

Sisters in Toil

St. Paul's First Union of Garment Workers

MARY CHRISTINE BADER



There are many monuments to famous men who helped build the material and political capital of Minnesota. There are only two thin volumes in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society to honor the memory of a little-known group of women who, in their modest way, helped build the state's moral capital. Within those two thin volumes are the minutes of St. Paul's earliest union of women garment workers, and between the handwritten lines are the aspirations, insecurities, and determination that fueled their lives.

As I untied the limp ribbon that bound the two old record books of the United Garment Workers of America Local 171, I couldn't help whispering my appreciation to my grandmother. She'd been dead more than 30 years, but I had a hunch her spirit had been liberated from the archives along with the books. As the union's recording secretary from 1926 until at least 1958, she had contributed many of the handwritten notes in the books, the only known record of the long hours she and her union sisters devoted to improving wages and working conditions early in the twentieth century. Minnesotans are never going to see streets or sports palaces bearing names like Marie Cory, Clara Engelen, Marie Schmoller, Mabel McEnaney, Alice Quayle, Pearl Peterson, or Christine Waldoch (my grandmother), but these St. Paul union women left their mark, if not their names. In the global race to the bottom for cheaper and cheaper labor, they were at the starting gate.

Christine was only 14 years old in 1905 when she went to work as a seamstress. She was proud of her industrious youth, and—appalling



Christine Waldoch (right), already working as a seamstress when she posed with a sister, about 1906–10

as it sounds today—in St. Paul that year, 575 children under the age of 16 were employed full time, the great majority of them in factories that were turning out work clothes, boots and shoes, printing, cigars, building products, and other goods.¹

In Christine's case, it was a strict family work ethic, not poverty, that sent her into the labor force, ending her education after eighth grade at

instilled the ideals of union loyalty in Christine, the second of his six children. As much as—and perhaps more than—the family's German Catholicism, the union movement would become her religion.

Years later in a newspaper article recognizing her as the longest-serving woman delegate to the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly, Christine described her route to the factory floor: "I liked to sew when I was a girl. I could have stayed at home and been a dressmaker, I suppose, but I wanted to go out to work. It was one step—a pretty hard one it seems now—from sewing on the foot treadle machine at home to the double needle joining power machine in the factory."²

Work as a power-machine operator was fast paced, and the low pay was by the piece. Operators in 1901 averaged top daily wages of \$1.25 for 9.5 hours of work. By 1905 some 935 people in St. Paul, most of them female, earned their living in low-paid garment manufacturing, an employment sector second only to boot and shoe manufacturing in the city. A few years later, Christine found employment stitching boots and shoes at St. Paul's Foot, Schulze & Company.³

By 1905 some 935 people in St. Paul, most of them female, earned their living in low-paid garment manufacturing.

Sacred Heart School in the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood of St. Paul. That's where her immigrant parents, Christian and Martha Dietl, raised their family. Christian, skilled as a maltster and one of the earliest union members at nearby Hamm's Brewery,

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Young women of the United Garment Workers Local 171 riding in St. Paul's Labor Day Parade, 1905, three years after the local was organized.

Despite the hard work their jobs entailed, many young women preferred such factory work to the common alternative: employment as servants. Factory work gave them more independence—and their evenings free.

Society may have considered Christine's occupation lowly, but I doubt she ever did. There was never anything humble or deferential about her. In old photos she is a young woman lavishly bundled in fur. Tall, slender, not beautiful but attractive, she wears the elegant, flowing clothes of the early 1900s with confidence. At a dance, she caught the eye of my grandfather, a young railroad brakeman named Louis Bader, and married him when she was 21.

Had her life gone as expected, Christine, like the majority of mar-

ried women of her time, may never have worked outside the home again, and for several years she did leave the workforce. But one spring day in 1917 her life took a sudden U-turn when my grandfather walked home from work, blood seeping from his mouth. By evening he was dead of a pulmonary hemorrhage. Not quite 26 years old, Christine found herself a widow with a 3-year-old son and an 18-month-old daughter to support. In 1917 there was no Social Security to provide for a breadwinner's survivors. Christine was vulnerable in a way familiar to millions of women before her and since. She was luckier than many, though, because she had relatives willing to care for her children while she found employment.

It is not hard to imagine that

the vulnerability and grief she knew as a young widow were seared into her memory. These forces propelled her—for the rest of her life—to join with other ordinary citizens to work toward the goal of a different kind of society, one that would offer greater economic security for everyone.

* * *

THE 1920S ROARED with insecurity for workers and their families. Unemployed World War I veterans walked the streets of American cities. In Washington the National Association of Manufacturers opposed legislation to outlaw child labor. And as Scott Fitzgerald dazzled friends at the University Club bar, elsewhere in St. Paul families were feeling the

Workers at Foot, Schulze & Company, St. Paul, about 1917





*Christine and husband Louis Bader,
about 1912*

pain of a post-war depression and a campaign by the city's business leaders to eliminate union shops. Similar efforts by employers in other American cities were causing union membership to decline.⁴

