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13 December 2021

### **William Lofton: Honoring the Truth**

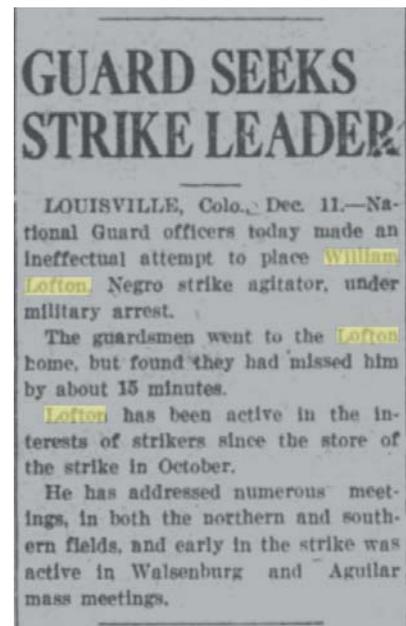
*“My skin is black, my heart is white, and my card is RED!”* These were the famed words of Labor Activist William Lofton, a man who sparked rebellion in the hearts of coal miners in Colorado.

Throughout the 1920’s, William Lofton was a key public figure in the fight for miner’s rights. His passionate prose garnered national attention for the International Workers of the World (IWW). After the governor’s crackdown on the strike, Lofton and his family were forced to flee their home on Lafarge Avenue in Louisville, and never returned. Despite his ostracism, activist William Lofton’s devoted work as one of the first Black strike leaders in Colorado warrants Lafarge Avenue to be renamed in his honor.

In the 1920's, coal strikes raged across the state as miners protested their unjust wages and hazardous worksite conditions; demanding substantial changes. When activist William Lofton and his wife Lillian Lofton moved to Louisville, he immediately became involved in the local IWW organization. Most miners in Louisville were working in the heart of the city at the Acme Mine. Little is known about the potential negotiations between the local miners and owners, but it is assumed that the owner of the mine, The Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, ignored the strikers protests until tensions erupted in October of 1927. The Colorado IWW voted to go on a state wide strike, and the majority of mines closed, including the Acme Mine. William Lofton rallied against the mine owners, providing oral arguments that drew onlookers like bees to honey. In November of the same year, he gained senior leadership in the local IWW through his undeniably persuasive speeches and dedicated work. In the same month, a picket outside the

Columbine Mine became deadly as state militia sent by Colorado Governor William H. Adams shot into the crowd, killing six. After this unprecedented violent event, Adams became increasingly determined to terminate the strikes, distributing warrants for IWW leaders, most likely including Lofton. This led to his eventual departure from Louisville, but he continued his activism in Southern Colorado and Denver, eventually dying sometime in the 1930's (Hogstad 1-4).

On the fateful night of December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1927, 21-year-old Ernie Zarina woke to the sound of a commotion outside his door. His father was arguing with a group of armed men sent by the National Guard to arrest leaders affiliated with the IWW. They had come for William Lofton, a middle-aged Black man they presumed lived at the Zarina's house. Luckily for Lofton, who was Ernie's neighbor, the ruckus alerted him to their presence, and allowed him to elude the mob. This incident was one of many that William Lofton faced as one of the leaders of the 1920's coal strike in



Louisville. Under pressure from the police and targeting from the KKK, which, at the time was popular in the area, he moved away from his home on LaFarge Avenue, but his long legacy of change remained (The Daily Times 1). IWW Activist William Lofton's role as one of the first Black strike leaders in Colorado merits his home street in the heart of Louisville to be renamed in his honor.

William Lofton's dedication towards improving the lives of his fellow coal miners across Colorado deserves a posthumous monument to his activism. Throughout the 1927 strike, William Lofton was renowned for his public speaking prowess. He persuaded many to join the fight and

his name became familiar across the state as he gained fame, if not admiration, from all sides. According to an edition of the *Louisville Historian*, William Lofton, “quite possibly, [was] the most famous and significant Louisville resident in the 1920’s... [he] gained regional and even national acclaim for his oratory skills and quickly became a public figure in his own fight” (The Louisville Historian 3). Lofton was an essential and established figure at the time, praised for his power to move a crowd. Yet the city of Louisville nor its citizens have done anything to honor him, and few even know his name. He was popular and powerful in the 1920’s, but lacks a monument or tribute now. Regardless, through his passionate work and oratory power, William Lofton gained universal recognition and deserves a commemoration to his monumental efforts in the Colorado Coal Strike of 1927.

Moreover, following Lofton’s startling experience with armed men on his street under orders to arrest him, Lafarge Avenue is an unnamed historical monument for the city of Louisville. During the time of the strike, Lofton and his fellow leaders of the IWW became familiar with unjust encounters with law enforcement. After Governor Adams’ crackdown, many of Lofton’s colleagues were unfairly arrested, beaten, or killed as a result of their involvement in the strike. Not much is known about the precise details of December 11, 1927, and of the time afterwards, but Ernie Zarini, the young man whose house was wrongly surrounded told the Louisville Historic Museum that, “Once, my house was mistakenly raided by some strike police” (Louisville Historic Museum Webinar 46:32). Lofton then fled, both because of his position as a IWW leader and the additional persecution for being black. William and his wife Lillian are eventually recorded living in Denver in the 1930’s as the strike soon dwindled in popularity. Therefore, due to the dramatic incident on Lafarge Avenue, and Lofton’s forced flight from Louisville, Lafarge Avenue is a hidden historical gem that must be established.

Historically and presently, Louisville's citizens have been predominantly white, and the town lacks representation activists or artists of color. If white citizens are commemorated for their deeds, then equitably, so should people of color like William Lofton. Throughout the city, artwork, parks, and even street names originate from white people, highlighting and acknowledging them for their achievements. Louisville's symbolism ignores people of color who also had a substantial impact on the town. In the 2019 census of Louisville, 85% of residents were recognized as white, an overwhelming majority that may have been closer to 90% back in the 1920's (Louisville Historic Museum Webinar 6:10). Around the time of the strike, the KKK was flourishing in the area, with many residents openly joining and supporting it. William Lofton's prominent role in the strike made him an instant target. After his forced exile from the town due to threats to him and his family, his legacy was overlooked and forgotten by people who hated the idea of elevating him. William Lofton's work was ignored, but his contributions were profound, and equitably, must be elevated.

Louisville's Lafarge Avenue was the home of activist William Lofton, and due to his dedicated work and persuasive prowess, he deserves to have this street renamed after him. Lofton's work to better his fellow miner's lives in the 1927 Coal Strike stretches to the present day, and like the work of Dr. Martin Luther King or John Lewis, these activists paved the way for others to stand and speak; making lasting change that extends to the present day. By remembering William Lofton, we choose to acknowledge history not tainted by bias or prejudice, but as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

## Works Cited

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