

## RED THREADS OF TRAGEDY

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In May of 1929, laborers employed at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina united under the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU). Among them, Fred Erwin Beal left the northeast to begin unionizing in North Carolina under the direction of NTWU. To the town's disbelief, Beal managed to convince mill workers to join. In response to the disruption, mill owners fired five workers from the union, thus triggering the beginning of the Loray Mill Strike. On June 7, 1929, Police Chief Orville F. Aderholt joined a group of deputized men to break the Loray picket line, which was composed of the women and children from the mill. By the end of the day, sixteen union workers shot and killed Aderholt, resulting in their arrest. Police claimed that Beal, one of the men arrested, fired the killing shot. Violence was not uncommon; however, this had been the most extreme instance thus far into the strike. Violence escalated two weeks later when Ella May Wiggins, a pregnant mother of five, was shot by a mob of anti-communist men.

Wiggins was one of the first in her mill to join the NTWU. She spent the previous ten years moving around from various mills in and around Gaston County. Like many North Carolina mill workers, she lived in poverty. In 1926, Wiggins' husband, John, was left crippled by a work-related injury and walked out on the family soon after when he developed an addiction to alcohol. The loss of income resulted in the deaths of Wiggins' children, caused by a disease known as Pellagra, caused by a lack of nutrition. By 1929, she lost four of her nine children. By joining the union, Wiggins felt like she was actively making a change not only for her own family, but for all the families in the mill.<sup>1</sup> Wiggins was a controversial member of her community for a number of reasons. The final straw for her community, however, was her involvement in the NTWU. By joining the NTWU, many in the town suspected that she aligned herself with communist ideology. Due to the poverty she and her family experienced, she lived and had a close relationship with the neighboring mill village, which had a predominantly black population and was therefore perceived as dangerous by the white community. In the summer of 1929, she became pregnant out of wedlock and found herself and her family targeted by her peers.

On September 14, 1929, three months after the shooting of Police Chief Aderholt, Wiggins and twenty members of the NTWU gathered in a truck and began the six-mile journey between Bessemer City and Gastonia to the Loray Mill. Halfway along, the truck was stopped by a mob of anti-communist, anti-union men. Several of the union members in the bed of the truck fell onto the road just as one of the mob's vehicles pulled in front of the union truck, cutting them off. The mob's violence escalated quickly, and it was evident to the union members that this was a targeted attack. In a blur, a shot was fired into the back window of the truck, fatally wounding Wiggins.

Following the murder of Wiggins, local and national newspapers recounted the events that occurred. However, the various outlets revealed the starkly different reactions between those within the community and those outside it. A local Southern newspaper, *Johnson City Chronicle*, published an article on September 16, two days after her murder, reporting that the military presence at the mill and Gastonia could

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<sup>1</sup> Kristina L. Horton, *Martyr of Loray Mill: Ella May and the 1929 Textile Workers' Strike in Gastonia, North Carolina* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2015).

not have prevented the mob of 100 men from hunting down and murdering Wiggins.<sup>2</sup> Though the governor of North Carolina ordered the National Guard to act as peacekeepers, the crowds at Loray devolved into the mass chaos of mob rule. However, the crowds at Loray devolved into the mass chaos of mob rule. An article from September 15 by *The Atlanta Constitution* stated that the group of men accused of the crime were merely passing through to a different town when the two vehicles collided, sending the union members into the field.<sup>3</sup> The article failed to name Wiggins as a victim. *The New York Times* took a different approach to reporting Wiggins' story in its article on September 16, of which the headline and article were far more critical of the mob and presented the story as an act of injustice.<sup>4</sup> The difference between the articles coming from the South versus the North is stark, but demonstrates how divisive Wiggins' murder was.

Two questions become apparent when reviewing articles from 1929 pertaining to Gastonia and the Loray Mill: who killed Wiggins, and why did they kill her? The headline of one article states "Pregnant Mother of 5 Slain," but the content of the article reverted its focus to Beal and his alleged crimes. Articles like such did not address the pressing questions that arose from the headlines. Following the initial shock of the tragedy, local and national news outlets only picked up stories pertaining to Wiggins when discussing the grand jury hearing, indictment, and conclusion of the trial for the men accused of killing her. Outside of local articles discussing the events of Gastonia, most coverage only pertained to Beal and little discussion was held regarding Wiggins. Today, scholarship documenting the 1929 strikes follows this trend, although very few pieces of scholarship pertain solely to Wiggins. Her story is attached to Beal's. *Martyr of Loray Mill: Ella May Wiggins and the 1929 Textile Workers' Strike* is one of the few examples of scholarship dedicated to unraveling the story of Wiggins.<sup>5</sup> In *Martyr of Loray Mill*, Kristinia Horton, one of Wiggins' great-great granddaughters, reflects on personal anecdotes of her late grandmother who seeks to tell the tragedy of her relative. Few scholars have published biographical studies on Wiggins and her life. Several people who attempted to publish biographical studies cited incorrect information, and, given Horton's familial connection, much of her biographical information comes from Wiggins' children and relatives who passed down stories about her. *Martyr of Loray Mill*, however, is still subject to scrutiny. Additionally, the selected cartoon graphics sourced from the Gastonia Public Library provide insight into the setting of the time period and an understanding of why hatred and violence occurred. Horton provides a concise and reputable biography. In addition to Horton and her grandmother's accounts of Wiggins' life, court documents, union archive material, and news articles of the time depict a story of injustice.

