streator historian Bennett, sent "a great shock" though all organized labor in the city. How could a Streator company refuse to even recognize a union? Out of necessity, the combined 60 men of Local 298 of the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 231, and the United Association of Gas and Steamfitters Local 177 all went on strike. They sent members of the local Boosters Club (an organization similar to the Chamber of Commerce) to negotiate with PSC's Superintendent Loeb, but Loeb

refused to recognize them. He would have no unions, he declared. He then hired deputy sheriffs from LaSalle and Livingston companies to run the streetcars. The message was clear—he had the full power of the state at his disposal.

Reub and the Streator Trades Council pushed back hard. They called a special meeting and voted to allocate 10 cents per member per week to the strikers. By the following weekend all local unions had agreed to donate. Meanwhile, the strikers placed a notice in the local paper on Friday, June 6 declaring all they wanted was a contract and no "open shop." The following Monday the company dispatched their cars, but no residents rode the trolleys, even to the popular baseball games at the edge of town. Locals instead wore green signs declaring "We Walk." With no effective trolley service, the Trades Council called on the City Council to demand Public Service forfeit the $20,000 surety bond it held against the PSC if it did not have cars operating by June 16. The Trades Council President, William Atkinson, also served on the City Council and formally asked the city to begin the forfeiture process. By the June 16 deadline only three empty, management-driven street cars were in service, and the city council decided to collect the bond.

The strike dragged on for weeks, with residents boycotting the trolley despite an intense heat wave and even the Fourth of July celebration. Finally, Mayor Jackson and some prominent businessmen entered the dispute and negotiated an end to the strike. On July 23 the street car workers all returned to their jobs at 3pm with their union intact; as the trolley cars passed, people cheered.[263]

The successful end to the Trolley Strike came just in time for Labor Day, which in 1913 was set to be a major event for the city. The previous year, the LaSalle County District Trades and Labor Council, of which Streator was a part, held a huge Labor Day parade in Ottawa, Illinois. The United Labor Council had decided whichever city brought the largest number of participants to Ottawa would host the parade the following year and Streator, sending over 6,000 people on four continuously running trains, won handily. The holiday began with a stirring parade at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, September 2. The large number of participants wound through almost all of downtown Streator. Featured speaker President John P. White of the UMWA spoke to a cheering, jubilant crowd. The "monster Labor Day celebration" even featured a boxing match between local favorite Sailor Rinert and Peoria's Jock McGinley.[264]

The success of the Trolley Strike taught Reuben some valuable lessons. Two of the key turning points in the struggle had been the intervention of the mayor and the revocation of the company's surety bond by the City Council, both of which depended on friendly political forces. This reinforced what unions had been learning and teaching nationally. The AFL had started speaking forcefully about the importance of political candidates. President Gompers advocated a simple, activist solution: elect friends, defeat enemies.

Labor Politics in the State and the Nation

This message of political activism was reinforced at the Illinois State Federation of Labor convention of 1913. The event hosted nearly 600 delegates, making it the largest of its kind in the entire United States.[265] John Walker, the president of the Illinois United Mine Workers, was elected the ISFL's president in a hotly contested election (the closest in the organization's history) against sitting President Wright. Walker's victory marked a major win for progressives like Reuben, who saw Walker's election as the defeat of the "old guard."[266] Addressing the crowd, the new president immediately went after the use of armed forces like the national guard in labor strikes, charging "The militia is not a protection to the people. It shoots down trade people and is the protection only of organized capital. When the union needs men in its defense none will answer sooner than the members of organized labor!"[267]

The year saw political victories for labor as well. Although Teddy Roosevelt had lost the Presidential election,

his entrance in the field assured the defeat of Taft and the victory of Democrat Woodrow Wilson. In an uncharacteristic move, Taft in his final hours as President signed a law establishing the Department of Labor as a cabinet level agency. Its stated mission was to "foster, promote and develop the welfare of working people, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment."[268] Former coal miner and current Pennsylvanian congressman William Wilson had led the fight to pass the legislation. Like many, he started mining as a child, and had spent 20 years in the coal fields. He had also served as International Secretary Treasurer of the UMWA. Upon assuming office, President Wilson tapped the congressman (of no relation) as the first Secretary of Labor.

Progressives won another victory on February 3, 1913, as Delaware became the 36th state to ratify the 16th Amendment. On February 25, Secretary of State Philander Chase Knox proclaimed the amendment in force, which empowered Congress to levy graduated income taxes on income of $3,000 a year and above. The income tax rate began at 1% on an annual income of $3,000, increasing to 7% for those who earned $500,000 or more. Only about 2% of the population had to pay the tax.[269]

A New Chapter

1913 brought important changes for Reuben as well. Professionally, he was rising through the ranks of union membership. That year, Reub was elected President of his own ITU Local 328, a meteoric rise. Even more importantly, was elected President of the Streator Trades and Labor Council—the youngest man to serve in that office. After retiring from the presidency in 1920 he became reading clerk, a position he would hold until 1936. As president, Reuben would often visit a union's monthly meeting and inform them of important issues, especially political candidates. He soon became a well-known figure, and whenever he attended a smoker, stag, or boxing match people always seemed ready with questions for him.[270]

Personally, Reuben faced a major transition as his mother Anna decided to leave Streator. With John and Joe dead, Paul and Lafe in Chicago, and Reuben and Jeanne to watch over Olga and Lorraine, Anna felt increasingly alone. She decided that July to visit her mother in Grandy, Minnesota to escape the heat and humidity. The summer visit soon stretched into a year.

These changes bore opportunities, too. An increasingly familiar yet fresh face, Reuben would soon play a major role in the labor movement's increasingly political life. As for his mother's absence, it was soon filled by the announcement of a new member of the Soderstrom family; that Christmas Jeanne told Reuben he would soon be a father.

1914 promised to be a banner year.

ERA IV
1914-1930

EARLY LEGISLATIVE YEARS

IN THIS ERA

Reuben runs for office. In 1914, he mounts his first campaign for the Illinois House on the Progressive ticket, and loses. He enters the 1918 race as a Republican and wins a seat representing the 39th District of Illinois. He helps pass several pro-labor bills, most notably the Injunction Limitation Act of 1925. His successes earn him the attention of many within organized labor, including national figures such as American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers and Industrial Workers of the World founder Eugene V. Debs. In 1926, Streator hosts the Illinois State Federation of Labor annual convention—a sign of Reuben's increasing political clout.

Soderstrom also gains powerful enemies, including J.M. Glenn, secretary of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. Glenn and his associates fight back by helping lead a successful effort to unseat Reuben in the 1920 election. The following year, they wage an "open shop" war in Streator in an attempt to break organized labor within the city. They levy injunctions against Reuben, take him to court, and threaten him with jail. Soderstrom overcomes these attacks and regains his legislative seat in the process.

At home, Reuben welcomes the birth of his first child, Bobbie, in July of 1914; Bobbie is joined by little Carl in December the following year. The celebration is cut short with Bobbie's death six weeks later. Happiness returns when Reub welcomes the birth of his first daughter, Rose Jeanne Soderstrom, in 1917. Meanwhile, sister Olga graduates high school in 1916 and enters nursing school. Brother Paul enters the military, serving as a motorcycle courier. Reuben supports the war effort on the home front by selling war bonds.

By 1930, Soderstrom begins maneuvering for the next step in his political career. He mounts an unsuccessful national campaign for the presidency of the International Typographical Union. Afterwards, the Executive Committee of the ISFL approaches Reuben with a new proposition: President of the ISFL.

> "The politicians generally were somewhat amused at the ambitions of a young labor official desiring to enter the field of legislation, as no such thing had happened in that district prior to that time. I made an intensive campaign, visited a lot of homes, and discovered that people found it very difficult to vote against someone who had been in their homes. And lo and behold, I was elected to the House of Representatives."
>
> *– Reuben G. Soderstrom, Interview, 1958*

CHAPTER 9
1914

REUBEN RUNS FOR OFFICE

LIFE, LABOR, AND POLITICS

The September Club

Opposite this page is an intriguing 1914 photo of Streator's "September Club," a collection of dashing gentlemen who are obvious colleagues, strategists and scholars most likely motivated around issues of politics, labor and life itself. Despite extensive efforts to learn more about this seemingly underground society, little documentation has been found to confirm its existence. But here sits this photograph with "September Club" scrawled beneath it, and undeniably present is the youthful figure presiding over the meeting: R.G. Soderstrom, proudly standing at the head of a table populated by men his age and older.

It is likely that the "September Club" was a more private version of the somewhat public Trades and Labor Council: an underground debating society, think tank, and dinner club first mobilized around issues of politics and labor. Or perhaps the club was a vestige of the old Knights of Labor, which used to meet late at night in a building off Bulldog Alley. But judging by the twinkling tone of the men in the photo, it would be no surprise if the club also involved lively discussions about boxers of the day, tales from life in the big city, or simply enjoyment of local beer and cigars purchased from an Italian immigrant earlier that day in Streator's City Park. The photo shares the jocular spirit of earlier photos of Reuben, Paul, Lafe and friends posing around the warehouses of Streator with hats and their Sunday best, and also speaks to Reuben's affable, social nature. Plain and simple, he liked people, ideas and conversation.

It's possible the club had its origins in the Streator labor council's selection of five members to formulate outreach for the council's central body, and perhaps that group morphed into the group we see in the photo. But it's more likely that the club was the brainchild of Reuben, Lafe and others who wanted to create a specific strategy around the political primaries—always held in September—and how to advance labor's interests therein. In 1914, the man of the hour was Reuben, colleague, friend and leader, and his time in politics was fast approaching.

During this time, Reuben lived in his childhood home with his wife Jeanne, sister Olga, mother Anna, and 3-year-old niece, Lorraine. Everyone helped out; Jeanne cooked meals before leaving to work her evening shift as chief operator at the Streator telephone office. Olga helped with daily chores and babysat Lorraine, while the widowed Anna struggled to overcome her melancholy. Family friend "Maw" Bottom often visited to babysit Lorraine, and the increasingly pregnant Jeanne began resting more. Working shifts at Andy Anderson's print shop, Reub both provided for the household and saved to eventually purchase a new house for himself, Jeanne and their newborn.

Soon after joining the Streator Trades and Labor Council, and with the help of his "September Club" cohorts, 26 year-old Reuben became the organization's president. His peers saw him as a natural choice. Reub later reflected, "They felt that anyone who was eloquent and who could put into words the feeling that these folks had in their hearts and was faithful to himself and his real feelings with respect to labor's great cause

would naturally become a leader…the strange part of it was that they selected a young man. Most of these men were 20 years older than I was."

He was called upon to negotiate strikes, promote the cause, and represent the Council at the state level as a delegate to the ISFL. His self-confidence belied his age, and people must have initially been surprised at the youthful delegate from Streator . . . until he rose to speak. He was highly informed, intellectually adept and full of conviction. His allies and adversaries alike would agree with his sister's assessment of him. "He dominated every situation and every conversation," Olga writes. "It was hard for him to just listen, and you couldn't change him. He believed he was always right (and mostly he was), so he'd never give an inch. But, like his Dad, he was good and kind and generous. He wanted to help everyone, and he did!"[271]

National Labor in 1914: From Rockefeller to Ford

At Andy's print shop, Reub no doubt followed the national labor news with rapt attention. Just the year before, in 1913, AFL President Samuel Gompers, while under a prison sentence, testified before Congress:

> This one fact is sure: That in all the world there is now an unrest among the people--primarily among working people--with the present position they occupy in society…In our own country it takes the form of the trade-union movement…formed to conform as nearly as it is possible to the American idea, and to have the crystallized unrest and discontent manifested in the American fashion; to press it home to the employers; to press it home to the lawmakers; to press it home to law administrators, and possibly to impregnate and influence the minds of judges who may accord to us the rights which are essential to our well-being…[272]

There was indeed deep unrest in the nation, and the American Labor movement continued to "press it home" to businessmen and politicians. They unseated anti-progressive President Taft and the pro-business Republicans to elect a Democratic Congress and Woodrow Wilson, only the second Democrat to be elected president since the Civil War. They promoted boycotts and published "unfair lists," even under threat of violence and imprisonment.

In September 1913, coal miners in Ludlow, Colorado went on strike against John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s Colorado Fuel and Iron (CF&I) company. Most of their demands were typical, such as a 10% wage increase, the right to unionize under the UMWA, and the ability to elect the all-important checkmen who weighed their coal. But even in the wake of Cherry, mine workers still struggled to attain the most basic rights: enforcement of federal work protections, freedom to choose where they lived and shopped (required to buy goods from the company store), and removal of the infamous union-busting "guards" from the Baldwin Felts Detective Agency, long feared for their lethal brutality.

In 1913, CF&I's Vice President Lamont wrote to his boss, John D. Rockefeller, referring to the UMWA as a "vicious gang," which came to Ludlow to help the workers organize. "Our net earnings would have been the largest in the history of the company by $200,000 but for the increase in wages paid the employees during the last few months," Lamont whined. "With everything running so smoothly and with an excellent outlook for 1914, it is mighty discouraging to have this vicious gang come into our state and not only destroy our profit but eat into that which has heretofore been saved."[273]

Rockefeller and Lamont responded to these "outside agitators" by immediately kicking the striking miners out of their homes. For months, over 1,200 miners and their families lived in a tent city occupying public property. CF&I used the Colorado militia and Baldwin Felts agents to surround the strikers and lay siege to the makeshift homes. To sow fear they randomly fired into the tents, killing innocent people while on "patrol" for months on end. On March 10 1914 the militia launched a devastating attack on the city while

occupiers were burying several infants who had died days before.

They brutalized the protesters and killed the leading miners, leaving their bodies in the railroad yard for three days in full view of passing trains. Those who had taken refuge in one of the city's tents were burned alive when the militia set it on fire. Soon the "Ludlow Massacre" was on every front page in America. The account in the *New York Times* was typical. "The Ludlow camp is a mass of charred debris," the Times described, "And buried beneath it is a story of horror unparalleled in the history of industrial warfare. In the holes which had been dug for their protection against the rifles' fire the women and children died like trapped rats when the flames swept over them. One pit, uncovered the day after the massacre disclosed the bodies of 10 children and two women."[274] President Wilson sent federal troops, but by the time they arrived on June 1, more than 70 people had been killed. By late November most miners returned to work after the company had literally starved them into submission.

In Michigan, another great industrialist, Henry Ford, recognized the "wage incentive" early on. He decided to offer a wage of $5 a day, twice the national average, bringing a swollen, colorful sea of immigrant men from all across the country. A blizzard blanketed the 10,000 men who had lined up at the gates of Ford's auto plant in Highland Park, Michigan auto plant on January 1, 1914. Filled with the hope of landing one of the 4,000 jobs the company had advertised, most of the men spent the night shivering as they stood huddled around curbside fires.

But Ford's wages came with a price. Employees would have to start a bank account, learn English (in company-provided schools) and become US citizens. To prevent turnover, workers could only collect half of their pay in their monthly check, with the other half deferred as a bonus if they stayed the full year. Ford also wanted power over his workers' personal habits. They weren't allowed to smoke or drink, on OR off the job. They couldn't rent out rooms in their homes, nor could anyone else in the household have a job. By keeping his employees from socializing and away from other income, Ford believed he could prevent unions and make his workers financially dependent on him. He wasn't alone; in the years leading up to prohibition, manufacturers greatly increased their control of the private lives of their workers, making a host of personal activities and associations fireable offenses.[275]

A CAMPAIGNER IS BORN

Under Reuben's leadership, the Streator Trades and Labor Council closely followed the events in Michigan and voted to help the newly striking copper miners there by adopting a resolution in support of them. As a result, the Streator UMWA Local 800 donated $200 to the families of the strikers. At this point, Reub's natural leadership began to beg a basic question: Why not make the race?

Reasons to Run

That was the question ISFL President John Walker asked Reuben in January of 1914. The "race" he was referring to was for the Illinois House of Representatives, and it wasn't a casual question. The labor movement, spearheaded by Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, had initiated a deliberate program to gain political power and influence. To affect change in the political arena, Gompers asserted, labor had to "elect our friends." Rather than creating a labor party as in Britain or a revolution as in Russia, he advocated placing working union men as candidates in America's already established political parties. Walker, the newly elected President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor (ISFL), had decided on a bold new legislative agenda that could make Gompers's mandate a reality. Reub remembered that Walker, "had a great deal of imagination. He worked out a program of 47 bills to be enacted into law…the Federation is certainly indebted to him for his program of legislation. He was a pioneer."[276]

In order for his 47 bills to succeed, Walker knew the first thing he needed was a strong team. He was keenly aware of his own limitations; although inspirational and charismatic, Walker was too much of a firebrand for the task at hand. In the words of Eugene Staley "Walker is a man of strong emotions; feeling, not logic, is the key to his spirit…Walker feels and talks the 'decency of humanity,' leaving the subtleties of constitutional law to others."[277] As a member and activist in the Socialist Party, Walker could never become the legislator the movement needed. Walker needed a leader with both passion and practicality, and he was convinced Reub could be that man.

One issue was Reuben's age. At nearly 26, he was far younger than most politicians of his time. "Politicians generally were somewhat amused at the ambitions of a young labor official desiring to enter the field of legislation," Reuben later recounted. "No such thing had happened in that district prior to that time."[278] In fact, the American political system of the time was defined more by patronage than popularity, and as a young man without many markers or connections would face an uphill battle.

Another issue was party. When Gompers advocated that friends of labor join established parties, the issue was which one: Democrats and Republicans? Both hosted pro-labor politicians, but Democrats had the edge. However, Streator sat square in the middle of Republican territory. "It's always been Republican," Reub later explained, "In fact the whole county of LaSalle is Republican."[279] Furthermore, both parties already had strong incumbent candidates. Young Reub did not have a natural party to call home.

The final consideration for Reub was personal. With a sister, mother, young niece, and pregnant wife to support, he had to seriously consider if he was ready for another major commitment.

Walker Recruits Reuben

Given the gusto Reub had for public policy, he was likely very flattered by the attention, but unsure if the legislature was his natural home. To close the deal on his prized recruit, President Walker came to Streator to personally make his pitch. Reuben later recounted:

> When I first met John Walker, he came to the city of Streator and wanted me to become interested in legislative work and he told me that he had been the President of the United Mine Workers of Illinois for 6 years, and during that period of time he had worked out this program of 47 bills, and he felt that with the fine arguments that we have that that legislation could be enacted if they had someone on the floor of the house that could present these controversial bills without antagonizing people and without making people mad. And he turned that whole list over to me….I was a little dubious about trying for that type of place [the General Assembly], not knowing whether people would vote for me or not, but Mr. Walker stated he thought they would. I tried to explain to him that I was merely a labor official and that didn't mean folks generally would vote for that type of person.[280]

Walker continued to press him, however. "I think you've got the qualities, the temperament, and you are the person that they might vote for," Walker told Reub. Walker stated that the future for labor was building politicians directly from the ranks of labor, rather than relying on the sympathies of elected officials. There was nothing to lose, and everything to gain, so "why not make the race?"[281]

Reuben eventually agreed, and on January 25, 1914, at their January meeting the Streator Trades and Labor Council unanimously adopted a resolution to nominate one of their own to the state legislature. The following morning, the Streator Daily Free Press published the endorsement, "Resolved that the Streator Trades and Labor Council request the local Progressive party to do all in their power to place the Vice

President of this council, RG Soderstrom, a well-known Streator Trades unionist and an aggressive progressive since the inception of the party, as candidate for representative on the Progressive ticket at the Spring primaries; and be it further resolved that we heartily endorse said union man and pledge our support…and do all in our power to elect RG Soderstrom in the coming fall election."[282]

With that announcement, Reuben officially became a new breed of unionist who would fight for the rights of working men from the legislative floor. And he wouldn't be going it alone. Reub soon pulled in Jeanne, Paul, Anna and his steadfast confidante, Lafe, for support. Although still living in Chicago, Lafe often traveled to Streator on the Santa Fe train to join several of the September club meetings and work on Reuben's campaign.

In July 1914, Reuben and Jeanne welcomed their son Robert into the world. He was born in the family home with Anna and Olga working as midwives to bring another Soderstrom in the world. Little Lorraine would now have a Soderstrom cousin: Baby Bobbie. Reuben and Jeanne were full of happiness as they held their bundle of joy in their arms and stared into the baby's sparkling eyes. Reub cried wishing his father could meet his first child, but was so grateful to share him with Anna, Olga, Paul and Lafe. It was a busy year, and the young Trades and Labor president could add another line to his resume: father.

Bull-Moose Reub

As noted in the announcement, Reuben made the decision not to run as a Democrat or a Republican, but as a Progressive. Formed in the summer of 1912 by former US President Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party began as a splinter group of the Republican Party founded primarily to support Roosevelt's run for the White House. After splitting the Republican vote and effectively awarding Wilson the Presidency, the question by 1914 was whether this new faction could survive on its own. Reub bet his first run for public office on the belief that it could. He had been enamored of Roosevelt since his first term as President. Roosevelt's "Square Deal," a domestic program based on conserving nature, regulating corporations, and protecting consumers spoke directly to Reuben's own beliefs. As Olga remembers:

> Reub always believed that the worker had a right to share financially in the wealth he produced; that the worker had a right to a decent living, a right to have sufficient (support) from his labors to see a little of this beautiful country—A right to vacations, medical care in illness, and a right to warm clothing, all of which takes money. Certainly, a right to a decent home, some luxury, and a right for his family to eat well and enjoy life. And for this, Reub spent his entire life and being, and every hour he worked to achieve these ends.[283]

Although Roosevelt lost his 1912 bid for the Presidency, his party still continued. In 1914, it placed candidates on the ballot in a wide number of state and local elections; whether or not these candidates succeeded would determine the future of the party itself. By running for election as a candidate for the Progressive Party, Reuben placed himself square in the middle of this existential fight.

The decision to join the Progressive ticket was also politically canny. According to Illinois' unique "majority rules, minority rights" voting system, each district elected three representatives, only two of which could be from the same party. Each voter was likewise accorded three votes, which could be cast in any combination. In districts where one party was strongly favored, like Reuben's 39th, the majority party typically fielded two candidates instead of one. Majority voters would cast two votes for the first candidate and one for the second, while minority voters would cast all three for their party's choice ("plumping" the minority candidates vote totals). By running as a third party candidate, Reuben could pull off an upset win in the general election if enough progressive Republicans and pro-labor Democrats all three of their votes for him.

Campaign Life

Once endorsed, Reuben began the long, hard fight to win his party's primary. His political support extended beyond the Trades Council; in recent years, the local Labor movement in Streator had placed members on the city council and in the mayor's office. These men would become allies in Reuben's campaign fight. Reuben took to many podiums that year, speaking at union meetings, fraternal organizations, and to Streator's communities of Italians, Irish, Germans, Slavs, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics, the Knights of Columbus, or anyone else. As a matter of integrity, he also paid for the campaigns out of his own pocket, no matter the hardship. "I bankrolled my own campaigns, every one of them" Reuben stated. "I wouldn't accept a penny."[284]

Ultimately the election of 1914 would be a harsh introduction to Illinois politics for the idealistic 26-year-old. It was also at this point that a large and powerful character—well-heeled, weighty and often-fraudulent—lumbered into Reuben's life. It's appropriate to spend a few pages becoming acquainted with this looming and soon-to-be nemesis.

THE ILLINOIS MANUFACTURERS' ASSOCIATION (IMA)

Of all the labor opponents Reuben faced, none was more determined, powerful, or implacable than the Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA). Forged in direct response to the rise of labor unions, big capital organizations like the IMA existed for one sole purpose—to defeat or neuter any legislation written to protect workers or enhance their quality of life.

Humble Beginnings: Undoing Women's Rights and Worker Safety

The IMA originally formed in 1893 to stop a proposed law, inspired by Jane Addams and the Illinois State Federation of Labor (ISFL), limiting the toil of women in factories to eight hours per day. Calling the bill an "outrage on the liberties of the working women" (the vast majority of whom supported the legislation), the IMA rejected all offers of compromise and used their influence in the courts to have the law declared unconstitutional in 1894.[285] After a brief respite, the organization reconstituted in 1897 to defeat a law requiring metallic fire escapes on factories. The IMA ran a publicity campaign casting the law as the product of a corrupt ring of fire escape manufacturers seeking to get rich by making their new (life-saving) products mandatory. They urged manufacturers throughout the state to simply ignore the law, forcing inspectors eventually to declare it unenforceable.[286] Despite its best efforts, organized labor watched helplessly as its cherished reforms withered in the face of these vicious, well-funded attacks.

JM Glenn: Architect of a Lobbying Empire

Having defeated labor in the courts and in the streets, the IMA turned its attention to the lawmakers themselves. The Association appointed a permanent secretary, JM Glenn, to kill "obnoxious legislation" on the floor of the General Assembly before it ever saw the light of day. An uncompromising true believer, Glenn was the perfect vessel for the IMA's cause. As the historian Alfred Kelly writes, "In his methods and philosophy, JM Glenn personified all that the Illinois Manufacturer's Association stood for. The man was an excellent salesman…passionately convinced of what he later called 'the manufacturers' cause'…it was he who first realized that the real future of the Association lay in resisting organized labor upon the floor of the state legislature."[287]

Glenn soon grew the Association into a lobbying juggernaut. Its membership exploded from fifty parties in 1897 to over 1,100 by 1909.[288] Under his guidance the Association became labor's primary foe, dedicating

itself to fighting what it considered the "menace of the labor union."[289] Glenn's attacks were often personal, incendiary, and just shy of slander. As the ISFL weekly noted when describing Glenn's attacks on Chief Factory Inspector, Oscar F. Nelson, "The editorial in question is characteristic of 'Johnnie's' tactics, in that, while containing a number of insinuations, it evades direct charges which might render it liable to become a defendant in a libel suit." In his response, Inspector Nelson pulled no punches. "To indict and convict you, Mr. Glenn, of inconsistency, insincerity, and untruthfulness, requires no effort," he wrote in an open letter to the IMA chief. "Your record as a misrepresentative of the manufacturers' interests is known to a majority of the manufacturers in this State, practically all of the Legislature, and so exceptionally well known to the Laboring people of the State that it has often created antagonism between the employer and the employee where such antagonism would not have existed but for your misrepresentations."[290]

Factory Inspectors like Nelson were the first and favorite targets of Glenn and his Association. In 1907 he defeated the Comprehensive Factory Inspection Act, a bill designed by Illinois State factory inspector Edgar Davies and Dr. Charles Henderson of the University of Chicago to reduce Illinois' woeful industrial accident record. Despite its broad support from numerous public figures, Glenn denounced the bill as "unfair, unjust and un-American." He successfully used the IMA's considerable resources to label the act's supporters as terrorists, the "anarchists the police of the large cities are trying to suppress."[291]

In 1909, Glenn trained the IMA's guns on The Women's Bill, an act crafted by the Women's Trade Union League and the ISFL to prohibit factory owners from compelling women to work more than forty-eight hours in a six-day week (after the US Supreme Court found such acts constitutional earlier that year). With a showman's flair, Glenn arranged for a series of hearings before the Senate Committee on Labor, presenting not only manufacturers who warned the law would be "absolutely ruinous" but carefully selected working women who testified that the law would inhibit their earning power. He labeled the bill "class warfare," crafted to "work harm to our women employees by denying them the right to use their option in working overtime"[292] Although unable to stop the bill, Glenn was able to water-down its restrictions to 10-hour days.

JM Glenn's biggest early fights, however, were over workman's compensation. For years he managed to beat back legislation compelling companies to pay for those maimed and killed in their service. In the wake of the Cherry Mine disaster, however, even the IMA's vast resources were unable to prevail against the powerful example of dozens of victims, widowed and orphaned by industrial negligence. Glenn tried every trick he had by undermining commissions from within, assailing them from without, marching hundreds to the capital in protest of the signing, and even attacking the constitutionality of legislation in court. But despite his best efforts, JM Glenn was unable to defeat the Workman's Compensation Act.[293] It was after this loss that Glenn and the IMA made a fateful decision; if he couldn't convince the legislature or courts of his cause, he would just have to pick the legislators and judges himself.

Big Business Elects Its Friends

In 1911, the IMA overhauled its legislative strategy and moved into the arena of electoral politics. JM Glenn had decided the best way to prevent pro-labor legislation was to "secure the election of a legislature more friendly to business interests," and he wasted no time in doing so. He divided the state into districts and placed in each a committee of Association officials. These Association Committees would then interview all candidates, and instructed its membership to "vigorously support"—particularly financially—those candidates found "acceptable." Glenn also kept scorecards of legislators and would issue them in voter pamphlets.

Under Glenn's instruction, members of the Association also used their power as employers to influence the vote. Days before the election, factory owners would call their workers to mass meetings where they "made employees aware of the best men available for the election."[294] While no explicit threats were issued, it was not

uncommon for owners to assert that if their candidates were not selected, firings could be necessary in the wake of ruinous legislation.

Once an IMA candidate was elected, he was carefully overseen by Glenn's Legislative Bureau. As Kelly writes, "The Springfield office [of the IMA Legislative Bureau], open during the entire assembly session, watched all bills carefully as they moved forward to enactment. Its fundamental assumption was that all laws were inherently bad; the best that the Association might hope for would be the enactment of as few statues as possible. The blocking of legislation was, in fact, the measure of success or failure which the Association applied to its own efforts."[295]

In this way Glenn and the IMA ruled the Illinois legislature with an iron fist. From 1911 through 1929, only one piece of legislation survived the IMA's objections and became law.

Elect Our Judges

Glenn's election strategy also extended into the courtroom. Judges were vital in the fight against labor. Glenn and the Manufacturers Association depended on the courts not only for the overturning of unfavorable laws but for the issuance of injunctions—restraining orders that barred union leaders from talking to or even going near striking workers. While some justices were openly corrupt, many—like the famous "injunction judges" Denis Sullivan and Jesse Hodom—were motivated by ideology and the conviction that they were legally compelled to issue any and all injunctions filed. When labor tried to defeat the judges at the ballot box (judges were elected in Illinois), the IMA responded by helping to foster popular outrage against the "union bosses," inspiring grassroots movements to support pro-injunction judges. The IMA publicly cast the targets of injunctions as:

> Labor union dictators who live by the fees extorted from their hapless victim, the ignorant worker…it was the self-interest of these leeches, in their search for issues to delude the laborer and the public, which kept 'social reform' alive…The half-baked college professor, steeped in his doctrinaire theories of economics and sociology, the silly minister, who believed that he could legislate God's Kingdom onto the Earth, the addle-brained women's club secretary with her feeble-minded interest in social welfare—these were the dupes of a cunning group of 'racketeers', the labor union leaders.[296]

These portraits convinced some conservatives to join "patriot" movements expressly created to help elect pro-injunction judges like Sullivan and Hodom. The most famous were the "Minute Men of the Constitution," formed by Gen. Charles G. Dawes. Dawes, a former President of the Northwestern Gas Light and Coke Company and Republican politician who would later serve as Vice President under Calvin Coolidge, insisted that he was non-partisan and not anti-union, telling the press, "We seek to bring a sense of gratitude and admiration of all good citizens to those courageous American citizens in labor organizations who, in defiance of labor demagogues and enemies of law support law enforcement and good government at the polls"[297] These men rang doorbells and manned the polls to sway the vote in favor of anti-labor judges and politicians. A heavy turnout always helped the Manufacturers Association win the day.[298] When 26 year-old Reub Soderstrom threw his modest hat into the ring in the 1914 primary, it's likely that JM Glenn and the powerful IMA hardly took notice; their favored candidate in Streator, former Sheriff Ole Benson (pronounced "Oley"), was a well-funded and unbeatable mainstay.

