

The Lives and Working Conditions of Workers at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, Pueblo,
Colorado, 1892-1914

**How did paternalism in the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company affect the lives of workers
and industry in the West?**

History Extended Essay

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Table of Contents

A. Abstract.....	1
B. Introduction.....	2
C. Investigation	
1. Paternalism.....	4
2. The Founding of the CF&I.....	5
3. Workers of the CF&I Company.....	8
4. Labor Protests and Effects.....	11
D. Conclusion.....	14
E. Bibliography.....	16

Abstract

This essay explores the question, “**How did paternalism in the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company affect the lives of workers and industry in the West?**” The essay starts with a breakdown of paternalism, its meanings and effects, and an example of how it has been seen in the history of the United States. Then the essay proceeds with an investigation on the start of the Colorado Fuel and Iron company and some of the conditions surrounding industry and industrialization in the West of the United States that contributed to the company’s start. The investigation continues with descriptions on the specific paternalism workers of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company faced, how it affected them, and some of the initial reactions to this treatment. Following this, the essay details the grander reactions to the treatment of workers that resulted in the Colorado Labor Wars and various protests and how it links in to the greater progressive movement fighting for improved working conditions in the industry. This essay concludes that the paternalism at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company in the region had an extremely impactful effect on the lives of workers and industry in the West. This is demonstrated through the protests and the response of workers to paternalism in industry, clashes between the working class and their employers, and the resulting legal actions taken to ensure just and quality conditions for workers in the United States.

Word Count: 237

Introduction

As seen throughout history, battles between authority and its constituents have always existed. This has been seen when workers have been upset with how they are treated or paid and have used their voices to demand fairer conditions from their employers. These issues became more prevalent on a massive scale during the industrial revolution, lasting from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries as newer companies attempted to increase profits by subjecting workers to long, difficult hours consisting of performing monotonous tasks for measly pay.¹ In the start of this Industrial Revolution, labor laws were in-existent, and industry was not fully regulated. The heads of the businesses in this revolution, known as Captains of Industry, were able to get away with these harsh conditions simply because it was not regulated, and they were doing anything to increase the bottom line.²

This happened in the Northeast of the country where populations of cities were exploding and were at the heart of industry in the nation. But as the United States refined iron to steel and marched westward on the ever-expanding railroad, much of these ideals came westward. In the mountainous regions of Colorado, a large market for the resources buried in rock was born. Companies such as the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company (CF&I) made large profits off harvesting the resources of coal and iron in the ground and employed large work forces to get this job done.³ Similarly to those out in the east, the CF&I and other similar companies in

¹ Walsh, Francis P., and Basil M. Manly. Industrial Relations: Final Reports and Testimony. Primary Source ed. United States Commission on Industrial Relations

² Rees, Jonathan. Representation and Rebellion: The Rockefeller Plan at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, 1914-1942. University Press of Colorado, 2010.

³ Scamehorn, H. Lee. Pioneer Steelmaker in the West: The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, 1872-1903. Boulder, CO: Pruett Pub., 1976.

Colorado implemented these ideas in a form of paternalism, or when an authority limits the power of a group by restricting where they can live and spend their money.⁴

This investigation explores the relationship and ideals of the workers and owners of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. The paper is based on the research question, “**How did paternalism in the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company affect the lives of workers and industry in the West?**” This topic is worthy of investigation because industry today still faces some of the same problems for workers and strikes over conditions that existed over a hundred years ago. This question will be discussed through and proven by the conditions and events of labor of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and how they treated their workers. Through the knowledge of the events of labor battles at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, an understanding of how labor rights and changes that made since the early twentieth century can be created.

The paternalism of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company had a great impact on the lives of their workers as well as being a major factor leading to improvements for coal and steel workers in throughout the United States. Due to their poor and unfair working conditions, workers at the CF&I were fueled to speak out for change for the companies in their industry.⁵ Despite the paternalism workers were subjected to, they joined together, against the powerful Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, and advocated for change in the working conditions and unfair rules they faced.

⁴ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

⁵ Martelle, Scott. *Blood Passion*. America Star Books, 2016.