For years, business and labor had coexisted peacefully in St. Paul under an unofficial civic compact, a scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours pragmatism that set the capital city apart from its larger twin. Minneapolis was dominated by an aggressively anti-union business establishment that fostered a climate of fear among workers, which provided a breeding ground for a more radical brand of unionism and, eventually, violence. In contrast, the labor movement was strong in St. Paul, as was the Catholic Church, with its teachings supporting the rights of workers. The closed shop, in which union membership was a condition of employment, was an accepted way of doing business in the city. But in the 1920s employers under the banner of the St. Paul Citizens Alliance, following the example

of their Minneapolis counterparts, began an "open shop" campaign—a frontal attack on union shops.⁵

In 1923, in the midst of this growing tension, my grandmother's name first appeared in the UGW record books along with those of other new members. By then her name was Christine Waldoch, for she had remarried a few years earlier. She and her new husband, Jack Waldoch, were the parents of a two-year-old boy named Billy, and Jack had proven to be a kind, reliable stepfather to Christine's other children: my father, Donald, and aunt, Dorothy. The family had recently moved to their own home, a small bungalow at 1060 Farrington in the Rice Street neighborhood, and stability must have seemed just around the corner at last—until, that is, Jack lost his job. As a boilermaker for the Great Northern Railroad, Jack was caught up in the Shopmen's Strike of 1922, a major national strike that hit St.

work, might be earning \$12 to \$20 for a 44-hour week.⁷

Despite the open-shop campaign, the UGW experienced a surge in membership in St. Paul after the war, growing from 30 members in 1918 to 220 in 1924, when it was the largest group of unionized women in the city. That same year, the St. Paul Association of Public and Business Affairs published a report about women employed in the city. The report concluded that unionization was decreasing because "many features formerly advocated regarding hours, wages, and conditions of work are now generally accepted and enforced by the State, and . . . the majority of women do not feel that they are in a permanent line of activity."⁸

From a distance of many decades, that study and its conclusions seem to be an exquisite expression of anti-unionism, sexism, and paternalism—the latter two qualities in ample supply within the union struc-

The Citizens Alliance open-shop campaign was not the only challenge the garment workers faced in the 1920s.

Paul's railroad workers hard as they resisted their employers' rollback of benefits and wage gains granted during World War I.⁶ To shore up family finances at this difficult time, Christine found work in a garment factory.

The employers' open-shop campaign threatened to undermine garment workers' wages, already among the lowest in the city despite the gains made since the war. Before the war, a typical garment worker, paid by piecework rates, earned \$7 to \$14 during a 48-hour work week. When Christine re-entered the workforce, that same worker, still paid by piece-

ture, as well as society in general.⁹ Men held most of the paid union jobs and negotiating power, and men also usually held the higher-paid garment industry jobs, such as cutter. The few male members among the St. Paul garment workers generally kept a low profile and left the mundane organizational work to the women.

Even at the peak of its membership, however, UGW Local 171 represented only about 10 percent of the 2,000 or more women working in the city's garment factories. The industry, located primarily in Lowertown, was anchored by old, established firms that produced overalls and jackets



The Cowden Manufacturing Company building, 300 East Fourth Street, St. Paul, 2006

worn by railroad, construction, and other workers. During the 1920s Local 171 had only four union shops: Simon & Mogilner and Cowden Manufacturing Company, both located in Lowertown; Klinkerfues Brothers, in Dayton's Bluff; and Lang Manufacturing Company, a relatively new firm in South St. Paul. Owned by an Austrian immigrant named Harry Lang, it advertised "Union Made Overalls and Work Shirts."¹⁰ It was at Lang's UGW union shop that my grandmother found work.

The garment workers were adding new members each month, but before long the open-shop campaign began to expose their lack of power. When Simon & Mogilner, one of the garment workers' first employers, declared it was an open shop, the local summoned members to an emergency meeting. Their worries were evident in the minutes.

The firm will allow all present employees to remain in the union but they are not to ask new employees to organize. . . . The members were advised to pay dues and keep in good standing so the firm will not think you are lacking as a good trade unionist. There are 18 to 20 working at present and 4 who do not belong to the local.

The members pledged themselves to keep up dues in order to maintain their wages and conditions for the future.¹¹

* * *

THE CITIZENS ALLIANCE open-shop campaign was not the only challenge the garment workers faced in the 1920s. They also faced a deteriorating economy, widespread unemployment, and competition from

prison labor. Many states had garment factories inside prisons, where contractors paid inmates a fraction of union wages and then sold the finished product on the open market, profiting handsomely even while undercutting prices of union-made garments. Some manufacturers joined the crusade against prison-made goods, waging a national advertising campaign against prison-made overalls "which so many workers innocently buy and wear."¹² Other manufacturers, however, were more than willing to use convict labor to fatten their profit margins.

Minnesota workers were acutely aware of the threat. An international organizer for the UGW addressed the state labor federation in 1924 on the subject, declaring that "70 percent of the work shirts worn in the United States were prison made at an average cost of 75 cents a dozen, and that prisoners were being taught a woman's trade that would be of no use to them when they finished their terms."¹³

In 1925, when the state legislature was considering a bill to allow the manufacture of overalls and shirts in state institutions, Frank Starkey, a prominent Minnesota labor leader, attended a meeting of

Biennial convention of the Woman's International Union Label League and Trade Union Auxiliary, St. Paul, 1925. Christine was her local's representative to the league, and other union sisters also belonged.