THE ELECTION OF 1914

In the primary election on September 10, Reuben was defeated by 27 votes in his bid to represent the Progressive Party.[299] This came despite the unequivocal support of labor and President Walker. However, the

candidate who won the Progressive bid later withdrew and Reub took his place in the general election, where he appeared on the ticket with the IMA's Ole Benson. On the day before the November vote, Reuben ran an ad seeking votes, stating:

> I am the Streator candidate and if the local voters stay with me, regardless of politics, it means election. As a people we may be republicans, democrats and progressives--but we live in the same city and we love our families and our homes, and we have the welfare of Streator and Streator people at our heart…And with that feeling friends, I'm looking forward, unafraid, as your Streator candidate for state representative.[300]

Despite his best efforts, Reuben was unable to use the three-vote/three-candidate system to his advantage. Much to his chagrin, the Democrats tried to capitalize on the Republican/Progressive split by making the unusual decision to fielding two candidates in the general election. The move siphoned off many of the votes Reuben had been counting on. In the end, the Republican and Democratic incumbents retained their establishment edge. The final tally from the general election was not kind to Reuben, who came in a disappointing of the fifth.[301]

Reub Soderstrom went home a loser. He gathered the family in their small dining room and discussed the loss with Olga, Lafe, and Jeanne as she held baby Bobbie. He no doubt analyzed his late entry into the race as well as the IMA's broad impact, which rippled across the state and into every district.

In 1914, Reub suffered from the lack of a solid party and poor name recognition in the rural outreaches of LaSalle County. He had campaigned aggressively in the city but had failed to gain traction in the countryside, where more voting tended to be more conservative. But in any event, the new father—recruited specifically by ISFL President Walker—had found a taste for politics beyond the Trades and Labor Council of Streator, Illinois.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

ORGANIZED LABOR IN 1914

UNION LIFE IN STREATOR

While campaigning, Reuben continued to act as President of the local Trades Council. He was sworn in by Thomas Kelly, local barber and ISFL Executive Board member, on the same day he received his endorsement. Soderstrom went straight to work, and there was plenty of it; over the next several months Reub, Streator, and the nation would face a fierce battle against powerful interests.

The first struggle union labor faced in Streator was an internal one. Teamsters faced a challenge from their delivery wagon drivers, who thought they should split and form their own union. Reub, well respected by both parties, was called in to arbitrate the dispute. Through his efforts, the drivers were able to find accommodation, choosing that Feb ruary to remain one Local.

Reub also aided in negotiations with the Wabash Railroad company when local section crew workers went on strike that March. The workers were successful, winning the modest raises they sought. The victory was bittersweet, however, as crewmember Jose Alvarez was killed that same month while working in the yards.

Negotiations between the coal mine owners and the UMWA, meanwhile, continued to stall. Many had expected a statewide strike, and companies that relied on coal, including the local bottle factories, had amassed stockpiles in anticipation. The resulting lack of demand meant hundreds of local coal miners sat idle, even though they had not gone on strike. Those who did work continued to face deadly conditions. In October of that year, over one hundred miners were trapped by a gas explosion in the Franklin Coal & Coke Co. mine in Royalton, IL. The tragedy sent shockwaves through the town; women and children were temporarily barred from the morgues to prevent a panic. More than half of those trapped would later be confirmed dead.[302]

That April, the carpenters of Streator also went on strike, seeking an additional five cents an hour for the 8-hour day. Local bottle company workers threatened to do likewise, and by that summer the factory had agreed to reduce workdays. Starting July 6, the 12-hour shifts would be replaced by 8-hour shifts, while 10-hour shifts would likewise be reduced to a 9-hour shift with an hour for lunch at noon. Machine operators on the 8-hour shifts also received a half-cent an hour raise.

Overall, labor in Streator fared better than elsewhere in the nation. There were still problems; many men continued to earn less than fair wages and endured dangerous and harsh working conditions. Some trades continued to be hit hard by mechanization. The formerly wealthy glass blowers for example, could now barely earn enough to feed their families. Still, new industries and factories were emerging to take their place. The auto industry in particular showed remarkable strength. For years, the Halladay Auto had been the pride of the Streator Motor Car Company. Known as "The Raciest, Classiest Roadster of them All," the Hallady Roadster was famous for its endurance and reliability. The company was acquired by Albert Barley in 1913, and by the following year the rechristened Barley Manufacturing Company was offering higher wages than the glass factories ever had.

Unionization was also on the rise; by 1914 all the miners and skilled craft workers in the city had been organized. Better still, while many cities experienced jobless rates of over 12%, Streator had no shortage of work. Though many were underemployed, the long line of unemployment had thankfully stopped short of

reaching Reuben's adopted hometown.

CLAYTON ACT PASSED

Joblessness may not have been a problem in Streator, but it was in the wider world. There was a fundamental weakness in the economy, and efforts to ease the symptoms often ignored the underlying illness. "How much more do we need to know to do something more fundamental than start bread lines, temporary work shops, or asking men to work half time or to receive less pay?" wrote famed social reformer Frances Kellor. "Is it not ironical that we depend so largely upon entertainments to keep people from freezing to death? The proceeds of a circus are today paying the wages of helpless women in New York City, and this is typical of the country."[303]

Despite these troubles, labor did enjoy one major legislative victory in 1914: The Clayton Act. A successor to the Sherman Act, this bill primarily sought to strengthen antitrust law. More importantly for unions, however, it specifically prohibited the use of antitrust law to attack Unions. Some Judges (supported by high financiers) had previously used the original Sherman Antitrust Act intended to weaken wealthy "robber barons," against organized labor, labeling union actions like boycotts and peaceful strikes as "conspiratorial acts" prosecutable under law. Several labor leaders, including AFL President Gompers, had been convicted through such questionable legal interpretations. The Clayton Act was supported and passed in large part to end this corruption of law, specifically stating:

> The labor of the human being is not a commodity or article of commerce. Nothing contained in the antitrust laws shall be construed to forbid the existence and operation of labor…nor shall such organizations, or the members thereof, be held or construed to be illegal combinations or conspiracies in restraint of free trade, under the antitrust laws.[304]

Although weakening the abuse of the court system by anti-union forces, the Clayton Act did not end it. Despite the Act's clear language respecting the legality of union acts, business owners still sued union leaders for conspiracy. Business-friendly judges could still restrict their movements, and passed injunctions prohibiting union organizers from even approaching striking workers, legal decrees that soon would become very familiar to Reuben G. Soderstrom.

CHAPTER 10
1915-1916

CELEBRATION AND SORROW

1915: NEW LIFE AND LOSS

The 1914 campaign had been brutal for Reuben. He lost his party's primary contest, was nominated by default when the victor dropped out, and then failed to secure any of the three open seats. It was not a fully formed attempt to gain a legislative seat, but it was enough to earn Reub the fierce enmity of JM Glenn and Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA), who stood like an impenetrable wall between the young, card-carrying union man and the hallowed halls of the Illinois statehouse. In January of 1915, Ole Benson returned to Springfield as one of Streator's statehouse representatives, while Reub remained in Streator and turned his attention back to his printing job and his family.

Family Matters

"Baby Bobbie" was a joy for Reub and Jeanne as they watched him grow through his first year, celebrating his first steps and his first words. In the hot, humid days of July, Anna, Lafe and Olga joined Reuben and Jeanne in celebrating Bobbie's first birthday with an apple pie and a few wooden toys. Bobbie was a family effort, and Anna and Olga often washed his cloth diapers in an outdoor tub or gave Jeanne a break by holding the little bundle of joy in a hand-washed, sun-dried cotton blanket on their small front porch.

Reuben and Jeanne moved out of the family house and found a home of their own on Sherman Street on the West side of Streator. It was 600 square feet with three small rooms and cost $900. The young couple would walk three blocks on sidewalks made from Streator bricks to City Park or to the green grocer to buy zucchini and tomatoes. New neighbors offered mushrooms from walks in the woods, small baskets of wild raspberries and the occasional hunting prize: a game bird such as a quail or pheasant, which would be cooked in a cast iron pan with field onions and rosemary.

After sleepless nights with the newborn, Reub walked to Andy Anderson's print shop, where he now worked full-time as an operator, linotype repairman and also, importantly, as a writer for several publications. As he stated later in life in an interview with Professor Derber:

> I wrote articles for labor papers; Peoria Labor News was one of them. I did that for a long time—without compensation—just because I liked to write….As a member of the central body I wrote two columns; one general news for the city of Streator because the Peoria Labor News had the circulation in my community there, you see, and another column that I called "Doings in Printerdom," which was devoted largely to the activities in the typographical industry.[305]

Anna, widowed without any of her sons in the house, began taking short-term tenants to help pay the bills. A senior in high school at the time, Olga remembers the attempts at squeezing a meager income from their home. "Mother made our home into two apartments—one upstairs and one downstairs. The parlor downstairs we always kept; but folks who rented could have their choice of three rooms downstairs or the three rooms upstairs. So often we were moving from one to the other."[306] Anna also returned to "practical

nursing," occasionally taking cases in-house and acting as a home care assistant for sick friends or patients. It was the only source of income for a widowed woman with no pension or savings, and she cared for enough patients to get by.

Missing from the Streator landscape at this time was Reub's brother and best friend Lafe, who had stayed in the Second City as a proud member of the Chicago ITU. Still, Lafe frequently journeyed to Streator on the train with small gifts for Bobbie and Marshall Field chocolates for the others, which the poor family would gather around to admire and discuss before devouring with relish.

Paul, meanwhile, had taken a drastically different course. In addition to losing his first child, Paul had lost his wife, Clara, after the birth of their second child, Lorraine. At this point, Paul had already left his baby daughter with his mother Anna and had headed for parts unknown. What we know now is that the former race car driver and mechanic became a motorcyclist in the US Army, carrying sensitive messages between dangerous outposts along the Mexican Border for General John Joseph Pershing. On March 15, 1915, Paul Soderstrom and the rest of Pershing's troops entered Mexico on an expedition to capture the revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, who had just attacked Columbus, New Mexico. For over a year, Paul and the 10,000 other members of the expeditionary force penetrated 350 miles into Mexico, seeking without success to capture the famous outlaw. For the thrill-seeker from Streator, the scrubby desert was an exhilarating place with its warring men, maps and motorbikes. Although he didn't know it, Paul's battles in the hot Mexican hinterlands were just a taste of more foreign lands to come.

Sadness Strikes

For the rest of the Soderstroms, 1915 was a fast-paced and happy year, culminating on December 15 with the birth of Carl William Soderstrom, second son to Reuben and Jeanne, making for an extra special Christmas that year. Reub brought home a small Christmas tree and placed it in the parlor and everyone adorned it with popcorn and cranberry string and candles. Only a few gifts were placed under the tree, while others were placed on the doorstep in the Swedish custom. On Christmas Day Reuben took his family to his father's old place of worship, St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. With a baby boy in each arm and his wife by his side, it was a holiday for Reuben to remember.

But six weeks later, the yuletide happiness was shattered. The local newspaper reported:

> The Death Angel entered the home of Mr. and Mrs. R. G. Soderstrom, 216 Sherman Street, late Saturday afternoon, claiming their firstborn, little Robert George, aged twenty-one months. The little fellow had been ailing for two or three weeks, but his condition was not considered serious, as he had always been so strong and sturdy. When pneumonia developed and the Grim Messenger entered the home on Saturday the parents and relatives were totally unprepared, and could scarcely realize the little life had been cut short so soon, for "Bobbie" had been the pride of the household.[307]

Any parent who knows firsthand the power and wonder of witnessing an infant grow through the first year of life cannot fathom the devastation of seeing that precious little life cut short. Even worse, having financed the funerals of his father, brother Joe, and sister-in-law Clara, Reub had no money left for Baby Bobbie's miniature casket and burial. He instead took out a loan from the Finlen Funeral Chapel and made painful monthly payments of $1.50 for the next two years. For Jeanne, Baby Bobbie's graveyard headstone was viewable from her kitchen window—across the Vermilion River and in the Riverview Cemetery—and no doubt the little family was shackled with grief at every turn. They would soon move to a different house.

1916: POLITICAL STRUGGLES

Reeling from his loss, Reuben threw himself into labor as a council member. Over the next year, labor leaders increasingly voiced concerns over fair pay and working conditions, but faced intimidation, violence and even worse: court ordered injunctions preventing the peaceful assembly of workers to discuss their plight. The working man was being muzzled and abused and something had to change.

Battling the Injustice of Injunctions

It was as this point that Soderstrom encountered an enormous mountain of injustice—the excessive use of injunctions to impede the peaceful gathering of laborers to discuss their plight. In response, he commenced a life-defining, 10 year-long journey to provide workers with the right to organize, freely assemble, engage in discourse and altogether gain self-determination as a political group unfettered by unconstitutional maneuvers from pro-business judges.

It is no surprise that when a mass meeting was called in Chicago that year to formulate a strategy to pass anti-injunction legislation, Reub eagerly attended as the representative for the Streator Trades and Labor Council. Samuel Gompers himself attended the conference, helping to craft a statement and legislation to end this rule by judicial fiat.[308] Addressing the conference, Gompers stressed the importance of electing "friends" to office as the best solution. Describing his experience on the national level, he told the delegates:

> We began a campaign to elect some congressmen who held union cards, regardless of their party. And we succeeded in electing six; and then at the next election we went to the same political parties in their national conventions and presented identical demands….And what occurred you know - a political revolution occurred; and those who primarily stood for "the interests" were routed…Now as a result, we secured the election of eighteen members of Congress, union card men, and regardless of which party they were members. We had Republicans, we had Democrats, and we had a Single-Taxer and a Socialist. But insofar as the fundamental principles and demands of labor were concerned, the union card group voted as a unit.[309]

At the conclusion of the conference, 28 year-old Reub proudly affixed his signature to a letter signed by all 20 attendees, which included Illinois UMWA President Frank Farrington, CFL President John Fitzpatrick, and AFL Vice President John R. Alpine. Stressing the importance of legislation that allowed workers to freely assemble, the illustrious group wrote, "The organized movement of the workers of all pledges itself to make this measure the paramount issue in the pending political campaign."[310] Although not yet a legislator himself, Reub was helping labor become more politically active, endorsing steps like making the Joint Labor Legislative Board—an effort by multiple labor groups endorse politicians for office—become a permanent body to give potential candidates like himself sustained support.[311]

A paramount issue, indeed. Injunctions posed the single greatest legal threat to labor. Despite some union successes in Congressional and Presidential elections, the courts remained firmly under the control of industry. In Illinois, judges like Denis Sullivan of the Superior Court of Chicago were actively suppressing labor's right to organize, treating organized labor as if it were a business cartel. Through the use of injunctions, pro-factory judges like Sullivan could restrict the movement of labor leaders, preventing them from speaking to striking workers or even disbursing pamphlets. Factory owners also pushed for charges of "conspiracy to extort" against labor leaders, claiming that strikes were "an unlawful interference designed to coerce and compel a party to do something which he has a legal right to refuse to do…picketing is done for the same purpose and also may be and generally is, and is frequently held to be in and of itself intimidating, menacing and annoying."[312]

Lobbied heavily by JM Glenn and the IMA, many Illinois State Attorneys aggressively prosecuted labor

leaders, securing three-year prison terms for six union agents in 1916, while fining another eight a total of $13,250 (over $290,300 in 2012 dollars).[313] While the IMA had labor leaders on the run, Reuben undoubtedly sat on the train back to Streator studying his notes from the Gompers' conference and strategizing on how to outlaw the anti-labor injunctions. It was no surprise or irony that injunctions were soon filed against him too.

Violence Strikes Illinois

Attacks on labor movement struck ever closer to Streator. In 1916, a bitter nine-week strike at the cement plants in neighboring Oglesby and La Salle impacted the entire county. The strikes had been particularly contentious, with attorneys for the cement companies charging that strikers made "indecent display of their persons and called the guards all sorts of vile and indecent names, and did everything they could to provoke a riot." Worse, they made unsubstantiated claims that protesters had attacked strikebreaking workers and "filled them with shot; some of them were killed on the streets of Oglesby by strikers."[314]

Factory owners were in turn accused of hiring "gunmen and sluggers for the purpose of intimidating the workers."[315] Citing threat of a riot, local businessmen convinced the Governor to send in the state militia. As the strikers persevered, owners used increasingly dirty tactics to keep their factories open, like using employment agencies to hire men for work in Dubuque, Iowa, who were then sent to La Salle to work as strike breakers without their knowledge or consent.[316] Threats soon descended into mob-style "hits." In Peru, IL, General Organizer Chubbeck was assaulted by an attacker who jumped out of a car, clubbed Chubbeck, and then quickly drove off, sending a clear message to labor leaders that they were in constant personal danger.[317]

Violence and brutality also defined the other major Illinois strike of 1916: the miner's strike at Rosiclare. In what was called the "Ludlow of Illinois," roughly 450 miners striking for better wages and shorter hours faced an army of gunmen hired by the mine's owners. The owners' men, many of them out-of-state convicts, were "deputized" by the Sheriff and quickly went beyond their mandate to protect the mine and company assets. They moved into the town itself and declared martial law, driving over five hundred townspeople from their homes. Again, union leadership was specifically targeted, with the local labor president and trustees run out of town.

The Election of 1916

Reub had spent the last year considering another run for the Illinois General Assembly. He took advantage of his work at Andy's to learn all he could in anticipation of a second round. As Olga remembered:

> Reub made use of his printing job in many ways. He didn't just set the type, he absorbed what he was printing. Andy Anderson's was a job office printing many things. Besides, Reub's wife carried books from the Streator Library and Reub burned the midnight oil studying. He always called the Streator Library his university. He studied hard and long these many years.[318]

Ever the idealist, Reub certainly had thought of running again as a Progressive. The nascent party, however, was quickly coming undone. The year 1916 was again a Presidential election, but Teddy Roosevelt refused the Bull Moose nomination and eventually endorsed the Republican candidate, Charles Evans Hughes. Reuben likewise decided to refrain from running. Soderstrom watched from the sidelines as IMA-friendly candidates like the 39th's Ole Benson were elected for another term in the Illinois statehouse while he returned to meetings of the active Streator Trades and Labor Council, to work at Andy Anderson's print shop, and to a quiet life spent at home with a grieving Jeanne and their precious and only son, Carl.

A Happy Farewell

Olga graduated high school in the summer of 1916, just six days after Reub returned from the Chicago anti-injunction conference. After initially working as a secretary in a washing machine factory, Olga decided to go into nursing. Reub wanted his sister to become a teacher, but ultimately approved of her decision and even helped finance her schooling. His support was not lost on Olga: "Seems phenomenal, that I could make these decisions because of our dependency on my wonderful brother."[319] Her sendoff even made the local paper (thanks, in all likelihood, to a few strings pulled by her linotypist brother). The Streator Daily Independent Times notes:

> Miss Olga Soderstrom, 708. E. Lundy Street, was given the surprise of her life last evening when a merry group of her girl friends called at her home…They had the lawn brilliantly decorated with Japanese lanterns and didn't mind it a bit when "big brother" came onto them suddenly in the midst of an interesting game of leap frog. Of course there was music, with Miss Grace Carroll at the piano, and singing and dancing and a good time generally…After the games the "kids" had refreshments of ice cream, cake and stick candy, and then had their pictures taken by Photographer Fedor.[320]

Olga moved near her brother Lafe in Chicago and entered the West Side Hospital in September of 1916. Despite Reub's support, Olga still faced difficulties making ends meet. She described her circumstance in that first year:

> We, nurses in training, received three dollars per month the first year of training, which, of course, did not cover expenses. Mother used to buy shoes on sale sometimes for twenty-five cents a pair and send me. Many times they were a poor fit, but I wore them. I could buy blouses and sometimes I bought material and would hand-make a dress. We could usually buy things on credit at nearby stores and I'd pay say fifty cents a month on the bill.[321]

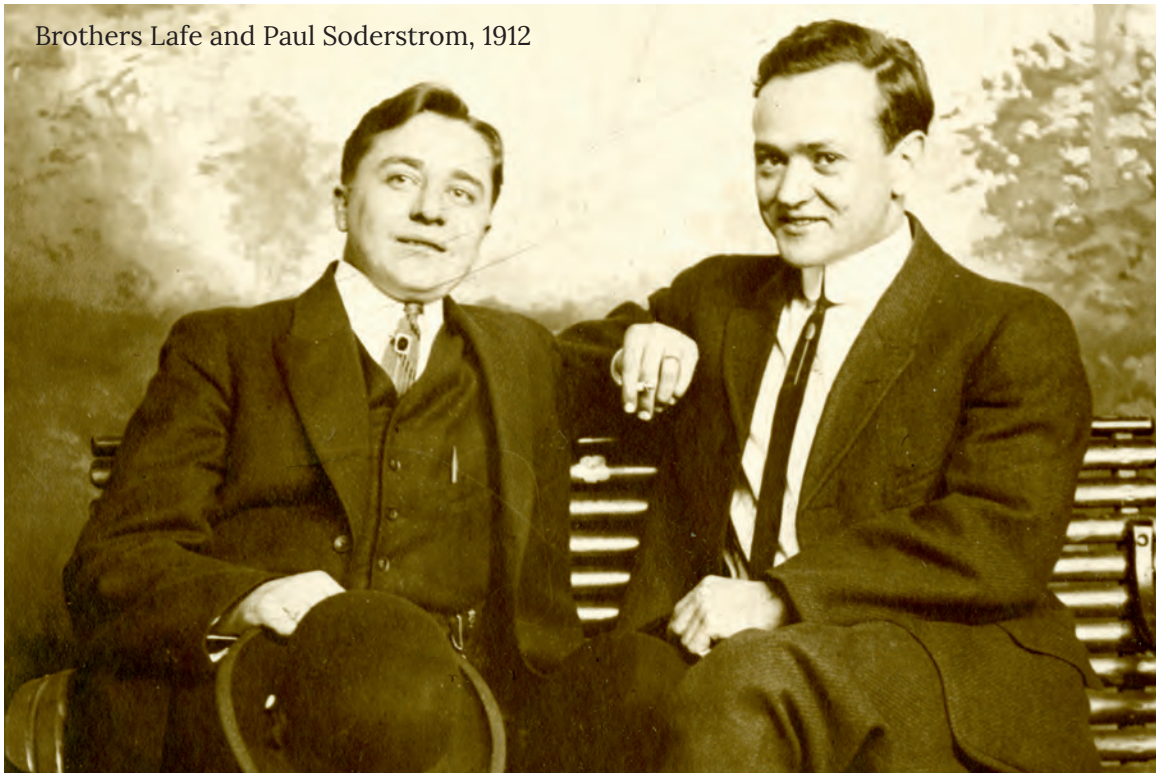
Her journey to become an educated woman certainly filled Reuben with joy. It was because of Reuben that Olga had the opportunity to pursue her professional desires, and they both knew it. And as Reuben bid Godspeed to Olga, Jeanne gave him the first piece of good news he'd had in recent memory. She was pregnant again.

Postcard sent from Reuben to his mother
from St. Louis, MO, 1909

Anna Soderstrom and
10-year-old Reuben, 1898

Reuben's parents John and
Anna Soderstrom, 1903

Brothers Lafe and Paul Soderstrom, 1912



Reuben's future wife Jeanne Shaw, 1910

Reuben Soderstrom, 1912

VOTE FOR
R. G. SODERSTROM

"HONEST, EFFICIENT, HUMAN."

"Soderstrom has an unbroken record of service to the common people."

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE

For STATE REPRESENTATIVE

"A man who has nerve enough to work and vote for the things the farmer, worker, soldier, educator and progressive business man want."

SUBJECT TO THE DECISION OF THE

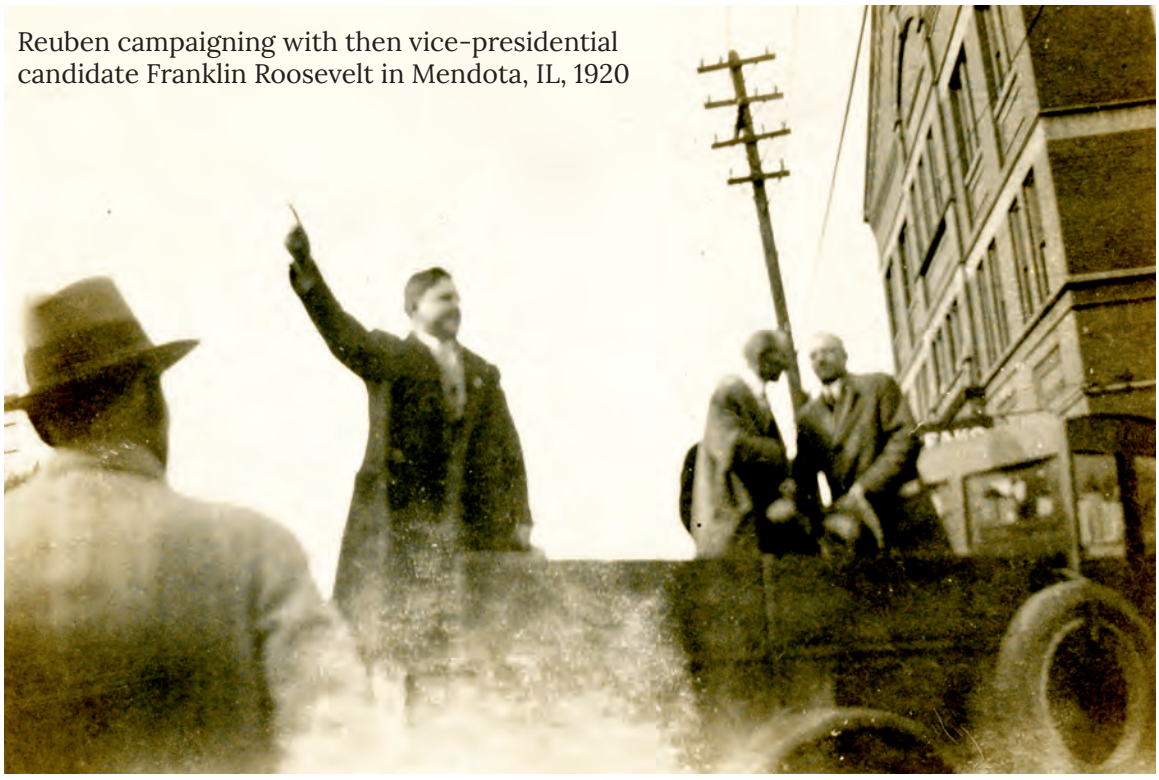
Election, Tuesday, November 4th, 1924

"Soderstrom is an intelligent, capable, laboring man, who will be for anything the farmer wants. He comes from the common people and will not forget where he came from. If I lived in La Salle County, I would go to the polls and help send him to the Legislature. The workers and the farmers need him there."—John H. Walker, President State Federation of Labor.

Campaign Poster for Reuben Soderstrom, 1924

Reuben Soderstrom, circa 1925

Family photo of Reuben with his wife Jeanne, son Carl and daughter Rose Jeanne, 1918



Reuben campaigning with then vice-presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt in Mendota, IL, 1920

CHAPTER 11
1917-1918

WORLD WAR ONE AND THE ELECTION OF 1918

A NEW DAWN

In the last year, Reuben buried a son, sat out the election, watched a brother leave to fight on foreign soil, and said goodbye to his only sister as she headed for Chicago. Labor had taken a beating as factory and mine owners in Illinois hired criminals to club labor leaders in broad daylight and drive striking workers out of their homes in the night. It had been a year of sadness and loss.

But just as loved ones left Reuben's life, others entered: Rose Jeanne Soderstrom was born in early 1917, bringing with her a breath of fresh air to the little house on Sherman Avenue. Reub continued to support his growing family as well as his mother and Paul's daughter, 4-year-old daughter Lorraine, while working both as a delegate in the Labor Council and as a printer at Andy's print shop. As he walked briskly to and from work or into another meeting at the Trades and Labor Council, 29-year-old Reuben took the quiet respite to stir up plans for his future in politics. There was certainly a lot to think about as he set the copy for the morning paper.

A WORLD AT WAR

In 1917, the Great War between European powers had entered its fourth year. Although America strenuously maintained official neutrality—President Wilson was re-elected on the premise that "he kept us out of war"—1917 would see America enter the conflict in short order. Tensions between the United States and the imperial powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary had been steadily increasing for some time: nearly 200 Americans had died in German U-boat attacks of merchant ships, and the Kaiser even proposed in his infamous "Zimmerman note" to create a military alliance with Mexico, promising to help "reconquer" the American southwest. In March of that year, Germany sunk three American ships (the City of Memphis, the Vigilancia, and the Illinois), and by April 2 President Wilson asked a special joint session of Congress for a declaration of war against Germany.

The War Hits Home

That autumn, the war took on a personal dimension for the Soderstroms as brother Paul's brigade was sent overseas to fight as part of the American Expeditionary Force. A naturally gifted cyclist, he served as courier, carrying important information between headquarters on his bike. The experience profoundly changed him, as Olga recounts, "Paul…was a war casualty. He received a bad leg injury--was hit with shrapnel in his thigh…Paul was not the most stable person after the war, he was often in financial straits and Reub so often had to give him financial assistance."[322]

In fact, Olga was nearly a victim of the war herself. Many of the troops returning home from war carried with them a deadly strain of flu, and by 1918 the illness had become a full-blown epidemic in the States. Olga,

now in the second year of her nurse training in Chicago, experienced the horror where she worked:

> It was a tragic thing. Boys would come back from the war and be brought in the hospital and die in less than twenty-four hours. We had no treatment for the flu then and everywhere people died. We lost several nurses with the flu and I contracted it. Apparently, I was on the critical list and the hospital notified my folks. Lafe was living in Chicago at this time and he called Reub. So Reub came up from Streator and both came up to the hospital to see me. I, of course, did not know that they had been called, so I tried so hard not to let them know how ill I was. I just couldn't eat anything and all I wanted and asked for was lemonade...while my brothers were there supper was served, and when they brought my supper, I thought I must eat so my brothers would not know how sick I was, so I ate all on my tray. After they left, I was so desperately ill from having eaten, but they left the hospital feeling I was getting along.[323]

Olga survived, but others were not so lucky. By its end, the influenza pandemic would kill up to 75 million people worldwide.

Reub himself wasted no time in helping the war effort. He became a "War Bond Minute Man" (not to be confused with Charles Dawes' pro-manufacturers "Minute Men of the Constitution"), appearing at theaters, lodges, churches, schools and union meetings to give three minute speeches selling War Bonds. He was highly effective. And importantly, his public appearances introduced him to a broad and diverse audience of LaSalle County voters, which would prove very valuable.

Meanwhile, Jeanne was at home with two-year-old Carl and baby Jeanne and found ways to adhere to the nation's war-time rations by feeding the family through meatless Tuesday, wheatless Wednesdays, and porkless Thursdays. She also learned to bake dark "victory bread" using corn or rye flour in place of wheat.

Business And Labor During World War I

With so many American men fighting in the trenches in Europe, business asked for a moratorium on union organizing during the war to maintain what they claimed would be "cordial" labor relations. While they publicly preached solidarity, anti-union forces privately used the war towards their own ends. According to the ISFL, "Enemies of Labor…are deliberately circulating false statements to the to the effect that the Council of National Defense has urged the defeat of all progressive labor measures…even [going] so far as to circulate a story, under a pledge of secrecy, that the Secretary of War had advised against the passage of Labor's injunction limitation bill."[324] While Secretary of War Newton Baker directly and publicly disputed the assertion, pro-manufacturers continued whisper campaigns to connect labor with shadowy international and anti-American forces to devastating effect. In Illinois, the injunction limitation bill failed that year by a mere four votes.[325]

Labor, meanwhile, took pains to express support for the country without abandoning the rights of workers. While observing that "previous wars, for whatever purpose waged, developed new opportunities for exploiting wage-earners," the AFL swore to defend the Republic and its ideals, officially declaring upon America's entrance into the war:

> We, officers of the National and International Trade Unions of America…hereby pledge ourselves in peace or in war, in stress or in storm, to stand unreservedly by the standards of liberty and the safety and preservation of the institutions and ideals of our Republic…we, with these ideals of liberty and justice herein declared…offer our services to our country in every field of activity to defend, safeguard, and preserve the republic of the United States of America against its enemies whomsoever they might be, and we call upon our fellow workers and fellow citizens in the holy name of Labor, Justice, Freedom and Humanity to devotedly and patriotically

give like service.[326]

In Reuben's Streator, the local Labor Council issued a similar declaration, throwing its own support behind President Wilson and his efforts. Of course, these declarations and endorsements had a political dimension as well. As Streator historian Dale Bennett observes, the council's actions "helped [labor] gain public acceptance…The endorsement of the Wilson Administration's war policy by the Streator Labor movement went beyond patriotism. The labor movement had been accused that it was a socialistic element in society. Although it is not known who made this charge, the labor movement did all it could to overcome this indictment. It was good public relations."[327]

The Battle of "Open Shop" Vs. "Closed Shop"

Amidst the epic struggle against the Kaiser's forces abroad and a ruthless whisper campaign at home, there was a local struggle in 1917 that became a growing concern for labor in Streator and soon consumed a great deal of Reuben's time: the "open shop" versus "closed shop" debate.

