

Henry C. Frick, chairman, Carnegie Steel
 Martin Murray } steel workers
 Joe Sotak }
 Sam Cluley, Deputy Sheriff
 A. L. Wells } Pinkerton agents
 Jim Klein }
 Scout
 Rider
 Charles Nordrum } Pinkerton captains
 Frederick Heinde }
 1st Striker
 2nd Striker

ABOUT THIS PLAY

In the late 1800s, a visitor referred to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as “hell with the lid off” because of its many steel mills and factories belching smoke, soot, and fire. The city reflected the change in the U.S. economy from mostly agriculture to mostly industry.

From the Civil War (1861-65) onward, industrial growth in the U.S. soared. Factories produced tons of metal and other products for the war and for growing U.S. cities. Immigrants poured into the U.S. to work in the factories.

Most factory and mine owners became very wealthy. But their workers suffered. They were paid low wages and worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Because of dangerous working conditions, many were maimed or killed.

Some workers formed unions so that they could negotiate for better pay, hours, and conditions. They threatened to **strike** (refuse to work) if owners would not negotiate and agree to some of their demands. Frequently, violence erupted when owners tried to break strikes by hiring armed guards and bringing in nonunion workers.

One of the most violent strikes occurred at a Carnegie Steel mill in Homestead, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. In July 1889, Andrew Carnegie, owner of Carnegie Steel, was vacationing in Europe when the Homestead union threatened to strike. But the company bosses settled with the union and a three-year contract was signed.

Carnegie later disapproved of the 1889 agreement, but he could not change it — not yet. He made Henry

BATTLE AT FORT FRICK

by Andrew Ragan

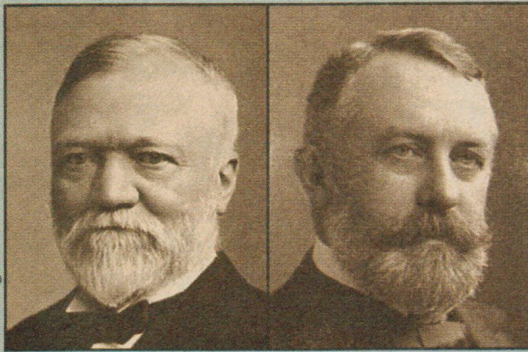
The Homestead Strike was one of the most violent in U.S. history. What was at stake?

CAST

Narrators A-H
 William Roberts }
 John McLuckie } union officials
 Hugh O'Donnell }

John Potter, mill superintendent
 Sally Murray, 13
 Paul Murray, 11, her brother
 1st Woman
 2nd Woman

C. Frick, a tough anti-union boss, chairman of Carnegie Steel. In 1892, the Homestead union asked for a new contract. Carnegie sailed off for Europe again. The negotiations were in Frick's hands.



Andrew Carnegie

Henry C. Frick

SCENE ONE

Narrator A: May 29, 1892. William Roberts, union negotiator, meets with John Potter, superintendent of Carnegie's Homestead Works. In earlier meetings, the union had asked for the same contract as in 1889, with small wage increases. But Frick told Potter that the workers must take a big wage cut.

Roberts: Mr. Potter, we will take a wage cut if you can show us it is necessary for the good of the company. We want to settle without trouble. We don't want to strike.

Potter: I'm sorry, but Mr. Frick believes there is nothing more to negotiate. You have until June 24 to accept our terms. If you do not, there will be no union contract.

Roberts (furious): Do you think that is fair? Is it giving us a chance to settle this in a friendly way?

Potter: It is Mr. Frick's ultimatum.

SCENE TWO

Narrator B: Roberts meets with union leaders John McLuckie and Hugh O'Donnell.

McLuckie: Frick knows we can't accept his terms without bargaining. That would make our union powerless.

Roberts: But if we strike, he will bring in nonunion workers to take our jobs. And if there is trouble, he will use force to crush us.

O'Donnell: Frick intends to crush us, one way or another.

SCENE THREE

Narrator C: Mid-June. As Frick's deadline nears, Homestead grows tense. Newsboy Paul Murray tries to sell papers on a corner.

Paul: Extra! Extra! Democrats nominate Cleveland for President!

Narrator C: A crowd gathers near the steel mill. Sally Murray sees her brother and calls to him.

Sally: Come on, Paul! The real news is right here! Frick is building a fence around the mill!

Narrator C: Paul and Sally join the crowd. They watch workmen erecting a tall wooden fence topped with barbed wire and lookout platforms.

Paul: It looks like a fort. Fort Frick!

Sally: Look at the holes in the fence.

1st Woman (overhearing): They're for guns. I've heard about Frick. He uses private police to break strikes.

2nd Woman: This mill has been transformed into an armed fort!

SCENE FOUR

Narrator D: June 23. Frick meets with the union once more, but no agreement is reached. He writes to the chief of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. His plan is to shut the mill down by July 2, then reopen it with nonunion workers on July 6.

Frick (in letter): We need 300 guards at our Homestead mills. We expect some violence from striking workers trying to keep out the new workers we will hire. . . .

Narrator D: July 2. Frick has fired all Homestead workers and shut down the mill. The union calls a strike. Rumors spread that the Pinkertons

and strikebreakers are on their way. The workers surround the mill and the town.

Potter and the other bosses try to enter the mill. Two strikers, Murray and Sotak, block their path.