By examining both primary and secondary scholarship, it is possible to answer who was responsible for Wiggins' death and why the act of violence was committed. Although a singular person is ultimately at fault for the crime, the town of Gastonia is collectively responsible for the murder of Wiggins. Her involvement in radical political activity prompted fear in a community that valued tradition. Local papers urged the public to act against the rebellion and Wiggins was their scapegoat, depicted as a communist scandalized by the rigidity of social morality within her community. Wiggins and her family were victimized by the community prior to her

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<sup>2</sup> "Pregnant Mother of 5 Slain," *Johnson City Chronicle*, September 16, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> "Mother of 5 Slain In Strike Disorder Near Gastonia," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 15, 1929, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> "Arrested In Death of Ella Wiggins," *New York Times*, September 26, 1929, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Horton, *Martyr*.

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eventual murder. If the community caused harm to her in the past without punishment, they could do so again not only to Wiggins' legacy, but to other victims as well. Her story is divisive and morally ambiguous, revealing uncomfortable truths about society and its failures. The tragedy of Ella May Wiggins opens a window to understanding the intersection of gender, ideology, and identity in the American South.

Unionizing in the South during the early 1900s was incredibly difficult due to cultural practices and beliefs. By deviating from tradition and order, Wiggins faced fierce and violent opposition. From a surface-level perspective, unions represented Northern thought and action. By the 1920s, the South maintained a strained relationship with the North in terms of economic and political involvement. Fears of further devastation caused by the Civil War and Reconstruction still sat at the forefront of many Southerners' minds.<sup>6</sup> However, the largest barrier the union faced was the culture within the mills. Gaston County textile mills, such as Loray, were inexplicably intertwined with the local churches and paternalistic work culture. Consequently, the National Textile Workers Union faced fierce opposition because they were a communist union from the North.

In 1950, Liston Pope, a Yale Assistant Professor of Social Ethics under the Yale Divinity School, found a fundamental relationship between the local church community and mill culture, describing a paternalistic culture. When Gastonia began to industrialize, the local churches were the first to express public approval of textile mills and entrepreneurs.<sup>7</sup> Former Gastonia minister Mr. Gray died in 1912 and was buried with a headstone that read "a captain of industry—a pioneer of prosperity."<sup>8</sup> From the beginning, textile manufacturers saw support, acceptance, and encouragement by the leaders of Gastonia churches. Leaders like Mr. Gray served as the reason for the successful industrial growth, as the church held great influence over mill owners and operators. Managers were expected to present themselves with good Christian morals and instill them within the population of workers. If they did not, they could lose their positions. Most importantly, however, the church created its own ideals for economic culture.<sup>9</sup> When prohibition swept through the region, the church supported abstinence from alcohol based on moral and economic arguments. By doing so, the mills saw an increase in production and revenues.<sup>10</sup> Churches believed that applying religious morals, such as abstinence, would create better labor discipline.<sup>11</sup> Mills applied the relationship between pastor and congregation to owner and worker, all in an effort to create a culture of subservient workers compliant under their paternalistic pastors and bosses who ensured that social harmony continued.<sup>12</sup>

Paternalism within cotton mills of the South was a popular practice, benefitting both the workers and the mill owners.<sup>13</sup> Several mills in Gastonia sought out laborers by employing the individuals living in the Appalachian Mountains.<sup>14</sup> To maintain their labor force, the mills created social programs.<sup>15</sup> The mill provided

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<sup>6</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 38-39.

<sup>7</sup> Liston Pope, Richard A. Peterson, and Nicholas Jay Demerath, *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Melton Alonza McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest: Southern Cotton Mill Workers and Organized Labor, 1875-1905* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*, 36-37.

housing for the relocated families, dormitories for single employees, a cafeteria, designated schools for children of employees, and more.<sup>16</sup> Despite the decline in revenue, the mill continued to expand its social welfare programs.<sup>17</sup> Loray attracted and maintained its labor force through the benefits given to workers; they were able to feed, clothe, and educate their families.<sup>18</sup> The benefits gave a reason for mill employees to feel content with their low wages as the mill provided basic resources. In turn, mill owners outright controlled every aspect of their employees' lives, such as where an individual shopped, how they worshiped, and where they lived. Mill villages were heavily policed to maintain social morality; The consumption of liquor, use of prostitutes, and organization of labor were heavily policed. Politically, employees were monitored by inspectors during elections to ensure they voted in the best interests of the mill. The mills operated in such a controlled environment that any attempt to unionize would fail.<sup>19</sup> Pope argues that the mill satisfied parents' desires to create a better life for themselves and their children, intensifying certain mill operatives' willingness to unionize. By working at the mill, families subjected themselves to a life of poverty. However, by unionizing, mill workers had the opportunity to change the trajectory of their future.

