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The Long Red Summer on the Railroads: Labor, Race, and Exclusion in Appalachia

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Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between race, work, and exclusion during the Long Red Summer of 1919. I focus on several “transportation towns” of railroad employees in Appalachia to argue for the combined importance of labor history and racial ideology in attempts to understand wartime violence. Academic and federal government investigations inform my analysis, as does the robust body of scholarship on railroad labor. After examining racism embedded in railroad work, unions, and community life, the essay then turns to the Wilson administration’s nationalization of the roads during the war. Wartime changes resulted in higher wages for Black workers and many perceived threats to the racialized labor hierarchy. What was once white railroaders’ effort to exclude African Americans from certain jobs became one to expel them from the industry entirely. In several transportation towns that experienced wartime migration, however, this impulse transformed into a campaign to remove Black people from their communities once and for all. I cite testimony from a grand jury trial of an expulsion, railroad union journals, and newspaper accounts of mob violence that made it clear that the transportation towns belonged to white labor at the end of the Long Red Summer.

Keywords: labor; race; Red Summer; Appalachia; World War I

On the morning of October 31, 1919, A. C. Martin, a baggage agent for the Louisville and Nashville (L&N) Railroad in Corbin, Kentucky, showed up to work. To his surprise, he could not find any of the Black employees who had been on the company payroll just the day before. He had heard rumors about an effort to drive out the town’s entire Black population, and when he inquired of a railroad switchman, the railroader replied, “Yes, we ran them off, and we will also run all of the damned sympathizers off if they fool with us.” Indeed, the night before had seen a mob of white railroad employees and other townspeople expel – through violence and intimidation – nearly all of Corbin’s Black residents. Whether on foot or in boxcars on trains headed south, hundreds of African Americans – many of whom had arrived to work as construction laborers in the railroad yards – left the

railroad town under threat of force. Months later, Martin still deemed Corbin “unsafe for any of the negroes to return to.”¹ Throughout the following years, rumors, stories, and threats of violence cemented it as a “sundown town,” or a place that is all white on purpose. To many Black residents in nearby communities, Corbin stood out as a dangerous den of racism. “On the way to Knoxville,” Dorothy Wilkerson, a Black resident of Lynch, Kentucky, explained decades later, “we never came off in ... Corbin, Kentucky. They didn’t allow black people there—you didn’t even get off the train.”² At its height, hundreds of cars passed through Corbin every day, but Black people were not welcome.

The violent expulsion of African Americans from Corbin occurred within the intertwined contexts of world war, the Great Migration, and the increased standing of organized labor. When Europe went to war, according to W. E. B. Du Bois, “the world changed.” Armies prepared to engage in “willful murder,” and American industry retooled to provide the necessary material. “Hands that made food made powder,” Du Bois explained, while “iron for railways was iron for guns.” War tied the American periphery and core more closely together, producing a profound moment of social change. Faced with the closing off of immigration from Europe, industrial employers turned to the South for a new source of labor. From 1916 to 1918, half a million Black southerners left for points further north in the first phase of what came to be called the Great Migration. Du Bois outlined their many journeys: African American migrants went to the industries of Pennsylvania and New Jersey “because war needs ships and iron”; to the “automobiles of Detroit and the load-carrying of Chicago,” and to the mines of Appalachia “because war needs coal.”³ By leaving the land of the Deep South, Black men and women attempted to claim their rights as American citizens. Black migrants to Appalachia made the most of these opportunities, coming “closer to finding economic equality” there than in any other coalfield region.⁴ Their movements also promised to transform the working class at the very moment that organized labor reached new heights of power. Federal intervention during the war resulted in the recognition of unions, waves of strike activity, and what some scholars describe as the rise of mass democracy.⁵