Local 171. The proposed legislation directly threatened members' jobs, and Starkey urged them to write letters of opposition to the lawmakers. The bill was killed, and the following month's minutes gratefully included a motion "to send a box of cigars to Frank Starkey and two others in appreciation for their help."¹⁴

That summer, when the crusading Kate Richards O'Hare brought her national campaign against prison labor to St. Paul, the women of Local 171 joined in. As she did wherever she went, O'Hare visited local department stores and asked managers to remove goods that she identified as prison made. The *Minnesota Union Advocate*, a weekly St. Paul newspaper, announced that it would not publish the names of the offending stores because they had agreed to pull the merchandise. Local 171

Major Twin Cities and Chicago department store ad prominently displaying the UGW label; Minnesota Union Advocate, February 12, 1931.



appointed a Prison Labor Committee to continue checking stores, but their progress was cut short by the disheartening news that one of the union shops, Klinkerfues Brothers, had begun handling prison-made garments. The union—meekly, it seems—accepted the owner's explanation that he had to do so to stay competitive.¹⁵

The sad truth was that the garment workers had little muscle. Their main tactic was promotion

The garment workers' new political muscles were toning up—just in time for the general economic meltdown of the Great Depression.

of the union label—a tactic whose success depended on consumers' willingness to buy union goods. The label was the union's seal of approval, a signal to consumers that a garment was produced by people who could bargain collectively to improve their wages and working conditions. The power to withdraw their label from an employer was one of the few tools garment workers had to strengthen their bargaining position at a time when large numbers of unemployed people provided easy replacements for strikers.

Other unions had labels, too, and Local 171's minutes are filled with instructions to members about what products they should buy (union-made shoes and boots, union-made bread) or not buy (hosiery from Minneapolis's Strutwear, which was engulfed in labor battles). Union solidarity extended to entertainment, too. After hearing a presentation by a representative of the striking stage employees union, Local 171 passed a motion to fine members \$5 if they attended the theater while the strike was in progress.¹⁶

But the meetings of Local 171 were much more than boycott briefings. Visitors gave educational talks on issues of the day, and always there were reports about what was happening at the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly. Almost every meeting included motions of solidarity and financial support for other unions—the struggling boot makers one month, the striking mine workers another. Members supported one another, too, by voting to authorize

union sick benefits when one of their group fell ill, since paid sick leave was not provided by employers any more than paid vacations, health insurance, or other benefits that workers later in the twentieth century would take for granted.

The union was also a social organization. Bunco parties, built around the dice game, were big. And then there was the peculiar annual competition to elect the queen of the Labor Day picnic, a ritual whose outcome was determined by the union that sold the largest number of tickets in support of its candidate—or perhaps made a deal with another union. Local 171's minutes suggest the latter tactic succeeded in naming their treasurer, Grace Lohr, queen in 1929: Competition was "so close, that it was decided the Fur Workers purchase 25 books amounting to \$25 to enable Miss Lohr to win in the contest. A motion made and passed to donate \$10 to the Fur Workers Union to help defray the expense."¹⁷

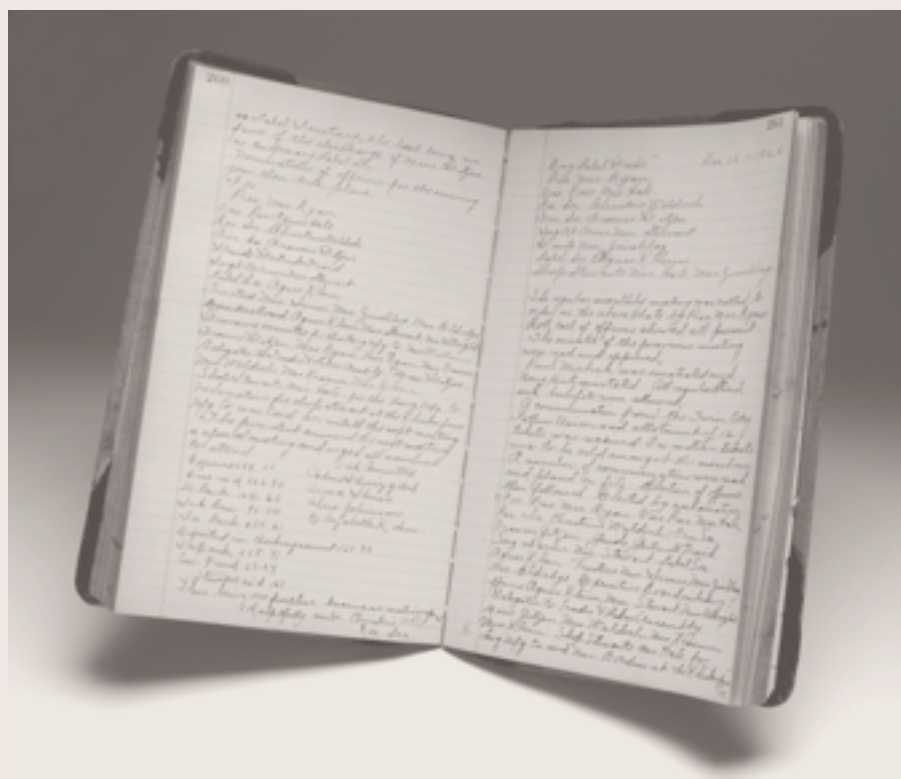
Lohr even had a campaign manager: Frances Gitzen Siegel, herself a queen candidate five years earlier

and a perennial leader of the local, though one who usually concerned herself with more serious matters. Among those were the antiwar council meetings of 1927 at which Frances and my grandmother represented Local 171. These meetings were organized by local labor leaders to protest U.S. interventions in the affairs of Nicaragua, Mexico, and China.