In the latter half of 1916, several employees of the local Barely Motor Company were fired for attempting to organize a union. The following January, the workers of the BMC formed Federal Labor Union 15497 and attempted to force the company to rehire the men. In addition to the return of their colleagues, the new union called for grievance procedures, a 25-cent wage increase per day, and most importantly a commitment that the automotive manufacturer would hire only union men (making it closed to nonunion labor, or a "closed shop"). The union drafted and presented the contract to Mr. Stephenson, the plant manager, the following day.

Instead of meeting to consider their demands, Stephenson refused even to read the contract, which motivated nearly all the disgruntled employees to strike in protest the following day. Stephenson immediately called on the Sheriff's office in Pontiac for deputies to protect company property, as he later told the Streator Free Press, "Just to be on the safe side." The armed guard was provided, despite the lack of violence and firm assertion by the local's Chairman Vincent Cox, that "There will be no violence as far as the men are concerned. If any of the men are found guilty of damaging the property of the company, our men will help prosecute them."[328] The next day, AC Barely, the firm's owner, came to Streator and doubled down on his manager's refusal to negotiate. He said he would rather move the plant than negotiate, maintaining that his shop would remain open to nonunion labor (an "open shop"). He further disparaged the striking workers as "men picked off the street…With a few of them we have succeeded and with others our work has been only a complete and miserable failure. We have been compelled to put up with poor workmanship."[329] True to his word, Barely soon closed the plant entirely and moved it to Kalamazoo, Michigan. All of the employees lost their jobs and the strike ended in failure.

According to historian Bennett, there were several unique factors which allowed Barely's successful stand against the organized workers. The automotive baron had never significantly invested in Streator, instead buying up the remains of the defunct Erie Motor Carriage Company (a practice he continued in Kalamazoo, where he relocated to the former Kalamazoo Buggy Co. factory). The creeping collapse of Streator's mining and bottling industries—brought on by resource exhaustion and the growth of the prohibition movement—created high unemployment, allowing Barely to exploit and eventually discard his workers. Barely also managed to keep a low profile; the short, bloodless strike initially received little attention, and the ISFL didn't even bother to mention it at the time. However, this seemingly small and unique incident had established a dangerous precedent in the city: a hard line against the "closed shop." As Bennett writes:

The union men fought a very clean fight and lost. Barely's apparent success in breaking this particular local

> would be a prelude for other open shop campaigns in the next decade…The local labor movement, in spite of its moderate approach to labor relations, probably did not realize the full significance of the open shop campaign at the Barely Motor Company. Actually, the moderate approach may not have been adequate when dealing with employers who could move their plants rather than recognize a union. Labor was confronted with a new environment, a factor, which it would have to cope with and find a solution.[330]

Emboldened by Barely's example, Streator manufacturers would soon try to follow suit, putting them on a collision course with Reuben and his fellow leaders of labor.

THE ELECTION OF 1918

A loser in 1914 and absent from the 1916 contest, a different Reuben Soderstrom stepped up to the plate in the 1918 election; he was more realistic, cunning, and experienced. He spent four years strategically planning this race with colleagues and was ready for another swing at the IMA's candidate, Ole Benson. This time, Reuben had a dramatically different game plan.

A Winning "September" Strategy

As we've seen, the unique "Plump Three" method of electioneering in 1918 allowed Illinois districts to elect three representatives every term to the statehouse. The state law was intended to provide two seats for the majority party and one seat for minority in every district. In Republican-heavy districts like LaSalle County, this meant that the two Republicans and one Democrat who won their party's respective primaries were virtually guaranteed a general election victory, even though they were often joined by a number of scrappy candidates from smaller third parties like Socialists and Progressives.

This method of voting created an interesting strategic decision for Reuben; should he run in the general election as a third party candidate, where he was guaranteed to make the general ballot but would not have the protection and support of a major party? Or should he officially join a party and try to unseat one of the major party incumbents in the primary?

Reuben knew two things. First, Democrat Lee Browne was a longtime incumbent and a pro-labor man. Reub did not want to unseat him. And Reub also knew that Republicans dominated LaSalle's District 39, outnumbering Democrats two to one at the ballot box. For that reason, a long-term political career in LaSalle County necessitated being a Republican.

Reub set his sights on unseating anti-labor, pro-manufacturer candidate Ole Benson, a Streator sand mine operator and an outspoken opponent of labor's beloved Anti-Injunction Bill. Taking on Benson in the Republican primary was both strategic and gutsy. Benson was moneyed and entrenched, one of the longest-serving representatives in the General Assembly. But Reub knew that the other major Republican, Will Scanlon, would win the Republican primary, which was fine because Scanlon voted for many labor measures, including the 1917 Anti-Injunction Bill. Reub didn't need to finish ahead of all Republicans in the primary; he just needed to finish in front of Benson. If Reub could beat out Benson, all three reps from Streator would be pro-labor.

This meant that Reuben Soderstrom, progressive labor leader, would run as a Republican. It was not a love marriage but an arranged one, orchestrated by none other than Reuben himself, brilliantly demonstrating his skills as both an operative and an opportunist. Reub was no longer a hopeless idealist, but an expedient politician. He needed to get from Andy Anderson's print shop to the halls of Springfield, from news printer to news maker. But the party wasn't the most natural place for Reuben, as party leaders well knew. "They said

I wasn't a real Republican, which was true," Reuben later humorously recalled. "I was running on the Republican ticket. I may have been a visionary, and idealist, but I was practical enough to ride on the kind of vehicle that would get me to the place where I wanted to go."[331]

With the traditional party leadership (and its money) aligned against him, Reuben cultivated a powerful personal organization with his friends in the "September Club." Together, they came up with a support network of their own—a league for political education. As Reuben later recounted to Professor Derber:

> In the county of LaSalle when I started to aspire for public office and antagonized those who have control over the affairs of men, I found it necessary to form a political league. We called it the LaSalle County Voters' Defense League. It was made up of representatives of about 70 unions in the county of LaSalle and we would meet each Sunday for seven Sundays before Election Day. I would address these people—we had about 75 or 80 people attend these meetings—and they would go back home and on Election Day they would act as precinct committeemen, don't you see. And they'd man every precinct in the industrial centers of the county and that was why I won…they came from all of the local unions of LaSalle. They formed my organization because I couldn't get support from the political organization, don't you see, and many merchants supported me.[332]

At these monthly meetings, Reub energized those in attendance and always reminded them of Rep. Benson's annual opposition to labor's agenda. Support swelled for Reub among union members. Soon, an able and willing cadre of volunteers lined up to help him. The Trades Council and Reuben's personal local helped pay for campaign flyers, while volunteers distributed them throughout the entire 39th district. Reuben also put up a tremendous personal effort, visiting the homes of people in key locations. "I could pick out 25 or 30 homes that I would get into in a day, just talk to the people—'I'm a candidate for the office of State Representative. I need your help, and if you can help me conscientiously, I'll thoroughly appreciate it,' you see. And that type of campaigning paid off."[333] Further, it didn't hurt that Reuben was freshly known around the county as a compelling and patriotic "Minute Man" selling war bonds. Reub even used his Scandinavian heritage to his advantage for the first time in the northeastern section of the country, where his people's camaraderie helped secure perhaps a few hundred more votes. Politician Reuben G. Soderstrom had arrived.

Reuben Soderstrom: State Representative

In the Republican primary on September 9, Reub collected more votes than incumbent Ole Benson and therefore earned the right to be one of two Republicans on the general election ballot (with Will Scanlan). On the eve of the general election, Reuben had the supreme pleasure of receiving an endorsement from the paper that first employed him as a young apprentice. The Streator Independent Times wrote in unqualified support of him, stating:

> Another Streator man who is going to be elected by a tremendous vote is RG Soderstrom, who is a candidate for the legislature. Mr. Soderstrom is prominent in labor movements and has been sought for as speaker at all the patriotic demonstrations in the county. During the several liberty loan campaigns he has been one of the four-minute speakers, and his earnestness won for him thousands of friends who didn't know him before his appearance in this way. Mr. Soderstrom is capable, he is honest, and he is fearless. He is the champion of right anywhere and at all times. Streator will be proud to give Reub a unanimous vote tomorrow.[334]

Because LaSalle County was heavily Republican, the general election on November 5, 1918, in Illinois District 39 was a formality; the top three vote getters were going to Springfield, and Reub Soderstrom was number three on the list:

The IMA's candidate, Ole Benson, had been out-crafted and unseated by the 30-year-old labor upstart. After the successful election, ISFL President Walker (who had first convinced Reub to run in 1914) trumpeted both the success and the method behind it, emphasizing the need to implement Reuben's successful campaign tactics statewide:

> Because the workers were aroused, had organized themselves and acted intelligently and unitedly, Mr. Ole Benson was defeated and Reub Soderstrom of Streator, an active trade unionist and a bright, able, honest and clean young man, was nominated in his place…Their method is the method that will have to be put in practice in some other localities to assure final success. Nearly every local union in the 39th Senatorial District sent one or more of their members to central meetings and there laid their plans that brought success. The trade unionists of LaSalle County are to be congratulated on their intelligent and just action…Reub Soderstrom will fight honestly and persistently to give workers of this state the same protection in the state courts, in the right of peaceful assemblage, free press and free speech that the labor section of the Clayton Bill gives us in Federal Courts. He will also fight intelligently and persistently from the beginning to the end to put a law on the statute books that will bring Illinois out of the dark ages with reference to women's labor and give them the eight-hour day.[335]

Six days later, on November 11, 1918, the "Great War" came to a close as Germany signed the Armistice Agreement and the world would enter a tenuous peace. After years of hard work, narrow defeats and personal loss, it was a great time for thirty year-old Reub to head to the Illinois General Assembly. Thus began the illustrious and staggeringly productive legislative career of Reuben G. Soderstrom, who would serve with only one two-year absence as a State Representative from 1918 through 1936. Though young, Reub would not sit quietly, nor waste a single moment, introducing his first bill—a momentous one—HB No. 32, in his very first week in office. This act would set the stage for the most important fight Reuben and Illinois labor had faced up to this point: the struggle against a corrupt court system, injunctions, and the great open shop debate.

It was a beautiful Christmas that year with a dusting of snow on December 24, the traditional Swedish time of celebration. Reuben celebrated with Jeanne and their two young children, his sister Olga, his mother Anna, and a jubilant Lafe who was back for the holidays. As gifts for himself, Reub bought two new neckties, a small suitcase, and a train ticket to Springfield.

CHAPTER 12
1919-1920

FRESHMAN YEAR

1919: COME OUT SWINGING

Approaching the Illinois State capitol building in Springfield for his first day of work must have been awesome and humbling for 31-year-old Reuben. A lifelong student of government and politics, he most certainly was honored to approach the building in the crisp January air, its tall silvery zinc dome in French Renaissance style, and walk inside to gaze up at its ornate and colorful ceiling. In the chamber, where he spotted famous legislators of the day from Chicago and "downstate" alike, he was assigned and seated at a wooden desk in the very back row of the chamber. After five years of hard-fought, frustratingly narrow electoral defeats—and countless more years reading the annals of Greek democracy, the great Congressional sessions of America, and reports on contemporary political maneuvering—Reuben G. Soderstrom was a member of the Illinois House of Representatives.

Origins of The Injunction Limitation Act

In his first week in office, Reuben personally took on one of the state's biggest and most long-standing issues by introducing the Injunction Limitation Bill. Many veteran lawmakers likely arched their eyebrows over this thunderous volley from the young newcomer on the backbench.

It was a momentous issue. Of all the weapons employed against labor, none was more insidious than the injunction. Commonly called restraining orders, court-ordered injunctions had long been used to prevent violence and harassment. By the early twentieth century, however, wealthy manufacturers had perverted this rule for their own ends. Claiming a fear of violence and violation of their property, company owners used sympathetic judges to issue orders forbidding workers from organizing, picketing, protesting, and in some cases from striking altogether, forcing them to return to work or go to jail. These orders often targeted labor leaders specifically, cutting them off from all communication and effectively placing them under house arrest. Their purpose was clear: to brutally punish labor leaders and intimidate workers. In the words of labor's nemesis, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA), "When some of them are bayoneted for refusing to stand for these conditions, the rest will submit."[336]

Reub viewed injunctions as nothing less than a violation of workers' constitutional right to assemble. How could a court mandate that four or more workers constituted a "conspiracy" and were not allowed to congregate to discuss their plight? For labor, eliminating the abusive injunction practice was job number one. Without an end to injunctions, manufacturers and their judges could violate workers' most basic rights. As Reub warned from the House floor, someone sanctioned by injunction was "not a full citizen…if I can't exercise my rights of free press and free speech and peaceful assembly, I'm not a full citizen."[337]

The ISFL newsletters from this era are ripe with angry and emotional articles fully mobilized around abolishing manufacturers' abuse of injunctions. Workers speak to being locked out of work and prevented from congregating or discussing matters with co-workers or local labor leaders. At the urging of JM Glenn's IMA, anti-labor injunctions were handed out daily like schoolroom detentions. For that reason, Reuben,

freshman legislator from Streator, went to the heart of the matter and re-introduced the Injunction Limitation Bill to the floor for debate.

An injunction limitation bill had been introduced four years earlier, in 1915. Described as "labor's most important legislative measure," its language was identical to the Clayton Act previously passed by the United States Congress, and matched similar efforts in states across the nation.[338] However, a series of legislative tricks continually postponed a vote on the Illinois bill, most notoriously when Representatives scared of voting "No" simply did not answer during the roll call, preventing a quorum. This silent vote allowed pro-business candidates to claim they did not vote "No" on the popular bill…while simultaneously killing it.[339]

After years of legislative wrangling, the bill again came up for debate in May 1917, as House Bill 270. In that year, the floor debate demonstrated how high the stakes were. Rep. Tuttle from Saline, who called up the bill, remarked "I dare say that there has not been a bill in this assembly that there is more interest in at this time, or that there has been more interest manifested, during this session of the Legislature than number 270." Stating "there is not a bill in the Assembly today…that will be of more interest and more good to a class or any classes of people than this will be to the working people," he reminded opponents that passage of identical legislation on the federal level had failed to create the imagined collapse of industry. "There is no harm that can result from the enactment of a bill of this kind into law," he emphasized.[340]

Anti-union legislators responded with wild threats and incendiary language. Rep. Weber from Cook County denounced the law as "one of the most insidious bills, one of the worst bills that has come to this House." He carefully cast himself and allies not as industrialist shills but as defenders of the working class: "I am not talking on behalf of any corporation," he stressed. Calling the courts a "haven and the rescue of the poor and the suffering," he claimed that passage of the bill would "Drive from the borders of our State all the industries which are now run under the order of open shops, and you will drive from it every vestige—instead of bringing industry to our State, instead of increasing the manufacturing establishments of our State, you will drive them from the borders of our state, and throw over the entire manufacturing proposition into the hands of labor organizations."[341] By the end of the debate, the wild warnings of men like Weber (and fear of the IMA's JM Glenn, who announced he would score the vote from the galleys in the Assembly) carried the day. The bill was defeated. Although 73 favored the bill and only 53 (including then-Representative Ole Benson) opposed it, again 21 representatives were "absent," leaving the bill four votes shy of the necessary 77.[342]

Reuben Battles Courtroom Corruption

Despite these losses, Reuben wasted no time taking up the cause as his own. He knew how important an Injunction Limitation Bill was to workers' rights, and had defeated Ole Benson in the 1918 election in part because of Benson's vote against the original.[343] At this point in our narrative, it is a pleasure to finally introduce our protagonist speaking in his own words within the year we are studying, and they do not disappoint. Speaking from the statehouse floor, 31-year-old Reuben declared:

> The humanitarian spirit that is prevailing in our nation, and the demands for social justice which has taken hold of the hearts of men and women declare that the brutal doctrine which held that human labor was a commodity to be bought and sold at the lowest possible market price as machinery, oil, coal, wheat, flour, and used until its supply is consumed or its efficiency exhausted, is vicious in morals and unsound in economics…No nation will be truly great, indeed no nation will survive that thus oppresses its producers.[344]

Reuben was charging straight at JM Glenn and the IMA. He fought ferociously for his bill, arguing persuasively before the Committee of the Judiciary that March. As the ISFL Weekly News Letter noted, Reub's "clear views on this matter and the able manner in which he pointed out how the judges of Illinois had

abused the legal and natural rights of the workers in the states proves that he is thoroughly familiar with this entire injunction question and is determined to have the power of these judges limited to common sense."[345] There is no doubt that JM Glenn was now paying attention to the young politician from Streator.

In many respects, Glenn was like Reuben himself: a gifted writer and speaker, salesman and evangelist. He tirelessly used his considerable gifts to gain adherents to his cause. Yet, while Reub relied on his charisma and persuasion, preferring to win through consensus building, Glenn, in contrast, relied on fear. He was "a fighter rather than a compromiser, a complete partisan in methods and spirit."[346] Reub was the type that could run in the other party's primary and win; Glenn was the type that could convince those in the other party that if they crossed him they'd lose everything.

As soon as Reuben resurrected the bill, Glenn went to work gathering resources to defeat it. He sent letters to the IMA's powerful members, instructing them to make in-person meetings with senators and representatives to tell them to oppose Reuben's bill. In fact, the personal letter he sent to his fellow industrialists was exposed by a cleaning woman who, upon hearing her boss talking about the need to "hold labor down," felt her blood boil. Thinking of her son, who was risking his life overseas for the freedoms these men joked about taking away, she made a handwritten copy of the note and leaked it to the press. It read in part:

> Every manufacturer is (to meet with) the House Members in the Districts in which their property is located and urge them to use their influence to prevent the passage of this bill. Please advise this office at once as to...any information you receive as to the attitude of members of the legislature…If you have not already done so, please promptly fill out the enclosed blank, giving the name or names of those persons connected with your company upon whom our legislative committee may depend for your cooperation.
>
> Yours very truly,
> John M. Glenn, Sec'y.[347]

While Reuben was on the House floor making the argument for the bill on its merit, Glenn was in the back room twisting all the right arms. On April 9, 1919—a mere two months after Reub took office—the bill went down in defeat 69-51. Saliently, the manufacturers again orchestrated 30 absentee legislators. It was JM Glenn's third defeat of anti-injunction legislation in four years.[348]

Reub's big swing did not send him victoriously around the bases; it sent him back to the dugout. Unfortunately for him, there was worse still to come. That same year Glenn beat back labor's attempts at an 8-hour workday bill for women while long, protracted strikes such as the Illinois coal miners' strike and the great steel strike consumed most of labor's attention and resources.

Textbooks For Streator's Schoolchildren

Reuben did enjoy one notable success. In large part though his efforts (and the legislative machine he helped create), the trade unionists of Streator were able to place the question of free textbooks for schoolchildren on the local ballot at the end of 1919. Reub knew the value of books better than most; the product of child labor, he was able to educate himself in large part through the goodness of John Williams, who gave Reuben lasting and valuable access to both public and private libraries.

By an overwhelming number, the people of Streator embraced Reub's proposition (only 69 voted against the measure). It was an historic vote, making Reub's hometown the first city in central Illinois to ensure children finally had access to free textbooks.[349] The victory was especially important for Reub in light of a very personal loss; John Williams, Reuben's teacher, mentor, and role model, died on January 2, 1919, shortly after

witnessing his star pupil win elected office.

1920: ELECTIONS, CONVENTIONS, TENSION, AND TEMPERANCE

Like Brother, Like Sister: Olga On Strike

Reuben's valuing of free textbooks came from his love of the written word, which he still exercised at his other job as a typesetter. It was also badly needed income; as Olga notes:

> When Reub won this election of 1918, he would go to Springfield for three days and then he would work at Andy Anderson's three days, for which he received Eighteen Dollars ($18.00) a week. Now, I had gone in training, so Reub would give Mother Five Dollars ($5.00) a week. During this period Mother did practical nursing and rented rooms. His pay during those years from the State of Illinois was Eighteen Hundred Dollars ($1,800.00) for two years, which netted him little when you see he always had two campaigns in order to win. He received no pay, of course, from being president of the Streator Trades and Labor Council. This position he held for ten years.[350]

Working three jobs (State Rep, typesetter and President of the Labor Council), Reub was perhaps so busy he could barely keep track of Olga's whereabouts in nursing school. Now a senior, Olga and her compatriots found their working conditions intolerable. So Olga, every inch her brother's kid sister, circulated a petition:

> I called a meeting and there had been so much dissatisfaction among the nurses that it wasn't difficult to get them to sign the petition and if conditions were not improved we threatened to strike. We sure created a storm! We were told that if the news reached the press, we'd be expelled…but, five of us upon learning they wanted no publicity, immediately went to the Chicago American and told our story and our pictures appeared. Well, we all were suspended and after we left, more were suspended for a year. No time was stated for the five of us. We were even told they would blackball us in any hospital we might try to enter.[351]

Initially Olga held the news from Reub, probably because for years he had scrimped and saved to put her through nursing school, and now she was seemingly blacklisted. Still, while it may have been against his wishes, his example likely had a role in the affair:

> You can believe Reub was not happy over this experience. Funny, too, the hospital thought we had outside help. I had formulated the letter and our staff doctors said no nurse in training had written that letter…we had no outside help, my brother knew nothing of this until it appeared in the paper. It was a difficult time; Mother felt I had disgraced them.[352]

Luckily, the affair had a happy ending:

> It happened one of the doctors was in sympathy with us, and he took an interest in me and said he would help me get into another hospital. I asked that he take my dear friend, Leah Hodgson, along and he got us into the American Hospital on Irving Park Boulevard. It was a new hospital then and Dr. Thorax was its chief surgeon. We, Leah and I, entered there and joined their senior class, which was the first class to graduate from their new hospital.[353]

In the end, Reuben likely couldn't help but be a little proud of his sister's courage. After all, she notes, "I believe I probably lead the first strike of nurses…as long as I could finish my training, I was forgiven (by Mother). I will say Reub never scolded me!"[354]

Fruitless Pursuit: The Illinois Constitutional Convention

The Illinois Labor movement spent much of 1920 preoccupied with what most in the state thought would be a game-changing event. On November 5, 1918, the Illinois electorate voted to hold a convention for a new state constitution. Although Governor Lowden put forth the call to re-organize the elective offices, parties of all stripes saw the gathering as a chance to write their interests permanently into Illinois State law. Labor, stinging from the defeat of Reuben's Injunction Limitation Bill, used considerable energy and resources to find redress through the new constitution. In February of 1920, the ISFL proposed the following constitutional article:

> Section 1: The labor of a human being is an attribute of life and is not property.
>
> Section 2: The right of workmen to organize into trade and labor unions and to deal and speak through representatives chosen by themselves is declared and it shall not be abridged.
>
> Section 3: No court, tribunal, judge nor any officer or official shall by any process, order, injunction, restraining order, decree or proclamation abridge the right of any workman to quit any employment either singly or in concert, nor the right of by peaceful persuasion, picketing, assemblage or the payment of strike benefits inducing others so to quit or to refrain from working, nor shall any such acts be made or held to be unlawful, or to constitute an unlawful conspiracy. Nor shall any such process, order, injunction, restraining order, decree or proclamation interfere with the exercise of the legitimate functions of any organization formed for the purpose of advancing the interests of those who labor.[355]

While labor sought to increase workers' protections, JM Glenn and the IMA sought to remove what little protection workers enjoyed. Delegates from downstate, meanwhile, used their clout to prevent popular representation (stripping votes away from the more populous and union-friendly north). These machinations led some in the press to declare "The constitutional convention appears to be hard at work drafting an unconstitutional constitution."[356] In the end, the unpopular constitutional draft was handily rejected by Illinois voters. Labor's considerable anti-injunction efforts, in both 1919 and 1920, suffered very certain defeats, and the IMA's grip was as firm as ever.

Prohibition

The end of the Great War brought with it a huge influx of out-of-work veterans who had virtually no support. Economic instability in the post-war economy shot up at an alarming rate as unemployment climbed from 558,000 in the beginning of 1920 to a height of nearly 4,754,000 (an increase of over 850%) by 1921.[357] Even those who had jobs could no longer make ends meet. While wages over the previous three years had increased 28%, the cost of living over that same period had increased over 78%.[358]

This economic calamity fanned the flames of an intense social program: Prohibition. The movement to outlaw alcohol truly caught fire in the 1900s when zealous messengers like Carrie Nation and Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union spoke of the "evils of drink" in churches across the nation. The Prohibition Party was the official political arm of the movement, succeeded by the powerful Anti-Saloon League (ASL), both of which drew most of their support from dry, dour Protestant ministers and their congregations. Reuben would soon draw the ire of the ASL in his upcoming election in Streator.

Even with the backing of Protestant zealots, the prohibition movement likely never would have succeeded without big business. Prohibition was "an appealing instrument of social control for respectable Anglo-Saxons, North and South."[359] Manufacturers saw it as an effective way "of keeping the unwashed classes sober,

self-disciplined, and on time for work."[360] As the vice-president of the Detroit Executives Club, Boyd Fisher, declared in 1917, "It wasn't Billy Sunday, it was the employers of Michigan that put the state in the prohibition column. They wanted to remove the saloon on the route between home and factory."[361]

Prohibition hit Streator especially hard because the glass industry had become the primary employer of labor by 1912.[362] No doubt milk bottles provided plenty of jobs, but beer bottles had been the mainstay since Adolphus Busch had invested in the Streator Bottle and Glass Company in 1881 to make bottles for his family's breweries. The passage of the Volstead Act, which outlawed alcohol nationally in 1918, had already devastated Streator. By 1920 the Glass Bottle Blowers Association lost most of its members and the town experienced economic depression and massive social unrest.[363] Reuben watched all this befall his beloved hometown during his first term as a legislator.

As the state and national push for the prohibition of alcohol intensified, the issue of whether a legislator served as "wet" or "dry" moved to the forefront. Amid this fierce national debate, Reub faced a difficult choice; the preacher's son didn't have much of a taste for alcohol himself. Still, Prohibition threatened to strangle the lifeblood of Streator. To complicate matters, the "holy rollers" behind the Prohibition movement weren't above playing political hardball. In early 1919, Scott McBride, Illinois State superintendent for the Anti-Saloon League, sent a letter to Reub making it clear if he didn't support the League's position, they would work aggressively to defeat him next election. McBride wrote to Reuben: "You are a young man just starting in public life along legislation lines and if you make a mistake by not conforming to the understanding in the beginning, you will find it will seriously handicap you through your whole career."[364]

Reub was not intimidated. When the Illinois House ratified the 18th Amendment on January 14, 1919, Reub voted against it. The Streator Daily Independent Times defended his choice, warning against the dangers of single-issue advocacy:

> Rep. Soderstrom is… a man who has ideas, and the courage to apply them; a man in close contact with labor problems, yet sophisticated enough to be intelligently conscious of their mutual dependence on the welfare of capitalistic interests; a young and growing man keenly interested in education… The point we want to call attention to which should be noted by every voter who really wants his ideals realized politically, is that you cannot damn a man for one thing on one issue but you must judge every candidate for office not only on overt acts but on his attitude generally towards problems and his qualifications for putting things over.[365]

The Election of 1920

By the end of his freshman term, 32-year-old Reub had taken on JM Glenn and the powerful IMA, as well as Scott McBride and his anti-alcohol "morality police." At the same time, Reub's allies in the ISFL became distracted not only with the farcical constitutional convention but by the allure of a Labor Party. In the lead-up to the 1920 elections, a variety of factors—including economic instability, a distrust of established parties, and the effective end of progressive Republicanism with the death of President Roosevelt in 1919—led some to believe that the people were hungry for a new type of politics. In Illinois, union leaders like CFL president John Fitzpatrick and ISFL president (and Ruben's mentor) John Walker became convinced the time was right to form a state Labor Party. On April 10, 1919, more than six hundred delegates organized the Labor Party of Illinois, which joined with other state organizations to form the Labor Party of the United States that December. The following June, the new party (renamed the Farmer-Labor Party) nominated Walker as its gubernatorial candidate. He ran a populist campaign, telling the unexpectedly large crowds gathered to hear him that "The progress of the old political parties means a continuation of the present system of profiteering and exploitation of all the peoples of the earth. Indeed, we could not expect otherwise, when both Democrat and Republican parties are owned, controlled, and dominated by profiteers."[366]

No doubt Reuben followed this development closely after searching for years for a party to match his politics. Certainly, there was an idealistic appeal to both the Farmer-Labor Party broadly and Walker's candidacy in particular. However, Reub stuck with the established party system, convinced they provided the only real avenues to political authority and, ultimately, to reform. His instincts proved right; the Farmer-Labor party failed to gain any traction, with Walker winning less than 3% of all votes cast and finishing fourth behind Socialist Party candidate Andrew Lafin.[367] Even more devastating, Walker's focus on promoting a Labor Party drew money, effort, and attention away from pro-labor mainstream candidacies like Reub's.

Reuben may have run as a Republican, but that didn't stop him from crossing party lines. His dream that his idol, Teddy Roosevelt, would return to the national ticket was dashed when the grand old man died, opening the opportunity for Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio. But the national campaign season opened a remarkable experience for Reub right in his backyard. Reuben campaigned that autumn in neighboring Mendota, IL with a young Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was running for Vice President on the Democratic ticket with James M. Cox. A crisp energetic air seemed to swirl around Reuben and Roosevelt as each took their turn speaking to the small town crowd from the back of a flatbed pickup truck. It was a bold move; after all, he was a Republican endorsing a Democrat while being attacked by both the Anti-Saloon League and the Manufacturers Association, all while his state labor leader was experimenting with his own doomed race in the Farmers-Labor Party.

Like FDR, however, Reub lost in 1920. There were many eager to take the credit or cast blame for the electoral defeat. Some interpreted his primary defeat as punishment for his willingness to stump for a Democratic presidential candidate. McBride and his ilk pointed to the fact that Reuben lost to the Prohibitionist candidate John Wylie as evidence of their influence. Others, including the Joint Labor Legislative Board in their own analysis, faulted the unions' emphasis on Walker and the Farmer-Labor party.[368] The Daily independent Times of Streator blamed the voters themselves, warning its readership:

> He (Reub) is a promising young man… [who] has been defeated for a man past the prime of his life who is bound by age and temperament to be more or less reactionary and who through his more sheltered career has never come in contact with the vital problems of toil and stress…We believe firmly that Reub Soderstrom is the one candidate who could have most effectively realized for the prohibitionists and for the righteous of this community the ideals they want embodied in community life. We believe they defeated their own purpose. We need good representatives of labor interests at Springfield. We cannot thrive as a state with too large a proportion of lawyers in our legislative halls. It would be a good thing if we had more farmers, more laboring men and more ordinary business men in the congress of this state. Citizenship is a serious obligation these days… Reub Soderstrom lost out in votes, but he has won by his own merit, he was worthy of continuation in office.[369]

Yes, indeed, he won (and lost) on his own merit. It should not be lost on the reader of this biography that the three issues that contributed to Reuben's 1920 election loss ultimately would be treated quite kindly by history: his fierce advocacy for an injunction limitation bill, his vote against prohibition, and his endorsement of the opposite party's Vice Presidential candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was a prescient performance by the freshman.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

FRANCIS SCOTT MCBRIDE AND THE ANTI-SALOON LEAGUE

Intimidating and uncompromising, Francis Scott McBride was a major force in the 1920 election. A Presbyterian minister by trade, McBride was a competitor at heart. A former football star, he was an imposing man with "the physical and moral tenacity of his (Scottish) forebearers."[370] As leader of the Anti-Saloon league, McBride used his bully pulpit to influence Illinois politics. "Under his leadership the prohibition forces of Illinois have attained and held state-wide political mastery," contemporary sources noted, "and have won notable victories within the city of Chicago."[371]

One of those victories was the LaSalle County election of John Wylie. With McBride's support, this obscure politician consolidated the "temperance vote" (bolstered by newly empowered female voters) behind him, forming a powerful bloc that dominated the 1920 election. Wylie not only defeated the freshman Soderstrom in the primary; he also beat out veteran Representatives Scanlon and Browne to win over 37% of the total vote (the traditional winner and Minority Leader Browne, in contrast, finished with only 24%).[372] Reuben, who stood with the citizens of Streator working in the bottle factories against McBride and his upper-class backers, never stood a chance. By the time the dust had settled, McBride and his candidates had taken the Illinois House, promising "vigorous enforcement" of prohibition and "severe punishment" for all who opposed the new law of the land.[373]

CHAPTER 13
1921-1922

MANUFACTURING DECLARES WAR IN STREATOR

OPEN SHOP VS. CLOSED SHOP

A Leader Emerges

A loser after a single term, Reuben purchased a one-way ticket out of Springfield and gazed out the train window at the cold gray November sky and pondered his future in Illinois politics. He may have thumbed through the few black and white photos of his children, Carl (6) and Jeanne (3), but his attention would be dashed by three confident businessmen striding through the car dressed in elegant tweed overcoats and hats, the snow falling off their shoulders as they walked: JM Glenn and two lieutenants. As they brushed past Reuben on the way to first class, he wondered: Why are they traveling to Streator instead of Chicago?