In some places, Corbin among them, white residents greeted wartime migration with coordinated violence. As the many incidents of the Long Red Summer of 1917 to 1921 made clear, racism and exclusion presented tantalizing alternatives to class solidarity in the United States.⁶ For white railroaders, in particular, their newfound power was too tempting not to wield. To account for these differences in outcome, smaller stories of workers and their communities must be oriented within the systems that connect them. This focus on the local, rather than the national, can help us better understand the causes of Red Summer. Indeed, as one scholar has observed, the period is best conceptualized as “disparate *local* events that responded to immediate conditions.”⁷ In this essay, I argue that one way to diagnose the meanings of the mob violence of the Long Red Summer is through the lens of labor history. I contend that workers’ social worlds flowed from their material relationship to capital, with ideologies of race and gender, religion, politics, and attempts at unionization all revolving around their daily experiences on the job and in the community. For decades, white railroaders constructed a racialized hierarchy of labor and, through their unions, sought to exclude Black labor from the industry. During the war, what was once an effort to drive African Americans off the job became one to expel them from the industry entirely. Indeed, as labor historian Eric Arnesen has observed, the war years saw white unionists write “a new chapter in the history of racial exclusion in railroad employment.”⁸ Yet in several towns along coal-carrying railroads in Appalachia, this impulse transformed into a campaign to remove Black people from their

communities wholesale. The expulsion in Corbin mirrored two other incidents in Erwin, Tennessee, and Ravenna, Kentucky. All three towns – which I identify as “transportation towns” – were regional hubs for coal-carrying railroads, and over the Long Red Summer, all three forcibly removed Black residents. Labor history, then, can explain why expulsion and riots happened alongside the rewriting of union rules, strikes, and gun battles with the hired private guards of capital. The war had broken the racialized hierarchy of labor on the railroads, but white workers were willing to hammer it back together.

Working on the Railroad

To be a railroader meant often working under the watchful eye of a powerful company. In an industry characterized by monopoly power, perhaps more so than any other, the L&N stood out as one of the South’s most extensive and influential railroads. By the turn of the twentieth century, it was one of five lines that controlled most of the trackage in the region. The L&N claimed 5,000 miles, and only the newly formed Southern Railway was bigger.⁹ As railroad companies expanded their influence, they revolutionized the nation’s business structure and attempted (sometimes unsuccessfully) to impose order and rationality on a rapidly evolving industrial economy.¹⁰ Under the stated goal of efficiency, the L&N and other railroad companies imposed a strict “synchronization of labor” on their workers. Both road service, where railroaders were paid by the mile or trip rate, and the shift-based work in rail yards depended on a regimented, organized, supervised workplace.¹¹

From a conductor’s timepiece to the precise schedule of trains’ arrivals and departures, railroad work was highly structured. For example, the operation of a single coal train required the cooperation of an entire crew of railroaders. In the cab at the head of the train, the engineer marshaled man and machine to ensure a successful run. From the moment he placed his hand on the throttle, an engineer managed a number of variables: the company timetables, signals on the roadside, the track in front of the engine, the gauges measuring temperature, steam and water levels, and the sound of the engine itself. Over time, the state of constant vigilance demanded of engineers became second nature, but the weight of responsibility and the sense of “latent danger” never disappeared.¹² Engineers took immense pride in their work. To them, the locomotive was “a being of life and intelligence,” and they enjoyed “great satisfaction ... in learning to master its moods.”¹³ The job also came with its perks, including high wages and prestige. According to a veteran railroader, engineers enjoyed a celebrity comparable to a “crack air-mail pilot.”¹⁴

An engineer may have received the lion’s share of public admiration, but he was useless without the fireman by his side. “The hardest worked man in train service,” the fireman’s task was to build and maintain the fire that powered the steam engine. On an average freight train traveling 100 miles, the fireman scooped more than eleven tons of coal from the tender connected to the cab. He then walked to the boiler and threw the pile of fuel through the small firebox opening at knee level, occasionally stooping down to spread the coals evenly inside the chamber. Other tasks included shaking the grates at the bottom of the chamber, breaking up clumps too large for the firebox, and cleaning out “clinkered” fires that suffered a buildup of ash or impurities in the coal. He did all this as the train hurtled down the track and the engine deck shifted beneath his feet. Fireboxes emitted intense heat, and many firemen donned leather aprons to keep their clothes from igniting. Between the high temperatures near the boiler, weather conditions in the open-air cab, and fumes from the firebox, firemen engaged in exceptionally dangerous and exhausting work.¹⁵