Considering that the long struggle for women's suffrage had only recently succeeded, it surprised me to find no feminist sentiments in the UGW minutes. After all, the local was a politically aware group composed almost exclusively of females. Whatever the reality, the official record of Local 171 in the 1920s contains no evidence that the members saw themselves as part of the movement for women's equality. At that time, the movement was splintering. Some leaders advocated an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, while union women and their sympathizers feared such an amendment would erode anti-sweatshop and other protective legislation they had fought long and hard to gain.¹⁸

* * *

AS THE TWENTIES GROUND ON, union activity was increasingly political. Christine represented the garment workers at meetings of the newly organized Farmer-Labor Party. The UGW had been an early contributor to the party's predecessor, the Working People's Non-Partisan League, and within a few years it would help elect Farmer-Labor leader Floyd B. Olson governor, launching one of the most powerful political movements in Minnesota's history. By the end of the decade, the garment workers' new political muscles were toning up—just in time for the general



"Buy Label Goods," exhorted Local 171's minutes for December 13, 1926, taken by recording secretary Christine Waldoch.

economic meltdown of the Great Depression. The growing tension was apparent in an entry Christine made in the UGW minutes in the spring of 1930. The local had received a request from Bannons department store "to buy St. Paul made goods. . . . The secretary was instructed to send the letter back and inform the management that the stationery did not bear the union label."¹⁹

The garment workers were soon to discover just how sharply.

My grandmother's handwritten minutes of Local 171's meetings end abruptly and without explanation after the May 1, 1930, entry. I looked for an explanation and found it in the pages of the *Minnesota Union Advocate*.²⁰

For several years there had been signs of tension between the work-

With the experience of their Minneapolis union sisters in mind, the St. Paul garment workers took to the picket line.

The garment workers wanted to send a message that loyalty was a two-way street. But in the depressed economy of 1930, the line between the interests of owners and the interest of labor in St. Paul was being drawn more sharply than in the past.

ers and one of Local 171's employers, Harry Lang. Then in June of 1930, as the number of unemployed workers in the city grew, Lang announced that he would no longer pay the UGW scale. He asked his union workers to accept a 30-percent wage reduction

for sewing automobile seat covers in his shop, which by then had moved to 232 East Seventh Street. When the workers refused, Lang advertised for replacements. The women of UGW Local 171 were locked out.

The same scenario had played out a year earlier at a Minneapolis company in which Lang had an interest. The employees in that lockout were members of UGW Local 27. With the experience of their Minneapolis union sisters in mind, the St. Paul garment workers took to the picket line in what was the first strike in the history of Local 171.²¹

They marched in front of the Lang shop throughout the summer of 1930, while Lang hired bodyguards to protect their replacements. The locked-out garment workers also waged an aggressive public-relations campaign through the *Union Advocate*. Their leader and spokesperson was the union president, Katherine Ryan, a Lang employee who was particularly indignant about the situation because she had—on her own initiative—been promoting the union-made virtues of Lang’s product. Now, as reported by the *Advocate*, Ryan was “directing the fight against the unfair and ungrateful concern.” Assisting her was Christine Waldoch.

The *Advocate* accused Lang of being connected with a sweatshop operation in Somerset, Wisconsin, that was paying a wage lower than the cost of prison labor, exploiting unorganized women workers of the small town and rural area.

A committee of the Garment Workers’ union visited Somerset last week and obtained first-hand information about shop conditions. . . . Some of the girls interviewed stated that their earn-



First-page news in the Union Advocate, July 3, 1930

ings averaged about \$1 a day! Those who made more had to be speedy. A former employee of the Lang company is in charge of the factory at Somerset. When he recognized the members of the committee he shunted the help away and posted them not to disclose any further facts. . . . This is the model that Lang evidently had in mind when he decided to cut wages in his Saint Paul factory.

The garment workers’ cause quickly garnered support from the broader labor movement, which saw it as an example of an ominous trend. As the Great Depression deepened, some employers were taking advantage of surplus labor to squeeze workers’ paychecks, sometimes in ways that even the state Industrial Commission called “abuse.”²²

In June the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly appointed a special committee to advise the strikers.

The Minneapolis local of the UGW hosted a picnic at Lake Minnetonka to benefit the St. Paulites, and members of other unions helped make Local 171’s own benefit dance at Lake Owasso a success. In August, after President Katherine Ryan made a plea for support at the Minnesota Federation of Labor’s annual convention in Duluth, sympathetic delegates took up a collection for the garment workers’ cause, indicating “in no uncertain way that the fight of the garment workers is interpreted as the fight of the organized labor movement all over the state and will get the backing of it.”²³

The *Union Advocate* covered the lockout with long, front-page stories week after week throughout the summer. It offered editorial support in colorful hyperbole, blaming the lockout on the Citizens Alliance and its determination to break the power of the labor movement in St. Paul.