He would soon learn that after JM Glenn and the manufacturers' massive victory in Springfield, killing Reuben's Anti-Injunction bill, they were now boldly expanding the lines of battle into Streator itself! The plan was to create a local version of the IMA called the Streator Manufacturers Association, a direct and audacious challenge to Reuben's Trades and Labor Council. The battle was following Reuben from the statehouse straight back to the factories of Streator.

Glenn aimed to fan the flames of Streator's rapidly escalating debate over "open shop" vs. "closed shop." Streator factories that were "closed shops" were labor-friendly and hired only union workers. Open shops did not have such a requirement, and therefore had many employees who were merely at-will, independent contractors. Indeed, manufacturers favored open shops because the labor force quickly became atomized and ineffectual.

Up in the first class cabin on the train that day, Glenn consulted a long list of businessmen who owned factories in the labor stronghold of Streator; it was his goal to meet each one and lobby them to become anti-labor open shops. As Reuben later recounted, "Well, the employers, they finally made up their minds following the First World War…they formed what they called the American Plan…And one of the spots that was thoroughly unionized where they were going to destroy the unions, if they could, was Streator."[374] Olga too remembers, "After World War I, an attempt was made in Streator to break all the Unions, and this was a terrific attempt to bring back the open, or non-union, shops. Injunctions were used among the workers, they were deprived of their rights—no freedom of speech, or peaceful assembly, or a free press was not to be allowed labor."[375] Glenn brought a battle for the very heart of Streator directly to Reub's doorstep.

The opening salvo occurred two days after Christmas. Reuben was waxing the runners of his son Carl's sled when a neighbor approached, his finger stabbing the morning paper with anger. While standing in the snow on his narrow driveway, Reuben read the article to see that JM Glenn had made quick headway gathering businessmen to his cause, and had lost no time declaring it to the laborers of Streator in a prominently placed declaration:

> We are now in an era of keenest competition for business ever known. Streator industries must be in a position to meet this competition. Only those plants which can meet the competitive conditions and pay fair and equitable wages, are those not handicapped in operating by the restrictions of a Closed Shop agreement during the past year has lost business, and decreased its payroll on account of this handicap…Several signers of this announcement have at the present time contracts with various labor unions and all of those contracts will be carefully and faithfully carried out. After these contracts have expired all of these factories will be operated on the Open Shop basis.[376]

The manufacturers dubbed their campaign the "American Plan," playing off public fears of international communism invading from foreign shores, deliberately conflating unionism with communism. The stakes couldn't be higher—the manufacturers had pledged themselves to nothing less than the total destruction of all the unions in Streator, and in the ongoing economic crisis they believed they could scare and bully the workers into submission. Glenn may have thought that Representative Reuben G. Soderstrom, fresh from defeat, would prefer not to get involved. He was wrong.

Reuben Responds

Threatened with an attack on its very right to exist, the Trades and Labor Council took immediate action. The first step was to craft a rational yet passionate response to the accusations of Glenn and his manufacturers. The Council turned to Reuben, who as Reading Clerk was charged with writing public statements and speeches for the Council. He had also recently become a member of Streator's Chamber of Commerce, which welcomed four members from labor. On January 9, and on behalf of the Trades and Labor Council, Reuben crafted and published the official response to Glenn's salvo two weeks earlier:

> The labor movement of Streator does not intend to enter into a newspaper controversy. This is merely a reply to the misleading statements made by the "Open Shop" advocates which appeared in our two papers the day after Christmas…Now then organized labor has been charged with retarding the growth of the city. If it wasn't for the fact that people are so unthinking the charge would be humorous…
>
> Prohibition, it is reliably claimed, reduced the payroll in the American Bottle Factory, our largest institution, from about $150,000 a month to $15,000 or less. Dry legislation did away with beer and the need for beer bottles naturally declined…
>
> Streator also had almost two thousand coal miners 20 years ago. Labor, yes organized labor did its share towards eliminating the mining industry by willingly going down into the bowels of earth and bringing to the surface the coal that could be profitably dug. Shame on Union Labor. When the coal was exhausted the miners moved to other fields and reduced the population. Charge this to Labor…
>
> Our labor movement represents the thought and struggles of a free people and it bears the marks and scars of battle. The labor movement of Streator represents the crystallized thought, hope and aspirations of humanity for a better life and these employers in their associations, their combinations, yes in their unions, if you please, are using a nationwide business depression, and a humbug population argument to drive back, to kill the spirit of freedom that lives in the hearts of those of us who belong to this movement of labor. May God grant that they fail.[377]

And with that, the war was on; a struggle for the soul of Streator, with Reub at the helm. It would soon get bloody.

Violence Erupts

On December 31 of 1921, three of the companies that had signed the IMA's proclamation saw their collective agreements expire. True to their word, they refused to renegotiate and picket lines were immediately drawn by labor. To survive the strike, companies relied on strikebreakers who were often imported workers already marginalized by race or ethnicity and desperate enough to risk the anger of fellow workmen. To get the vitriolic flavor of the times, it is worth quoting historian Dale Bennett at length from his work, *The Labor Movement of Streator, Illinois, 1868-1933:*

> At the Metal Stamping Works, Federal Labor Union 17317 ordered that a picket line be established on January 3. On January 14, EB List, purchasing agent, and FC Mason, superintendent of the plant, arrived at the plant around 7:30 am. Mason received a phone call from Will Jensen, a strikebreaker. Jensen told Mason he was afraid to cross the picket line. Mason told the boy not to worry because he and List would escort him across the picket line.
>
> As List, Mason and Jensen approached the plant gate, they were confronted by 20 or 30 pickets. A couple of people in the small crowd of pickets grabbed Jensen and told List and Mason that "they wouldn't let the (boy) go in the plant." Mason and List finally freed Jensen from the crowd. As the three men passed through the plant gate, the crowd yelled "We'll kill the damn scabs."
>
> The company continued to hire strikebreakers, but after the Jensen incident it took the precaution of bringing workers across the picket line in trucks. On January 15, as the strikebreakers were getting to leave the plant, the pickets ran up to the trucks and started fist fights with the men. The pickets also threw rocks and bricks at the strikebreakers. As the truck left the plant, Anna Malick, one of the pickets yelled "go get them, take them out of there." Then she and three other girls began to throw rocks at the men in the trucks.
>
> The next afternoon a crowd of 300 people gathered at the plant around quitting time. Earlier in the day the 45 strikebreakers had their cars pelted with stones and bricks as they drove into the plant. A few stones and bricks would be minor to what was awaiting the men outside the plant. Superintendent Mason opened the plant gate around 4:15 pm and the workers bean to drive out of the plant. After all the cars had passed through the gate Mason began to close the gate. The crowd yelled, "Kill him, hang him." Then the crowd began to throw rocks at him. Mason was hit by a large rock and a club.
>
> Mason turned around and looked at Mabel Shedd, one of the pickets, and said, "You son of a bitch, you have said enough." Frank Shedd, Mabel's brother, ran up to Mason and hit him so hard that Mason was knocked to the ground. Mason was pelted again with rocks and bricks. Mason—who by this time was badly bruised—finally got back into the plant and away from his attackers. He called the Chief of Police in Streator and asked Chief Hopkins to the plant to take him home.[378]

When the police arrived, they arrested several protesters, including Mabel. The attack on Mason caused an instant media firestorm. "Police Save Streator Man From Mob" read the front page of the Belvidere Daily Republican the following morning, complete with a sensationalized story that described a "frenzied strike mob" that "had a rope around Mason's neck."[379] The media attention only strengthened the strike; the next day a giant crowd— newspaper estimates ranged anywhere from 300 to 800— formed outside the plant, led by Mabel's mother Mary.[380]

While the police clashed with the strikers, the Metal Stampings Corporation clashed with the unions in court. Their lawyers, led by prominent Streator attorney Arthur Shay, filed a petition on January 19 for an injunction to "prohibit the strikers from assembling at the plant, or on any street leading to the plant, or any

street that a worker in the plant traveled upon to get to work."[381] The injunction bound strikers not only in where they could travel but in what they could say; calling the strike breakers "scabs" or the open shop contracts "yellow dog" deals could land a worker in jail, no matter where or in what context the words were uttered. Most devastatingly, the injunction applied not only to the striking union itself, but to all the officers of the Streator Trades and Labor Council.

Reuben Under Injunction

As Reading Clerk of the Trades and Labor Council, Reuben was now party to an anti-labor injunction, precisely the same infamous and inequitable legal tool he legislated against the previous term in Springfield. Saliently, he was named in the injunction regarding the event at the Metal Stamping Corporation in which he did not even participate (Attorney Shaw would later argue that Reuben was named in the injunction for inciting the town's violence with his January 9 newspaper statement). Seeing Reuben's name on the injunction must have brought forth a hearty laugh from JM Glenn in his august Chicago offices; this meant that Reuben, who was just run out of Springfield after a single term, now found himself barred from traveling in and around the streets of his own hometown.

In response, Reuben rallied the Streator Trades and Labor Council and the Executive Committee of the ISFL to hold an emergency session at the Plumb Theater in Streator. Thousands of laborers—angry, anxious and unemployed—filled the theater and hundreds more had to be turned away into the cold January night. It was at this point that one of the enduring figures of Reuben's life literally walked onto center stage: Victor Olander, ISFL Secretary Treasurer and the man who would become one of Reub's closest confidants for many decades. The child of immigrants, Vic was orphaned at thirteen and forced to do, in his words, "Everything a kid ever did to earn a living, I guess, and several things no kid ever had to do before."[382] A former sailor, he began his career in labor as a delegate for the Seaman's Union in 1901 and was elected secretary-treasurer of the ISFL in 1914. He cut a striking appearance; after meeting him in person writer Mary Gray Peck described him as "A blue-eyed, fair-haired Viking, who stood six feet in his stockings and tipped the scales at two hundred odd. He laid aside the omnipresent pipe as I entered, and welcomed me in a deep bass voice. A leader of the heroic type, it was evident at the first glance, one with the men around him, hearty, frank, and ready with a smile and perhaps an equally ready frown."[383]

Reub, also the child of immigrants and likewise driven by necessity into child labor, saw in Victor a man with whom he could relate. They shared both life story and professional passion; each was a gifted leader with the ability to clearly assess the fight at hand and connect it to the greater struggle for human dignity. "Victor A. Olander was a great man," Reub later said. "He possessed a mind which was constantly reasoning. He could analyze any situation accurately and evaluate the opposition to labor's progress in language that needed no translation. His memory was matchless and his judgment of proportions penetrating and entrancingly correct…He was a natural teacher and a dedicated leader of labor of the Samuel Gompers variety.[384]

That night at the Plumb Theater, Olander turned the tables on the manufacturers—who never tired of confusing labor with communism—by making a clear connection between Glenn's IMA and Bolshevism:

> The nation is in as much danger now as during the world war. However, with the problem as it stands now it is not the outside forces that are to be feared but those working from the inside…The situation as it is in this country today can in a way be compared to that in Moscow, Russia. The big men in that country say that we will permit you to speak to us but you must do the things we tell you to do and take the things we give you and work as we tell you and in no event shall you take part in any organization…
>
> The open shop men are doing the same thing right here in Streator, at least it is the same thing in principle,

> only the Moscow men know what they are doing and the businessmen of Streator do not. The thing for working men and women to do is keep on preaching and practicing right things and in time this will bring out the man and womanhood in our organization... A great many men who signed the open shop declaration are not (to be) held responsible as they were led to the thing by their ignorance rather than by their intention and now these same men have made this great mistake, it is up to the working men and women to teach them a lesson and we can prove ourselves capable of the task through knowledge of our own rights.[385]

While the meeting inspired the masses, the joint councils were unable to legally defeat the injunction. Sitting around the small dining table back at his house that night, Reub, Olander, and the Council instead focused their efforts on immediate matters on the street: now the Streator Clay Manufacturing Company and Streator Drain Tile Company were also canceling their contracts with labor, and the ensuing strikes soon descended into violence as well. On February 11th a truck importing seven out-of-town strikebreakers to Streator Clay was met by over 125 picketers, and on February 20 John Morris, the general manager of Streator Drain Tile, was accosted by a crowd of over 300 dispossessed workers. Again, injunctions were filed not only against the striking workers but the Trades and Labor Council as well, who were charged with nothing less than conspiracy. The injunctions against Reuben were piling up; by March, he and his fellow councilmen were effectively prisoners within their own city, barred from any route on any road that might lead to any of the factories that had signed Glenn's declaration of war.

In the middle of these turbulent times, one thing became clear in Reuben's mind: he had to return to Springfield and fight against the insidious use of anti-labor injunctions. The labor movement would never get off the ground as long as he and the council were prevented by law from simply holding a meeting after being roundly fired and replaced!

And with that he decided to charge right at Glenn and launch another campaign for the statehouse.

THE 1922 ELECTION

In early 1922, a soggy spring witnessed the city of Streator exhausted by daily skirmishes, emergency court hearings, and roaming vigilante (anti-labor) "peace officers" who enforced the confusing network of streets made unusable by a hailstorm of anti-labor injunctions. With the town bound by the IMA's makeshift attempt at martial law, JM Glenn began focusing on the next part of his co-called American Plan: taking Springfield. Operating through a hand-picked committee tasked with "securing the election of a legislature more friendly to business interests," Glenn was determined to place his candidates in the statehouse to run down any runaway revivals of the injunction limitation bill in Springfield's next session. [386]In LaSalle, that meant putting Reub's old rival Ole Benson back on top in the Republican primary.

Reuben entered the primary race too. There was simply too much at stake. He had endured and was even energized by the constant opposition from the IMA and its anti-labor judges, whose efforts to belittle labor escalated as the primary election date of April 11 approached. Still, the restrictions stung; Olga writes that the injunctions piling up with Reuben's name not only complicated his campaigning but even prevented him from seeing his family! "Reub had a number of injunctions served on him and he was limited to just certain areas in Streator where he could walk or visit. One area ended at the Santa Fe tracks, he could not cross them so he couldn't even visit his mother."[387]

And as if this was not enough challenge for Reuben, one of his biggest threats came not from the manufacturers or Ole Benson but from his own boss, Andy Anderson.

Job Loss?

Anderson had supported Reub's earlier run and term in office in hopes of furthering his own political career. In 1921, Anderson ran for mayor of Streator with the backing of the Chamber of Commerce, both local newspapers, the ITU and other unions. Yet despite this support, Anderson lost to CG Reno, a war veteran who had the support of the powerful American Legion Post.[388] Embittered by the loss, Anderson decided that if his political career had ended, Reuben's should as well. On February 22, while recuperating from the loss at the modern Hotel Poinsettia in sunny St. Petersburg, Florida, Andy penned a terse ultimatum to Reub:

> Dear Reuben,
>
> Just see by the paper you are talking about being a candidate for the legislature once more. Don't you think you are losing too much time under our present agreement? It is hardly fair to the balance of us and I do not think I will be as lenient this time as I was four years ago. The time has come where you must choose between the printing business and politics, as they can go together no longer. You must either quit one or the other. It is up to you to decide.
>
> Your friend,
> Mr. Anderson
>
> Of course I prefer you stay with the printing business.[389]

Reub had run Andy's print house for years and suspected that Anderson needed him more than he needed the shop. Reub knew Anderson's real motivation may have been his own disappointment; but still, Reub was legally barred from campaigning himself in much of the city and faced a mounting number of injunctions, fines, and even potential jail time. With Jean and two young children at home, Reub could ill afford to lose his job too.

But a withdrawal at this critical moment would have assured a Statehouse seat for Reub's old foe, Ole Benson. Reub was the only candidate with a chance of beating him. After a long conversation with Jeanne, two days later Reub sat down and wrote the only response he felt he honorably could:

> Friend Anderson,
>
> The campaign will be on in earnest by March 20, and I think it will be better for all concerned if you will secure an operator to take my place from then on. I don't think that I have a chance to win a place on the Republican ticket, but political obligations and ramifications make it impossible for me to honorably withdraw from the contest.
>
> If it is agreeable to you after April 11 (election day) whether I win or lose I'll be glad to work for you again. If you don't want me back and you desire to keep your new operator it will be all the same. I've talked the matter over with my wife and home people and we think we have money enough to equip a nice little printing office of our own. I would rather stay at the AH Anderson offices, of course, but will not knowingly be the party that is doing the unfair thing to his partners.
>
> Hope you will be home in time to vote for me.
>
> With kindest regards and best wishes to you and Mrs. Anderson, I am yours, as ever,
>
> R. G. Soderstrom[390]

Unblinking, Reub called Andy's bluff. Anderson let the matter pass without further comment and Reub continued to work at the print shop as the 1922 election came into full swing.

A New Alliance

The Open Shop fight in Streator continued to worsen. With Reub and his Labor Council on its heels, the Manufacturers of Streator mounted an even stronger offensive. Leveraging their power within law enforcement, they tasked the LaSalle County Sheriff to deputize out-of-town 'detectives' hired by the IMA. Ostensibly hired to protect the plant, these private security forces soon spilled into the streets as armed "patrols," accosting not only striking workers but also average citizens. The "imported thugs" began stopping and questioning anyone at will. George Hodgson, a former worker at Western Glass, wrote an appeal to the City Council to have the Sheriff remove the dehumanizing patrols:

> They show no credentials and this I think is not right, as we would like to know whether or not these men are officials of the law. If they are, we want to respect them, if they are not we want to have them released from their duties, as they are violating the law and should be charged with inciting riots. The sheriff is deputizing men working in the plants, after which they are allowed to carry weapons and patrol the streets. Four of the deputies were ordered out of the city only to be replaced by six more…It is coming to the point where something has to be done as the men have been idle now for several months and it makes it quite difficult for them to be hampered by these men acting as deputies patrolling the streets with weapons.[391]

The City Council, however, was cowed by the IMA. They demurred, ruling they had no authority over the sheriff and were therefore powerless to stop the violence and intimidation on their own streets. Soderstrom was barred by injunction from meeting with striking workers, harassed by armed intimidation at every street corner, and unable to turn to city government for any kind of relief.

With the walls of Streator closing in on him, our protagonist went to extraordinary measures to keep himself and his movement alive; he contacted the Governor of Illinois, Len Small, who accepted the proposal that he meet Reuben in his offices in Springfield. Speaking for the Streator Labor Council, Reuben appealed for the Governor's support, fearing that without his help many union leaders, himself included, might be imprisoned for conspiracy and wholly eliminated from public life. After a long, private discussion, Governor Small pledged his support to Reub, telling him: "In spite of what happens, Soderstrom, just remember that Governor Len Small holds the keys in his hands to the penitentiaries in the state of Illinois."[392] The Governor's support wasn't simply altruistic. In his analysis of the deal, historian Dale Bennet concludes:

> Governor Small took such a position (of support) for two reasons: First, Soderstrom was a Republican, as was Small, running for a term in the General Assembly in the fall elections of 1922. Secondly, Small always had a great deal of sympathy for the underdog in any dispute. The first reason is significant because Len Small became Governor running on a platform promising the building of highways throughout Illinois. Reuben's platform for 1922 was also the building of more highways. The second reason is pertinent because of the persecution that Small experienced after he vetoed the appropriations of the fifty-second General Assembly. Small's enemies had made many charges and tried to impeach him on more than one occasion; therefore, Small's promise to Soderstrom that he would not go to jail appeared to be an exchange for Soderstrom's aid for Small's program in the next General Assembly.[393]

With Smalls' endorsement, Reuben was able to return to Streator and shore up the remaining votes he needed. On April 11, Reub defeated both the incumbent John Wylie and the resurgent Ole Benson to claim the second seat in the Republican primary alongside longtime representative William Scanlan. Much to the

chagrin of the IMA, Soderstrom was alive!

Reuben Exonerated

The IMA's immediate response to Reuben's primary victory was to extend the injunctions against him and therefore impede his campaigning abilities leading up to the general election in November. So in the last week of May, Reuben and the Streator Trades and Labor Council were called back into Judge Baker's Pontiac, Illinois courtroom to determine if the earlier temporary injunction would become permanent. Arthur Shay, the IMA's attorney, aggressively claimed that all the violence in Streator was the result of a conspiracy conducted by the Labor Council generally and Reuben G. Soderstrom specifically, particularly his newspaper response to the Open Shop declaration of December 27, 1921. The 34-year-old Reuben was called to the stand, where he and Shay engaged in combative and colorful jousting about the purpose of the IMA's published statement and Reuben's response. One can only imagine the humiliating requirement that Reuben defend his exercise of free speech (which ironically was in response to the IMA's exercise of the same), or the proceeding's condescending quality in which all members of the Labor Council were called to the stand like schoolchildren in the principal's office.

With Reuben on the stand, Shay referenced various newspaper articles stating that members of the trade union movement in Streator were anarchists (the terrorists of the day) and asked if Reuben agreed. "I do not," Reuben replied, "But I would like to explain the sentiment that it developed. Well, the fellows who had read the articles and those who had talked to me, they resented it. They said that we were not lawless anarchists, that we had nothing to do with that proposition."[394] One after another the members of the Council were brought to the stand and interrogated about Reuben's article, attacked for every word. At the end of the trial, Judge Baker ruled in favor of the Manufacturers and made permanent all the injunctions against Local 17317. It was a devastating blow. The IMA asked Judge Baker to consider extending all other outstanding injunctions against Reuben as well.

But then came a miraculous turn of events, and the historian can only wonder if illicit, outside influences—like the office of the Governor—were at play. Eleven days after the ruling, Judge Baker ruled in favor of Reuben and the Council in regard to both outstanding injunctions as well as the formerly adjudicated injunctions, effectively overruling himself and removing any and all injunctions against the members of the Streator Trades and Labor Council. Reuben was euphoric. Labor's attorney, smelling blood, pressed for more, stating "in my part of the country, the plaintiff always pays damages when he fails to prove his case."[395] Judge Baker agreed and ordered $2,666 in damages be awarded to the Council.

It was an important victory for Reub and his allies; now the Council could continue advocating for workers' rights and meet openly with the laborers of Streator. The win in court also insulated them against future conspiracy claims. For Reub personally, it meant that he could charge unencumbered toward the general election.

Allies Line Up

In the 1922 elections, the ISFL rejected the idea of a Labor Party and returned once again to Sam Gompers's call for non-partisan support of labor candidates rather than creating their own Labor Party. Gompers and the AFL committed to enter "elections everywhere to make certain that candidates favorable to the rights and interests of the workers are nominated."[396] In a national speech, Gompers singled out Reub's home state. "There is a striking unity of determination. Illinois has been particularly active in making early preparations."[397] And although he had their moral support, Reuben refused union money on principle. "A person elected to public office, if he bankrolls himself, pays his own expenses, and he's obliged to no one,

then he's free to serve whomever he pleases after he's elected to public office," Reuben later recounted. "I bankrolled my own campaigns—every one of them."[398]

Reuben had access to something even more powerful: manpower. Unable to purchase newspaper ads, Reub and his supporters relied on the distribution of flyers and multiple personal appearances. Soderstrom missed no opportunity to attend a gathering, whether it be union, lodge, or celebration. He found particularly supportive allies in the local churches, which had been strong supporters of labor throughout the open shop crisis.

Most importantly, Reub could count on his family for support. Jeanne and Anna spent the unseasonably cold days knocking on doors. Lafe took days off work so he could help hand out pro-Reuben leaflets at union meetings and at the gates of closed shop factories as workers changed shift. Paul did not appear at many of his brother's campaign events, but acted behind the scenes, particularly helping with the veteran vote. Even Olga's new husband, Arthur Hodgson, helped the campaign while he and Olga (who had just finished nursing school) lived in Anna's house, temporarily transformed into the campaign headquarters for Reuben's 1922 effort.

There was a bittersweet joy in having the family together again. Sunday evenings in mother Anna's house were busy affairs. Lafe would take one of the six Wabash daily trains on the Streator-Forrest branch into town to be met at the station by Reub. They'd animatedly discuss the latest labor issues of the day while Anna and Olga worked in the kitchen preparing *Isterband* sausage or *Kalops* stew. Jeanne would strike up friendly conversation with the ever-polite Art in the parlor, who always smiled (even when he failed to understand her Scottish accent). Meanwhile little Lorraine re-connected with her father Paul, who quietly suffered from the trauma he had endured overseas. When dinner was ready they'd gather around the table, a family reunited for the first time in years.

A November Surprise

Reuben's primary win in April brought attention and support from labor supporters around the state. Victor Olander visited Streator a second time in the sweltering August heat in a show of support for Soderstrom the labor candidate. Feeling momentum turning against the IMA, thousands of laborers turned out for a twelve-block long march through town in support of unions. Reuben presided over the festivities as Olander addressed the crowd of 4,000 in City Park, appealing for industrial freedom and the "right to happiness."[399] According to the Streator Daily Independent Times, Olander explained how injunctions hurt all workers and then "paid a splendid tribute to RG Soderstrom, local labor leader, who as a member of the Illinois Assembly for two years, 'made a splendid fight in favor of revision in the injunction system.' On the strength of this, Olander urged that local man's election in the Assembly in the fall."[400]

In November, the 39th District elected Reuben Soderstrom back into the Illinois Assembly, capping one of the more tumultuous personal campaigns in the history of the Illinois statehouse. However, Reuben's victory wasn't the only election day surprise. Ole Benson, undaunted by his loss in the primary, broke with his party and ran as an independent candidate. Although losing to Reuben by several thousand votes in the primary, he managed to defeat Scanlan by several hundred, securing his old seat in the Assembly. When Reuben again boarded the train to return to office at the statehouse, Ole Benson stepped on board as well; the IMA was following Reuben back to Springfield.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

VICTOR OLANDER

Of all the friends and allies that Reuben worked with and for during his years in labor, perhaps none was closer to him than longtime Secretary-Treasurer of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, Victor Olander. A large portion of Reub's success as both a state representative and leader of labor rested upon his great fortune to have worked closely with the man he described as:

> A great man. He possessed a mind which was constantly reasoning. He could analyze any situation accurately and evaluate the opposition to labor's progress in language that needed no translation. His memory was matchless and his judgment of proportions penetrating and entrancingly correct. Victor Olander was my constant companion for 27 years, and master-minded the labor strategy in court cases and in advancing highly controversial labor bills, both on the state and national level. He was a natural teacher and a dedicated leader of labor of the Samuel Gompers variety.[401]

AN UNCOMMON BOND

A common early life had forged a strong bond between the two men. Born the child of immigrants in Chicago in 1874, Vic was orphaned at thirteen and survived by finding work as a cabin boy on the Great Lakes. It was a fact he rarely talked about. He disapproved of those who bragged of their own impoverished beginnings, explaining "I don't like it because it seems a sort of commendation of poverty and hardships."[402] Still, it is hard to separate the great man Olander would become from the harsh experiences he endured in his youth. Lean but powerful, the teenaged Olander was stronger than many of the adult men he worked alongside. He later remembered:

> I was large for my age, though goodness knows it wasn't because I had had many square meals to do it on, and I soon rose to be an able seaman, and then quartermaster. What is a quartermaster? He steers. And let me tell you, it's no easy job to steer a whale-back in a heavy sea…A ship doesn't go along in a straight line, but swerves continually, and you have to keep some landmark in sea or sky in your eye to help guide your course.[403]

While the waters tested his body, Vic's adolescent mind craved something more. He became involved in the Seamen's Union at the age of 25, and by 28 he was elected vice-president of the International Seamen's Union of America. He rose to national prominence through his crucial work on behalf of the 1913 La Follette Seamen's Act, and in 1914 the delegates of the Illinois State Federation of Labor elected Olander secretary-treasurer of the ISFL.[404] Things appeared incredibly promising for the labor leader.

Then tragedy struck. At age 45, Victor began to develop cataracts, and by the end of the decade he had gone blind—an especially cruel fate for the voracious reader and essayist. Whispers had begun to circulate that his days leading labor were numbered, and when Vic and Reub met during the Streator Open Shop struggle of 1921-1923 Olander was arguably at the lowest point in his personal and professional life.

The meeting would prove fateful for both men. The connection between them was dynamic; Olander saw in Soderstrom a gifted political figure, more pragmatic and less radical than John Walker (his current partner in the ISFL), with an uncanny gift for rhetoric and oratory. Reuben, meanwhile, found in Olander a mentor unlike any he'd previously known—a figure who combined Walker's passion and political ferocity with the intellectual acuity of Reub's first teacher John E. Williams.

Soderstrom was particularly impressed by Olander's keen wit and flawless memory. Although Victor's eyesight was surgically restored by 1925, the years spent bereft of pen and paper had led him to develop a nearly photographic memory. "He was a human blotter," Reuben later recounted. "It didn't matter if you had a conference, say, 20 years ago, he could tell you every single word that was spoken—the things you said, the things he said, and what the result of the conference was. He had a matchless memory."[405] Victor was also an unprecedented legal mind, an "intellectual giant," as Reub later called him, continuing:

> The great legal minds of our time oftentimes consulted with Olander…you could call him on the telephone and he'd build a case for you while you were listening to him. And you could take that argument to the Supreme Court…Clarence Darrow offered him $10,000 a year to occupy a desk in the Darrow law office, merely to analyze situations for him, that he could make use of in his lectures and in his arguments before juries. They were great friends.[406]

Olander's most memorable quality, however, was his unparalleled power of persuasion, which Reub could only describe as "Olander-esque…He had a very peculiar convincing quality. Not only argument, but convincing argument."[407] One time, Victor and Reub met with the Illinois Manufacturers Association and the Chamber of Commerce to discuss the national Wagner Act. The IMA was seeking support from labor to repeal parts it found unfavorable, but when the meeting began and Victor started talking:

> Olander outlined the situation, stated that (the act) was based somewhat on the Railway Labor Act, and the objective was to minimize strikes, don't you see. And of course it had many good points. He talked to them about the possibility of having things run smoother in industry because of this type of legislation in that delightful Olander-esque way of talking. He seemed to have them hypnotized. And finally he said, "Of course the day is coming when we'll want a small Wagner Act in the State of Illinois and when that time comes, of course we'd like to discuss the features of that act with representatives of the employers. Until such time, however, we in Illinois have very little to do with federal legislation, that's in the hands of the AFL and their officers; there isn't much that we can do about it. And we'll be delighted and happy to sit with you folks to work out a proper little Wagner Act in the state of Illinois…" and I could see them nodding their heads and agreeing with him, because he was reasoning, constantly reasoning. And his type of reasoning was so engaging that he had the floor about all the time we were in that conference.