Wiggins' life began like many of the Loray Mill workers. Her family came from the hills of the Smoky Mountains as independent farmers relocating to make a better life for themselves.<sup>20</sup> Much of her life was a constant fight for survival. As a child, she moved from one logging camp to another, following her father as he sought to find work.<sup>21</sup> At seventeen, Wiggins married fellow logger, John Wiggins, and bore their first child shortly after. When John suffered an injury that left him disabled, Wiggins packed her family and moved to industry-based work with better chances of success than she had as a child.<sup>22</sup> The family relied on a single income from Wiggins while John frequently left the family to go on "trips." Wiggins' daughter, Millie, recounted that her father would only return home long enough to get her mother "in the family way."<sup>23</sup> His infrequent visits also revealed his newly adopted taste for alcohol. Mary May, Wiggins' sister-in-law, recalled that John would not provide for the family.<sup>24</sup> By 1926, John had walked out on the family for good.<sup>25</sup> Now on her own, Wiggins moved her family to a plantation in Spartanburg, South Carolina,<sup>26</sup> where she worked alongside Black cotton pickers. There, she developed a respect for the hard work of her peers and lasting friendships, defying the racial divisions that defined so much of Southern culture.<sup>27</sup>

In 1927, Wiggins settled in Bessemer City, gave birth to her last child, Etta Charlotte, and began working at the last of several mills. She struggled to switch from the more flexible lifestyle of the mountains to the highly controlled sink-or-swim

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<sup>16</sup> "Loray School to Open," *Gastonia Gazette*, April 4, 1902. From *Building Loray, 1899-1912* in *History of the Mill and Village*.

<sup>17</sup> "Announcement of \$1 Million Dollar Expansion," *Gastonia Gazette*, February 4, 1920.

<sup>18</sup> Mclaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Mclaurin, *Paternalism and Protest*, 38-39.

<sup>20</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 35.

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capitalist nature of mill work. Like many of the Appalachian workers, she came from a culture of freedom and self-sustainment. Wiggins was frequently fired for needing time off to recover from maternity leave.<sup>28</sup> The opportunities to earn a livable wage for women were severely limited. While textile mills offered impoverished women the same opportunities as men, their wages were not equitable.<sup>29</sup> On average, women took home \$9 per week, and children would take home less than \$5 per week.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Wiggins' independent nature often caused trouble. She was brash and had a reputation for speaking her mind.<sup>31</sup> Despite the clash between her upbringing and mill culture, Wiggins continued to roam around the Piedmont region in search of mill work. As a woman, and more specifically a single mother, mill work was not only the one source of industrial income available but also the most dependable.

By 1929, mill workers were increasingly disgruntled with the paternalist culture of labor; It had transformed from a system born out of necessity for discipline to a moral justification for exploitation.<sup>32</sup> The conditions of mills were outright dangerous; workers suffered long and demanding shifts as a new system of labor was implemented and referred to as "stretch-out."<sup>33</sup> Instead of tending to one or two looms, a worker was responsible for six to nine looms.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, ownership switched from Southern to Northern companies, often located hundreds of miles away.<sup>35</sup> Their concerns for profits, with no connection to the actual workings of the factories, caused increasingly difficult experiences for the workers.<sup>36</sup> From the beginning, mill owners were attracted to hiring Southern workers, who were plentiful, cheap, and freer from socialist ideology compared to the Northern labor.<sup>37</sup> Owners believed that Southern workers were more resistant to unionization, leading to the impression that they would remain subservient.<sup>38</sup> And yet, by 1929, these distinctions were no longer so clear. The transition from Southern ownership to Northern, the experience of stretch-out, and the increasing presence of union activists led the Loray Mill employees to begin their own "union," thus leading to the initial strike.<sup>39</sup> Initially the strikes were infrequent, however, the entrance of the NTWU would change the trajectory of the mill.

In the summer of 1929, Fred Beal stood at the entrance of the Loray Mill, informing the workers about the benefits of the union he represented. To his own disbelief, and to the town's increasing dismay, the workers were eager to join the NTWU. Paul Blanshard published the article, "Communism in Southern Cotton Mills," in *The Nation*, giving the union a scathing review. Blanshard began by stating:

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<sup>28</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Cathy L. MacHugh, *Mill Family: The Labor System in the Southern Cotton Textile Industry, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 99.