Investigation

Paternalism

The most important way of describing the working conditions of the CF&I in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century was through the paternalism displayed by the company. In a broad sense, the word paternalism refers to when an authority limits a groups liberty or autonomy.⁶ Most often, from the authority's perspective, this act is done for the group's own good and is intended to help them in the long run, but this rarely occurs.⁷ Inside of paternalism, there are several types: soft (voluntary) and hard (involuntary), as well as weak (directed at those who cannot act autonomously) and strong (directed at those who can act autonomously).⁸ In the case of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, workers' rights of how much they got paid, where they could live, and where they could spend their money inside company towns were all limited.⁹

The paternalism at the CF&I is an example of hard and strong paternalism. In the words of psychologist Gerald Dworkin "it is [believed to be] legitimate to interfere"¹⁰ with the lives of the constituents. At the CF&I the company involuntarily placed these restrictions upon the workers and believed they would both benefit the workers lives and ability to work as well as benefit the company with more working hours and productivity. Paternalism is not necessarily negative or positive in nature as it can both benefit and detriment the subject. For the workers subjected to paternalism at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, as stated by historian Rick Clyne, "[The CF&I gave] a remarkable attempt to redress the social problems that contributed to

⁶ Dworkin, Gerald. "Paternalism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. February 12, 2017.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paternalism/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hands, Barbara. "Paternalism and the Law." Philosophy Now. 2009.
https://philosophynow.org/issues/71/Paternalism_and_the_Law.

⁹ Olson, Todd N. The Decline of American Steel: The History of the CF & I Steel Corporation. 1985.

¹⁰ Dworkin, "Paternalism"

discontent and labor unrest”¹¹ in hopes to be a better and more powerful company. It instead only proved to aid the company while workers of the mills were forced to live difficult and strenuous conditions to make a money for their families.

One example in United States of paternalism in the workplace was that of women entering the work force around the same time period as the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. Prior to this time, men dominated the work force in the office, and it was not until the progressive era when women started incorporating.¹² In the 1870s, women first entered the workforce, almost entirely employed as typists, and would spend their day transcribing on a typewriter. Women were believed to be the best type of person for this role, and that “the typewriter [was] adapted to feminine fingers.”¹³ Women were “paternalized” by their employers as they were only allowed to fill these less educated, simpler roles and were not believed to be able to work in some of the more “serious positions.” It was not until the feminist movement of the 1960s that women started to fill more roles in the workplace because they were kept down by their paternal employers.¹⁴

The Founding of the CF&I

During the Second Industrial Revolution, occurring from about 1870 up until 1914, the country was in high-demand for resources to fuel the machine of industry.¹⁵ At the time, the U.S. was primarily focused on a large shift of people from rural areas to more urban called the “Great Migration” as well as the construction of a network of railroads spanning the continent. After just

¹¹ Clyne, Rick J. *Coal People; Life in Southern Colorado's Company Towns, 1890-1930*. Denver, CO: History Colorado, 1999.

¹² The Arrival of Women in the Office." BBC News. July 25, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23432653>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

coming out of the Civil War, many citizens were eager to find a better living in the larger cities and some were inclined to move out west into the less inhabited portions of the country.¹⁶ Due to these massive increases in needs for transportation, individuals founded companies to create and refine the resources necessary for the country. One of these companies was the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, founded in 1892 in Pueblo, Colorado.¹⁷

In the newly-founded Colorado, the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (DRGW) was a primary railroad that brought both goods and people to the state. As well, the DRGW helped connect mines and smaller cities together through its network of railways.¹⁸ In 1881, the first iron mill in the western half of the country was founded by the Colorado Coal and Iron Company (CC&I) to provide resources for the DRGW. Both the company and railroad were led by General William J. Palmer, a war-veteran, philanthropist, and founder of the City of Colorado Springs north of the mill.¹⁹ This mill provided everything from rail-road tracks and spikes to a closer proximity to where the tracks were being constructed. This helped increase the expansion of the company as these products no longer required distant transport from the mills in the eastern states.

To source the raw minerals, the CC&I created mines throughout the southern half of Colorado in and around the mining cities of Canyon City and Trinidad. The mill was successful for producing coal and iron to fuel the DRGW up until 1890 when demand decreased from the railway.²⁰ At the same time in Southern Colorado the Colorado Fuel Company (CFC) was being

¹⁶ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

¹⁷ "Colorado Fuel and Iron: CF&I Timeline." University of Southern California. <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-colorado-fuel-and-iron-company/cfi-timeline?path=index>.