As Reub escorted the men out the door, the leader of the IMA turned to Reub, began to laugh and exclaimed:

> Well, this is great. We came down here hoping to make use of the representatives of labor to get rid of a portion of the Wagner Labor Relations Act on the national level, and I'll be damned if we don't sit here and agree to extend the darn thing into the state of Illinois![408]

A LABOR MOVEMENT GROUNDED IN AMERICAN PRINCIPLES

Although his service and skills were invaluable, Victor's greatest gift to both Reuben and the Labor Movement as a whole was his clear and comprehensive articulation of labor rights. His foundational argument, first articulated in his fight to unbind sailors from their ships in the Seamen's Act of 1915, rested on Section 1 of the 13th Amendment, which reads "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."[409] According to Olander, preventing workers from striking—compelling them to work when they would freely choose not to—was the very definition of involuntary servitude, and was therefore a clear violation of their constitutional rights. "There can be no more straightforward and definitive prohibition of involuntary servitude than that which is contained in the great Thirteenth Amendment," Olander wrote.[410] The linkage between legal strikebreaking and slavery was one Olander made explicitly and

often. "No man can be compelled to serve an employer against his will," Victor thundered in characteristically deep, drawn tones during one of his many appearances on the "Voice of Labor," WCFL (which he served as Director). "We have the right of choice, the only people on earth who have that right firmly fixed in a constitution that not even the national legislative body can alter... to paraphrase the words of the immortal Lincoln, 'this earth under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.'"[411]

Like Reuben, Olander rooted the broader struggle for labor rights firmly within the American intellectual tradition and its foundational documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. He firmly affixed the Organized Labor Movement as the inheritor and natural extension of the principles upon which the Founders had first fashioned the nation:

> It is well that we should remind ourselves that the American torch of liberty was lighted by the hand of Jefferson, even as he penned the Declaration of Independence. The assertion of the equality of status for all the inhabitants of the land was no mere expression of a pleasing theory. It represented a definite plan of action for the future. We, you and I, and all of us, are legitimate heirs of Jefferson, of Lincoln, of Gompers, and of the great host of our forebears to whose intelligence and struggles we owe our present status as free men and women.[412]

Unlike some international labor movements, Olander took great care to infuse the fight for American labor with patriotism, connecting the movement to the American Dream:

> We, the people of America, rich and poor alike, are the freest of all mankind. Freedom develops and flourishes only through effort. It calls for struggle, for hope and for ambition, and often for temporary sacrifices. That is the true American way of life, an open road upward to the heights of a finer civilization. Barriers must be surmounted on the way, stones may bruise the feet and thorns tear the flesh, but ever the way leads upward and onward. For this, we of America fight and work. That is the American way of life.[413]

Olander saw organized labor and its unions as sentinels of liberty, advancing the rights of all Americans by asserting their own. Once asked what unions did for the community and country, Olander wrote, "Who is it that stands guard against assaults upon the freedom of American people? It is organized labor whose hand so persistently holds aloft the torch of human liberty. It is the American Federation of Labor that is on guard."[414] When asked in 1932 how workers should judge organized labor, Olander responded:

> The thoughtful citizen whose judgement is based upon the evidence of the years and not upon the prejudice of the moment will, I believe, agree that the activities of the American trade union movement are beneficial to all America. The true value of any movement may be most accurately measured by its effect upon life in the community in which it exists. What changes have taken place! The "company store" is gone, and in its place are the corner grocery, the hardware merchant, the jeweler, the druggist, the clothier, and a myriad of other retail activities... the school is an important center of the community and the school board is comprised of independent citizens... I submit that the record offers unimpeachable evidence that the service which the trade union gives to the community in which it exists marks the organization of one of humanity's most useful institutions... the net result has been improved living standards for all.[415]

AN ENDURING PARTNERSHIP

Together, Soderstrom and Olander strove to establish an effective and educated labor movement. They served together not only in the ISFL but on multiple boards and committees, including the National Recovery Administration Regional Board, the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, the State Council of Defense, and more. They jointly published their ISFL Weekly Newsletter, crafting a common narrative of Organized

Labor's struggle. They sounded essays and ideas off of one another, developing their agendas in close concert.

Victor and Reub shared more than simply work, however. They became partners who evolved into family, building a bond that would last a lifetime. At Victor's funeral, both Reub and his son Carl served as pallbearers, carrying him to his final resting place. Praise for the leader came from all corners. "We have always regarded him as a scholar, a philosopher and a great teacher in our trade movement," said AFL President William Green.[416] "His loss is a terrific shock to the Illinois Labor movement," mourned State Director of Labor Frank Annunzio. "I regarded Mr. Olander as one of the foremost labor leaders in America."[417] Still, the moving tribute came from Reuben himself, who eulogized to his closest friend as "labor light," telling those assembled:

> Victor Olander was born to practical obscurity, orphaned at a young and tender age, denied the privileges of academic training, forced into employment before his teens by sheer desperation and hunger. Nevertheless, he rose to heights in the labor movement and in the civic leadership of men, coveted by many but occupied by very few…He gave generously of his time, his marvelous mental energy, and of himself…A scintillating debater, able, logical and convincing, he could unfold his views in a manner at once engaging, kindly and sincere. Extremely human in everything he discussed and did, it can truthfully be said of him that he was always considerate, always a friend of every person in need…he was a sincere friend and comrade, a great leader of men, a trustworthy son of labor in Illinois, the personification of all things distinctively American.[418]

Labor's ship may not have traveled in a straight line, but Victor, ever the sailor, never took his eye off the goal. Acting as Soderstrom's guide through the years, he became the companion Reub counted on the most—a faithful friend to Reuben, to labor, and to the nation he ceaselessly served.

CHAPTER 14
1923-1924

REUBEN AND THE STREATOR TRADES & LABOR COUNCIL FIGHT BACK

THE STRUGGLE FROM THE LEGISLATIVE FLOOR

An Organized Attack

Following the successful 1922 election, the Illinois Joint Labor Legislative Board met to discuss labor's agenda for the coming term. Comprised of 20 points in all, the core of the agenda had four key acts: "Improvements to the Workmen's Compensation Law…an eight-hour law for women employees…bill(s) limiting the injunctive power of the courts…. (and) a bill providing for one day rest in seven for all industrial employees."[419]

On the House floor, Reuben personally lead the battle on each of these issues. In his first week in office, the returning Representative introduced a resolution for a "gateway amendment" making it easier to amend the constitution, a necessary step in overcoming the hostile courts. He quickly followed this with a proposed One Day Rest in Seven bill, which guaranteed every worker at least one day off each week. An ISFL article that March took note of Reub's tenacity, reporting that "Representative RG Soderstrom of Streator, introducer of the bill, is prepared to make vigorous effort to secure its passage."[420] To help his cause, Reuben secured support not only from labor but religious leaders and even the theatre community (whom opponents falsely claimed would be barred from performing matinees under the act). "The measure…is fostered by the Illinois State Federation of Labor, the Joint Labor Legislative Board of Illinois, the Chicago Church Federation, the Catholic Welfare Union, the Actors' Equity Association and other organizations…The Soderstrom bill in Illinois has the full support of the progressive organizations throughout the state."[421]

Building on this momentum, young Reuben soon struck again, this time introducing amendments to the Workman's Compensation Act. And he didn't stop there. Securing a seat on the Industrial Affairs Committee, Reuben ensured that the body recommend the Women's Eight Hour bill by a vote of 21 to 3 to the House after employer associations bragged they would "talk the bill to death" in a joint Senate/House committee.[422] He achieved this by working together with Representatives Lottie Holman O'Neill and Frank McCarty, who introduced the women's eight hour and injunction limitation bills, respectively.

On April 11, that same committee also considered Reub's One Day Rest in Seven bill, hearing a remarkable number of high profile figures invited by Reuben to speak including Victor Olander and John Walker of the ISFL, Dr. Fleming and Dr. Quale of the Chicago Church Federation, Rev. Father Maguire of the Catholic Welfare Council, Frank Dare of the Actors' Equity Association, and many others representing over a dozen different unions and organizations. The One Day Rest in Seven bill passed the House by a vote of eighty-eight to thirty-one after Reuben made a "vigorous plea for passage" on the House floor.[423] His Compensation bill passed in the House by a vote of eighty-four to six.[424]

Reuben was 35 years old and four months into his second term, and was perhaps the most prodigious

legislator in the Illinois House. Challenging the Senate would prove to be a different matter.

The "Senatorial Jungle at Midnight"

While Reuben moved quickly and proficiently in the House, JM Glenn exercised steady and powerful influence over the Senate, creating a sticky spider web awaiting the arrival of pro-labor bills from the other chamber. One of Glenn's men, Senator John Turnbaugh, introduced bills to prohibit strikes and to increase the liability of voluntary associations, acts designed to undermine workers' rights. To advance their cause, the manufacturers backed the so-called "League for Industrial Rights," which through its spokesman EH Cassells devoted considerable time and energy on and off the Senate floor to undermine unions.

On April 18, Glenn personally campaigned against Reub's One Day Rest in Seven Bill, stating that it was a "threat to the economic integrity of society," and also unnecessary because "the self-interest of the businessman automatically eliminates evil practices from industry."[425] Glenn also denounced pro-labor religious men as "silly ministers who believed that they could legislate God's Kingdom onto the earth."[426]

Despite Reub's multiple victories in the House, the Illinois Senate did not pass a single bill, save for a minor co-operative rights bill.[427] In the end, the Illinois Manufacturer's Association collaborated with their influential Senate allies to kill all of Reuben's bills by postponement. As the ISFL Weekly News Letter ruefully detailed in its article "The Senatorial Jungle at Midnight," Judiciary Committee Chair Senator Dailey conspired with fellow Senators Mills and Kessinger to engage in a series of delaying tactics that included scheduling "phantom" committee meetings, "forgetting" to record committee reports, and engaging in "sham battles" proposing amendments that the sponsoring senators themselves did not support. Glenn's Senators ran out the clock on labor legislation, killing it without actually having to vote against the popular bills.[428]

Across the hallway, the triumphant Reub was quickly cut down to size. But still, he had much to celebrate. Largely through his efforts, the Illinois House was able to promote a clear and coordinated agenda that demonstrated wide-ranging, overwhelming popular support for labor. They unified the powerful religious community with labor leaders to undercut the Manufacturers' laissez faire ideology. Anti-union legislators like Ole Benson, who once proudly cast their votes against unions, were now reduced to relying on procedural tricks in the Senate to cover their cowardice.

THE WAR IN STREATOR

Keep Away From Streator!

With the legislative season winding down, Reub returned his attention to the battle being waged in his hometown—the Manufacturers' Open Shop campaign against the unions of Streator, which was grinding into its second year and devastating the city's economy. Seven local companies had signed Glenn's Open Shop Pledge to refuse to recognize any union-represented workers. As the ISFL Weekly News Letter reported that year:

> The great struggle of trade unionists at Streator, Illinois, to maintain their organization continues unabated. Despite their long struggle the strikers are standing firm. The "open shop" manufacturers headed by the brick companies of the city are making frequent efforts to import strikebreakers with little success. Injunctions, conspiracy charges and other court proceedings utilized by the employers have failed to damper the ardor of the strikers. Trade unionists in other localities, especially those engaged in building work, will do well to remember that all Streator brick and tile is strikebound and that any brick shipped from Streator plants is the product of strikebreakers.[429]

Week after week, loyal unionists were urged to "keep away from Streator" and contribute to the striking workers fund. Unions from across the state filled the coffers with all they had, especially mining locals that shared deep roots with the Streator community. The AFL likewise gave all it could to the cause. By the summer of 1923 it had donated over $29,000, along with promises of continued support.[430] When AFL President Samuel Gompers came to Chicago that June, he was met by a delegation (which may have included Reuben) from Streator, which had come to discuss their increasingly desperate situation with him. Moved by their testimony, Gompers replied:

> As [the delegates] rightly said, the struggle there [in Streator] has been going on for over two years, and the American Federation of Labor had several, and has several, local unions in Streator…notwithstanding the fact that the American Federation of Labor, as such, is not a financial institution, it has gone further in trying to aid financially and morally the men engaged in that struggle at Streator than in any other instance of which I know. My compliments to the splendid spirit of the men in Streator!
>
> In connection with that…I called a conference of international unions affected in the industries in Streator, to take place beginning tomorrow, and there is hope that out of it there may be further cemented the mind and spirit, the unity and solidarity of those engaged in this struggle to bring it to a speedy and triumphant conclusion.[431]

Three days later Gompers met personally with Streator labor officials and the IMA leadership in hopes of settling the conflict.[432] But it was no avail; month after month, the conflict dragged on as the businesses involved sank ever deeper into decline. Several plants ceased production altogether. Eventually the secretary of the Streator Manufacturers' Association (Glenn's local counterpart) quit, as did his successor, who had been brought in as a "strikebreaker expert." By the summer of 1923, the manager of the Streator Drain Tile Company and the superintendent of the Streator Brick Company had also resigned, and the Bar Clay Company was forced out of business. By fall, two companies finally signed agreements with labor.[433] Still, times were tough for the strikers of Streator. As JN St. Clair, the treasurer of the Streator Trades and Labor Council, wrote:

> I think the outlook is better. The scabs are leaving and the union men are in pretty good spirits, working at odd jobs. The younger men are about all working away from home. In two years about the best any company has been able to reach is about fifty percent of normal, some only twenty-five percent. We are going to win this fight but may have to go through this winter and will need money, as we will have between fifty and sixty families to feed and furnish coal for. These are older men who cannot go away from home, and two years have brought their finances to a low mark. We are in need of money badly, as our bills have to be met. Many of the members have sunk all their savings of years in this fight and are still one hundred percent fighting for a principle. We have seventeen cases in court and need defense. We cannot desert them and will go to the last ditch. I was in the Appellate Court on my case all day yesterday. Have not been given a decision as yet. Will let you know as soon as they are kind enough to notify me.[434]

The laborers of Streator were holding on, but barely.

A Fateful Encounter with Samuel Gompers

Despite all Reuben and his compatriots had done, it seemed they had nothing to show for it. None of his major bills had been passed. He had been exonerated in court, but his friends faced new charges by the day. The Open Shop struggle had ground to a bitter stalemate with no victor in sight, and the city he loved was badly damaged. Families were going cold and hungry as the holiday season approached. Two years in, it

became increasingly clear that the devastation Glenn and the IMA had brought to Streator would last a long time. Later in life, Reuben would reflect on the episode; "The whole town developed into a sort of Civil War. They tied up every plant in that community, don't you see, and over 700 people had to move out of Streator…It took the town about 15 years to get over that fight."[435]

It was at that moment that Sam Gompers, President and founder of the American Federation of Labor, met personally with Reuben. The exact circumstances of the encounter are not entirely clear; Olga remembers Gompers calling on Reuben at his home.[436] Gompers's travel schedule, however, indicates that the meeting more likely took place at the Morrison hotel in Chicago, where the AFL president met with the Streator delegation.[437] Regardless of where the meeting occurred, it had a profound impact on Reuben. In a candid and heartfelt conversation, Gompers told the young man he saw "marvelous material for the Labor Movement" in Reub, and encouraged him in his efforts.[438] Soderstrom thanked the president for the compliment, but quickly turned the conversation to the urgency of his city's needs, their battles, and his frustrations. Gompers gave him the pep talk he needed, as Reub later described:

> One of the things that influenced my early activities was the contact that I was fortunate to have with Samuel Gompers. Sam told me at one time when we needed money to help people that were locked out in 1921 to 1923 in the city of Streator, that he felt that we were going to make progress. Gompers said that we would make progress day by day and step by step, and he turned to me and looked at me rather sharply, and he said, "Young man, you know you can climb the highest mountain if you've got the patience to do it one step at a time." That philosophy had a lot to do with guiding the activities that I've been engaged in.[439]

Reuben would never forget that meeting, nor the words of encouragement and instruction. After that encounter, Reuben remembered, "I also—in line with what he suggested young labor leaders ought to do—I made a study of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence, because Samuel Gompers believed that labor officials ought to be thoroughly familiar with these documents and if they allow these documents to guide them, that they wouldn't go far wrong in the labor field."[440]

Gompers died the following year, in December 1924.

1924: FAMILY AND ELECTION

On Hearth and Home

While Reub's public life may have been full of conflict and chaos, his private life in these years was comparatively tranquil. Little Carl and Jeanne filled the Soderstrom household with vitality and happiness, enchanting Reub each day as he returned from Andy's print shop, where he continued to work three days a week. During the legislative season, Reub took his family to Springfield for three days in April. Young Carl, who would return to Streator and tell the other students at Grant School about his adventures, even served as a page in the House when he wasn't riding the elevator.

In September of 1924 Reub's sister Olga, who had been working as a nurse, and her husband Frank moved to Kankakee. Reub may have been busy, but he always took time on Sunday to escort mother Anna and family on the train to see Olga's home. While Reub missed his sister, the move was toughest on Anna and Lorraine, who'd come to depend on her in so many ways. Olga and Reub worked together to support their mother. "When we came to Kankakee, Reub and I agreed to each contribute $15.00 a month to mother for expenses, and rooms would be rented again," Olga writes. "At Christmas I would go home, get a tree, trim it, rig Lorraine out with clothes and always give mother money, as I did on all special occasions, such as Mother's day, birthdays and always when I went home for a few days I'd give extra money or buy all the groceries."[441]

Despite these changes, life in the Soderstrom house continued on an even, upbeat pace; a quiet refuge for Reub from the political storms raging outside.

The Election of 1924

Reub won re-election in a landslide. With 31,129 certified votes, the local paper declared "Labor's candidate received 7,000 more votes on November 4th than he had ever received before in any campaign—making the results a new and notable victory for those who work for a living. RG Soderstrom's labor record, made in two stormy sessions of the General Assembly, was the thing that attracted votes."[442] In contrast, manufacturers' candidate Ole Benson failed to win in both the Republican primary and general election, earning only 8,500 votes as an independent candidate in the general election.[443] Benson quickly faded from Streator's political scene while Soderstrom stormed to the front of it.

Reuben had proven himself a strong defender of worker's rights in both Springfield and Streator, giving him a clear majority of support in his home town. He was, in the words of the *ISFL Weekly News Letter*, "An outstanding progressive leader of the house, a champion of the peoples' rights…who ably and forcibly supported all labor and progressive legislation." Just as important, the open shop fight had rallied the outlying rural areas of the district to Reuben's side. They blamed the uncompromising Manufacturers' Association for the economic devastation they'd suffered, and took their frustrations straight to the ballot box.

However, Reub's work was far from done. Although Glenn and the IMA had prevented labor from scoring a touchdown, Reuben was beginning to win the battle of field position. In the coming term, Reub would take them head on…in what would prove to be the biggest political fight of the decade.

PILLAR III

RIGHT TO STRIKE: ANTI-LABOR INJUNCTIONS

"No weapon has been used with such disastrous effect against trade unions as the injunction in labor disputes. By means of it trade unions and trade unionists have been prevented under severe penalties from doing what they had a legal right to do… and to the working classes, as to all fair-minded men, it seems little less than a crime to tolerate it longer."

-Reuben Soderstrom, Illinois State Federation of Labor News Letter, 1919

THE ORIGIN OF INJUNCTION

The battle against unjust injunctions was a key front in Reuben's fight for working labor's right to strike. Of all the evils Reuben railed against as a leader of labor, none was more damaging, insidious, or unethical than labor injunctions. These orders—weapons fashioned by industry lawyers and wielded by illiberal judges—were used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to deny working men and women of their rights to speech, assembly, and free movement. Soderstrom himself was a victim of injunction attacks; more than once he was brought to court to defend his right to walk his hometown streets. But what was the labor injunction? Where did it come from, and what made it so effective and onerous? And how did labor—and Reuben—fight back?

By the 1920s, injunctions had become the preferred tool of attack against strikers and protesters, but they didn't start out that way. Injunctions—orders preventing someone from beginning or continuing an act that invades the rights of another—originated in British law as a means to address losses or damages to property or property rights in civil court. However, legally forcing a person to do or not do something is an extraordinary remedy that is supposed to be used when it is the only way to prevent "irreparable harm."[444] If used as intended, injunctions are effective and positive legal tools, as Reuben himself explained in a speech before the Illinois House:

> If properly used in its own sphere, as determined by English and American judicial decisions prior to 1890 the injunction may be useful and necessary. An injunction was merely an order by a court of equity, commanding a certain person or persons to desist from some action proposed or actually begun… The injunction was in the nature of an ounce of prevention and was intended to obviate certain civil injuries… It was not until the opponents of the trade union-unionists and the enemies of the working classes decided upon concerted movement against labor organizations, that the full possibilities of the injunction, as distorted and perverted by the courts, became apparent.[445]

As Soderstrom noted, abuse of this civil remedy began in the late 1880s and 1890s in response to a series of increasingly effective strikes. When the engineers and firemen of Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (CB & Q) launched a strike in 1888, they started a boycott of the railroad that spread across eight states and 5,500 miles of track. In response, the CB & Q president sought and received an injunction against the railroad unions in federal court under the Interstate Commerce Act, bringing railroad labor relations largely under court control.[446] This trend accelerated under then Sixth Circuit judge and future President Howard Taft. In case

after case he issued sweeping injunctions, ruling union calls for boycotts illegal and unions liable for the financial losses they caused.[447]

Things came to a head during the Pullman strike of 1894. When employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company went on strike after a 22% wage cut, they called on their labor brothers for support. The American Railway Union didn't disappoint; ARU members in every trade on every Western line helped shut down all company traffic from Chicago westward. Owner George Pullman and the General Managers Association retaliated by calling in a favor from former railway lawyer and then-current Attorney-General Richard Olney. Olney sought an injunction against the strikers that ultimately resulted in President Cleveland sending companies of infantry, cavalry, and a battalion of artillery into Chicago in "an unseemly desire to intervene in the dispute with force."[448] This tinderbox of strikers and armed troops exploded on July 6, when an Illinois regiment fired point blank into an attacking mob, killing twenty to thirty people and wounding scores of others. Over the next several days repeated clashes between strikers and solders resulted more dead civilians, and eventually the protest buckled under the steady show of lethal force.[449]

Such brutal put-downs were nothing new to labor, but the impact of Olney's legal action was. Under the law injunctions can't be issued against lawful actions, so Eugene Debs, head of the ARU (and a local leader of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman during the CB & Q strike), was charged with criminal conspiracy under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. This law, meant to prevent companies from colluding to keep prices (and profits) artificially high, was now being twisted to make strikes illegal under the pretext that they were a "conspiracy in restraint of trade or commerce among the several states."[450] The following year this case against "Dictator Debs" (as the anti-labor press called him) made its way to the US Supreme Court. In its ruling on *In re Debs*, the court affirmed the right of the federal government to appeal to civil courts and "invoke the powers of these courts to remove or restrain…obstruction[s]" of interstate commerce.[451]

The decision shook labor to its core. In the cases that followed—notably *Hitchman v Mitchell*, The Danbury Hatters case (*Loewe v Lawlor*) and *Gompers v Buck's Stove and Range Co.*—the courts effectively declared open season on unions. In the words of labor historian Clayton Sinyai:

> Members of the bench, enchanted with their shiny new juridical toys, set out to see just what they could do. The courts quickly concluded that most union boycott activity was illegal at common law under the Sherman Act; that sympathetic refusal to handle struck goods was also a conspiracy in restraint of trade; that when unions urged workers to strike or join a union in violation of a contract with an employer, they engaged in illegal conspiracy; that mass picketing was illegal intimidation. And they gave a sympathetic ear to employers who demanded relief from such activities by means of a labor injunction. The injunction had heretofore been an extraordinary measure, issued only when the possibility of irreparable damage to the plaintiff rendered the glacial pace of normal court proceedings futile. Hereafter, an employer's word that an ongoing labor action was dealing his business irreparable harm was good enough for many a judge.[452]

Soon nearly every strike was met with judge-issued injunctions against union leaders, forbidding them from even talking to protesting workers, without trial or due process. Workers were barred from striking and forced to work against their will, lest they be held in contempt of court. Even the boycott—an American tradition as old as the Stamp Act—became illegal. According to AFL President Samuel Gompers, by 1925 "Abuse of the injunctive writ had grown in frequency until it had become the paramount issue in labor problems."[453]

THE CASE AGAINST INJUSTICE

Organized labor vehemently opposed injunctions in labor disputes, judicial actions they perceived as illegal. With the flimsiest of excuses, a business could request an injunction, while a single (usually business-friendly)

judge had power to decide whether to issue the order, who was under it, who paid a fine, and who went to jail. This danger was especially acute in Illinois, which had been targeted by manufacturing interests in a concerted and coordinated effort to use injunctions against unions. As ISFL President John Walker warned, the manufacturers of Illinois had "made clear they expect to use the courts to prevent the workers from exercising the right of free speech, free press and communication, peaceful assemblage, the right to a trial by jury, to face the witnesses who appear against them and to cross-examine such witnesses, all designed to prevent growth of the labor movement."[454] By 1916 the First District Appellate Court went so far as to rule even peaceful labor protests illegal, writing in *Barnes v. Chicago Typographical Union* that "picketing itself is an act of intimidation and an unwarrantable interference with the right of free trade. The very fact of establishing a picket line is evidence of an intention to annoy, embarrass and intimidate, whether physical violence is resorted to or not."[455]

These efforts were not only unfair in the eyes of labor but un-American, striking at the very core of the constitution. As Victor Olander, ISFL Secretary and arguably the greatest mind of Illinois labor, wrote:

> The cornerstone of the constitution is another document, whose words are written in the life blood of the patriots and which is known as the Declaration of Independence. It asserts that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights…When the injunction judge issues a restraining order, directed against working people, of a character which he never directs against any other class of citizens, he denies the equality of man and repudiates the Declaration of Independence whether he knows it or not. When he insists, as he frequently does, in cases where he is called upon to support the interests of employers against working people during strikes, that there exists no right which may not be restricted by his orders, then he denies the doctrine of inherent and inalienable rights and again repudiates the Declaration of Independence.[456]

The power of a judge through injunctions to single-handedly destroy the lives of men and women involved in a strike was particularly dangerous, not to mention undemocratic. According to Walker:

> You can easily understand how this preys on the minds of the wives and children of the strikers… He is not only the judge, but the prosecuting attorney, prosecuting witness and the jury—all in one… and in so doing the injunction recognizes no law, organic or statutory in our land, or no rule of justice, honesty or humanity.[457]

The effect of these judicial decrees were nothing less than devastating. As the Illinois Federation editorialized in its weekly newsletter (possibly written by Reuben himself):

> All people who do not believe these judges with their long robes are something divine and who believe with the great Lincoln that human rights are of more importance than property rights, are opposed to the present power of judges who can say in effect "You can organize, but if you strike you injure the employers' property; you must not do that. If your pickets tell the public that girls are striking for living wages against those hotels and restaurants, the public might stay away and that would destroy his business, therefore you cannot tell the public you are striking for more life."
>
> Life to those judges, you must understand, is not so dear and important as the continued patronage of the public to these eating houses. "My God! If the public stays away the proprietor will either have to grant the strikers' demands or meet a property loss to his business," views the judge. So Mr. Injunction Judge says in effect: "You can strike, but don't make your strike effective. I will restrain you from telling anyone the circumstances of the strike, from persuading anyone from taking your job, from asking the public to refrain from patronizing my company during the dispute, from paying strike benefits to the strikers, from saying anything about the strike or holding meetings, and if you violate any of my court orders I will send you to jail

without trial, regardless of your constitutional rights about a trial by jury."[458]

In organized labor's view, this was a clear case of the courts and industry colluding to strip workers of their rights. By keeping workers from organizing, they violated the American protection of free speech. By keeping them from striking, injunctions kept workers in slavery, laboring without their consent. By issuing these orders without trial or limit, judges were acting like kings, violating the workers' right to due process. As Reuben himself argued:

> In my judgment this extension of the use of injunction is the most disturbing factor in our national life—the darkest cloud overshadowing America. The elements who favor injunction as applied in labor disputes are either consciously or unconsciously inimical to true democracy and are apparently in favor of what is practically a monarchical, even despotic government, and in favor of the limitation and restriction of the rights of working people. Let me say this: that those who still advocate further use of this injunction weapon are undermining the faith of the people in the constitution and the laws of the land and are destroying the confidence of the working classes in the impartiality of the courts.[459]

The ISFL took action to push back against these intrusions, working with the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) to quickly establish a legal department to address the issue of injunctions. The finest labor lawyers in the country agreed to fight the battle; Chief Counsel W. B. Rubin of Milwaukee joined by AW Kerr of Springfield, Frank Walsh of Kansas City, and Clarence Darrow of Chicago to act as expert advisers to Chicago attorney Fred Schmidt, who served as the full-time counsel for the ISFL.[460]

At the heart of the organization's efforts, however, was an effort to pass legislation ending abuse of injunctions. It was a move encouraged by labor leaders across the country; as American Federation of Labor (AFL) President Sam Gompers wrote to all members, "Every effort should be made to secure the enactment of a law… every personal desire… curbed; every other political issue should be subordinated to the attainment of this one end."[461] At its annual convention in 1916, the ISFL adopted a resolution which called for the state federation to direct its efforts at passing an Injunction Limitation bill. From that day forward until the bill's passage, no other political issue occupied such a prominent place in organized labor's legislative efforts in Illinois. At every session of the General Assembly, union-friendly legislators would introduce the bill. Every year, it would go down to defeat.

INJUNCTIONS HIT HOME

While fighting against injunctions in the legislature and the courts, unions continued the struggle for the rights of laborers through strikes and pickets, despite the risk. It wasn't going well. Nearly every dispute was met with a slew of injunctions barring just about every union activity imaginable. Violating these judicial decrees meant, at best, fines and possible jail time. At worst, disobedience could be used as a pretext for armed assault, often by former convicts and thugs deputized for the fight by (well-compensated) sheriffs and marshals. Several new owners' groups, including the American Anti-Boycott Association, The Citizens' Industrial Association of America, and the National Manufacturers' Association were formed to help organize the fight against unions.

In Illinois in particular, these groups and their lawyers broke strikes through a series of injunctions and convictions for criminal conspiracy. Legislative battles began to escalate as the spread of injunctions hampered organized labor's efforts across the state. At its height, this abuse resulted in over 400 active injunctions filed against CFL President John Fitzpatrick alone, prompting ISFL Secretary Olander to comment "The menace of misused injunction power has become acute in Illinois, more so than any other state. This injunction evil is not confined to Chicago by any means; it is felt throughout the state."[462]

One of the Association's key targets became "closed shops," businesses where union membership was required of all workers. In 1904, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association under JM Glenn declared a war on closed shops, calling them "an illegal infringement of contract rights guaranteed by common law and the laws and constitution of the state of Illinois," using injunctions as their primary weapon.[463] Eventually this fight struck home for Reuben. Streator—home to a wealth of mining, brick, and glass production—became a flash point in the conflict when, on December 27, 1921, the Streator Manufacturers' Association published a proclamation in the local Streator newspapers stating their intention to switch to an "open shop" that no longer negotiated with a union:

> We are in an era of keenest competition for business ever known. Streator industries must be in a position to meet this competition. Only those plants which can meet the competitive conditions and pay fair and equitable wages, are those not handicapped in operating by the restrictions of a Closed Shop contract. Several signers of this announcement have at the present time contracts with various labor unions and all of these contracts will be carefully and faithfully carried out. After these contracts have expired all of these factories will be operated on the Open Shop basis.[464]

A week after the proclamation by the Manufacturers' Association, Reub, who served as reading clerk for the local Trades Council, wrote a rebuttal titled "We Fight," published in the local newspapers on January 9, 1922:

> The labor movement of Streator represents the crystallized thought, hope and aspirations of humanity for a better life and these employers in their associations, their combinations, yes in their unions, if you please, are using a nationwide business depression, and a humbug population argument to drive back, to kill the spirit of freedom that lives in the hearts of those of us who belong to his movement of labor. May God grant that they fail.[465]

The night after "We Fight" appeared in the newspapers, delegates from the council addressed a meeting of Local 17317, the bargaining agent for the workers at the Streator Metal Stamping Company, and encouraged them to protest for their rights. In the days that followed, large crowds of picketers gathered at the factory gate. The situation soon got heated, with strikebreakers and factory Superintendant Frank Mason accosted as they left their shifts.[466] The company blamed union leaders, applying for and obtaining an injunction and restraining order against the officers and members of Federal Labor Union No. 17317. They didn't stop there, however; three officers of the Trades Council, President William Atkinson, Vice President Thomas Kelly, and Reading Clerk Reuben G. Soderstrom, were also slapped with injunctions.[467] Reuben, a sitting Illinois State House Representative, became a virtual prisoner in his own hometown as the injunction barred him from whole sections of the city deemed too close to the factory. He wasn't even able to visit his own mother, whose house was in the "forbidden zone." Never a rich man, Reuben faced crippling fines and even possible jail time, all for simply encouraging workers to stand up for themselves.