<sup>33</sup> "Stretchout: Workers Pushed to Produce," Gaston County Museum of Art and History, Loray Digital Archive, January 1, 1928-March 1, 1929. From Working Loray, 1928-1934 in History of the Mill and Village.

<sup>34</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 48.

<sup>35</sup> "Loray Mill Sold to Jenckes Company," Charlotte News, May 11, 1919. From Everyday Life at Loray, 1913-1923 in History of the Mill and Village.

<sup>36</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> "Massive Strike of Loray Workers," Gastonia Gazette, October 28, 1919. From Everyday Life at Loray, 1913-1923 in History of the Mill and Village.

It is the inflection-point for a series of strikes that have aroused the whole Piedmont section, involving a dozen mills and 15,000 workers ... The strikes are partly the result of systematic agitation and partly spontaneous revolt of overburdened workers against the lowest wages and longest hours in American Factories. The Organized strikes are led by the new National Textile Workers Union which was formed by Communists last summer to challenge the American Federation of Labor in the textile industry ... Ironically enough, the wages in this mill where the strike centers are considerably higher than in most mills of the South.<sup>40</sup>

*The Nation*, a staunchly conservative magazine, hired Blanshard to publish a series of op-eds regarding the Loray strike and the wave of unionism occurring throughout the Piedmont region. Blanshard specialized in producing conservative opinions on religion and labor. In "Communism in Southern Cotton Mills," Blanshard suggests that the strikers at Loray had little reason to start a strike or unionize in the first place due to the higher wages given to its employees. This was a common sentiment amongst anti-union articles coming out about the Loray strike and is even explored in scholarship today. In *The Thirteenth Juror*, authors Williams and Williams make a similar argument to Blanshard's argument.<sup>41</sup> The work cites that workers of the Loray Mill earned around \$15 to \$17 per week, whereas, in Bessemer City, Wiggins earned a meager \$9 per week.<sup>42</sup> Although it is true that the wages at Loray were strikingly different, it certainly raises the question of how a single mother of five could live on \$17 per week, let alone \$9 per week, given the impending economic collapse.<sup>43</sup> The article further reveals the hostility Beal and his union members faced; "Fred Beal, Communist leader, sleeps in a worker's cottage surrounded by four trusty guards with four shotguns and revolvers. He needs *them* all."<sup>44</sup> Beal truly was the most hated figure in Gastonia during his stay in the town. However, this passage also reveals the threatening language used in anti-union and anti-communist articles.

*The Gastonia Gazette*, Gastonia's local newspaper, published a series of articles warning the community of the danger presented by the NTWU through fear-mongering tactics, such as an article titled "Mob Rule vs. Law and Order." *The Gastonia Gazette* outlines the threat presented by the union and inadvertently encourages the public to take action:

"Every patriotic, law-abiding American Citizen who was at the Loray Mills yesterday [when a policeman was knocked down] could see the difference between mob rule on the one hand and law and order on the other. Every American citizen who loved his country and venerated its traditions could see the difference between the Stars and Stripes, the beautiful emblem of this Republic, and the Blood-red Banner of Bolshevism, the flag of those who favor the destruction of all constitutional government, the flag of revolution

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Blanshard, "Communism in Southern Cotton Mills," *Nation* 128, no. 3329 (April 1929): 500.

<sup>41</sup> Robert L. Williams and Elizabeth Williams, *The Thirteenth Juror: The Story of the 1929 Loray Strike* (Kings Mountain: Herald House Publishers, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> In *The Thirteenth Juror*, Williams claims that Beal conducted his own research finding that Loray Mill employees earned less than nine dollars for sixty-six hours of work. Men working a full day averaged \$11 and night shift men earned \$12 per week. He added that workers we kept in perpetual debt.

<sup>44</sup> Blanshard, "Communism," 500.

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and all bloodshed, the flag of the country which does not believe in religion, which does not believe in the sanctity of marriage. Men and women of Gaston County, are you willing to permit the men of the type of Beal and his associates to continue to preach the doctrines of Bolshevism anywhere in America, especially here in your midst?"<sup>45</sup>

The article is the pinnacle of classic yellow journalism; when a police officer is pushed to the ground, the group responsible "represents the flag of destruction." Further, in response to this article, Blanshard states that *every* member of the union working in the mills carries a weapon. This fact is not substantiated by any primary or secondary scholarship.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, the article equates the union's efforts to mobilize to the Bolshevik revolution that occurred in the newly formed USSR.<sup>47</sup> A similar article published by *The Gastonia Gazette* headlined "CALL OUT TO MILITIA" on April 3, 1929, documenting General J. Van B. Metts' authorization of the Howitzer Company, local National Guard, and Shelby unit of the Guard, claiming conditions were rapidly growing beyond the control of city police and the sheriff's department.<sup>48</sup>

