



Sylvester Clark Smith, Labor Unions, and The Morning Echo

by Gilbert P. Gia
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Newspaper readers in 1900 might have been aware of the county's growing concern for teachers who were no longer able to work. The Minneapolis Board of Education established a pension funded by one percent of the salaries of Minneapolis school teachers, but the state's supreme court soon struck down the law. Ohio courts reversed a similar statute.

During that time Sylvester Clark Smith, owner and editor of the Bakersfield Morning Echo, regularly promoted public education. He wrote in 1903, "It is notoriously a fact that teachers as a rule do not get sufficient wages to permit them to live as they must and hold their places and lay by anything for support in their old age, or after they have worn themselves out, usually at an early age compared with workers in other lines. It is to be hoped that out of all the discussion and attempted legislation some way may be found to assist the men and women who give the best years and talents they have to pupils for too small a remuneration."¹

Born in Iowa in 1858, Smith was a product of the public schools and at age 18 took up grammar school teaching to pay for his own further education. When 21 he moved to Colusa County, California, where he farmed and again taught school. In 1882 Smith and his wife moved to San Francisco so he could pursue the law, however by 1883 they lived in Kern County, and Smith taught in the Tehachapi and Glennville areas while continuing to study law. In 1885 Sylvester Clark Smith was admitted to the California bar, and that year he opened a law office in Bakersfield.

In 1886 Kern County farmers who were unaligned in the great Kern River water-rights suit founded the Kern County Echo and hired Sylvester C. Smith and Robert F. Gregory² to print the paper and voice farming concerns.³ After the Miller-Haggin settlement of 1888, Smith bought the Echo, and it remained under his direction for the next twenty-six years, seven months and twenty-one days.

Some years after settlement of the water dispute, however, Smith described the Echo as a non-partisan newspaper: "It is not the organ of any corporation, any clique or faction, and is bound to no special interest or interests. It has no allegiance except to the public which it serves, and caters to nobody except the most intelligent and independent readers of Kern County."⁴

As newspaperman and Republican, Smith defended business and supported its needs, but he was also a sympathetic friend to unionized labor, which he viewed as an efficient labor force that was well-educated, well-trained, and

deserving of living wages and decent working conditions. If union men were industrious and frugal, said Smith, they could achieve far more than just supporting their families and homes: Union labor if allowed its fair share of business profits could more successfully educate the next generation of Americans and thus insure the nation's prosperity. The fact that Smith said that is not surprising; his successes in life came entirely from his own hard work and industry.

The Union label was prominently on page one of every Bakersfield Morning Echo, but the Typographical Union was not alone in Bakersfield. In 1910, between 500 and 600 union men marched in the Labor Day parade. Three hundred were from the carpenters' local, while the machinists' claimed second honors. Early that September morning the trades took up their parade positions and at about 10 am departed from Labor Hall at 21st and Eye.⁵ Leading the parade was Chief Marshal RB Moore and his aides, Messrs. RH Stickel, RM Labrun, and JM Dupes. Behind them came the marching band, and behind it the trades: Cigar makers, Electrical Workers, Machinists, Carpenters, Bartenders, and the Typographical Union, whose members rode in an automobile and scattered cards requesting that those watching the parade make sure that the Union label appeared on their printing orders.

The parade was called the finest yet given by Bakersfield unions: Participants were obviously pleased, and spectators that crowded the sidewalks showed great enthusiasm. But the day was not over. The Californian wrote, "Tonight at Armory Hall a grand ball will be the concluding event of the day, and a

large attendance is expected. Mienes orchestra will furnish the music. Ladies will be admitted free while men will be charged one dollar for admittance.”⁶

Organized labor appeared healthy in the Bakersfield of 1910, but all was not that well in 1904. Editor Smith wrote, “So long as the labor unions are fundamentally militant organizations, fighting for the rights of their members, there will be an element of grimness in a Labor day parade, but when the happy day arrives that there are no more labor troubles, the Labor day parade may take on new forms of usefulness. The ability to do things with one's hands, to perform useful and skillful service to the needs of the people is a very fine thing, and the badge that shows one to be the master of a craft is an honorable badge and one which no healthy minded citizen should be ashamed to wear.”⁷

In addition to his newspaper and farming, Smith was a member of the National Guard, the Board of Trade, the Board of Health, and director of the Kern Farm and Water Company. As editor he helped organize city debating clubs and street improvement associations, and he was an advocate for city parks, and healthy and respectable social clubs for working men.