Reuben was eventually able to succeed against the charges in court, with labor attorney James Conway even convincing the court to compel the owners to pay the union officials' legal fees.[468] Still, the damage had been done, both to Reuben and his beloved Streator. Soderstrom's experience had caused him to fear for his freedom and the financial security of his family, while the protracted open shop struggle left the city economically devastated. No one should have to live like this, he vowed. If unions were going to have any hope of success, the abuse of injunctions had to end, and he was going to be the one to end it.

CHAPTER 15
1925

EPIC BATTLE, ENDURING VICTORY

THE INJUSTICE OF INJUNCTION

The Gauntlet Is Thrown

It was an unusually cold Tuesday morning on March 3 as Reuben arrived at the Illinois statehouse. Wrapped in a borrowed overcoat, he hurried up the steps to the Judiciary Committee meeting. As he entered the chamber he removed his weather-worn jacket to reveal a pressed suit and white button-on collar closely hugging his neck: the day was especially important because the Committee would hear his Injunction Limitation Bill, which needed their approval to move to the House floor.

The storm clouds had been gathering for years over the courthouses and labor halls of Illinois, and labor and manufacturing alike braced for the next legislative battle over the widespread use of workplace injunctions. In the 1920s, Reuben saw anti-labor injunctions used to stop workers from simply gathering together to discuss their workplace plights. Manufacturers often locked out workers and then immediately imposed injunctions preventing them from gathering together, emasculating laborers both financially and politically. Injunctions could kill a strike in its infancy under the pretext of procedural protection. "They tell us to go to the higher courts for a remedy," testified ISFL President John Walker, "But the damage is done with the issuance of the restraining order. The workers are overawed by it, and the strike is broken. All we ask is that the legislature define the ways in which the injunction may be used so as to preserve for the workers their rights of peaceful assemblage."[469] Reub's ally and Secretary-Treasurer of the ISFL, Victor Olander, highlighted the hypocrisy of such "protections," noting "It is a significant fact that the injunction as issued in labor disputes is always directed against the working people and never against the employer. That indicates quite plainly that it is an instrument designed to maintain the interests of one class of citizens against the interests of another class of citizens and is thus foreign to the purposes and intent of both the state and federal constitutions."[470]

And so Reuben was determined to eliminate injunctions from Illinois once and for all. On January 27, he introduced the Injunction-Limitation Bill, designated House Bill 28 (HB 28). Drafted by the ISFL and the Joint Labor Legislative Board, the act:

> —Declared the right to organize "inherent and unalienable"
>
> —Denied injunctions barring free speech, free press, or peaceable assembly from being granted
>
> —Limited injunctions in labor disputes to "irreparable injury to property or a property right for which there is no remedy in law", with the irreparable loss particularly described in the application
>
> —Defined human labor is "an attribute of individual life" which cannot be treated as a commodity or property
>
> —Prevented injunctions from barring people from collectively performing activities that would be lawful individually[471]

It was an audacious and ambitious bill, one that had failed the previous time Reub presented it. This time, however, he had some new tricks up his sleeve.

Round One: Committee Standoff

Soon after his arrival to the Judicial Committee, over thirty representatives took their seats to hear testimony from the opposing parties. Reading the *ISFL Weekly News Letter,* one can easily imagine the scene in the paneled hearing room. In labor's corner sat John Walker and Victor Olander from the ISFL alongside Father John Maguire, a Priest and Instructor from St. Viator College. Each man cut a strikingly different pose—Walker stewing with anger from many years of oppression by injunction; the diminutive father quietly carrying an outsized aura of authority in economics and religion; and of course Victor, sitting as a giant of a man both in intellect and physical size. Across the room sat three attorneys, one from the District Attorney's office, another from the Associated Employers of Illinois and another from Glenn's Illinois Manufacturers Association, all of them watching as Walker opened the testimony. As the ISFL Newsletter chronicled, "Walker discussed the development of the injunction system as used against labor during industrial controversies and pointed out that while peaceful persuasion during strikes had been recognized as lawful by the law side of the courts it was being held unlawful on the equity side. The injunction writ, he stated, is being used as a strike breaking instrument."[472]

Committee Representatives opposed to labor did not sit quietly as Walker made his case. Early in his testimony, they began "hurling a volley of questions" at the ISFL President. Giving as good as he got, he was, in Reub's words, "intensely human…carrying forward the story of labor" in every response.[473]

Speaking after Walker, Father Maguire made the moral argument for the bill. In a manner at once both cerebral and compassionate, Father Maguire "Urged the need for social justice and in the course of his address stated that this was an effort to restore human rights that have been invaded by the courts and that the giving of lawmaking power to one judge deprived men of the right of trial by jury…He further stated that the right of the working man to a living wage was "as sacred as the right of a property owner to his building."[474]

As Father Maguire sat down, the opposition came forward. First up was Cyrus Dietz, a lawyer for the Associated Employers of Illinois, who immediately attacked Reub's bill on constitutional grounds, declaring that the legislature had no right to encroach upon the powers of the judicial branch. Comparing striking workers to abusive husbands and deadbeat tenants, he sneered, "It is absurd for the workers to ask for special protection from the injunction, as if all persons engaged in divorce suits or all tenants disputing with their landlords were to combine for the purpose of fighting the use of restraining orders in that sort of litigation."[475] He then turned on Father Maguire's comparison, declaring labor was property as well. This argument seemingly invalidated Reub's bill, which held human labor to be "an attribute of individual life."[476]

At this point, *The ISFL Weekly News Letter* reports, a pro-labor legislator energetically engaged in the discussion, and it is reasonable to conclude that this man was Reub. The Association's man was cross-examined: "If labor is property, who owns it? How is it transferred?" Dietz replied that the work of a man was owned by his employer, paid for by his wage. "But you're speaking to the product of a man's labor, don't you see?" came Reub's quick reply. "What of the labor itself?"

It was an answer Dietz had not anticipated. Nervous, he tried to repeat that what a man makes is owned by his employer. Reub cut him off. "You're failing to make the distinction between 'labor' and the 'products of labor.' I ask you again, sir, if labor is property, then who is the owner? Is it not the working man who owns his labor, and who is thus entitled to the freedom, liberty, and equality extended to him by this bill?" Dietz

declined to make the distinction and sat down. Otto Jaburek and Colin Fyffe, attorneys for the AEI and IMA respectively, followed Dietz, but neither offered much of a defense after being so aggressively questioned by Reuben Soderstrom. Victor then closed the case for labor. Putting his encyclical memory to use, he "Presented into evidence a number of specific injunctions, including the Rock Island garment workers' case, the carpenters' case against the Citizens Committee in Chicago, the Streator cases, the Chicago garment workers and other cases with relation to the so-called 'yellow-dog' contracts in which workers are compelled to sign away their rights, closing his address with a reference to the British Trades Disputes Act."[477]

Reub's bill was recommended to the House for passage by a vote of 17 to 13. As the Alton Telegraph reported at the time, "Soderstrom himself seemed quite optimistic of the success of the bill, after it was recommended by the judiciary committee late yesterday afternoon. He thought it would go through the house without much trouble, and said that it would probably come up for passage within two or three weeks."[478] The committee meeting, however, proved only the first of many battles to come.

Round Two: Early Voting

As the Soderstrom bill came to the House floor for the first time, Reub readied himself for a wider fight. Reub had to be especially vigilant; for as the ISFL correctly noted "the second reading is the stage at which bills are frequently subjected to attack by the submission of amendments calculated to defeat original purpose and effect of the measures at which the amending motions are directed."[479] However, Reub was "prepared for all emergencies when the bill was called upon. He stood ready…to defend the bill with facts and figures sufficient to convince any thoughtful and unprejudiced lawmaker. The enemies of the measure made no move, however, and it passed up to the order of third reading with silence among the opposition."[480]

The lack of amendments didn't signal a dearth of opposition. Rather, it demonstrated the complete contempt the manufacturers had for the act and their confidence that the legislation would never pass. They had reason for their smugness; not since the Workman's Compensation Act of 1911, passed in the wake of the Cherry Mine Tragedy by Reub's mentor, John Williams, had a major piece of pro-labor legislation been put into law. Glenn and his boys had no need to amend the Soderstrom Bill because they had determined early on to never let it see the light of day, and were certain they had their hands in all the right pockets to make sure it stayed dead.

Reub knew better. He'd spent the last several years carefully cultivating relationships that he now believed could wrangle him the votes he needed. His legislation already had the backing of many Democrats, whose constituencies wanted the bill. With a Democratic base solidified, Reub used his Republican status to quietly build a coalition of Republican lawmakers willing to support the act. He wasn't alone; both Governor Small and Speaker Scholes, both Republicans, were supporters of Labor, and weren't afraid to whip up the necessary votes. Small had let it be known publicly that he wanted the bill to pass.[481]

Key to Reub's strategy was shoring up the new class of legislators who'd received labor support. In the weeks leading up to the 1924 election, the ISFL had endorsed a crop of young legislators in their freshman and sophomore bids, helping them to win tight races. Now it was time to collect. Day after day, Reub crossed the floor of the house taking meeting after meeting with new Representatives. He dominated the conversations with arguments both rational and personal, alternating between the demonstrable need for reform and his own experiences in Streator over the last two years, when multiple injunctions had left him a virtual prisoner in his own hometown. Over the next two weeks Reub collected private assurances right under Glenn's nose, readying himself for the vote.

On the morning of Tuesday, March 31, Reub took to the House floor and called the bill up for a third

reading and roll call. He watched closely as every vote was cast, carefully checking the tally. As the ayes started to mount, IMA lobbyists ran to their men, mixing promises and intimidation to stem the tide; they at least secured nine "silent" votes—Representatives declaring themselves absent—in an effort to prevent Reub from reaching a mandated majority of the 77 yes votes required for passage.

As the count wore on, Reub paced up and down the aisle of the general assembly and looked worriedly at several empty chairs. Seven of his own men, sure yes votes, were not in the chamber. As the vote neared closing, he sat down and realized he didn't have the votes necessary and immediately took action. As *The ISFL Weekly News Letter* Describes:

> When it became evident that the bill would be three votes short of the constitutional requirement, Representative Soderstrom…sprung to his feet and presented a motion to postpone consideration of the bill to a future date. Speaker Robert Scholes put the Soderstrom motion to a vote and declared it carried. This action prevented a defeat and made possible another vote on the measure…when it is hoped that several representatives who were absent will be present to vote for the bill.[482]

The vote was rescheduled for later that April.[483]

Reub fell two votes shy. He needed to regroup. Where could he find two more votes? And why were seven "yes" votes suddenly absent?

Round Three: Intimidation

Glenn had been caught off guard. Reub, a stubborn nobody from a town he thought he'd taken out of play years ago, had come out of nowhere and nearly beat him on the single most important piece of legislation in Illinois. As a result, Glenn sent out a special bulletin to all IMA members warning them of this "communistic and unwarranted attack upon property rights."[484] Praising injunctions as "the great bulwark against the unlicensed assaults made upon the rights of property and the integrity of the independent worker against the encroachment of the labor union dictatorship," he called on his full membership to write and wire their representative instructing them to reject this "vile act."[485]

With his base ginned up, Glenn brought the hammer down in the Assembly. He personally visited all the freshman and sophomore representatives who'd voted against the IMA. Though missing Reub's heart, Glenn matched him in conviction; his lack of compassion was compounded by a spirit of viciousness. A "complete partisan in methods and spirit," Glenn reminded the representatives they were in competitive districts.[486] While the endorsements they'd gotten from Labor might have helped them squeak by in the past, labor's support meant nothing compared to the weight of the Manufacturers' power. He made sure they knew that a second yes vote would turn substantial dollars against them in '26.

Glenn was effective. By the time of the second vote on April 28, five of the Freshman representatives Reub courted—Anderson (D), Hoff (D), Martens (D), Babb (R), and Waller (R)—voted either absent or against the bill, despite endorsements from labor in their elections. Another two sophomore representatives, Lohmann (D) and Kribbs (D), also voted against the bill, despite voting mostly with labor in the previous term.[487] As the vote closed, Reub pleaded and assailed them in turn, trying to find any way in to get their vote. It was no use; Glenn had them now, and there would be no prying them loose. In the end, Reub's bill HB 28 lost by an even greater margin than it had the first time: 74 to 62, with fourteen "silent" votes.[488]

JM Glenn most certainly sat back in his chair in the Assembly galleys and allowed a small smile curl up on his lips.

Round Four: Building the Vote

Reuben refused to lay down and die. Mulling over the roll calls, he realized that the path to success in the House went directly through the Senate. As he later recalled:

> The injunction bill came up, and it got some 75 votes...when I brought it up again it got 74 votes. I sat down and analyzed the two roll calls…I went down to the Governor's office (I was friendly with Governor Small) and I requested him to call his group (I think I used the word gang) in the Illinois Senate, and urge them to pass the injunction bill, see. The Senators over there are likely to pass it because they'll say it's been killed twice in the House and for that reason it can't pass. But Governor, here are the two roll calls, and I know I have 77 votes. I think if the Senate bill will come over with all of this information and the argument that I have for this type of legislation, and I think we could pass it. And he smiled at me, and he said all right.[489]

Reub and Governor Small tapped Senator Daniel Weber of Chicago, a legislator trusted by both the Governor and labor, to introduce the bill in the Senate. They soon brought in Senator Cuthbertson, and by late May the Cuthbertson-Soderstrom bill made its way out of committee. Reub meanwhile began feeling out representatives, particularly those who'd voted "no" or "silent" the two times previous to see what it would take to bring them on board. His search led him to a group of diverse Republicans with some common concerns about the bill. This grab-bag group included men such as Ed Ryan, a sophomore legislator and farmer from Lawrenceville, and C.E. Sawyer, representative from Kankakee. Ryan and Sawyer had different constituencies and mixed voting records when it came to labor, each supporting some bills while opposing others (both had voted against Reub's One Day Rest in Seven bill).[490] But saliently, both had the same concern with the Injunction Limitation Bill; they worried that it would give license to violent brawls like those seen on the streets of Streator during the Open Shop Campaign. In an attempt to win their vote, Reuben talked with them at length, giving assurance that this bill only limited abuse of injunctions, and only prevented them from being used for illegitimate concerns. Despite his best efforts, they still hedged their support, claiming private assurances weren't enough.

It is at this point where one can imagine Reuben sitting alone at the little wooden desk in his Springfield hotel room, reflecting on the role of assembly in a democratic society, and society's need for safety and security. The newspapers were rife with reports of barbaric behavior from striking workers across the state. So Reub dug deep and made a substantive adjustment to labor's thinking about strikes: if workers did not want to suffer injunctions, then their gatherings would have to be peaceful. The next day, he and Senator Cuthbertson amended their bill; it now read that injunctions could not be used to restrain people from "peacefully and without threats or intimidation" recommending, advising, or persuading other to join in a strike. In what the ISFL called an "excess of caution," the Senate inserted the language four different times in the 150-word act.[491] Striking laborers would have to resort to peaceful protests, and Reuben was content with the change.

Round Five: Unions and Race

The Soderstrom—Cuthbertson bill passed the Senate. But as it wound its way through Senate speeches on its way to passage, another, even deeper division emerged. During the bill's final reading in the Senate, Adelbert Roberts, the Senate's only African-American member, stood at the lectern and heaped criticism on both the bill and unions in general. According to the ISFL, "Senator Roberts said, in substance, that his opposition to the trade unions was based upon the claim that the unions discriminate against Negro workers."[492] The tremors of this speech shook Reuben. No one could credibly argue that there weren't deep racial divisions within labor. As Bob Gibson, a future AFL-CIO Treasurer later recalled, "We used to have separate locals based on ethnic and racial lines. There was the Italian carpenters union, the Irish carpenters union, and the

Black carpenters union."[493] As Senator Roberts revealed, the black workers in Illinois did not see labor unions as a welcoming home of workers' rights but rather an unruly instigator of racial divisions. Roberts' opposition in the Senate gave voice to this tension, and he wasn't alone; as Reub went back and scanned the rolls of the previous House votes, he saw that all four African-Americans there had voted against the bill. As ISFL President Walker explained to Ben Ferris of the Chicago lathers, after speaking with the black legislators:

> The colored representatives voted against our injunction-limitation bill…because, they said, that they dare not go home to their districts (my information is that they are living in districts that are largely populated by colored people) if they voted for any measure which the trade union movement was supporting, on account of the fact that their people said that the Trade Union Movement is trying to prevent them from making a living in Chicago, particularly citing the action of your local union which refuses to permit colored lathers to belong to their union, and which they say, even where they do belong to a colored local union of your international organization, prevents them from getting work in the general construction work in which members of the labor movement are employed in Chicago… Senator Roberts (colored) from Chicago…says he wants to vote for labor's measures…but on account of union labor being opposed to it [anti-union bills], that if he voted in opposition to it, that it would mean his political finish with his people; he says they tell him that the unions are all against them in Chicago.[494]

Reuben realized the Illinois labor movement needed to wake up to the cause of the black worker, to embrace him as an important and valuable constituent. Those four votes in the House could make the Injunction-Limitation bill a reality. Labor needed the Negro vote. Labor needed to welcome the Negro worker. The ISFL began reaching out to African-American representatives, attempting to address the discrimination their communities faced. Although lacking the political authority to force unions to adopt colored workers, President Walker committed his moral authority and considerable powers of persuasion to create change. As he continued in his letter to Ferris:

> I sincerely hope that you will be able to get your local union to change this attitude, because it is not only injurious to all working men and women, and their families in this state, but it is wrong from the point of view of the Trade Unionists everywhere. The Trade Union Movement does not believe that a man should be discriminated against, just because of the color of his skin. It was founded for the purpose of protecting those who were unable to protect themselves—the weak and helpless, and it should not be used as an instrument of oppression or persecution of the weak and the helpless.[495]

Walker also highlighted the contribution of "colored workers" to the AFL in the Illinois chapter's *Weekly News Letter.* He gave special attention to an address given by T. Arnold Hill, director of the Department of Industrial Relations of the National Urban League, on the disposition of "the colored workers toward unions" before the AFL Executive Council. In it, Hill cited a declaration made by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at their 1924 convention which read, "Intelligent Negroes know full well that a blow at organized labor is a blow at all labor. That black labor today profits by the blood and sweat of labor leaders in the past who have fought oppression and monopoly by organization." He declared that "colored workers were anxious to organize as they believed they should receive the same wages as white workers."[496] This message—that unions could and should be natural allies of the black community in their fight for equality—was one Walker made sure all union members in Illinois heard loud and clear.

Victor Olander, meanwhile, attempted to make the case that unions and the black community held common cause. He published a major work drawing direct connection between injunctions, which barred union members from striking or stopping work, and the depravity of American slavery:

> What is it that separates the free man and the slave? It is this, that the man who is free has the right to refuse to

> remain in the service of others, to withhold his labor, to consult freely with his fellows and to join with them in bringing about improved standards of life and work. The slave is a slave because he is by law prevented from leaving the service of those for whom he works without their consent. He may not withhold his labor. He is not permitted to consult freely with his associates…Whenever an injunction judge issues a so-called restraining order…he is endeavoring, either consciously or unconsciously, to tear the robes of liberty from the shoulders of free men and women effected by this order and compelling them to accept the shameful garb of slaves.[497]

Paramount to all, in a meeting on the evening of May 29 at ISFL headquarters, a committee of 26 African-American trade unionists adopted a memorial urging all lawmakers of color to pass the Soderstrom-Cuthbertson Bill. It is unknown whether Soderstrom, Walker, or Olander were present at this meeting, or were instrumental in its organization, but it is not merely coincidental that African-American votes were important in the immediate session. The committee selected four of their own to act as a special envoy to personally petition Representatives Warren Douglas, Charles Griffin, William King and S.B. Turner. The memorial read in part:

> The American Federation of Labor, in the obligation presented to every man who joins in direct membership through one of its directly affiliated local unions, calls for this promise as condition of membership: "To be respectful in word and action to every woman; to be considerate to the widow and the orphan, the weak and defenseless; and never to discriminate against a fellow worker on account of creed, color or nationality." An examination of the records of the American Federation of Labor will show that it has always stood for justice to the Negro workers…
>
> Please understand that, as thoughtful members of our race, conscious of its needs and problems, that we are not assuming to take the position that discrimination does not exist. But we insist that the way to remedy that condition wherever it does exist is not by arousing additional antagonism by taking a stand which would be injurious to our white brothers, but, rather, while insisting upon justice for members of our own race, we also insist upon justice for all others…
>
> We desire to direct your attention to one very important measure which has already passed the Senate and is now pending in the House. It is Senate Bill N. 442, generally known as the Injunction-Limitation Bill and frequently referred to as the Cuthbertson-Soderstrom Bill. In effect it provides that no injunctions shall be issued enjoining working people when on strike from 'peaceably and without threats or intimidation, recommending, advising, or persuading' others to join with them…the purpose (of injunctions), of course, is to discourage strike activities and thus to, by indirection, do something that under the constitution of the United States cannot legally be done directly, namely, to put pressure upon men, through government authority, to keep them at their work. Now let us call your attention to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States prohibiting involuntary servitude and slavery. That great amendment grew out of the misery and suffering of our race. Of all the people of the United States, we should understand it best…
>
> Shall it be said that members of our race in the Illinois legislature have persisted in taking the position that will prevent passage of a law in harmony with our own please for freedom? Shall it be said, when the General Assembly adjourns in a few weeks hence, that the injunction-limitation bill, designed to promote the freedom which we all crave, was defeated because the Negro representatives in the lawmaking body voted against it? We hope not, and in the faith that a consciousness of the great need of our people to be better understood by all of the other people of our state and nation, you will stand for the fullest measure of freedom and liberty for all, we submit this memorial to you.[498]

With that ringing endorsement in hand, Reuben headed directly back to Springfield, where his bill had passed the Senate and was again to be introduced to the House for the third time that session.

Round Six: Knockout!

As soon as the doors to the Illinois House galleries opened on June 10, 1926, JM Glenn promptly filled the room with his men—swarms of industrialists brought in from all corners of the state at his personal call. In his 26 years as permanent secretary of the Illinois Manufacturers Association, Glenn had never lost a match against the ISFL, and he'd be damned if he'd break that streak in the 1925 session on a thrice-introduced bill by a pesky legislator from Streator who had already lost an election just a few years earlier, only to bounce back into the statehouse with verve and tenacity.

Reuben confidently took to the floor and "opened the discussion by an eloquent portrayal of the important role played by trade unions in the progress of human society, and the manner in which injunctions had been misused to check that essential progress."[499] He implored the legislature to restore the rights of its citizens:

> The constitutional rights of free speech and free press are violated by the sort of injunctions complained of, and the right of trial by jury is denied to accused workers…Equal justice for all can be established in Illinois only though such legislation as is proposed by (this) House Bill…The working people have fought their way upward from bondage and slavery to the point where the law recognized their right to organize for the purpose of helping each other to secure improved conditions, of life and labor, but this very essential right of organization, established in law, is now being denied by injunction judges.[500]

With the full attention of the House, Soderstrom dramatically pulled from his jacket the injunctions issued against himself in Streator, Illinois, and held them high in the air as he spoke. With words full of the pain and heartache that these sanctions had caused, Reub made an impassioned plea. His sister Olga recounted:

> Reub had a number of injunctions served on him and he was limited to just certain areas in Streator where he could walk or visit. One area ended at the Santa tacks; he could not cross them so he couldn't even visit his mother. He took these injunctions with him to Springfield, waved them in the air in the Assembly Hall so all his co-legislators could see them and made them aware of the fact that one of their honorable legislators was under this strain, of what he felt was illegal…Injunctions were used among the workers, they were deprived of their rights, no freedom of speech or peaceful assembly, or a free press was not to be allowed "Labor!"[501]

With the room in rapt attention, Reub then retired to his seat. Glenn's move was next and he went straight to the heart of Reuben's new found constituency—the Negro worker. As T*he ISFL Weekly News Letter* reported, "The opposition opened its attack upon the bill through one of the Negro Representatives, Sheadrick B. Turner, of Chicago. Representative Turner made a furious onslaught against organized labor and charged that working people of his race were being discriminated against by the American Federation of Labor, saying that for this reason he would vote against the Limitation Injunction Bill."[502]

Glenn sent one Representative after another to eviscerate the bill's supporters. Debate raged for over two hours, with those for and against the bill launching heated rhetoric late into the afternoon:

> [The vote fight] in the legislature was a veritable tug of war between the Illinois State Federation of Labor and the Joint Labor Legislative Board on one side, and the lobbyists of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and the Associated Employers, on the other…When the final scene was staged on the floor of the House as the roll call began the situation was as tense as ever witnessed in the legislature…the 'ayes' and 'nays' responded sharply to the droning call of the clerk until the last name had been uttered. The affirmative vote had reached only 74![503]

Reub took the results like a blow to the chest. He'd failed to swing a single vote, despite all efforts! The employers' lobby in the galleries, meanwhile, looked relieved. They'd survived the call without a single defection. Only Glenn appeared tense, all attention focused on the action below. For a moment, all appeared lost.

But it lasted only a moment. Speaker Scholes, who supported the bill, demanded a call of absentees. There would be no "silent" vote this time; he would call and call again until every member present went on record as to where they stood. Reub sprang into action, heading straight to Representative Ryan to make his case. Ryan was a farmer, an honest man who made his way through hard work. Sure, farmers and labor hadn't always seen eye to eye—neither had he and Reub—but a vote for this bill was a vote to let honest men and women peaceably advocate for their right to a fair wage for hard work. Could he in good conscience deny this right? The Speaker was calling for a vote; which side could he take, look his constituents in the eye, and tell them it was just?

Again the clerk began droning out names—73, 74…75! Labor had gotten the opposition to break ranks! The chamber began to buzz with excitement, hope and fear. Two more votes were needed. Could Reub succeed?

> The crowded galleries were straining to watch the proceedings on the floor. House members were on their feet, congregating in groups, arguing and pleading with each other. Representative RG Soderstrom, sponsor of the house bill, moved swiftly from one to the other and despite the intense excitement maintained the pleasing smile which had won him scores of friends.[504]

Glenn watched helplessly from the galleys as Reub worked the room. Despite Turner's attack, Reub made his way to the remaining black Representatives, imploring them for their vote. He went to Representative Douglas, one of the best orators in the House, and made his appeal. Yes, discrimination and division existed within labor as regards race, but this bill would protect all workers, including those of color. The core mission of the AFL was one of equality, fairness and freedom and committed to becoming an ally to the black community. All hinged on their vote, on his vote. When the day was done, what would be said of the "Negro vote"— that it had made protection of workers' rights possible, or sealed their loss?

After several painstaking moments, Douglas replied that "he hoped the door of opportunity would open wider to the people of his race in the future."[505] Reub didn't know what to think of this response; did the Representative just declare support for the bill or for the opposition? Before he could ask he was overwhelmed by shouts from the floor:

> "Verification! Verification!" cried supporters of the bill, seeking to gain more time. "The clerk will verify the roll," responded the strong voice of Speaker Scholes, whose own vote had been cast in favor of the labor bill. Again the clerk began droning out the names. Another member recorded his vote for the bill! 76! One more was needed and only a moment remained before verification would be finished, the vote closed and the result announced. The house and galleries were in a fever of excitement. Then came a gasping shout, with a note of triumph and relief: "77! 77! Was it true? Who voted? Who was it?" Friend and foe voiced the query. "77," came the answer, "No-78-78-we win—we win!"[506]

The chamber erupted. Removed from the chaos below, Glenn stoically bit his inner lip and held his hat in hand. All these years he'd succeeded in denying his enemy any quarter, only to be beat by a kid, a young man who seemed to embody everything he'd taught his flock to fear. This laboring, self-educated son of an immigrant preacher had bested him by every measure. Reub, for his part, was completely caught up in the moment, which he later described:

> After a tremendous fight on the floor the bill finally got 77 votes and the tenseness and the type of legislative fight that it was so exciting that the members on both sides, both those who voted for the bill and those who voted against it, somehow started to cheer. The House was a bedlam. The Speaker couldn't get order. He tried several times to gavel the thing into some semblance of décor but failed entirely and he had to adjourn the Illinois House of Representatives. I'd say it was the greatest labor victory in the history of the state.[507]

CELEBRATION

A Win Declared Across The Nation

Reuben's victory was met with jubilation. Papers across North America featured front page stories on the bill's success. The Trade Union News of Philadelphia's editorial board proclaimed the law "a notice to all the courts of the state," while the Los Angeles Citizen marveled at its opposition: "The Illinois measure…was opposed by powerful interests, much money being spent, it is reported, to accomplish defeat of the bill."[508] No less a figure than AFL President William Green telegrammed to express his congratulations on the bill's passage, stating "The enactment of this injunction limitation bill will increase the prestige and influence of organized labor in Illinois and throughout our entire jurisdiction as well."[509]

Messages of thanks and support extended beyond just the labor community. Religious organizations such as the National Catholic Welfare Conference praised the win, denouncing the use of unfair injunctions as a practice that "causes a great deal of discontent, invades the civil rights of the working people and perpetuates the injustice of industry."[510] Victor Olander, noting such broad support and connecting the bill's passage to recent Supreme Court decisions and a House bill making judges more directly accountable, predicted a broad "turning of the tide" against the enemies of labor.[511]

Labors' enemies saw the same trend, and it filled them with a wild mix of vitriol and fear. The Employers' Association of Chicago took to the pages of their Employers' News publication to declare "The battle is on, or will soon be on, and we think we can predict with reasonable accuracy the result. If employers have been apathetic to conditions that have been imposed by union labor merely because they were not materially affected, they will soon recognize that the fires they have helped kindle have become a devastating flame."[512] Glenn and the IMA likewise declared a renewed battle against labor, promising retribution.

A Hero's Welcome

On Sunday, July 19, 1925, Reuben came home to the cheers of a hero's welcome. Trade unionists from throughout the district swarmed to Streator to signally honor RG Soderstrom for "the great service he had rendered to organized labor in bringing about the passage of the injunction limitation law.".[513] They packed the local Eagle Hall in a "smoker" held in his honor as Thomas Kelly of Streator, the First Vice-President of the ISFL, opened the meeting. After brief remarks from Mayor Sam Myer the podium was given to Attorney Jim Conway, who had represented Reuben and the Streator Labor Council during the dark days of the Open Shop war. His speech, intensely human and tender, brought the raucous crowd into a rapt hush as he described the man who had become both his compatriot and leader:

> We have come here today to perform a duty which we owe to a good, clean, decent citizen to express our appreciation for the faithful services he has rendered us as our representative in the Legislature of Illinois…
>
> Our distinguished fellow citizen and guest of honor, the Honorable Reuben G. Soderstrom, has but quite recently returned from the field of his titanic legislative struggles in our behalf….While the legislature was in session he was always to be found there at his desk watching with unflagging zeal the interests of us at home

> who sent him there…He has always espoused the cause of that class of citizens who were believers in personal liberty: I mean that class of citizens who believe that every man and woman in this country has and ought to have the inherent right to eat and drink what they please without the supervision of any moral censor…To those of you who place the love of humanity above the lust for gold, Reuben G. Soderstrom stands forth as your Premier Representative in our legislature…
>
> To you, Reub, I will say you have fought the people's battles well but no golden reward therefore is yours. You or yours will not enjoy the luxuries of life that are always awarded to the rich man's tools, but you will enjoy the possession of that self-respect which money cannot buy; you will enjoy a confidence, the esteem and love of your fellow man whom you have faithfully served. After you have completed your earthly activities and passed the veil to receive your well-merited reward, your children will point with pride to the record of their honored father.[514]

Then, with the audience spellbound, Mr. Conway bestowed upon Reub a beautiful diamond ring to commemorate not just his legislative success but the affection of all those present. Turning from the crowd, Conway spoke directly to his friend has he delivered the thanks of so many to the man who'd given so much:

> To you, who fought tyranny and injustice so fiercely and with all strength of your rugged manly nature, and yet again, to you, whose heart is as tender as a mother's tears, to you, whose intellect is as brilliant as the scintillations of this magnificent jewel, the gift of your admiring friends, I have the pleasure and honor on their behalf, and as their representative, of presenting this token of their affection and esteem. May you accept this token and ever wear the same as an evidence of your appreciation of the affection and esteem of your friends. May you retain that affection and esteem as long as this beautiful jewel, which I now present you, shall continue to reflect from its prismatic depths the scintillating rays of the eternal sun.[515]

Overwhelmed, Reub humbly accepted the gift as the crowd rose in applause. He had not expected any of this honor; he thought the smoker was to celebrate the injunction-limitation act, not for him personally, and he could barely contain the pull of emotion evoked by this unexpected honor. In the words of a reporter from the Streator Independent Times covering the event, "Representative Soderstrom is a ready talker, and can express himself freely and clearly, even under severe pressure, but it took him some time to recover from the magic words of praise and appreciation expressed by Mr. Conway."[516] After an extended period of cheering and applause, Reuben addressed the crowd, fighting back tears as he spoke:

> I feel almost unable to talk. Am somewhat dizzy. The kind of things that have been said about me, the splendid beautiful gift that has been given to me, the kindly expression that I see on every face overwhelms me. I did not know that this occasion was to be decorated with anything as pleasant as this…. I can't find words off-hand to express my appreciation of your generosity and sincerely hope you will somehow understand how happy and proud I am of the beautiful ring presented to me and the kind words spoken and the wonderful labor-smoker held in honor of our victory.[517]

Reflecting on the struggle recently behind him and the many more soon to come, Reub appeared fresh for the fight. He relished the struggle, and even went so far as to credit the strength and intransigence of his opponents for fostering a dynamic conversation:

> It seems that the worker, the labor movement, the human race, has to have oppression, misery and suffering in some acute form before legislation can be secured… Victor Olander, one of the most remarkable men in Illinois and a man whom I love as tenderly and affectionately as I do President John. H. Walker, once said to me that "the enemy is our best friend." In a certain sense that is true. He is our critic. We need constructive criticism. We invite it.