For readers, it appeared as though the paper called upon local citizens to take action at the mill rather than the uniformed guard. The article then went on to summarize the events. Union members and workers were intimidated by anti-union, communist activists. The crowd shifted from being jovial to a "belligerent, threatening mob."<sup>49</sup> The article read, "Before the troops arrived yesterday, the mob was rampant at or near the Loray Mill in all of its seething hideousness, ready to kill, ready to destroy property. The troops arrived—and all became quiet and the mob dispersed."<sup>50</sup> Vera Buch Wiesbord, wife of Alan Wiesbord, was present during this strike and explained in her memoir, "The pictures in the paper showed the crowd of paraders in Gastonia and a huge group in the front of the Loray, with signs."<sup>51</sup> The signs read: "Solidarity forever!," "To Hell with the Hank-Clock," "The international will feed you," "No union man will starve."<sup>52</sup> A full page article the next day, on April 4, 1929, by *The Gastonia Gazette*, denounced the strike leaders as communists and stated:

"Let every man and woman in Gaston County ask the question: Am I willing to allow the mob to control Gaston County? The mob whose leaders do not believe in God and who would destroy the government? The strike at the Loray is something more than merely a few men asking for better wages. It was not inaugurated for that purpose. It was started simply for the purpose of overthrowing this Government, to destroy property and to *kill, kill, kill*. The time is at hand for every American to do his duty."<sup>53</sup>

Union scrutiny and communist fear were not just limited to articles. *The Gastonia Gazette* cartoonist, Ben E. Abernathy, published a series of cartoons depicting the evils of the union. The paper highlighted the danger of communism and what could be done to prevent its spread. Beal found humor in the *Gazette's* behavior.

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<sup>45</sup> Blanshard, "Communism," 500.

<sup>46</sup> Blanshard, "Communism," 500.

<sup>47</sup> Blanshard, "Communism," 500.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Thirteenth Juror*, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *Thirteenth Juror*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 182.

<sup>51</sup> Weisbord, *Radical Life*, 182.

<sup>52</sup> Weisbord, *Radical Life*, 182.

<sup>53</sup> Weisbord, *Radical Life*, 183.

When Vera Buch Weisbord met with Beal in Gastonia, he passed her the most recent copy of the paper, consisting of a cartoon depicting him as a devil in “livid red” with horns invading the peaceful community.<sup>54</sup> Other cartoons depicted a more violent tone. One cartoon showed a Gladiator styled man hunting a beast. The man is identified as “the spirit of Gastonia,” and the beast is labeled simply as “Communism” (see Figure 1).<sup>55</sup> When the community faced the death of Police Chief Aderholt, a cartoon was published depicting a medieval knight kneeling before the grave of Aderholt, decorated bountifully in floral wreaths. The shield of the knight reads “Justice” and, underneath, “Gastonia.” Besides the grave in a patch of grass lies a snake with “Communism” inscribed (see Figure 2).<sup>56</sup> Some of the cartoons depict a less violent end to the spread of communism in Gastonia. In one of the less violent selections, a child-size man attempts to persuade an average-size man to join the NTWU. The average size man responds to the smaller man, stating: “I’m not interested in your Russian union. Go and peddle your cabbage” (see Figure 3).<sup>57</sup> The depiction of strikers as child-size was a common tactic used in several other cartoons, the small stature compared to the average size of non-strikers demonstrates a child-like attribute to the movement. The cartoons borrowed from popular hero stories and animal imagery, primarily through the depiction of snakes, which are often used by writers to emphasize death and destruction. From a Christian perspective, Satan disguises himself as a snake to deceive Eve into turning against God’s word. Both representations of the snake align with the ultimate message by *The Gastonia Gazette*. The most striking use of a snake is shown in a cartoon published on April 11, 1929, in which the snake labeled “Communism” is climbing up the pole of an American flag. The cartoon reads; “Communism in the South ... Kill it!” (see figure 4).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Weisbord, *Radical Life*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> Ben E. Abernathy, “The Gastonia Spirit Fights The Monster,” Cartoon, *Gastonia Gazette*, Month, Day, Year. From Gastonia Public Library. Microfilm, URL if available (accessed April 25, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> Ben E. Abernathy, “Justice Weeps But Only For the Moment,” Cartoon, *Gastonia Gazette*, Month, Day, Year. From Gastonia Public Library. Microfilm, URL if available (accessed April 25, 2023).

<sup>57</sup> Ben E. Abernathy, “Cabbage- And Communism Too,” Cartoon, *Gastonia Gazette*, Month, Day, Year. From Gastonia Public Library. Microfilm, URL if available (accessed April 25, 2023).

<sup>58</sup> Ben E. Abernathy, “A Viper That Must Be Smashed!” Cartoon, *Gastonia Gazette*, Month, Day, Year. From Gastonia Public Library. Microfilm, URL if available (accessed April 25, 2023).