Although Smith was an outspoken Republican, he was even-handed in his criticism of both political parties – which never pleased everyone in Bakersfield. One evening a man burst into the Echo's office carrying a gun in one hand and a clipping from the Echo in the other. With the pistol leveled at Smith's face, the infuriated citizen demanded that the editor

literally eat the offending article. Smith first considered the weapon and then calmly turned to his clerk and asked him to telephone the sheriff. Smith resumed writing at his desk, and the affair ended without bloodshed.⁸



The Hon. Sylvester Clark Smith

Most pages of the Echo reflected Smith's interest in state, national, and global politics. In 1895 he was elected Senator in the 34th California District, and while carrying out political duties at Sacramento, he continued to publish the Morning Echo and write editorials.⁹

Smith served at the state capitol for six consecutive years. Among his first legislative efforts was a bill to establish at San Luis Obispo a polytechnic college for agriculture, mechanics, engineering, business, and domestic economy. The bill passed in the Senate but failed in the Assembly. In 1897 it passed both houses, but Gov. Budd vetoed it. In each of the following years Smith worked for passage of his college bill. Both houses passed it in 1901, and Gov. Henry Gage signed it into law; at that moment the institution was born that we know

today as California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

In 1901 Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as President of the United States, and as a progressive Republican he turned his administration's efforts to trust-busting and harnessing corporate monopolies. Roosevelt's head-butting with big business encouraged those who were striving for living wages, safe working conditions, and the eight-hour day. Sylvester Smith supported the justice behind Roosevelt's Square Deal, but both were realists, and both navigated the difficult channel between radical unionism and rapacious big business. Smith did it particularly well.

Elected in 1904 to the 8th California District, US House of Representative, Smith served four terms, and his committee work produced such notable successes as safeguards for the US Treasury and laws that helped business by establishing royalties for inventors while restricting monopolies on patents.

Throughout Smith's political career his interests remained deeply rooted in his home district. In 1910 he garnered \$20,000 in Federal monies for a post office site in Bakersfield, which was followed by a \$135,000 grant to build the post office.¹⁰

Smith's last months in Congress were important to Kern County and the nation's oil industry, which at that time was paralyzed by contested land titles. Smith had been so ill during debate in 1911 that fellow Congressmen had to help him stand, and even with that assistance, his voice could hardly be heard as he called for suspension of House rules and consent

for passage of his rescue measure. Signed into law in February, Smith's bill allowed oil producers to peacefully fuel industrial America.

Smith died in January 1913 after a convalescence of many months at a Hollywood hospital. His Bakersfield funeral was elaborate, and the town's National Guard company led his funeral cortège to Union Cemetery. The march included many labor unions and civic and fraternal organizations and sympathetic, loyal friends. The Kern County Grand Jury wrote an elegy. It read, "S.C. Smith was, during his long residence in Kern county, a man of strong personality, warm friendship, sterling integrity, and marked ability; that as a citizen, as a newspaper man, as a lawyer and as a legislator, he became well known and endeared himself personally to the people of this county; and that, when his services to his fellow men, and his marked abilities, took him from our midst and made him a national representative, he carried the same admirable traits into his work as a member of the Congress of the United States and rendered signal services, not only to his constituents but to the nation." ¹¹

Bakersfield has forgotten Sylvester Clark Smith. But is that not the way of the world when it comes to extraordinary citizens and their deeds?

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- 1 Morning Echo, Feb 1, 1903. The State of California enacted pensions for retired teachers in Jan 1914.
- 2 Gregory was listed as a 23 year-old printer in the 1880 US Census of Kern county.
- 3 Shirley Harris, "Kern County Newspapers, 1866-1900," (monograph). Seminar in Kern County History, Dr. Harland Boyd, Mar 12, 1974 . Kern Co Beale Library, McGuire Local History Room
- 4 Morning Echo, Aug 6, 1911, sec 2, p 1. Extant local issues of the Morning Echo begin in 1902 and are on microfilm at Kern Co Library, Bakersfield, California..
- 5 Same location of the Labor Hall today
- 6 Bakersfield Californian, Sep 5, 1910
- 7 Morning Echo, Sep 4, 1904
- 8 Wallace Melvin Morgan, History of Kern County, 1914
- 9 "At various times he had able associates, including Harry G. Stuart [publisher while Smith served in politics], Lawrence E. Chenoweth [educational leader], and Wallace M. Morgan." William Harland Boyd, *Lower Kern River Country, 1850-1950: Wildrreiness to Empire*, 1997, p 98
- 10 Equivalent to \$3M in 2010
- 11 Bakersfield Californian, Feb 1, 1915. The Echo declined in importance and was absorbed in the late 1920s by Alfred Harrell's Bakersfield Californian. William Harland Boyd, *Lower Kern River Country, 1850-1950: Wildrreiness to Empire*, 1997, p 98