> But the open shop association in their published program did not offer constructive criticism. Their published declaration of intentions was cowardly and beastly…. It meant a reduction in wages, the lengthening of hours, the lowering of standards. It meant less food, less clothes and less shelter for the toilers. It meant the destroying of homes and starvation of the mother and innocent babes—it meant the destruction of normal progress and the disruption of the labor movement itself. Every decent, red-blooded citizen protested against it and organized labor, after due deliberation, accepted their challenge and gave this community and the labor movement of Illinois the thrill of a century when it flung back into the face of the open shop challenger the dramatic and historical answer of the workers— "that we accept your challenge, we'll fight the open shop to the last ditch, be the consequences what they may!"
>
> The great cause of humanity thrives on opposition. Every effort that has been made here to deprive humble citizens of a living wage and their sacred constitutional guarantees has made the labor movement stronger. Economists, professors, attorneys and even preachers rallied to the standard of organized labor from far and near and gallantly stood by the courageous trade unionists in the Streator struggle. It attracted nation-wide attention and before the conflict is finally ended here more good will result from the sacrifices made here than has come to the men of labor from all the disasters, catastrophes and labor opposition of the past. Oppression brings reform. Opposition has brought progress. The great resolve to oppose the oppressors was commendable indeed and recent developments to prove that the struggle was not in vain. Labor is victorious. The injunction-limitation bill is a reality![518]

In closing Reub, the unyielding advocate, pledged himself to the men and women of labor:

> And may I say this to you, President Walker, and to you, Secretary Olander, with reference to my own faithfulness, to the fundamental principles, and the highest aspirations of labor and the labor movement, I want to here voluntarily pledge to you, and through you to the men of labor, and the women of toil, and the children, too, who are to take their places as they grow up, that there will be neither a wrongful nor a dishonorable act, on my part which shall in the least detract from the greatest triumph that can come to labor of the cause of labor as long as I am permitted to remain in public life.[519]

After Reuben's acceptance, the crowd was treated to powerful speeches by President John Walker and Victor Olander. Walker paid a glowing tribute to Reub, while Victor warmly painted a picture of Reuben as the "smiling warrior." With the speeches concluded, Reuben and his compatriots joined the rest of the Hall, chatting and smoking deep into the evening hours. It was a moment to savor, and for once Reub—who so often spent his hours and attention focusing on the next day, took the time simply to relax and enjoy the company in the hot summer night.

PILLAR IV

FINANCIAL SECURITY: CREDIT UNIONS

ORIGIN AND INTENT OF CREDIT UNIONS

One of the greatest financial innovations for working men and women in the early twentieth century was the creation of the credit union—nonprofit monetary cooperatives designed to provide saving and lending opportunities exclusively for their membership. Originating in Germany in 1852, by the early twentieth century this increasingly popular form of banking had reached the United States, and in 1925 Reuben Soderstrom decided to bring the advantages of the credit union to Illinois in the form of his Credit Union Bill. The principle behind credit unions—that communities sharing a common bond should be allowed to have control over their own financial future—eventually became one of Reuben Soderstrom's core pillars of a successful and thriving world of work.

In the mid-1920s, many workers had a difficult time securing credit. All too often, a laborer in need of a small loan or payday advance turned to the local "loan shark," lenders who offered small, short-term, high-interest loans meant to trap the borrower in debt.[520] Credit unions allowed groups to pool their resources in order to make small, low-interest loans their own members, creating "a source of credit for [members] at legitimate rates of interest for provident purposes."[521] Some of these institutions already existed in rudimentary form at some of the state's industrial plants.[522] However, state banking laws declared these unions unlawful, as only banks and trust companies—under strict federal and state supervision—were permitted to engage in such practices.[523] Reuben's bill put these existing unions and all subsequent ones under the direct supervision of the state auditor, making them safe and sanctioned sources of small, short-term loans.[524] Loan interest was to not exceed 1% a month, with loan amounts limited to $50 for unsecured loans and $1,000 for secured loans.[525]

A credit union did more than just loan money; it also helped workers save. According to Reuben's bill, a primary purpose for these organizations was "promoting thrift among its members."[526] As ISFL President John Walker wrote in an open letter to the Assembly in support:

> This is a bill for the benefit of the poorest of the poor people. The maximum value of shares in the credit union is ten dollars—no one can own more than five shares—all officers serve without remuneration. The loans are limited to provident and productive purposes…These organizations not only relieve many distressing cases, but they are creative of a spirit of thrift.[527]

A credit union was meant to serve people and communities that banks typically overlooked—those who would typically deposit less than 50 cents.[528] This made them ideal financial alternatives for Illinois laborers. "A worker's best key to financial security is membership in a credit union," Reuben later wrote. "When you need to borrow money you can get it without red tape or a red face because you're dealing with your friends…That's what I mean by financial security, a good safe place to save, with honest and friendly people to borrow from."[529]

REUBEN BRINGS CREDIT UNIONS TO ILLINOIS

Soderstrom's interest in credit unions began when, at the urging of ISFL President Walker, he attended an intriguing talk on the subject by a Boston businessman named Leiter. As he later recounted:

> During the talk [Leiter] pointed out the benefits of a credit union, how they could work together to loan money to the membership, and how they would outlaw or push the loan sharks out of the picture. I thought there was something to this credit union thing. I was opposed to loan sharks, as we had them in the printing industry. Our printers would be paid on a Saturday, and many of them were broke on Wednesday. If they borrowed $5 they had to give the office loan sharks $6 on pay day. I wanted to get rid of them.
>
> After the meeting was over a man reached over and touched me on the shoulder, and he said, "Soderstrom, you'll never make a banker out of a blacksmith." That remark bothered me, and still has all these years. You can make a banker out of anybody if he has the opportunity and intelligence to become a banker.[530]

After that meeting, Reub set out to provide every laborer that opportunity. Working with fellow representative Ralph Church, Reuben slowly built strong bipartisan support for his proposed Credit Union Bill. It enjoyed broad support from multiple sectors and interests, including bankers, laborers, farmers, and welfare societies.[531] By the time it came for a final vote, Soderstrom's proposed act was passed by a vote of 90 to 22, far above the required constitutional majority.[532]

The victory became one of Soderstrom's most enduring advances. In the decades that followed, Illinois credit unions continued to evolve to serve the needs of working men and women. Even as late as 1962, the now-elder statesman was able to boast "I worked hard to help pass the Illinois Credit Union Act in the 1925 Illinois Legislature—and through these 37 years I've been very pleased with the way Credit Unions have developed and delivered for the working people I am certainly proud of the fact that I had a hand in establishing many successful credit unions."[533]

Three years later, William Brietzke, Managing Director of the Illinois Credit Union League, took to the stage of the Illinois AFL-CIO Convention to give special thanks to Reub for the role he played in bringing credit unions to Illinois. "It was forty years ago this spring when Reuben G. Soderstrom and Ralph Church introduced the Credit Union Act," he declared. "Little did these two gentlemen realize that by introducing this legislation they would bring better working conditions, better living conditions, and a wiser use of credit to presently over a million active members."[534] Brietzke then presented the Illinois AFL-CIO President with an award in special recognition of his efforts, reciting aloud the inscription which read:

> The Board of Directors of the Illinois Credit Union League, mindful of more than forty years of felicitous relations, presents this token in admiration and appreciation to Reuben G. Soderstrom, who as an Illinois State Representative, outstanding leader of Labor, and beloved President of the Illinois State AFL-CIO has toiled earnestly, constantly and untiringly to further the Credit Union Movement and introduced the original Credit Union Act in 1925, and who has remained our courageous advocate and friend before committees in the General Assembly, and in this State Convention of Organized Labor.[535]

Today there are over 250 chartered credit unions in the state of Illinois.[536] True to Soderstrom's original intent, they continue to empower workers financially, as they are more secure and structured to avoid the kind of risk-taking that too often drives their for-profit counterparts.[537] In a world of big banks and "too big to fail," the democratic, non-profit, and local character of credit unions make them an ideal alternative for working men and women of every color.

CHAPTER 16
1926

REUBEN SURVIVES RETRIBUTION

"We Welcome Our Visitors! Streator makes every effort to show her guests 'a real time' so as to make them want to come again. You see a welcome look on every face and hear it in every word. Our doors are open. Our city is yours. We want you to see Streator on Saturday night—and many other nights."

- JN St. Clair, Secretary of Convention Committee
August 21, 1926

STREATOR'S FAVORITE SON

Streator On Saturday Night

Reuben was riding high. His dramatic, massive legislative win made him a bona fide statewide hero, not only for his success but for how it was achieved. His jovial handshaking coupled with a brawler's determination gave him a reputation as labor's leading advocate in the statehouse. "Reub was kind, generous and precious," his sister Olga wrote, "but if you crossed him, he could surely lay you low! He was so determined; like Mother, he dominated every situation. He had his opinions and never budged."[538] Although unwavering in his convictions, Reub never descended into petty partisanship. "With experience, one learns the ropes, and he [Reuben] skillfully received the cooperation of both Republicans and Democrats to get his labor bills passed into law."[539] The victory of the injunction limitation bill was a momentous occasion for the Illinois laboring class…and for the political career of the junior legislator from Streator.

At 38, Reuben could count nearly 25 years living in Streator, including the very early days delivering water to muddy workers on the city's first trolley cars. But walking the streets in the mid-1920s and receiving warm greetings from friends and families, shopkeepers, and constituents, Reuben burst with enthusiasm for his hometown. He quickly ran home to Jeanne, where he scribbled out an enduring love letter to the city itself. "I went home on a Saturday night and wrote six stanzas in about forty minutes' time," he later said about the paean to his beloved hometown, titled *Streator on Saturday Night*. "This was a real live town with a lot of pioneer spirit," Reub said, "but I didn't show it to anybody for about eight months because my associates were a pretty rough bunch."[540]

Upon release, the poem was a smash hit in Streator, and even gained state-wide attention. Its captivating cadence and romantic rendering even had important consequences for Illinois labor that year. According to the Bloomington *Pantagraph*, "A rhyme entitled 'Streator on Saturday Night' today won the 1926 convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor for Streator. Voting was so close that the poetic appeal of Rube Soderstrom, state representative, was counted as the weight in the balance that carried the decision."[541] Streator's star legislator was also a poet and promoter!

The poem landed well because Saturday night was both the end of the work week (then six days long) and payday for most laboring folk, making it an especially magical moment. The poem's hometown pride also

struck a chord with an Illinois audience that often felt itself in the shadow of larger, more well-known cities like Chicago and St. Louis. Soon, Reuben found himself being asked to recite the poem at regularly scheduled events. He happily obliged. By the time of the 1926 Convention, everyone knew exactly what Streator Labor Council Secretary JN St. Clair meant when he told visitors he wanted them to see "Streator on Saturday Night!"

A Skilled Operator

Reub was given the personal honor of calling to order the Illinois State Federation of Labor's forty-fourth annual convention in 1926.[542] He and the Streator Trades and Labor Council made all the arrangements as the city of 18,000 hosted labor delegates from across the state and beyond. The Hotel Plumb—where Reuben had first learned of labor's cause from John E. Williams all those years ago—was selected as Convention Headquarters, while sessions were held in the Gymnasium of the Streator High School. Convention attendees could stay at the Plumb for $1.50, but if that was too rich for their blood they could stay at Republic Hotel or Santa Fe Hotel for half the price. For those times when attendees were not in session, the Council published city highlights for visitors and encouraged its guests to enjoy all Streator had to offer.

The convention was a hotbed of activity, with representatives from around the state pouring through the train depot and crowding the few bars and restaurants of downtown Streator to discuss the plight and promise of Illinois labor. Cigars and whiskey were most certainly in high demand and the late night sidewalks were crowded with both conversation and revelry. The days were filled with long academic sessions on the nature of the labor movement itself, with reports from nearby farmers or from a few men just returning from Europe. Other sessions were filled with angry outcries from manufacturing men fresh off the Chicago picket lines demanding better pay and better conditions. The old survivors of Cherry Mine were heralded as heroes, and their presence urged the adoption of reformed pensions for the aged and infirm.

In the wake of his legislative victory, Reub was a star, courted by many. It was most likely at this time that no less a figure than national union leader, socialist, and US Presidential candidate Eugene Debs paid Reuben a high honor by visiting the young leader in his home. Mr. Debs soon found himself deep in discussion with Reub on his porch, sips of Jeanne's homemade tea taking the edge off the humid night. Debs, a former Democrat and standard-bearer of the Socialist Party, thought it strange that Reub should be seated on the Republican side of the aisle. In his 1958 interview with Professor Derber, Reuben recounted their conversation in detail:

> Eugene B. Debs one time came to my home and he thought it was strange that I should be seated on the Republican side. In fact it amazed him. He said, "I don't see how you can get along with these high-finders on the Republican side." He'd been talking about one big union. I said, "Well, there are some things about you, Mr. Debs, that I don't understand either. You were discussing the possibility of one big union. Now, you don't believe that, do you, Mr. Debs? That you want to organize the thing on that basis?"
>
> Well, he said he did. "But do you believe that a section hand should be paid as much as an engineer?"
>
> He said, "It costs as much for the section hand to maintain his family as it does the engineer, and without the section hand the engineer wouldn't have a job."
>
> "That wasn't what you folks did." I said. "I know you're a railroad man, Mr. Debs, and an engineer. You folks formed an organization of engineers. You're paid about four times as much as the section hand."
>
> "Yes, that's what we did," he said, "But that doesn't make it right. See, it ought to be one big union."

> I kidded him about his socialism at that time, and explained to him that I didn't think he was arguing his socialism right. And he said, "No? What do you think it ought to be?"
>
> "Well," I said, "in this community where I live there wouldn't be any change made with respect to the way people work even if we had socialism. Here we all live together, and we belong to the same lodges together. We work in these plants together. We produce everything together, except sharing in the profit. That part of the evolution hadn't taken place. Now why don't you argue your socialism that way? Profit sharing proposition."[543]

Reuben no doubt personally walked Debs through the busy streets to downtown Streator, as he did ISFL President Walker and Secretary Olander as they arrived for the convention that September. After a successful convention, all the attendees bid farewell and carried the inspiration of the experience back to their towns, factories, and union halls. For Reuben, hosting the event had been a personal delight, and raised his profile even higher. Being star meant also being a target, however, and the next few months would be bumpy.

RETRIBUTION

Reuben's Recount

The Industrialists of Illinois wanted Reuben out of office. As in previous elections, anti-labor forces knew the only chance to unseat Reuben would be in the Republican primary, set that year for April 13. With established Republican John Wylie certain to secure one of the two Republican seats, Reub's opponents needed only one candidate to defeat him and thereby deny him a spot in the general election. LaSalle County Sheriff EJ Welter became the manufacturers' candidate of choice, despite charges of corruption for his improper use of county jail trustees.[544] Welter was promoted heavily to industrialists throughout the state, handily outspending Reuben. He ran huge newspaper ads for weeks prior to the election. Reub, who only had enough funding for very small ads, relied on word of mouth and public appearances to make his case. Still, he could count on allies like Walker and Olander to hold large rallies on his behalf.[545]

Despite snowfall and cold temperatures earlier in the month, pleasant weather on Election Day spurred a huge voter turnout, with Reub's supporters working overtime to turn out the vote for their man. One local newspaper recounted scores of workers drumming up votes and ensuring that every voter in the city was marking a ballot.[546] By the end of the day, news accounts reported Reuben beating Welter by 295 votes.[547] Reuben's lead continued to climb as the official vote count progressed; by the week's end his lead grew to 1,087.[548]

Still, Welter would not concede. He demanded a recount the day his loss was announced, and refused to withdraw even as the gap between Reuben and himself widened. His petition was granted that summer, and the vote-counting process —overseen by Welter in his capacity as LaSalle County Sheriff—began.

From the very beginning the situation was suspicious. News leaked from inside the clerk's office painted a chaotic picture of ballots being trampled and tossed aside. Others told of the Sheriff directing the counters, all personal friends, to manipulate the counts in his favor.[549] Soon, ballots from districts that heavily favored Reuben went "missing."[550]

Suddenly (if unsurprisingly), Reuben's ballot lead began to plummet. His 1,000+ lead dwindled to just under a few hundred.[551] Alarmed, Reuben took legal action. He went to the court, demanding that the count be conducted fairly or not at all. When the Sheriff assigned two of his men to guard the clerk's office, Reub insisted on hiring men of his own to keep watch on the ballots and on Welter's watchmen.[552] The four state

highway patrol officers Reub enlisted to protect the ballots did not come cheap. Neither did his legal defense, which was growing more complex by the day. The entire state paid attention as the weeks stretched into months and labor's rising star was clinging to a cliffhanger victory, battered daily by challenges and lawsuits. The situation became so urgent that the ISFL created a Defense Fund for Reuben to help cover his mounting legal fees, and encouraged its members to contribute:

> Enemies of organized labor in Illinois are attempting to force RG Soderstrom out of the state legislature by challenging his recent nomination through court action. They know that his income as a linotype operator is not sufficient to enable him to meet the cost of such litigation…The additional burden of court costs is more than [the Trade Unionists of LaSalle County] can carry, however, and now they are appealing to trade unions in other districts to assist them financially…. [and] request contributions to the Soderstrom Defense fund.[553]

Despite Welter's tricks, Reuben won the recount by a mere 55 and a half votes.[554] The Sheriff tried to contest the outcome yet again, petitioning for yet another recount. However, Judge Edgar Eldridge threw out Welter's case, complete with a stinging denunciation of the state in which the ballots had been kept. "It was the grossest negligence, inefficiency and utter disregard for legal duty on the part of the county clerk," Judge Eldridge declared in disbelief. "[The ballots] were strewn around on the floor and treated as waste paper…It is the grossest carelessness ever to come before the knowledge of any court I think."[555] The ISFL Weekly News Letter reported that "as the jurist finished speaking, a pin could have been heard to drop in any corner of the room…the jurist had not minced words and gave no indication of any desire on his part to cover up or excuse the carelessness with which the ballots had been handled."[556]

After surviving this ignominious primary, Reuben earned the right to run in the general election that fall, where he would run as "an outstanding progressive leader of the House, a champion of people's rights."[557]

Legal Challenges

The IMA also sought to undo Reuben's signature legislation through the courts. Just two months after its passage, the Injunction-Limitation Act would have its first day in court. Earlier that summer, pro-manufacturers Judge Denis E. Sullivan granted an injunction on behalf of the International Tailoring Company against its union. Union attorney William Cunnea, knowing he could not get a fair hearing from "Injunction Judge" Sullivan, applied for a change of venue to argue the validity of the injunction in light of the new law. Seeing an opportunity to defeat in court what they'd failed to stop in the legislature, the Chicago Employers' Association and the Associated Employers of Illinois dispatched lawyers to argue on behalf of the ITC that the law itself was unconstitutional.

In a decision by Judge Hugo Pam, the Cook County Superior Court found the law to be constitutional. Judge Pam left no question regarding the law's status. "Now, gentlemen, you have my opinion. I am upholding the constitutionality of the act," He said after issuing his ruling. "I will refuse to grant an injunction in this case which prohibits picketing itself. I recognize the right of labor to peaceful picketing and persuasion."[558]

Pam's definitive statement did not stop labor's opponents. They appealed to Judge Sullivan—the very Judge whom Pam had overruled—for relief from injunction limitations, which he was happy to provide, this time in Isidore Ossey v. Retail Clerks Union Local No. 195. The case involved a group of union retail clerks from the Ossey Brothers Department Store who peacefully picketed outside the shop in violation of an injunction placed on the union six months earlier. Lawyers for the men argued the injunction was now illegal under Reuben's Injunction Limitation Act. In a radical decision openly dismissive of the legislature, Judge Sullivan declared the law unconstitutional, stating "The court finds that the said Act of the Legislature aforementioned

is unconstitutional and therefore null and void."[559] Sullivan's decision, while listing multiple sections and articles, was in substance as vague as it was broad. By agreeing with the argument that the Injunction Limitation Act was somehow an "unwarranted invasion by the General Assembly of the constitutional powers and duties of the courts," Sullivan struck down Reuben's law.

The defendants, whom Sullivan had punished with up to $200 in fines and 30 days in jail, appealed. With two Superior Court judges delivering diametrically opposed decisions, the Supreme Court of Illinois took up the case. The Justices were faced with an unsavory choice: would they affirm Reuben's law and overturn Sullivan's decision—further undermining the well-connected judge—or affirm Sullivan and overrule the clear will of the people?

In an expert example of judicial politics, they chose neither. In June 1927 the Supreme Court ruled that since the injunctions in the case were issued prior to the law's enactment, the injunctions and the law forbidding them could both be valid:

> For immunity the appellants rely upon the act entitled "An act relating to disputes concerning terms and conditions of employment," approved June 19, 1925, in force July 1, 1925 (Laws of 1925, p.378)…The complainants, on the contrary, assert that the act contravenes the due process and equality guaranties of the fourteenth amendment to the federal constitution and certain provisions of the State constitution…In our view it is not necessary, in the case before us, to determine the validity of the act and we refrain, therefore, from deciding that question.[560]

Though this decision may have been unfortunate for the picketers of Local 195, it did send a clear signal to the IMA and others that the Supreme Court viewed the Injunction Limitation bill as constitutional. The enemies of labor had to swallow this bitter pill and prepare for the next fight.

Labor, meanwhile, decided to go on the offensive, targeting so-called "injunction judges" like Sullivan at the ballot box. Judges in Illinois were elected, not appointed, and the ISFL made a concerted effort to remove abusive judges. The campaign achieved some important victories. In the spring of 1927, labor forces managed to eliminate Circuit Judge Crow from nomination at the St. Claire County Republican Convention after a riveting battle that saw the local pro-Crow Sheriff barring anti-Crow delegates entrance to the convention.[561] In the fall of 1929 the ISFL even targeted Sullivan himself, although that effort failed due in large part to Sullivan's powerful supporters—a group that included US Vice President Charles Dawes, who took personal credit for the judge's election.[562]

The Road Ahead

Reub continued to work three days a week as a linotype operator at the Streator Daily Independent Times. He also tended to family matters, including caring for his mother Anna. "When I came to Kankakee, Reub and I agreed to each contribute $15.00 a month to Mother for expenses, and rooms would be rented again," Olga remembered. "At Christmas I would go home, get a tree, trim it, rig Lorraine out with clothes and always give mother money, as I did on all special occasions, such as Mother's Day birthdays and always when I went home for a few days I'd give extra money or buy all the groceries."[563]

Later that year, Anna stunned the family when she suddenly announced that she was remarrying! Reub pleaded with her to reconsider. "Reub tried so hard to impress upon her that it would never work, but she accepted no counsel from either of us and she married."[564]

With unsettling speed, Anna moved in with her new husband and sold the family house. Although married

with a place of his own, Reub's heart still sank as he said goodbye to the only real home of his childhood. This wasn't just where he'd grown up; it was where his family had become whole for the first time. Reuben watched as they carried away his father's desk with the roll-top and the organ he'd use to practice for Sunday service; as they packed the books filling the shelves and crammed underneath his bed. He watched as they emptied the house of the furniture bought second-hand from Barlow's so many years ago. He walked outside on the porch he'd built with his brother Lafe and wandered to the empty lot and railroad lines behind his house. Staring at the Santa Fe tracks, he relived picking the loose coal dropped from the passing cars, fuel they'd burn to make it through the freezing Midwestern nights. One last time, he closed the door to the room he'd shared with Paul and Lafe, as well as the room his mother had shared with Olga and baby brother Joseph. One last time he let his thoughts turn to memories good and bad, of celebration, of mourning, of family distant and gone, before returning to his new home, warm with cheer, and to his son Carl, now 11, and daughter Jeanne, now 8.

Putting the past squarely behind him, he readied himself for yet another legislative session. With their Injunction-Limitation Bill alive and well, Walker, Reuben and Olander looked forward to passing the next of the "47 bills" they had plotted out all those years ago: legislation creating old-age pensions, one day rest in seven, eight-hour workdays, and more. With the passage of the Injunction-Limitation Act, could these be far behind?

CHAPTER EXCERPT

STREATOR IN 1926

In anticipation of the 1926 Illinois State Federation of Labor convention, the Streator Trades and Labor Council published an article in the ISFL weekly promoting all the city had to offer. This included not only attractions like public spaces, movie theatres, and amusement parks, but details relevant to its citizens' standard of living such as the number of schools, quality of health care, and variety of social organizations. The full publication gives a wonderfully complete picture of the city at the time, from fire protection to garbage collection!

STREATOR HI-LIGHTS

Platted in 1868. Organized in 1870. Founded where industry and commerce meet.

Located eighty-nine miles southwest of Chicago on the beautiful Vermillion River. In the heart of the richest agricultural and manufacturing district in America.

Has a population of 18,000. Eighty-one per cent native born. A city in which seventy-two per cent of the homes are owned by the occupants. This speaks much for the stability of the workers.

It has about thirty passenger trains daily on the steam roads and an hourly service on the Illinois Traction.

At Streator and in the immediate vicinity are to be found high grade steam coal, the very best shale in unlimited quantities for clay products, such as brick, tile, and sewer pipe. Vast quantities of sand, gravel and limestone.

Streator is in the heart of the great corn belt. Other grains raised in abundance include wheat and oats. In addition such crops as asparagus, sweet corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, etc., are raised with marked success.

The health of Streator people is carefully guarded by a competent corps of doctors, aided by the largest, most modern and best equipped hospital in the state (outside of Cook county) which draws medical and surgical cases from a territory comprising eight or ten counties.

The city provides collection of garbage at regular intervals which is disposed of at a newly constructed incinerator plant.

Streator fire protection is afforded by two fully equipped motorized companies to be summoned by the use of street and private alarm boxes.

Streator has three well established banks with a combined capital of $300,000; combined surplus and undivided profits of $599,720.45, and combined deposits of nearly $600,000. We also have four prosperous, well managed building and loan associations that have helped to make Streator a city of home owners.

Streator has fifty-five acres of municipal park system, consisting of six parks with play grounds, and tourist free camping grounds. Public and private golf courses with a community athletic center. Two amusement parks and four modern movie theatres. Our YMCA and YWCA and Public Library are thoroughly modern and under efficient management. Visitors are always welcome.

Numerous clubs and fraternal organizations, among which are the Elks, Eagles, Moose, K. of C., American Legion, maintain club rooms.

Streator has a school system ranking well above the average in Illinois. It has nine grade school buildings, one township high school, four parochial schools and one business college. The health of the children is advanced by the employment of a full time nurse. Free text books supplied to all children in public elementary schools.

There are twenty churches in Streator, most of which have well-appointed buildings and welfare organizations.

The water supply is from the Vermillion River, impounded by a dam, with a storage capacity of 350,000,000 gallons. A 3,000,000 gallon per day filtration plant guarantees pure water for all users. This water is tested each day by the operating company and twice each month by the state board of health.

Gas for home and commercial use and electricity for light and power is available and reasonable for all desired needs. Modern generating, transforming, and distributing systems offer every practical guarantee for satisfactory and continuous service.[565]

CHAPTER 17
1927-1929

SODERSTROM CONDEMNS COUNTY POOR HOUSES

THE LEGISLATIVE BATTLEFIELD

Old-Age Pensions: "A Note of Humanity"

Reuben's first bold act of the 55th General Assembly was to introduce the Old Age Pension Bill, echoing his successful strategy with the Injunction-Limitation Bill: get out of the gate quick and strong with a momentous piece of legislation. If he were at a poker game, he would have been all-in with the first hand dealt…again.

Supported by the ISFL, the Joint Labor Legislative Board, the Fraternal Order of Eagles and other humanitarian organizations, the bill was "regarded as one of primary importance by the labor movement of the state."[566] During this era thousands of law-abiding citizens who had worked at unskilled jobs found themselves at retirement age without savings, and many were forced to spend their final years in the wretched County Poor House. Reub started the session with an impassioned speech on the floor that was carried throughout the newspapers of Illinois:

> I find no pride in the Poorhouses of our State, into which the aged men and women are cast and crowded together as so much worthless refuse. I want less of these scrap-baskets of humanity and more homes. Many aged, destitute couples who now inhabit these cheerless places of human misery are needlessly there. A few dollars paid periodically to many of them would have kept the private home in existence and would have allowed them to end their years with some measure of comfort and contentment…I claim that the right to die comfortably is just as desirable as the right to live prosperously. The silver lace of old age touches me more deeply than the flash and color of youth. I admire the dash and vigor of strength, but I honestly sympathize with the uncertain step and movement of weakness.[567]

That a married couple could be torn from one another horrified Reuben. According to Olga, the idea "disturbed Reuben greatly…Many County Poor Houses were badly managed, but the most distressing thing about them was this—the poor houses divided male and female. Each lived in different departments. Thus, when an old couple entered, they were separated…Reuben believed this was all wrong and hoped someday he could change this."[568]

The preservation of marriage was also one of the many reasons Reub's bill enjoyed such strong support among the religious community. Reub traces his passion for the issue back to his preacher father:

> My father was intensely interested in proper care for aged people. He told that in Scandinavian countries that aged people over there were always rather happy with smiles on their faces and worried about nothing because they did have an income, and they got that as a matter of right. At the age of 18 in the Scandinavian countries citizens are compelled to pay into an old age pension fund. And at the age of 60 no matter how rich they may

> be or how poor they may be, they must accept this old age pension. They have the right, of course, to return that to the fund, and many of them do who feel that they do not need that money, but they receive that as a matter or right.[569]

Most of the "Old World" already had some form of pension system, a central point of Reuben's argument. As he said:

> The older countries of Europe that do not boast of being "The Home of the Brave and The Free" have long since adopted the course of pensioning their old and impoverished citizens. Great Britain has such a law. Are we less generous? The State of Montana, the State of Nevada, the States of Tennessee, Colorado, Wisconsin and the territory of Alaska have taken favorable action on Old Age Pension Bills. Illinois—a prosperous, progressive State—should not hold back any longer.[570]

Reuben's bill provided $260 annually for those 70 and older who had been US citizens for 20 years or more. But despite this modest approach, the fight was intense as the Soderstrom Bill came to the House for a vote on April 20. Opponents—primarily from industrial interests—derided the bill as "socialistic" and "unworkable," while simultaneously (if disingenuously) claiming that the fund was too small to make any meaningful difference.[571] Reub responded from the floor:

> I want this Old Age Pension Bill because it will put a note of humanity into the work that we are doing. I want the work of the fifty-fifth General Assembly…to apply fairly to all the people in this State…I want this bill because it will demonstrate to the people of Illinois that they do not cease to be of concern to the State simply because they became old and poor. I want the Legislature to declare for homes instead of Poorhouses…I want liberty instead of imprisonment for the old. I want this grand old State of Illinois, whenever possible (and it is possible in our prosperous State), to help that old couple, gray-haired, bent with age, to live together and dream their dreams out under their own roof, at their own table, by their own fireside.[572]

Reub's bill gathered a respectable 65 votes, but fell 12 votes shy of the required majority.[573] He was flustered but not deterred when he walked the hallways of the statehouse and saw JM Glenn of the IMA sitting in the offices of various anti-labor legislators. Undaunted, Reub immediately scrambled to save the bill. He worked with the Senator Sneed to introduce a version of his bill that finally passed the Senate on June 23. With Senate approval secured, Reub redoubled his efforts in the House. This time he came remarkably close, as the ISFL newsletter reported:

> Representative Soderstrom again led the fight, but in spite of his earnest efforts and the support given him by the entire Joint Labor Legislative Board and all other friends of the measure in the House, it received but 75 votes, two short of the constitutional majority and thus was defeated. While the measure was defeated, its passage by the Senate and the large vote it received in the House in face of the formidable opposition against it, lends considerable confidence that this humane measure may find more favorable consideration in the future.[574]

But alas, the bill was doomed to lose. While this was partly due to the IMA's efforts, it also was a result of labor's smaller caucus in the legislature. Three labor-friendly legislators who won their elections died before the start of the 55th General Assembly, while another two were hospitalized during the session. A sixth pro-labor representative, who also served as an Alderman in Chicago, was unable to travel to Springfield without the opposition declaring his seat vacant under Chicago law. This meant labor was down a total of six votes total in the House.[575] These losses deepened during the 1928 election when six pro-labor representatives were beaten in their primary races, double the number of employer-friendly candidates.[576]

The IMA had the upper hand, and a vote on the Old Age Pension bill would have to wait for another day.