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Figure 1: Abernathy, Ben E. The Gastonia Spirit Fights The Monster Cartoon  
Gastonia Gazette, Gastonia Public Library Microfilm.



Figure 2: Abernathy, Ben E. Justice Weeps But Only For the Moment Cartoon  
Gastonia Gazette From Gastonia Public Library Microfilm.



Figure 3: Abernathy, Ben E. Cabbage- And Communism Too Cartoon Gastonia Gazette From Gastonia Public Library Microfilm (accessed April 25, 2023)



Figure 4: Abernathy, Ben E. A Viper That Must Be Smashed! Cartoon Gastonia Gazette From Gastonia Public Library Microfilm (accessed April 25, 2023)

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Newspapers such as *The Gastonia Gazette* and *The Nation* struggled to identify the proper label for union members. Within these same articles, union members were accused of being full-fledged “Russian” communists; however, in the same breath, the newspaper criticized the union activists’ faithfulness to their ideology. The only individuals who identified as communists or with the communist ideology were leaders such as Beal. Wiggins never considered herself a communist. One belief the NTWU held and desired to implement within the Southern textile industry was integration. Wiggins’ upbringing and outlook regarding the Black community was unique, although her co-workers outright rejected the idea of integration and would do so until well into the 1960s. Blanshard quotes a striker in the neighboring community Pineville:

“The niggus can join the union if they want to ... but they cayn’t meet under the same roof with us. No, suh! Not in the same room. Not in the same room at the mill neither. Anyway I ain’t seen a nigguh’s name on the books of this union yet. The Nothun folks cayn’t tell us how to run the niggus; we know how to do that ourselves.”<sup>59</sup>

Sentiments like this support Blanchard’s argument that union workers did not believe full-heartedly in the ideology spread by the NTWU. It would appear as though employees of the mill joined the union out of desperation and the true need for organized representation to free themselves from the confines of exploitation, not because they held the desire for an American Bolshevik revolution.<sup>60</sup>

Articles such as Blanshard’s and *The Gastonia Gazette* implied that the NTWU and communists preyed upon the town of Gastonia to spread communism and stage a revolution. The term communism was used freely with little understanding of the definition during this time period. Individuals harmed by the system of capitalism, such as Wiggins, were attracted to the union. For lower-class individuals, the promise of a classless society appeared to be the best solution to their economic dilemma.<sup>61</sup> The workers of the Loray Mill, Beal, and NTWU head leader Alan Weisbord believed they were making meaningful change for those suffering under capitalism and were not intentionally trying to swindle anyone. They did not advertise their presence or directly attempt to make an impact with their ideology. In 1928, the approach changed and the new philosophy became “dual unionism.” The NTWU was born out of a policy change by the American Communist Party. Previously the policy was “boring from within,” which was a subtle attempt by the party for communists to join unions and indirectly spread ideology.<sup>62</sup> The NTWU was the first union following this policy change.<sup>63</sup> The goals of the NTWU were to strengthen the party’s relationship with the Soviet Union and American Textile workers, specifically Southern Textile workers.<sup>64</sup> The ultimate goal of the union did reflect the Bolshevik revolution as suggested by Blanshard and *The Gastonia Gazette*. The union planned to covertly stage a peaceful,

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<sup>59</sup> Blanshard, “Communism,” 501.

<sup>60</sup> Articles published by the *Gastonia Gazette* liken the strike at Loray to the Bolshevik Revolution. The Bolshevik revolution is highly specific to the development of the USSR. Today the claim is far-fetched and not rooted in reality. However, it is fair to deduce the Bolshevik revolution served as the furthest extent of Communist knowledge by the average Gastonia resident. The *Gastonia Gazette* took the revolution idea and essentially ran with it, pushing this idea of an American Bolshevik Revolution.

<sup>61</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 60.

<sup>63</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 60.

non-violent revolution.<sup>65</sup> However, nothing suggests the majority of Southern textile members knew of or agreed with this ideology. The South was deliberately chosen by the union for a multitude of reasons. The South was a more culturally homogenous population compared to the North. Additionally, the North was rampant with strikes and therefore would not receive the National attention like a strike would in the South.<sup>66</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the articles published by *The Gastonia Gazette* may not have been completely of their own belief. In their book, *The Thirteenth Juror*, Robert L. and Elizabeth Williams make the claim that Loray Mill owners/ managers collected funds to help the Manville-Jenckes Company defeat the strikers through a series of advertisements.<sup>67</sup> The April article, “Mob Rule vs. Law And Order” is a part of these paid advertisements. Other advertisements followed a similar message of terror; “Do you want to see Gaston County’s industries, her farms, her homes, all of her institutions overthrown by a band of anarchists, bolshevists, and Russian reds? That is what Beal and Pershing are bringing to our people.”<sup>68</sup> The mill also embarked on a campaign of “hand-bill education” and distributed cards with short anecdotes such as; “Russia has 85 per cent of illiteracy. Shall they tell you what to do?, If you have \$7,000,000 why don’t you buy a mill of your own and run it to suit yourself?, When are those groceries coming?, Bust up your Russian union and let’s get back to work. And, “Can you live on promises?”<sup>69</sup> In the same breath, Manville-Jenckes was accused of organizing the Committee of One Hundred by Beal. This committee was alleged to be the same group of men in the mob responsible for the murder of Wiggins.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 60.