Potter: Move out of our way.

Murray: If we don't work, you don't work. No one gets into this mill.

Sotak: That's right. No scabs* are taking our jobs.

Potter: You workers don't own this company. Now, move out!

Narrator D: Potter and his men try to push their way into the mill, but the strikers shove them back.

SCENE FIVE

Narrator E: July 4. Deputy Sheriff Cluley arrives at Homestead with 11 deputies. They are surrounded by union leaders and 1,000 strikers.

Cluley: I'm here to put deputies into the mill to guard and protect the property for the company.

McLuckie: No deputy will ever go in there alive.

Cluley (to his men): Boys, keep close to me. (*He moves forward.*)

Narrator E: The strikers block Cluley's way, and he and his men are forced to return to Pittsburgh.

SCENE SIX

Narrator F: Midnight, July 6. Two barges carrying 316 Pinkertons are towed up the Monongahela River toward Homestead. The Pinkertons include ex-soldiers, drifters, college students, and regular agents. On board, A. L. Wells, a medical student, and Jim Klein, a regular, talk.

Strikers set fire to barges that brought Pinkertons to Homestead.



The Granger Collection

Wells: They should tell us where we're going. I don't like this secrecy.

Klein: Don't you read the papers? And didn't you see the crate of guns they loaded? It's easy to figure out: We're headed for Homestead.

Wells: But I was hired to guard, not fight. I can hardly shoot a gun.

Klein: You may not have a choice.

SCENE SEVEN

Narrator G: As the Pinkerton barges approach, a scout from the Homestead union sees them and races to a telegraph shack.

Scout (sending message): WATCH THE RIVER. BARGES JUST PASSED HERE.

Narrator G: 4 a.m. A loud steam whistle wakes Sally and Paul Murray. A horse approaches.

Rider: The Pinkertons are coming!

Paul (racing to the kitchen): What's going on?

Sally: The mill is being invaded. Papa has joined the workers there.

Paul: Where's Mother?

Sally: She went to see what happens.

Paul: I'm going, too. Perhaps more people will scare the Pinkertons away. *(They both leave.)*

SCENE EIGHT

Narrator H: Some townspeople carry guns; others hold clubs and stones. As the Pinkertons dock at the mill, the townspeople knock down Frick's fence and move to the landing. Pinkerton Captain Charles Nordrum climbs onto the barge's deck.

Nordrum (to crowd): We are coming up that hill. We don't want trouble!

The Pennsylvania militia arrives at Homestead to restore order.

1st Striker (also to crowd): Don't let the black sheep* in!

Nordrum (to Pinkertons): Get your guns. But don't return fire unless we are hit.

Narrator H: Forty Pinkertons, each with a rifle, line up beside Captains Nordrum and Heinde.

Heinde (to crowd): We're taking over the mill! You people disperse!

Narrator H: The crowd jeers.

2nd Striker: Don't step off that boat!

Narrator H: Heinde and his men step onto the gangplank. Suddenly, several strikers rush forward. A shot is fired, and gunfire erupts on both sides. Heinde is injured and Pinkerton Jim Klein dies instantly. Paul and Sally's father, Martin Murray, is shot in the shoulder. Joe Sotak rushes to help him.

Sotak: Martin!

Narrator H: As he reaches Murray, Sotak is shot and killed. The Pinkertons retreat inside the barges, where Wells tends to the wounded.

On the riverbank, dozens of townspeople lie bleeding. Sally and Paul rush to their father, who is barely conscious.

Sally: Papa, please answer me!

Murray (speaking slowly): Sally . . .

Paul . . . I'm not hit badly. But you must leave. Find your mother and get away from here.

Paul: But the Pinkertons —

Murray: The Pinkertons will go away, but not before more people are hurt or killed. And I don't want you to be one of them. Promise me!

Narrator H: Paul and Sally leave with their mother. They climb the Home-

stead hills, from which they witness a three-minute battle between the Pinkertons and the strikers. It is only the beginning of a long day of fighting. It is only the beginning, also, of a larger "war" for the workers' right to have a union.

AFTERWORD

The tugboat that took the Pinkerton barges to Homestead was unable to pull the boats away, and the Pinkertons became trapped on the hot, cramped barges. Hundreds of armed workers lined the riverbanks. Some tried to blow up the barges with dynamite or set them afire. More workers and Pinkertons were killed or injured.

An agreement was finally reached to allow the Pinkertons to surrender. But once the Pinkertons were on shore, the angry crowd kicked, clubbed, and threw rocks at the disarmed detectives, killing two and injuring all of them.

The Pinkertons were allowed to board trains for Pittsburgh, but the Homestead Strike was not over. At the request of Frick and the sheriff, the Pennsylvania militia was sent to Homestead to restore order.

The strike lasted six months. Frick, with the militia's protection, brought in nonunion workers to break the strike. Despite worldwide support for the strikers, their savings dried up. Some strikers had to go back to work. In November, with no choice left, the union called off the strike.

Frick had succeeded in crushing the union, but at a bloody price: Nine steelworkers and seven Pinkertons had died, and hundreds had been hurt. Unions did not return to the steel industry until 1937. ☆

YOUR TURN

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Homestead workers take over the steel mill? Do you think they had a right to do this?
2. Was Frick justified in calling in the Pinkertons? What should he have done?

*Scab and black sheep were terms used for strikebreakers.