Like the buzzard that swoops down on the battlefield to fill its loathsome maw with carrion, the Citizens Alliance is hovering about the scene of struggle . . . to gather credit by giving counsel and assistance to a concern that has undertaken to lower wages and depress the humble standards of poorly-paid seamstresses. . . . Certainly there are many unemployed workers in Saint Paul who are so desperate that they are willing to take the jobs of those who are fighting for a living wage. This is why Lang has been able to fill his factory with a horde of unskilled and destitute girls willing to take the bread out of the mouths of their sisters in toil.²⁴

The garment workers also picketed the homes of the replacement

workers, “determined,” the *Union Advocate* wrote, “to carry their message to the very neighborhood of those who are helping to tear down the wage standards of the garment workers.”²⁵ They also published the following passionate appeal in the *Advocate*:

We have refused to submit to a lower standard and are now fighting for a wage that will afford a decent living for ourselves and all others who work in the garment industry.

Employers are in business for profit and unless prevented will hire those who will work the cheapest. . . . Our places have been taken by you and others. You have not only taken advantage of our sacrifice but you have done so at a starvation wage. You are helping to pull down the standard of everyone working in the garment industry. While it is dishonorable to profit by another’s misfortune, it is contemptible to become a tool to degrade those you have wronged.

The Lang Company wants to compete with prison labor and aims to bring its employees down to that standard. Are you willing to help this concern accomplish its purpose of making free women workers compete with criminals within prison walls?

We have established our wage schedule by uniting into a union of the United Garment Workers. It is the only way we can keep from sinking to the depths of degradation set by greed and selfishness.

By the end of the second month of the lockout, rumors were circulating that the Lang shop planned to

move all its operations to a lower-wage shop in rural Wisconsin. The *Advocate* commented: “Garment Workers Union No. 171, by its militant attitude, has settled the question of cheap standard garment shops in St. Paul. The wage schedule is now low enough and it is determined not to let a cut-throat concern light in St. Paul. These girls will have done a great service if they succeed in chasing the Lang concern out of the city if it persists in the policy of prison standard of wages.”

Not long afterward, the summer-long dispute was over. Harry Lang and his company moved to River Falls, Wisconsin, which became the base of his operations that later grew to several factories, none in St. Paul.

Throughout the depression years, garment workers’ job prospects would continue to rise and fall with employment numbers.

The *Union Advocate* tried to put a good face on what was, in the end, a pyrrhic victory: “The members of the Garment Workers union put on one of the most thorough campaigns ever conducted in Saint Paul . . . and while it would have been much better to have settled on the basis of unionizing the plant, the next best thing was to drive it out of the community.”²⁶

As the UGW’s recording secretary, Christine Waldoch placed a letter in the *Union Advocate* thanking all who had supported her local during the long, stressful summer of 1930. She also made an announcement to the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly that provided an interesting footnote to the lockout: Harry Lang’s brother and vice-president, Soul Lang, who had at one time been a member of Local 171, had opened his own garment factory and might employ

some of the union members. Soul (pronounced Saul) Lang’s Energy Manufacturing Company would later become a leading employer in the city’s expanding garment industry, but his workers would be represented by a rival union.²⁷

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IN THE SAME MONTH that the Lang lockout ended, U.S. businesses reported rehiring employees to meet a moderate, seasonal demand for manufactured goods. That was good news for St. Paul garment workers, because rehiring in manufacturing meant increased demand for overalls and other work clothes, the sort of clothing produced in the city’s gar-

ment shops. For a year after their struggle at Lang’s, Local 171 members had work, but throughout the depression years, garment workers’ job prospects would continue to rise and fall with employment numbers.²⁸

By early 1932 most of Local 171’s members were employed, although not all had full-time jobs. They continued their unflagging promotion of the union label, and their style show remained a feature at the St. Paul Auditorium during the annual Industrial Show, the purpose of which was “educating the public to patronize St. Paul made union products and to promote union label interest and information.”²⁹

A sad sign of the times that year was the change at the Klinkerfues company. In February 1932 an ad in the *Union Advocate* proudly trumpeted “Klinkerfues Union Made



Making overalls, Winona, about 1938

Overalls” complete with innovative “stop loss” watch and pliers pockets—“a patented new feature that prevents anything falling from those pockets no matter in what position you work.” Five months later Klinkerfues repudiated its agreement with Local 171 and announced that it would hire only nonunion help.³⁰

By 1933 Cowden Manufacturing Company, at 300 East Fourth Street, was the only UGW employer listed in the *Union Advocate’s* annual Union Label Guide. The company employed 170 members of the garment workers union—virtually all of them, my grandmother included. However, Local 171 members were working an average of only two days a week until the summer of that year when Christine Waldoch announced some good news to the Trades and Labor Assembly: A local company had obtained a contract for work clothes for the “reforestation camps,” and all members of her union were now employed and enjoying a 16-percent increase in wages, too. The New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps was getting underway, and Local 171 was

experiencing a ripple effect. But not for long. By November the government contract was completed, and all the members of Local 171 were unemployed.³¹

The hardships of the Great Depression would continue for the rest of the decade, although Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal brought long-overdue reform—sometimes after bitter struggles, including the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters’ strike that resulted in four deaths and helped change the course of U.S. labor history.³² In 1935 Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, which guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the Social Security Act, which established a safety net for the majority of Americans by providing income to retired workers and others. In 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act set minimum-wage and maximum-hour standards for workers involved in interstate commerce and prohibited the hiring of children under the age of 16 in manufacturing or mining. Interstate commerce in prison-made goods became a federal offense in 1940.