<sup>66</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 60.

<sup>67</sup> *The Thirteenth Juror* is a controversial book within scholarship. The authors, who are husband and wife, have no known accreditation to consider this work a part of scholarship. However, the literature is often quoted and used in current scholarship being published on the topic. The sources used by authors range from plausible to completely out of left field. For instance, one of their primary sources is a woman from Gastonia not mentioned in any other scholarship; they obtained this information through a personal interview completed in the 70s. There is no record of this interview. Another issue with this book is the tone in which it is written; when discussing Wiggins involvement in the union the authors make a one sentence reflection “The widespread use of women, however, may have been one of the worst mistakes Beal made during his Gastonia stay.” The book is rich with subjective statements, like this, demonstrating the authors’ sexist, classist, and anti-communist approach to telling the story of the Loray Mill strikes as compared to the objective approach of other scholarship. Additionally Kristina Horton, in the introduction of her scholarship, criticizes Williams for making the claim that he had reason to believe he had information proving a subject’s guilt; he refused to name the person for personal reasons. While attending university, Horton confronted Williams about this information; in response to the confrontation Williams did give the name of the man. Horton disagreed, the man Williams believed responsible had somewhat been a wives tale within the town; the assumption lacked any critical or scholarly approach. Despite its irredeemable qualities, the decision to include this scholarship in the paper is due to the primary source information presented in which I did not have access to. The defamatory articles published by the *Gastonia Gazette* in the early months of union activity do not exist in databases, given the publication year of the book it is most likely these articles were accessed through physical records and have not been made available by electronic records. Further, the book reinforces the themes of gender, identity, and ideology in the American South.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Thirteenth Juror*, 62.

<sup>69</sup> Blanshard, “Communism,” 500.

<sup>70</sup> Williams, *Thirteenth Juror*, 65.

## RED THREADS OF TRAGEDY

Prior to her death, *The Gastonia Gazette* never published articles discussing Wiggins. The articles targeted individuals such as Beal, not Wiggins. But for members of the community, Wiggins was well known. Perhaps her greatest contribution to the movement was her music and poetry. As a child and teen, Wiggins developed her love for music in her father's logging camps.<sup>71</sup> Her songs and poems reflected the dangers of work and the fight for survival. Many scholars title her as the "Poet Laureate" for the Gastonia strikes.<sup>72</sup> Music was not her only contribution. Wiggins was directly involved with the union and was among a small group of activists that worked under Beal.<sup>73</sup> Due to her relationship with the Black mill community, she was directly responsible for encouraging their union membership. In fact, she was the only White union representative able to do so. Her direct involvement made her a target of violence. The Committee of One Hundred, also known as the Black Committee, was composed of "deputized" men from the local American Legion, as well as men within the mill uninvolved with the union. Current scholarship believes the committee was organized, employed, and paid for by the Manville-Jenckes Company and mill managers.

Following the death of Police Chief Aderholt, Gastonia went through a period referred to by scholars as the "Reign of Terror."<sup>74</sup> During this time, Wiggins was seen by many in her community as, "a loud-mouthed linthead"<sup>75</sup> whose unrestrained voice was bringing national shame upon the community.<sup>76</sup> Subsequently, she and her family became a target of anti-communist hate for Wiggins' position in the communist union. Wiggins was consumed by so much fear, she made it a point to never have her back to a window or door within their home.<sup>77</sup> However, Wiggins could not prevent her eldest daughter, Myrtle, from being raped by an unknown man who forced his way into the backroom of their home and barricaded himself inside with the eleven-year-old girl.<sup>78</sup> Soon after Myrtle's rape, the home water supply was poisoned, although nothing came of it despite the man being caught in the act.<sup>79</sup> Mill owners and law enforcement were working hand-in-hand to enable violence and evade justice against Wiggins.

The main question in this story is who was responsible for the murder of Wiggins. Wiggins and the other members of the union were aware their lives were at risk. However, Wiggins may not have understood just how much risk was involved. When police were notified of Wiggins' death, nine men were arrested as suspects in the murder. As Solicitor John Carpenter officiated at the inquest, the nine men were held on \$1000 bond.<sup>80</sup> Their bond was paid off; Fred Morrow, Troy Jones, Theodore Sims, Larry Davis, L.M. Sossoaman, O.H. Lunsford, W.M. Boyter, Harris Wheelus, and Jack Carver walked free for the remainder of their lives.<sup>81</sup> In October, one month following Wiggins' death, the Gaston County Court held a Grand Jury for the men accused of Wiggins' murder and found the bill to be untrue. The men could not be

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<sup>71</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, ix.