Like the injunction limitation bill before it, the Old Age Pension measure required even more attempts designed to recruit votes and bolster public awareness. To succeed, Reub would have to retool his plan and face-off against a fresh, new foe.

The IMA: A New Antagonist

After expertly engineering the defeat of the Old Age Pension Bill in the 1927 legislature, John M Glenn, the Lion of the Illinois Manufacturer's Association, died in Hot Springs Arkansas on April 21, 1928.[577] Until the end, Glenn had worked tirelessly for what he took to be his personal mission, the destruction of the "menace of labor."[578] Just before his death he conducted a "Good-will, Get-Acquainted" tour by train throughout Illinois, courting industrialists for his organization.[579] His death shook the IMA. More than any other man, Glenn had made the organization what it was, and his passing left the ship without a clear captain.

But the manufacturers were a resourceful organization and immediately found an effective torchbearer in James L. Donnelly. They matched the youthful energy of Reuben Soderstrom with Donnelly, aged 38 and Secretary of the Western Cartridge Company of East Illinois. He was selected to replace Glenn by the IMA board of directors on September 11, 1928.[580] An IMA Director for eight years and a vice president for one, the 38 year-old Donnelly was something of an outsider, eschewing the Chicago elite for his hometown of Alton, IL after a brief sojourn abroad. There he headed the Southern Division of the IMA, building a reputation for both a quick mind and silver tongue. Ably stepping into the shoes of the legendary JM Glenn, Donnelly would go toe-to-toe with Reuben for years to come.

LIFE IN AMERICA, LIFE IN STREATOR

Wall Street Versus Main Street

For the rich, 1927 and 1928 were boom years. The Wall Street Stock Exchange became home to a new gold rush, and those with means increased their share of the country's wealth dramatically. According to economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, the top 1% saw their incomes jump by 69% during the "boom years," from $204,363 to $345,567, between 1923 and 1928. America's elite did even better, increasing their annual gains from $2.61 million to over $7.25 million over the same period, an increase of over 177%. Average Americans, meanwhile, saw their meager average salary of $8,828 decrease by nearly 5% as manufacturers used their wealth and influence to keep organized labor weak.[581] Illinois was hurt particularly badly. In the words of ISFL President John Walker, the state suffered from "an industrial depression that is almost as bad as the one that was obtained just after the signing of the Armistice." Despite growing anger over the inequality that many suspected was at the heart of the crisis, "labor has seldom made any progress in legislative or other matters during such depressions."[582]

Compounding the situation were divisions within labor that prevented Illinois workers from realizing their full potential. Many Illinois unions were not contributing members of the American Federation of Labor, and even more were not members of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. John Walker wrote in an open report to AFL President William Green regarding pro-labor legislations: "If all the local unions in Illinois belonging to the international organizations affiliated with the American Federation of Labor had been members of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, paying their taxes to it and working unitedly in it for our program, there would have been no question about our putting it through in its entirety."[583]

Streator's Open Shop Fallout

Though Glenn was gone, his impact was keenly felt in Reuben's Streator. The legacy of the devastating Open

Shop vs. Closed Shop fight left the town a different place. Reuben argued that the evisceration of local unions left workers unprotected and exposed to lower wages, unable to afford quality products from local merchants. As a result, the worker with weaker buying power preferred discount stores and mail-order catalogues, which supplanted local merchants. Reuben spoke to the issue:

> Seven years ago the open shop association of Streator, Illinois began its drive to destroy the labor movement and reduce wages in this community. Fourteen hundred men and women were locked out and more destitution, misery and suffering was caused by this short-sighted policy of employers, business and professional men (who joined them) than was experienced here as a result of the World War. In their frenzy to reduce wages many strangers were imported, farmers and urbanites living in villages within a radius of fifty miles of Streator were brought into the open-shop plants to take the places of union workmen.
>
> Seven labor unions were destroyed—but twenty-nine chain stores are now occupying buildings in this city that formerly housed merchants who enjoyed a prosperous business when trade agreements were in operation in the open-shop plants. Most of the strangers who came here were mail order customers before they arrived and low wages made it impossible for them to buy quality groceries and merchandise. Whipped by necessity to buy where they could get what they needed the cheapest, merchant after merchant went out of business and chain stores appear everywhere today in the business district. Probably no illustration can be found anywhere of complete vindication of organized labor's defense of high wages than in Streator. The salvation of business prosperity rests on union wages. Legitimate merchants selling quality goods can exist only in communities where high wages are paid.[584]

With the legacy of the open shop vs. closed shop battle lingering and the Old Age Pension bill stalled in the statehouse, Reuben put his shoulder into his next campaign. Amidst all the social turbulence, it was imperative that he maintain his seat in the statehouse.

The Election of 1928

The election season of 1928 began with a shocking death: Democratic House leader and 39th District Representative Lee O'Neil Browne drowned in a river near his Ottawa home.[585] The loss meant that Reuben's race could look quite different; many of Browne's voters were up for grabs, especially given the state's unique three-vote/three-representative election rules. A candidate with high name recognition, even one from the opposing party, could conceivably swoop in and take a share of Browne's vote.

One man threatened to do exactly that. Ole Benson, Reub's old nemesis, had announced his intent to run in the Republican primary just days prior, a candidacy possibly engineered by the IMA to eliminate Reuben after their failure with Welter in 1926.[586] This wasn't Benson's first attempt to retake his old seat; in 1922 he actually won as an independent after failing in the Republican primary, denying Republicans one of their two traditional seats. Browne's death gave Benson a potential advantage, particularly if some of Browne's more conservative voters decided to switch to the Republican party. As was always the case, Reuben's survival would be determined in the Republican primary.

Five candidates—Incumbents Soderstrom and Wylie, Ole Benson, and newcomers William Isermann and Richard Entwistle—vied for a spot on the ticket in April of 1928. Reuben hustled hard. He addressed countless congregations, chapters, and any other group willing to listen. The speech Reub gave to the Plum Elementary School Parent Teacher Group on March 15 was a prime example of how he connected with the everyday voters of his district. With a folksy wit, he touted the benefits of active, good government through real-life, tangible examples. According to the Streator Independent Times detailed account:

> [Soderstrom's] preliminary remarks also touched upon taxation, through which he surely made each taxpayer feel that he was receiving much for his yearly payment to the government. He compared the small amount of taxation, with the privileges of enjoying such advantages as paved roads and highways, bridges, parks, libraries, schools, police and fire protection and many others, to the cost of education for one child in any one branch of art, say music. The cost of a musical education would amount to at least sixty dollars a year, what the average homeowner pays in taxes with its multifarious privileges.[587]

Soderstrom was also quick to note the funding he'd brought to the district, including money for 226 miles of paved roads, the huge Shippingsport Bridge at LaSalle and Fox River Bridge at Ottowa, as well as the Starved Rock and Buffalo State Parks.[588] As the election approached, posters plastered his face across the district touting his reputation as an "Honest, Efficient, and Human" as well as a man "who has nerve enough to work and vote for things the farmer, worker, soldier, educator and progressive businessman want."[589] Others put the challenge to his opponents, with Reuben declaring, "I defy any person to point to a single instance where my vote and voice have not been recorded on the side of the people, on the side of humanity."[590] Reuben's aggressive defense of labor and good government carried the day, giving Reuben a substantial primary win, with the second spot going to Wylie.

Soderstrom's opponents in didn't give up. Unfazed, they convinced the Republican Party to field three candidates in the fall, with his old foe Ole Benson and the IMA again playing the role of spoiler. Their incumbent-unseating strategy worked, but it was Wylie who fell instead of Reub, whose status as the elder statesmen of the 39th district helped him secure a landslide victory in the general election.

THE 1929 SPRINGFIELD SESSION

Old-Age Pensions, Round Two

Jim Donnelly glared from the galleys of the statehouse as the energetic Soderstrom crossed the House floor, happily shaking hands and discussing the promise of a new session. To his chagrin, all attempts to unseat the labor legislator only seemed to make him stronger. And with a new session came a new post for the 41-year-old Soderstrom—Chairman of the House Education Committee.[591]

As soon as the 56th Illinois General Assembly of 1929 convened, Reub again introduced the Old Age Pension Bill to floor of the House.[592] All factions anticipated Reub's persistent effort and a contentious fight immediately followed. Some anti-labor legislators rejected the idea that a Poorhouse problem even existed; as the ISFL Weekly recorded, "Representative Roy Juul denied the claim that industry men are being 'scrapped at 45 years of age,' and referred to the bill as dealing with 'an alleged social problem' on which there was no need for legislation."[593] Other attacks were more sensational. During the roll call, Representative Igoe voted against the bill only after launching into an extended personal attack of ISFL President Walker, falsely insinuating that he had led the mob responsible for the Herrin Strip Mine Massacre of 1922.[594] Reub refrained from such tactics, saying instead that "opponents of the bill are just as human as those supporting it" and that he "would not become abusive in [my] remarks."[595]

Once last time, Reub came to the floor and delivered an impassioned call for the bill's passage, imploring his colleagues to act on behalf of older workers "so that in the twilight of life they may dream their dreams out by their own firesides."[596] The speech was incredibly effective, described by the Pontiac Leader as "a splendid plea for passage of the bill as a humanitarian issue. (Soderstrom) was roundly applauded when he finished his talk."[597] As members spoke among themselves, Reub worked the room in an attempt to garner additional votes. "Fighting what at first appeared to be a losing battle," the Peru News-Herald noted, "Rep. RG Soderstrom, Streator steadily gained support for the measure as the roll call progressed."[598] The entire

experience closely echoed Reub's success with the Injunction Limitation Bill, and by the time debate ended, Reub had rounded up an overwhelming number of votes, passing the legislation by a count of 84 to 49.[599] The labor press was overwhelmed by the win, calling the bill "one of the most humanitarian pieces of legislation that has ever passed the House…March 19, 1929, will be recorded as a great day in the history of Illinois."[600]

Unfortunately, the IMA lay in waiting across the hall in the Senate. Through a series of procedural tricks and turns by Senate Judiciary Committee Chair James Barbour and others, anti-labor legislators worked in concert with Jim Donnelly and the Illinois Manufacturer's Association to prevent the bill from receiving a fair vote. Reub and the aged, working poor he represented were forced to defer their dream yet again.[601]

Reub's pension bill wasn't the manufacturers' only victim. The IMA itself noted with pride that "while 1,547 bills and resolutions were introduced in the General Assembly not a single bill seriously inimical to the manufacturing industries was enacted into law."[602] Donnelly was quick to attribute such "success" to his organizing efforts. "The importance to industry of effective legislative organization was conspicuously demonstrated during the 56th General Assembly," he noted in his report to IMA President Cunningham. "Nearly the entire staff of the Illinois Manufacturer's Association has been engaged throughout the session, either on the ground at Springfield or at our headquarters office in Chicago in the arduous task of earnestly protecting or advancing the legislative interests of its membership."[603] Donnelly singled out the defeat of Reuben's Old Age Pension Bill, which he derided as "another pet measure of organized labor…This bill (Old Age Pension) slipped through the House, but as the result of an aggressive campaign against it, led by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association following its passage in the House it was quickly disposed of by the Senate."[604]

For two sessions in a row, the IMA thwarted Reuben's Old Age Pension bill. Soderstrom had to sit with the odd reality that the bill passed both the House and the Senate, but not in the same legislative sessions.

The Coming Storm

Although Reub and his allies weren't able to pass much in the way of pro-labor legislation in the late 1920s, they weren't without their wins; Reuben personally secured amendments to the Workman's Compensation Act including additional hazardous employment benefits, minimum death benefits, payment reform, and more. In education, Reub was also able to provide a minimum eight months of school, raise the requirement for obtaining work certificates for child laborers, and increase funding for public schools and State Normal (teaching) schools by over 25%—advances made possible by his appointment as Chair of the House Education Committee. Labor was also twice able to amend the Mother's Pension Law, providing additional funds to widowed women who lost husbands in work-related accidents. The 1927 legislature additionally passed improvements to public employee pensions, an amendment to the Educational Distributive fund allowing money to be spent according to need, and a Wage Guarantee bill making shareholders personally liable for two weeks unpaid labor. Labor also stopped a State Military Police bill and filed opposition to a bill promoting sterilization of criminals.[605]

These minor successes paled in comparison to their defeats, however. The Women's Eight-Hour Bill and the One Day Rest in Seven Bill both failed to pass. Attempts to enact laws ending "Yellow Dog" contracts, which prevented signees from joining (or even talking to) a union also failed. These sessions represented modest wins, but no major victories for labor; and unfortunately, the worst was yet to come.

With the completion of the 1929 legislative season, Reuben returned to his life as a linotype operator, rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt to set type in the hot press room. As the end of the year approached, he looked

forward to a year of family and friends, free from many of the struggles and frustrations of Springfield. As he read the wire reports from the East coast, however, Reub began to see troubling trends. In the final hours of trading on Thursday, Oct. 23, stock prices took a precipitous dive. The following day the prices plunged even further. Despite assurances from President Hoover that "the fundamental business of the country…is on a sound and prosperous basis," the opening bell on Monday the 28 rang in a deepening crisis culminating in the notorious "Black Tuesday." By November 13, the market had bottomed out, with $25 billion lost in the crash.[606]

Late fall turned to deep winter as the Vermillion River froze solid. By 1930 the world Reub knew had turned on its head, and soon he would be called to help stem the crisis in the role of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 18
1930, Pt.1

REUBEN RUNS FOR PRESIDENCY OF THE INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHICAL UNION

A DARK WINTER

A Growing Depression

In the early and dark months of 1930, Reuben repeatedly stepped away from his linotype machine in his ink-stained apron to clear his head, increasingly clouded by somber anguish over the headlines he was asked to set:

"New Stock Market Crash!"
"Panic Seizes Stock Market"
"Hoover Takes Up 'Jobless' Situation"
"Senate Launches Investigation of Unemployment"
"Stock Market Comes to Stop After Big Drops"
"Nation Moves to Check Unemployment"

As a linotype man, Reuben's job was safe; unemployment in the printing trades was barely at 6%. But the broader scene was much darker; unemployment for all union trades soared from 9% shortly before the crash to over 22% by February of 1930. The building trades were hit especially hard, with a staggering 43% of all workers unemployed.[607]

With its industry built on the brick and tile trade, Streator was hit exceptionally hard. Local staples such Heenan's department store and the Western Glass company were shut down, exposing as many as 4,000 men and their families to unprecedented poverty.[608] Even the city's interurban rail, (on which Reub had worked as a child) could no longer afford to run. Unemployment gutted the town and families fled. The bustling boulevards of "Streator on Saturday Night" were replaced with foreclosed shops and shuttered factories. After hanging up his printer's apron and closing down the shop, Reuben would journey with Lafe down those empty streets looking in vain for signs of hope. They often walked along the tracks, now crowded with hundreds of men, women, and children wandering the country in search of work. Many ended up in what became known as the "jungle," camps near the rail lines full of decent folk in inhuman conditions. It was cold. The gift of an old jacket or a hard piece of bread was cherished.

Streator's jungle was a little more than a clearing for a campfire not far from the city barns on Oak Street.[609] As Reuben passed he could hear the jungle buzzard giving instructions, calling for scraps and spuds for the evening meal. Most often dinner was a stew made from whatever leftovers could be scavenged, remnants one camper described as "stuff I wouldn't feed to a hog."[610] On occasion Reub would anonymously contribute to the meal—a few potatoes or fresh bread to soak up the thin soup. To fend off the bitter cold, many of the unemployed local miners broke into "worked-out" coal mines to dig out whatever scrap coal could still be

found. Like other miners across the nation, they distributed the oily black shards to widows first, then amongst themselves.[611] The fires were small and the winds were fierce. At night in his own home, Reuben held his wife and children closely under their wool blankets.

Soderstrom Fights Unemployment and the IMA

As a representative of the people, Reub would ride the train to Springfield and watch as each town's depot told the story of a civilization in distress. Families were camped out on every platform and impromptu food lines and assistance centers were set up by charitable organizations and churches to serve the needy. One can imagine the tremendous responsibility Reuben carried with him into the statehouse. He would later state: "If we could keep our people employed, everything else seems to work out some way, in a fairly satisfactory way. But when folks are unemployed and home conditions become bad, then all is in a terrible state of mind; there's no income there; then things are really bad."[612]

Reuben campaigned fiercely against the laissez-faire approach of President Hoover and the Manufacturers' Association, turning to the pages of the ISFL to call for action:

> Organized labor, and many employers too, have discovered that unemployment, such as we have now, cannot be conquered by repeated and cheerful and grandiloquent newspaper statements, nor by private verbal expressions of combined wishing and hoping that it should end. Those in control of industry must do something worthwhile to solve this vexing unemployment condition. The duty of every citizen is plain and definite. Hungry people must be fed—that's clear. Destitution must be relieved.[613]

Lasting support would come through meaningful legislation, and Reuben's idea was a universally accepted 8-hour work day that fit into a 5–day work week. That was counter to the prevailing 10 to 12-hour workday that was often demanded in a 6-day work week. A more humane schedule would open up more hours for the unemployed. "We are confronted with a real unemployment emergency," he continued, "And the sooner that all employers discover that the eight-hour day and five-day work week is a step in the right direction, and universally declare for it and establish it, the sooner will this much desired business revival come into existence…Legislation can materially assist in starting industry off on the right road."[614]

Predictably, Reub's old adversaries at the Illinois Manufacturers' Association had a decidedly different point of view. They knew laws limiting the number of hours they could squeeze from a worker would force them to hire more men and women to meet their need. This would in turn increase the size of the unions, reduce the pool of strikebreakers, and ultimately lead to higher salaries when those fully employed demanded a living wage. To Glenn's successor James Donnelly, however, there was no crisis to manage; just a temporary downturn that Reuben was exploiting to pass new labor laws. The IMA initially denied the existence of a massive economic downturn. "The manufacturers of Illinois had not expected that catastrophe," writes Alfred Kelly in his history of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. "When the stock market first crashed, the Association hastened to assure its constituents and the public that the 'business situation' was 'essentially sound.' Even as the shadows of economic disintegration deepened, Donnelly and his colleagues declared again and again that economic recovery was a mere matter of the moment."[615]

According to Donnelly, unemployment wasn't the problem; it was a side effect of the "growth of socialism." Similarly, the true victims weren't the homeless eating food unfit for swine but the manufacturers, who were unable to pay higher wages or hire more men because of "ruinous taxation" that fed and sheltered those not working. As Donnelly later testified before a hearing of the US House Ways and Means Committee concerning unemployment insurance, "It (this bill) would increase unemployment by aggravating the very conditions which it is attempting to correct, by crippling the agencies which furnish opportunities for

employment, by discouraging efforts to relieve unemployment, and by placing a premium on idleness."[616]

As winter grew dark, it became clear to Reuben that they were on the cusp of massive social upheaval. The question he discussed with Lafe as they walked the streets of Streator was how he, a mere legislator, could more effectively aid labor in these trying times. Lafe had an idea.

DEEPENING DIVISIONS

Reuben Runs for ITU President

Though he lived in Chicago, Lafe still made the 81-mile trip south to Streator whenever he could for Sunday dinners with Reub, talking into the night about events on the ground. Lafe held the same unshakable faith in his brother that had bonded them since childhood, and he believed that it was time for Reub to run for higher office. At first he suggested a run for the US House as the 'at-large' Congressman for Illinois, or possibly challenging former Governor Charles Deneen for his seat in the US Senate. As the Soderstrom family gathered at Reuben's small brick home on Lincoln Avenue to celebrate the New Year, however, Lafe took his brother aside to discuss an even more audacious idea—a run for President of the International Typographers Union.

The International Typographical Union, or ITU, was one of the most powerful unions in all of organized labor. It was the union of the presses, and with that role came prestige and influence. Like other unions, the ITU had factions that supported different positions and people. Unlike their peers, though, these groups had grown into formal political parties, complete with nominations, committees, and campaigns. The conservative Administration Party had formed out of a secret society of printers called the Wahnetas (the "Wahs"), while the opposition coalesced into what became the Progressive Party ("Progs"). By 1930, the Progressives had won control of the organization, with Charles Howard from Chicago Local 16 leading the ITU as President. However, many within the party had grown disenchanted with Howard's leadership and viewed him as a "closet conservative," less than willing to assist striking locals. He was also lax in his support of measures that limited hours and he opposed sharing work with unemployed members.

Despite his souring reputation, Howard still had the support of his native Chicago; then came the events of the infamous "Black Sunday." In 1929, Chicago Local 16 was negotiating with local print shops for a five-day week and a wage increase of $2 and $3 for day and night workers, respectively. According to the officials of Local 16, nearly all employers had agreed to the scale when President Howard intervened on behalf of the shops of the Franklin Association. He ordered the strikers back to work, undermining the entire deal. Howard then held closed-door meetings with the shops and on Sunday, November 10, forced a settlement that effectively killed the five-day work week provisions. Outraged, Local President Worthington DeWolf condemned Howard's actions, stating "had President Howard kept his hands off we could have settled our job scale in twenty-four hours…I have no confidence in any man, nor would I trust any man, that works in secret with bosses."[617]

As an active member of Local 16, Lafe Soderstrom kept an ear to the ground and a finger to the wind; he was convinced enough anti-Howard sentiment existed to break his hold on the Progs. In January of 1930, Lafe quietly arranged a dinner in Chicago between Reub and the disaffected officials of Local 16. During the long meal they discussed their common concerns and possible options. Securing the Progressive nomination was soon dismissed as out of the question; Howard still controlled enough of the party machinery to prevent that. A run at the Administration Party ticket would also likely fail as Reub, known for his progressive politics dating back to the Roosevelt Bull-Moose years, would be unacceptable to their base. Still, both these parties were fractured. Disillusioned Progs were ready to leave the party altogether and there were rumors that the

Administrative Party was in a similar state. What if these groups combined to form their own party? With the right candidate to organize behind, the new party might have a chance.

Soon after the dinner, Reub boldly announced his intention to run as President of the ITU under the banner of the Unionist Party, a new group formed of breakaway Progressives and Conservatives alike. Lafe became vice president of the organization's Chicago branch and began forming the party's message. Its platform was a direct rebuke of Howard's politics, calling to fight unemployment through a five-day week and six-hour day to spread available work amongst all union members. It proposed a more democratic union with reforms to nominations and elections. Last, a humanization of the pension system, long an issue close to Reub's heart, was also made a central plank.[618]

Formed from competing interests specifically to oppose Howard, the Unionists clearly knew what they were against. What they needed was something to be for, and Lafe believed that something (or someone) could be Reuben. He deftly promoted his brother in speeches and in print as "Our Reub," using his life's story as a narrative for the Unionist cause. Party pamphlets introduced Reuben to a national audience as "The Man of the Hour," ready to lead in this moment of crisis:

> Organized labor has only one representative in the Illinois State Legislature—Reuben G. Soderstrom of Streator. Yet Illinois occupies first place among all the states of the nation in the matter of legislation favoring union labor and in the absence of legislation aiding the open-shop movement. And R.G. Soderstrom is very largely responsible for that condition. That he possesses exceptional qualities of leadership—personal magnetism, knowledge, courage—goes without saying. But those qualities do not account for the legislative power he wields…The secret of his phenomenal success is his deep and genuine sympathy for the toiling masses, which manifests itself in his personal contacts, his public utterances and legislative efforts…add to the above a clean, wholesome life and sterling honesty, and you have the picture of a champion of labor who commands the respect and admiration not only of union men and women, but their enemies, throughout Illinois and far beyond its boundaries.[619]

Soderstrom soon became synonymous with the party itself. The fact that he was "not a politician" who "makes no appeal to partisan prejudice" transformed into the party's slogan of "More Unionism-More Action-Less Politics."[620] It was a message that resonated.

In the following months, Reuben campaigned aggressively. With Lafe by his side, he began securing impressive endorsements of ITU locals across the country. The new party Unionists needed to win the endorsement votes of at least 50 locals to get on the ballot, and it wasn't long before Reub began marking major victories. First came New York Local 6 (the "Big Six"), one of the largest locals in the nation. The local overwhelmingly endorsed Howard in the last election, but in the early months of 1930 it declared it was "solid for Soderstrom," endorsing him by a clear majority. Then came triumph in Chicago as Reuben defeated Howard in his home local's election, leading the Unionists to crow that, "where Soderstrom became known, he was either endorsed or received a strong vote. Where Howard was known, he lost."[621] As the May election neared, Reuben and the Unionists continued to spread the word around the nation, but they ran into a rough reality: President Howard controlled the information ITU members received in his role as publisher of the Typographers Journal.

On May 28, many of the 70,000 ITU members across the country gathered in their labor temples and meeting rooms to cast votes for the nominated officers, with the final votes from each local communicated to the national headquarters in Indianapolis. Unfortunately for Reuben, the results showed that the Administrative Party (which renamed itself the Conservative Party after a large portion of its membership defected to the Unionists) split the anti-Howard vote; in the end, Reuben's Unionist ticket came in third with

roughly 18% of the vote.[622] Despite a valiant effort and colorful campaign, Lafe's dream of a Reuben Soderstrom-led ITU was dead.

Still, not all was lost. On April 8, 1930, Reuben again (and expectedly) won a spot on the Republican Party ticket for the general election of the 39th District of the Illinois House of Representatives. Despite the turbulence in many unions, Reuben at least was secure in his statehouse seat. Reuben came in far ahead of all his rivals, earning more votes than all the losing candidates combined.[623]

John L. Lewis and the ISFL's Mining Implosion

While Reuben campaigned for the ITU presidency, John Walker, the Illinois State Federation of Labor President and a close friend of Reuben's, was consumed by factional warfare within his own United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The 1920s had not been kind to America's miners. Most notable was the 1922 "Herrin Massacre," a mining strike ending with nineteen strikebreakers seized and slaughtered in revenge for the shooting deaths of three striking miners. Details of the massacre were chillingly gruesome; some of the captured scabs were forced to crawl on their hands and knees into their dug graves before being shot in front of a cheering, bloodthirsty crowd. The public outrage forced the UMWA to cut a deal that effectively forced the miners to end their strike with no increase in pay; this sent disgruntled miners back to work in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Alabama, Texas, Utah, and Colorado. Between 1920 and 1929, UMWA membership plummeted from over 600,000 to under 100,000.[624]

It was at this turbulent point that a new figure lumbered boisterously onto the stage of Reuben's life: John L. Lewis. The two men would soon share not just uncannily similar life journeys, but also at times an office, speaking engagements, and the inner-circle feuds, disputes, and resolutions that would lead labor through the bumpy subsequent decades.

Born and raised in Iowa, Lewis became a miner at age 15 and moved to Panama, Illinois, where he eventually became president of his UMW local. In 1911, he was hired by Samuel Gompers as a union organizer and rose quickly through the union ranks, becoming President of the UMWA in 1920. Even as a young man, Lewis had a flamboyant style and was known for his grandiloquent rhetoric, as well as his combative disposition and dictatorial style of leadership.[625] As the situation in the mines deteriorated in the late 1920s, many argued that the pugnacious Lewis seemed primarily invested in consolidating his own power and authority. He cut local relief spending and choked off benefits for unemployed miners, with aid dropping from over $3 million annually to under $17,000 by 1929. He even suspended the annual United Mineworkers' Convention indefinitely, claiming insufficient funds.[626] Funding for the UMWA's administration, however, was kept strong, with Lewis using UMWA budgets to enhance his authority and patronage.

All this aroused the ire of many local and regional leaders, who balked at what they viewed as Lewis's hardball tactics and neglect. They accused the President of "downright blundering, mad, unreasoning, stupid, destructive and disloyal leadership."[627] Local leaders Alexander Howatt of Kansas, Frank Keeny of West Virginia, and John Brophy of Pennsylvania were particularly incensed by Lewis's "abandonment" of their states' miners. They started a "Save Our Union" campaign to unseat Lewis, who punched back by labeling them communists and expelling them from the Union.[628] Still, regional opposition persisted, particularly in Illinois District 12, which comprised more than two-thirds of the union's dues-paying membership, including ISFL president John H. Walker himself. In an effort to break his opponents, on October 10, 1929, Lewis used charges of corruption to suspend the charter of District 12, remove the elected officials, and replace them with a provisional administration of loyalists answerable only to Lewis himself.

This was too much for the local miners to bear. The majority of the district refused to accept Lewis's cronies,

and with the support of Howatt, Keeny and Brophy, the Illinois miners went to court to stop him. They claimed that Lewis's actions were invalid because he had unilaterally suspended the UMWA constitution, and they immediately called for a convention of their own in Springfield, for March 10, to restore the UMWA back to its original form. But as soon as they did, Lewis called for his own convention in Indianapolis the same day.

Now, every local in the UMWA was forced to make a choice: would they stand with the miners of John Walker's Illinois District 12, or fall in line with Lewis? The choice was especially hard for Reub's close friend Walker. The ISFL president was widely respected and beloved; Reub later described him as someone "I was very fond of…I thought no greater man ever lived."[629] It was because of this reputation that Lewis' rivals, at a secret meeting in Chicago, asked Walker to help lead them. As Lewis biographer Melvyn Dubofsky writes:

> At their Chicago conclave, the insurgents wisely chose a slate of prospective officers…For the two primary administrative posts, president and secretary-treasurer, the insurgents selected John H. Walker and John Brophy. Walker could be charged with neither personal ambition nor selfish motives, because he had to relinquish his secure and prestigious office as president of the Illinois Federation of Labor in order to serve the insurgent coal miners.[630]

Walker was faced with a stark choice. He was now officially leading an expelled group of miners and the Illinois Federation of Labor, but he couldn't be both for long. In the end, according to Reuben, there was only one option:

> The group of miners that John H. Walker was identified with sort of formed a new miner's union, at least it was a dual organization of miners, with the result that John H. Walker felt that he ought to resign and stay with his group. It was no fault of his at all. It was just one of those things that sometimes happens in labor organizations, and he remained with his crowd…he stayed with the expelled crowd and was compelled to resign from the State presidency.[631]

So Walker, just like Reuben within the ITU, stayed with his crowd and made an improbable run against the entrenched leadership of his union. On March 10, Walker attended the insurgent convention at Springfield. As a result, ten days later AFL President Green, who refused to recognize the splinter group's legitimacy, asked for Walker's resignation as president of the ISFL. Walker submitted his notice to resign on April 9, and on May 5 the ISFL Executive board accepted his resignation, installing Vice President Fitchie as Interim President. For the first time in 17 years, the ISFL was without an elected leader.

As summer approached, our 42-year-old protagonist found himself tossed about in the turbulent world of labor politics. His old friend and ally Walker had been forced out of the ISFL while his adversary Howard had re-won his leadership post with the ITU, all against the backdrop of a deepening national depression. Then came the unexpected opportunity that would change Reuben's life forever.

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