As for the tough-minded garment workers of Local 171, their low-paying industry did not promise them a bright future. Even though the larger labor movement was progressing toward its strongest era in history, the garment industry was moving to cheaper labor markets in the South.³³ And as if the competition from cheaper labor wasn’t enough, the UGW also had competition within the ranks of organized labor.

* * *

THE NATIONAL UGW, founded in 1891, was an old-line, conservative union. Its Minneapolis and St. Paul locals, established in 1901 and 1902

respectively, had a serious rival in the younger, more aggressive Amalgamated Clothing Workers, founded in 1914. While the UGW organized workers in a specific trade, the Amalgamated sought to organize all who labored in the industry. Led in Minnesota by Sander D. Genis, the Amalgamated competed with the

Union Advocate, February 11, 1932

THE GOLDEN RULE
"Our Name, Our Policy"



**Klinkerfues
Union Made
Overalls
1.10**

Well made of good heavy denim, carefully bar-tacked throughout. Watch pocket and pliers pocket have the new "Stop-Loss" pockets—a patented new feature that prevents anything falling from those pockets no matter in what position you work.

The Golden Rule—Men's Clothing—
Second Floor.

UGW in both of the Twin Cities and, increasingly, won.³⁴ Both unions also followed Minnesota's garment industry to sewing factories in small towns in Minnesota and western Wisconsin. As the regional garment industry grew, it was the Amalgamated, not the UGW, that grew with it. But Christine and her longtime friends remained loyal to their union and their friendships.

The local garment industry recovered from the brutal business conditions of the depression and even enjoyed a long period of prosperity that began with production of military uniforms for World War II. But eventually Twin Cities garment manufacturers, like so many others, again heard the siren call of cheaper labor markets—this time in foreign countries. Companies that didn't move or start importing soon faced pressure on their margins from competitors who did.

By the 1950s the St. Paul women who sewed together under the banner of the United Garment Workers of America Local 171 were growing old. Time, with an assist from the forces of globalization, would soon erase not just their jobs but the union they had worked for years to build. And the issues that propelled a small group of union garment workers in St. Paul to risk their jobs in 1930 would move to other countries, where they remain today.

* * *

AND CHRISTINE WALDOCH? World War II, which brought renewed prosperity to the local garment industry, brought only more personal tragedy to her. Billy, the only child she and her husband Jack Waldoch had together, was killed in England in 1944 as his army unit prepared for D-Day.



Christine on her front porch, about 1940

I look at a picture of my grandmother from that time and marvel at her resilience. She stands on the front porch of her small bungalow. She is as I remember her—straight and proud, her hair turned white, sometimes with too much blue tint in it. Popular stereotypes about old time

“factory girls” being coarse and uneducated did not apply to Christine Waldoch. Life and the labor movement had given her skills. She was well dressed and well spoken—although privately, to her children and grandchildren, she routinely used a common vulgarity associated with the backend of a donkey to describe any politician she considered unfriendly to labor.

Even as her old union's prospects declined, she remained loyal to the UGW. After the lockout at Lang's, she had worked at Cowden Manufacturing as a machine operator, and later she became an instructor for the New Deal's WPA sewing project in St. Paul.

She never officially retired from the workforce; she just redirected her energy. She no longer ran a power sewing machine, but she did what she could to put power into the labor movement. She continued to serve as the union's recording secretary almost to the end of her life and represent the UGW at state conventions

Christine (second from left, facing camera), probably at St. Paul's WPA sewing project





Unionist as grandmother, St. Paul Pioneer Press, February 16, 1958

of the Minnesota Federation of Labor until she was well into her seventies. Christine also continued as a delegate to the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly for so long that in 1958, when she was 67 years old, she was recognized as the longest-serving female delegate and featured in a newspaper article. It was her only brush with fame. “There’s no better way to learn about economics, developments in your city and your government and in the thinking in all groups than at these meetings,” she was quoted as saying about the assembly. Certainly, the labor movement had been the education she didn’t have when she was young.³⁵

When I saw the old newspaper article for the first time a few years ago, I was startled to discover that the opinionated, politically involved grandmother I remember was portrayed as a sweet little old lady. The accompanying photo even showed her knitting. Her involvement in the labor movement was filtered through the lens of the 1950s’ vision of womanhood: She was “very feminine,” and it was “an interest in

the very feminine occupation of sewing that made a trade unionist” out of Christine Waldoch. That’s when I realized Christine’s real story and the stories of other union women were being lost in the undertow of history, their contributions woven anonymously into the fabric of our common narrative—and forgotten. It was not an interest in any “feminine occupation” that made them devoted to their union; it was an interest in adequately feeding, clothing, and housing their families. And for those like my grandmother, it was a dedication to the idea that greater economic security for ordinary citizens was a top priority for Minnesota and the country.

The labor movement seemed never far from Christine’s thoughts. “Do you belong to the union?” she would demand of a department-store clerk before making a purchase, and she would remind her daughter-in-law to do the same.³⁶

She was also unquestionably loyal to the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party and proud of the fact that, at least in some small way, she and her union sisters had helped put the “L”

the envelope-stuffing, vote-seeking, boiler-room troops that helped send Humphrey to the U.S. Senate and Eugene McCarthy to the House of Representatives in 1948.