<sup>72</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 112.

<sup>73</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 98.

<sup>74</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 111.

<sup>75</sup> This term was a derogatory term for a cotton mill worker.

<sup>76</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 111.

<sup>77</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 111.

<sup>78</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 112.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, *Thirteenth Juror*, 155.

<sup>81</sup> "Criminal Docket January-October 1929." Gaston County Courthouse, Gaston County, North Carolina, 1.

indicted for the charges presented.<sup>82</sup> In January of 1930, the men again faced the Gaston County Courthouse judge on new charges. The Attorney General then removed the case from Gaston County to Mecklenburg County. Today, Mecklenburg County does not have any record of what occurred. Perhaps the case was truly unsolvable, however, witness testimony overwhelmingly pointed to H.G. Wheelus.<sup>83</sup> During the initial Grand Jury hearing, there were reportedly 100 witnesses. The man sitting directly next to Wiggins when she was shot claimed to have seen Wheelus shoot Wiggins. The medical examiner corroborated this accusation, stating that based on the position of her injury, Wheelus was the only man capable of taking the shot.<sup>84</sup> Although the person responsible for the murder of Wiggins will likely never face charges, it is abundantly clear that Wiggins would likely not have been murdered had *The Gaston Gazette* not published the fear-mongering, “call to action” articles.

Wiggins’ death caused chaos and fear inside her community. Following Wiggins’ death, her children’s future was set in limbo. The town and the union fought for the right to determine the children’s next steps. The union wanted to send the children to a boarding school in the North that was specifically for children of communist leaders and activists, a school that mimicked children’s programs in the Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup> The union would pay for the children’s tuition and later tour the children around the country as victims of capitalism.<sup>86</sup> The community, however, was adamantly against this, as they believed the children had suffered enough. The town put the children in a state-run facility for orphans where the children would learn the “Southern way of life.”<sup>87</sup>

Later on during the children’s young-adult life, Beal returned to North Carolina with his book “The Proletariat Journey” for the children. Following his self-induced exile to the USSR, Beal was slowly disillusioned by communist ideology and published the book *Proletarian Journey*. He believed his role in the union contributed to the death of Wiggins. Thus, in giving his book to the children, he urged them to avoid communism, avoid socialism, and most importantly avoid unionism.<sup>88</sup> In her adult life, Millie recalled that an uncle of hers by marriage joined a union in his industry. The family then cut all communication with him.<sup>89</sup> Insert first name Horton, in turn, was brought up in a similar way. The family shied away from liberal activity, rejected unionization, and stuck to a traditional Southern life devoid of any communist sympathy. Wiggins was a reminder of the danger presented by joining and participating in radical political activity, as seen by a decline in union membership following her death. Furthermore to set Wiggins as an example not to be followed, *The Gaston Gazette* reported her death as an unfortunate consequence of the union and that as a woman she had fallen prey to union persuasion and suffered the ultimate consequence.

Today, Wiggins is regarded as a martyr for those who recall the history of Gastonia, but her story brings up the uncomfortable questions and truths of society

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<sup>82</sup> “Criminal Docket January-October 1929.” Gaston County Courthouse, Gaston County, North Carolina, 1.

<sup>83</sup> “Many Stories Told at Wiggins Inquest.” *The Atlanta Constitution*. September 26, 1929. Proquest Historical Newspapers: *The Atlanta Constitution*, 28.

<sup>84</sup> “Many Stories,” 28.

<sup>85</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 200.

<sup>86</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 200.

<sup>87</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 201.

<sup>88</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 203.

<sup>89</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, 203.

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then and now. By all accounts, scholars recall Fred E. Beal as the primary subject and shy away from the discussion of Wiggins. Beal's troubles at Loray are easily digested. Wiggins' story, however, is morally ambiguous. Somehow, society allowed a pregnant mother of five to become the target of an angry mob and neglected to seek out justice due to her involvement in a political fringe group. Today, there seems to be more discourse about Wiggins. In 2012, a memorial foundation started in Wiggins' name proposed a memorial in Gastonia.<sup>90</sup> Despite being proposed almost a decade ago the monument has yet to be erected due to funding issues as the state would not fund the project itself. Ultimately, this reflects conflicting ideas occurring today regarding the events that transpired in 1929. The desire to erect a monument in honor of Wiggins' life is seen as a physical reminder of the pain she and her family suffered. A single pregnant mother of five, a woman involved in "communist" political activity, and an unashamedly loud woman is not an individual society desires to memorialize. Individuals such as Wiggins' are prime examples of state and community failure due to gender and political identity within the American South.

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<sup>90</sup> Horton, *Martyr*, ix.

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