¹⁸ "Colorado Fuel & Iron Company." Gregory Howell. <http://www.gregoryhowell.com/colorado-fuel-iron-company/>.

¹⁹ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

²⁰ Clyne, *Coal People*

built up. This company had similar products as the CC&I but primarily sold to the Chicago Burlington Quincy Railroad and was managed by John C. Osgood.²¹ Both the CFC and the CC&I produced and sold ample amounts to their prospective railways in the region but were constantly in competition with one another. Amidst the competition, a decrease in the need for fuel in the railroads led to the 1892 merger of CFC and CC&I. Directed by Osgood, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I) was created.²²

In the new union of the companies, the CF&I prospered as both original companies doubled their natural resources and production mills for their iron, coal, and steel. During the 1890s, the CF&I continued to increase its assets, purchasing land with coal in the counties surrounding Pueblo, Colorado as well as in New Mexico, Wyoming, and Utah. In addition, the company purchased machines from smaller companies in the region increasing their output and how much raw materials they could process.²³ The primary steel mill of the company was the Minnequa Works in Pueblo County and was the main source for providing jobs for citizens in the region. According to Gregory Howell, at the CF&I “it took thousands of employees to operate such a massive company and brought immigrants from around the country and the globe to the West.”²⁴ The CF&I was surrounded by the mineral-rich land of mountainous Colorado and did not have to go far to find the raw resources they needed. In this decade, the company also worked to perfect the process of purifying iron ore and coal to increase the rate they could sell their product to the demanding railways.²⁵

²¹ Martelle, *Blood Passion*

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Colorado Fuel and Iron Company.” Howell

²⁵ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

The success of the CF&I continued to prosper and eventually caught the eye of the Captain of Industry, John D. Rockefeller. Rockefeller was an oil magnate on the East Coast and through his company, Standard Oil, he accumulated millions of dollars by mining for and refining petroleum.²⁶ His petroleum was used throughout the eastern portion of the United States and was the main resource for powering the massive industrial revolution. Rockefeller was interested by the prospects of the company and in 1904 he purchased a controlling share of the Colorado Fuel and Iron company.²⁷ Quickly, Rockefeller worked to further increase the productions and profits of the Minnequa Works in Pueblo at the worker's expense and leading to "into a long period of corporate stability".²⁸

Workers of the CF&I Company

To work the large steel mill of Minnequa, the CF&I needed a lot of working hands. In the state of Colorado, the company employed more than 10 percent of all workers.²⁹ The workers at the steel mills were primarily immigrants looking for a job to provide for their families. The CF&I provided this, as well as housing in company towns that were built up around the mills. With every mine and company town came a host of required company doctors, grocers, and cheaply built housing.³⁰ For the most part, workers were required by the company to visit the company doctors if they were not feeling well and to shop at the company grocer for all their needs. However, from the perspective of the company this was important "given the inherent dangers of the industry, the larger employers had to provide medical service"³¹ according to

²⁶ Rees, *Representation and Rebellion*

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Clyne, *Coal People*

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

historian Rick Clyne. This allowed the company to make back the money they paid their workers as it came right back into their pockets through their doctors. Many of the miners and steel workers were angry because of this act of paternalism from the company: forcing the workers to spend their money at a specific place owned by the CF&I. This led to many who spoke out against the company as they thought it was unfair that they should be required to do anything with the money they had earned.

The land of the mines and mills as well as much of the land surrounding these locations were owned by the company. Miners and workers were strongly encouraged to live on the poorly constructed houses on this land.³² Even though these workers were provided with a roof over their heads, the CF&I would require the tenants to pay increased prices to live there. In the case where a worker would lose their job at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, they would not only lose their income but their home through the company also.³³ As well as houses on the land owned by the company, the CF&I would quickly construct a ram-shackle town; they owned everything from the churches and schools to saloons and stores. This removed to autonomy of the workers and every dollar they spent went directly back to the company.