Myrtle Harris, the only member of either Twin Cities UGW local to land a place in Minnesota’s collective memory—by virtue of her longevity and tireless union organizing—was Christine’s Minneapolis colleague and, it’s reasonable to conclude, her friend and collaborator. In an oral history interview, Myrtle recorded a down-to-earth perspective on Humphrey and the visionary, though forgotten, women who helped him achieve his place in history.

I said to Humphrey one day, “Look Hubert, you know what you’re doing? Every time you go to a meeting and you got a crowd that listens to you, you always say, ‘Now you men, you boys.’” I said, “I want you to cut that out. I want you to say, ‘women.’” I said, “Who did your campaigning for you? It was the women.” I said, “Don’t ever underestimate the woman,” I said, “because who gets out your

The women of St. Paul’s first union of garment workers were citizens who took an active role in building the values of our commonwealth.

in its name. They had been among the multitude of active union members who formed the ground troops of Minnesota’s Farmer-Labor Party even before it merged with the Democrats to form the DFL in 1944.

Christine and her union sisters met Hubert Humphrey when he spoke to a Trades and Labor Assembly meeting. With their Minneapolis counterparts, they joined

votes? The women.” And he said, “Oh Myrt, that’s the best advice I ever had in my life.” And do you know ever since then—I’ve listened to Humphrey hundreds of times—and do you know he does, he brings in the women. I think I taught that boy a lesson.³⁷

I didn’t know Myrtle Harris, but I knew the pride that comes through

in her words. It was the same pride that overflowed in my grandmother when Humphrey was elected vice-president of the United States in 1964. She triumphantly displayed “Hubert’s” Christmas card on her dining room table. All year long. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that quite a few other Minnesotans did the same thing, for to them, as to her, Humphrey was not just one of their own; he was a symbol of their movement’s success—proof that ordinary people could make a difference by working together and sticking together.

In 1968 Christine died at home in her sleep at the age of 77. In that last year of her life she watched warily as a grandson departed for army duty in Vietnam, and she struggled to comprehend the incomprehensible: two DFL leaders, Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy, actually running against one another for the Democratic nomination for president. Her interest in politics that year seemed to shut down like an overloaded circuit, and her death came just days after Humphrey lost the presidential race to Richard Nixon.

Workers at Klinkerfues Brothers, St. Paul’s longest operating and last UGW shop, 1910. When the company closed in 1966, almost half of its UGW machine operators had been employees for more than 30 years.



UGW Local 171 continued to hold meetings into the early 1970s, with Minneapolis’s Myrtle Harris at times representing it at state labor conventions. By then Harris also held the title of international representative for the union. Among the last UGW union shops left was Klinkerfues, which, at the time it went out of business in 1966, had 85 UGW machine operators, almost half of them women who had been with the company for more than 30 years. By 1994, when the national organization of the UGW merged with the United Food and Commercial Workers, both Twin Cities locals had long ago faded from the scene.³⁸

* * *

ALL THAT REMAINS of my grandmother’s union now are the old minute books that end abruptly in the middle of 1930, when the women of UGW Local 171 began fighting for their economic lives during the lock-out at Lang’s. When that fight was over, my grandmother, the union’s long-serving secretary, certainly must have resumed recording the



Myrtle Harris at a textile workers conference, about 1940

union’s story—somewhere. For several years now, I’ve tried and failed to find post-1930 records. Union leaders tell me the minutes may be sitting in someone’s attic or composting in a landfill.

But does it matter? The story of UGW Local 171 is perhaps just a tiny footnote in Minnesota labor history. It lacks the drama of the bloody 1934 truckers’ strike in Minneapolis. And it lacks a single charismatic figure. Our age is drawn to violence and binges on adulating individual achievers, whether entrepreneurs or astronauts. It easily overlooks the contributions of a small group of women who banded together to better their lot and their community’s future. Still, the women of St. Paul’s first union of garment workers were citizens who took an active role in building the values of our commonwealth, and they deserve to be remembered. Part of who we are, after all, is who other people were, and how we honor their past affects the future of those who come after us. □

Notes

The author wishes to thank David Riehle and Burton Genis for their generous help in researching this article.

1. Minnesota Bureau of Labor, *Tenth Biennial Report, 1906*, 36.
2. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 16, 1958, first sec., p. 13.
3. Minnesota Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Eighth Biennial Report, 1901-02*, 462, and *Tenth Biennial Report, 1906*, 34. See *St. Paul City Directory, 1906-11*, for Christine's employment.
4. Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924), 342.
5. For a thorough history of this era, see Mary Lethert Wingerd, *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). Wingerd describes a civic compact under which employers recognized that workers were also their customers, and in their role as consumers, workers were encouraged to patronize the city's businesses. For the labor climate in Minneapolis, see William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).
6. W. Thomas White, "The Big Strike," www.workdayminnesota.org, *Union Advocate* Labor History Series, an adaptation of "The 1922 Shopmen's Strike in St. Paul and the Northwest," *Ramsey County History* 27 (Spring 1992):4-13. The author believes, based on family recollection, that Christine probably worked in nonunion garment factories for several years after 1917.
7. UGW Local 171, Report, Aug. 31, 1916, in *Trade Union Reports*, Department of Labor and Industries, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society, (MHS), St. Paul. Marie A. Cory, secretary of Local 171, also reported that the union would pay sick and accident benefits of \$3 per week for eight weeks. For 1923 figures, see M. C. Elmer, *A Cooperative Study of Women in Industry in Saint Paul, Minnesota* (St. Paul: Association of Public and Business Affairs, 1924), 39-42; for 44-hour week, see UGW Local 171, Minutes, Minute Book, vol. 2, p. 40, 265, MHS.
8. Minnesota Department of Labor, *Sixteenth Biennial Report, 1917-18*, 171; Elmer, *Women in Industry*, 6, 40.
9. For a detailed analysis of gender discrimination within the labor movement, see Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering & Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor*

Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

10. Elmer, *Women in Industry*, 13, which maintained that 14 percent of the 14,648-17,260 women worked in the manufacture of wearing apparel—making an estimated total of 2,000-2,400. On Lang, see *St. Paul City Directory, 1923*, 751; for the other three companies, see Local 171, Minutes, 2:67, 268.
11. Local 171, Minutes, 2:208. Before passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, union recognition by employers was nonbinding. Simon & Mogilner later moved to Alabama and employed members of another UGW local.
12. *Minnesota Union Advocate*, Jan. 21, 1925, p. 6. Garment manufacturers meeting in New York City in 1925 pledged \$50,000 to "fight against the prison contractors who are flooding the market with the shirts, overalls, aprons, baby dresses and other articles of general use."
13. *Minneapolis Labor Review*, July 25, 1924, p. 3.
14. Local 171, Minutes, 2:222.
15. *Union Advocate*, June 11, 1925, p. 1; Local 171, Minutes, 2:248. Imprisoned for speaking out against U.S. entry into World War I, O'Hare had worked in a contract garment factory. After her release, she launched a campaign against prison labor, working with the national office of the UGW.
16. Local 171, Minutes, 2:224, 246, 279, 282.
17. Local 171, Minutes, 2:351.
18. Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1989), 186-96.
19. Local 171, Minutes, 2:388.
20. The *Minnesota Union Advocate* is the principal source for the information about UGW Local 171 that follows. Corroborating information is from Minutes, June 13-Sept. 12, 1930, St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly Organizational Records, MHS.
21. Here and two paragraphs below, *Minnesota Union Advocate*, June 19, 1930, p. 1.
22. Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, *Twenty-Third Biennial Report, 1931-1932*, 243-47. This official report notes numerous complaints and calls for a cessation of various practices, such as female employees forced to punch out on time clocks while required to continue working overtime or deducting pay for shovels or other goods damaged in the normal course of work.

23. *Union Advocate*, Aug. 21, 1930, p. 1.
24. *Union Advocate*, July 3, 1930, p. 1.
25. Here and five paragraphs below, *Union Advocate*, Aug. 7, 1930, p. 2, Aug. 28, 1930, p. 1.
26. *Union Advocate*, Sept. 11, 1930, p. 2. Information about Harry Lang is from the *St. Paul City Directory, 1931*, and from author's interviews with Lang's daughter and granddaughters, May 2004.
27. Minutes, Sept. 12, 1930, St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly records. Energy Manufacturing Co. continued as a family-owned St. Paul company until 1989, surviving many others in the industry. It was not affiliated with Harry Lang's operations, and its workers were represented by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.
28. *St. Paul Daily News*, Sept. 7, 1930, p. 6.
29. *Union Advocate*, Jan. 28, 1932, p. 1.
30. *Union Advocate*, Feb. 11, 1932, p. 4, June 16, 1932, p. 1. Several years later when business improved, Klinkerfues reinstated the union and became its largest, most loyal employer.
31. *Union Advocate*, Feb. 9, p. 2, May 25, p. 3, June 8, p. 4; July 27, p. 4, and Nov. 30, p. 3—all 1933.
32. For a full account of the strike, see Millikan, *Union Against Unions*, 264-88.
33. *Union Advocate*, Apr. 16, 1936, p. 7, which reported that girls on piecework were earning as little as 60¢ a day, women \$1, and men \$1.25 in Mount Airy, North Carolina.
34. Sander D. Genis, interview by Martin Duffy, Duluth, Mar. 16, 1977, tape and transcript, especially p. 29, Oral History Collection, MHS. A faction of the UGW in New York City had founded the national Amalgamated Clothing Workers.
35. Here and below, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 16, 1958, first sec., p. 13.
36. Interview with author's mother, Madeline Bader, who witnessed this in the 1950s.
37. Myrtle Harris, interview by Jim Dooley, July 9, 1974, transcript, p. 27, Oral History Collection, MHS.
38. Don Conrad, telephone interview by author, Oct. 14, 2004. Conrad was vice-president for production of Klinkerfues Manufacturing Company when it closed. Programs from annual conventions of the Minnesota AFL-CIO, located in the organization's St. Paul office, indicate that Minneapolis UGW Local 27 outlasted St. Paul's local and was last represented at the state convention in 1977 by Myrtle Harris.

The photos on p. 27, 29, 30 (top), and 36 are courtesy the author; all others are in MHS collections, including the minute book, photographed by Eric Mortenson/MHS.



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