Another grievance of the miners and workers at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company was related to the dangerous working conditions they lived in and unfair pay from the company. In the mines in southern Colorado, accidents were not uncommon and included often explosions and cave-ins for those working in the coal-mines.³⁴ In a general case in the United States, it was customary for the worker and their family to be fairly compensated for the damages caused in a workplace accident. But as the workers were required to visit the company doctor, and be

³² Martelle, *Blood Passion*

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Clyne, *Coal People*

represented by a company attorney, workers were underpaid for these accidents and allowing the company to save money. In addition to accident compensation, workers were often not paid fairly. Instead of being paid by the hour, miners at the CF&I were paid in according to how much coal they brought out of the mine.³⁵ At the end of every shift, they would bring their coal to the weigh-man who would determine the value of their haul and pay them appropriately. But often, the weigh-men of the mines worked directly for the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and would not weight the coal correctly as to pay the workers less for the coal they mined.³⁶

Although some spoke out against these wrongdoings, the company did its best to limit this speech. If someone were to dissent against the company, they were labeled as “agitators” and fired from their position.³⁷ Miners and mill workers knew about this system and did not publicly argue against the actions of the CF&I. Even still, individuals working directly for the company were placed into job positions to seek out those who had something negative to say and would inform the operators and managers that oversaw all the workers resulting in the agitators losing their jobs.³⁸ Through this, the “CF&I made a considerable effort to dominate all aspects of their workforce’s lives.”³⁹ As well as free speech, the company also effectively limited the workers right to organize and have political activity. From the company’s perspective, these actions were the best thing for their workers. They believed that that they were very passionate and should provide their employees with healthcare and food, and that it came along with their jobs. Therefore, they were against their workers arguing with the conditions of paternalism that

³⁵ Conditions in the Coal Mines of Colorado. Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Mines and Mining ... Pursuant to H. Res. 387, a Resolution Authorizing and Directing the Committee ... To Make an Investigation. Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1914.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rees, *Representation and Rebellion*

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Howell, *Colorado Fuel and Iron Company*

the company employed continuing to save the company money and keep their workers within their reach.

Labor Protests and Effects

The sentiments of anger shown by the workers at the CF&I were also spread throughout other companies in Colorado. Similar practices of company towns sprouted throughout the state and took advantage of the poor. As this anger built up over time within the working communities workers started to speak out against their employers. This eventually led to the Colorado Labor Wars. These wars consisted of multiple strikes from 1903 to 1905 held by workers of the coal, iron, and fuel industry with support of the Western Federation of Miners.⁴⁰ Through the strikes, Labor Wars, and the eventual Ludlow Massacre, many of these issues came to national attention and lead to change in the United States regarding how workers were treated.

One of the main concerns of workers at the CF&I was that they felt they did not have any input on their lives and were held down by the paternalism of the company. Most of the decisions regarding their well-being came from the company itself as they believed the conditions would be best for the workers.⁴¹ Most mill workers and miners of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company disagreed, however. They believed that they should be able to live where they wanted to, buy what they wanted to, and be paid fairly. From those living in the CF&I towns, the communities were described as “hellish places to live, places where the corporation ruled over workers and residents with an iron fist.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

⁴¹ Scamehorn, H. Lee. *Mill and Mine: The CF&I in the Twentieth Century*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

⁴² Clyne, *Coal People*

Many at the CF&I tried to work with the “unionizers” but the company had a strict policy against unionization in their camps. If workers were rumored to attempt to unionize, they would quickly be silenced and fired.⁴³ The CF&I ensured, like many other companies in the industry, that they would not have to spend more on the workers for better conditions in order to prevent a decrease in the company’s profit. This act of preventing unionization was viewed as paternal by the workers. In addition to restriction of rights, the CF&I did not allow workers to speak out against their actions, furthering the idea that the company employed restrictions they thought benefited their employees. Even so, workers at the Minnequa mill in Pueblo risked their jobs and livelihoods to speak out against the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company to provide more benefits and rights to the workers.⁴⁴ Many from the company participated in the Colorado Labor Wars in Colorado City in 1903, fighting for an eight-hour work day and the end of paternalism in company towns.⁴⁵ To put an end to the Colorado Labor Wars, the state government sent the Colorado National Guard in attempt to halt the protesters often using violence.

Much of these coordinated strikes brought national media attention but the strike with the greatest impact was the Ludlow Massacre of 1914.⁴⁶ This massacre is described by Gregory Howell as “one of the most notorious incidents in American labor history.”⁴⁷ In another series of strikes somewhat separate from the original Labor Wars, miners from the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company camped out in the tent-city of Ludlow. The strikers hoped that through their protest, they could be given the ability to unionize as well as insure the company obeyed the laws and regulations regarding fair pay and workers’ rights. The strike lasted from 1913 to 1914 and in the

⁴³ Clyne, *Coal People*

⁴⁴ Scamehorn, *Mill and Mine*

⁴⁵ Scamehorn, *Pioneer Steelmaker*

⁴⁶ Scamehorn, *Mill and Mine*

⁴⁷ Howell, *Colorado Fuel and Iron Company*

spring of the 1914, tensions had risen greatly between protesters and strike-enders. Strike-enders were individuals payed by the company to intimidate the workers of the CF&I and physically attack the strikers to force them back to work.⁴⁸ Also stationed around the tent city was the Colorado National Guard who were put in place by the state government to keep the peace.

On April 20th, 1914, gunfire broke out between the Colorado National Guard inhabitants of the Ludlow tent-city. This led to a larger battle between the two groups and ultimately 19 deaths including 5 miners and 13 family members of miners.⁴⁹ Violence occurred throughout the state of Colorado for a week after the “Ludlow Massacre” as many other miners and workers were outraged by the casualties of the peaceful protesters. This eventually ended when the United States Army was sent to stop the minor battles by April 28th.⁵⁰ Although the strikes in Ludlow and the subsequent massacre did not directly enact change, media and journalism spread the story leading to national outrage and protests of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and its leader Rockefeller.

The Ludlow Massacre of the workers of the CF&I caused by the paternalism of the company was a turning point for national labor wars following the industrial revolution in the United States. This event gave the citizens of the country, at the time mostly unaware of the actions of big companies towards their workers, a reason to fight for the improvement of labor laws. According to Gregory Howell, “The labor war shocked the nation, and forced CF&I to alter some of its practices”⁵¹ and citizens of the U.S. would not rest until the change was made.

⁴⁸ Rees, *Representation and Rebellion*

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Howell, *Colorado Fuel and Iron Company*

These events stood out in the west as the last straw, as workers had been oppressed and silenced for too long. Due to how the workers at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company had been treated, the labor wars demonstrated how they would fight for change. This resulted in investigations from the federal government and national awareness of the conditions the workers faced.⁵² Through the work of labor protests and the progressive movement lasting up until the 1920s, workers were given a voice for the first time and could speak out against how they were treated in the bustling steel and coal industry.

Conclusion

In investigating the question of “**How did paternalism in the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company affect the lives of workers and industry in the West?**” several limitations and new questions arose. Firstly, the opinions of the workers at the CF&I were difficult to discover as many who worked at the company did not write down or send letters detailing their thoughts in fear of losing their jobs. The research of this investigation relied heavily on the published ideas of the Colorado Fuel and Iron company in addition to historians on the impact of the company and government documents detailing the company and their actions. Some additional questions for further research would be to investigate the impact of other companies both in Colorado and the greater West that faced similar issues and how they resolved or did not resolve them. As well, further research can be done to see if similar cases have occurred more recently and the effects of those events for worker’s rights in the modern era.

For the workers and miners at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, change was difficult to achieve as their voice and ability to unionize was stifled. Even still, due to the great

⁵² *Conditions of the Coal Mines of Colorado*

paternalism of the CF&I, many spoke for an increase in worker's rights and fairer compensation for their work. These rights that they fought for included the ability to think and say what they choose, the ability to live and spend money where they wanted, and to be paid accurately for work they accomplished. Although their jobs and livelihoods were at risk, the workers of the CF&I protested the policies of paternalism of the company and helped set regulations for work throughout the United States.

The paternalism of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company had a large effect on labor in the country. While the company believed that their actions would both benefit their employees and themselves, it mainly led to strikes and brought light to their removal of rights at the national stage. This directly caused the writing of new legislation still in action today to protect the working class from companies such as the actions made by the CF&I in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵³ As well as legislation removing "company towns" and more obvious paternalism in the workforce, the events of the Colorado Labor Wars were an important part of the larger progressive movement in the United States lasting from the 1890s up until the 1920s. Progressives, including the workers at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, risked their careers and livelihoods for reform and were greatly successful in bringing attention and change to labor in the West.

⁵³ Colorado Fuel & Iron Company. *Seeing CF&I Steel in Action*. Pueblo, CO, 1966.

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