Rounding out the crew, the conductor, the flagman, and several brakemen occupied the caboose at the rear. The tasks of the conductor, one of the highest-paid employees in road service, were mostly clerical and preparatory. He received orders from the company trainmaster or dispatcher and was responsible for the train's movements and its conformity with the rules of the road. Before departure, he and the flagman inspected the condition of all train cars and couplings. The conductor noted the markings on each car, comparing them against the bill of freight to ensure accuracy. In the days before the adoption of the airbrake, brakemen risked life and limb to scramble across the tops of cars, twisting brakes by hand to bring the train to a stop. Railroads adopted the new technology, and brakemen shifted to a support role, transmitting messages and throwing switches when necessary. Lastly, the flagman occupied the end of the train, using signals and lanterns to prevent collisions from the rear. After a screaming whistle brought the trip to an end, the conductor submitted his official report to the operating department, which used the report to determine the railroaders' pay.¹⁶

In addition to the operating trades, yard work and the mechanical repair shops relied on a hierarchical division of labor. Described as "railroading on foot," yard crews classified cargo and assembled cars along one of the outbound tracks. A typical crew numbered five railroaders: an engineer and fireman team, a pair of brakemen, and the conductor, more commonly known as the foreman. The foreman specified the specific cars for the crew to include, and the engineer pushed them into position through careful control of a locomotive's throttle. Brakemen rode on the cars as they drifted down the track and then coupled them. Under the authority of the yardmaster, whose office served as a communication hub for the entire yard, crews kept the operation running around the clock by working three eight-hour shifts, or "tricks."¹⁷ Meanwhile, machinists, boiler-makers, blacksmiths, carmen, electricians, and sheet-metal workers kept the company's rolling stock operational. In roundhouses strategically located at junction points, inspectors examined steam engines for defects, replaced steel tires, and double-checked the locomotive's myriad moving parts. This process transpired under the watchful eyes of the roundhouse foreman and the master mechanic. Although shop workers were divided along craft lines, working as cogs in a larger machine served to fuse them together. Similar to the operating crafts, shopmen felt attached to their work. When repaired engines again belched steam and left the shops, the men who had labored together looked on with pride. A taste of this experience, an electrician later explained, and "it gets in your blood."¹⁸

An extensive set of company rules kept the synchronization of labor in place. For John Garrett, an L&N engineer, a day of work meant "you had a superior over you all the time, to see that you lived up to the rules." Before each run, the company's book of rules mandated he receive a call an hour and a half before the train was to depart. The first hour was his to spend as he saw fit. Once he arrived at the roundhouse to take charge of the engine, the clock took command, and thirty minutes of paid "preparatory time" began. He and the fireman used this time to ensure they had the proper tools and enough coal and water to make the run. The engine left the roundhouse at the exact time on the call sheet, a brake tester gave him the go-ahead, and they pulled out of the yard. When they returned several hours later, Garrett detached the engine and turned it back over to the roundhouse. Before he went home, he stopped by the register room to fill out his trip card, make out an engine report, and enter the details of his trip in the logbook: his and his fireman's names, their engine number, departure time and arrival time, and the total hours they were on duty. Once off the railroad's time, he was "at liberty to do whatever we wanted to do until we was called again."¹⁹

Railroad management enforced discipline and the hierarchical division of labor through seniority lists. By progressing throughout their careers, railroad workers in entry-level positions expected to be promoted to better-paying, more prestigious jobs. At the top of the ladder stood the engineers and conductors, “labor aristocrats” who earned higher wages and enjoyed more prestige than the rest of the crew.²⁰ Firemen, considered to be the “engineer in embryo,” aimed to one day pilot the engines themselves, and brakemen aimed for the rank of conductor.²¹ Unlike the mileage system that governed the lives of engineers and firemen, work in the yards was strictly governed by time. A favorable position on the shift schedule, instead of a preferred route, was the goal of men in the yards. At the bottom of the ladder, a new switchman worked off the “extra board,” filling in for regular men in the event of no-shows or other vacancies. Eventually, he started a regular shift, often the “third trick” through the night. After several years in this position, he could apply for a promotion to the head of the crew as a yard conductor, also called a foreman. A most well-regarded foreman could then ascend to assistant yardmaster and eventually the top job of yardmaster, with authority over all switching crews. The yard and switching service implemented a separate promotion system from the operating trades. Although sometimes labeled *junior employment* by the operating trades, a career in the yards rewarded steady employment, and the jobs at the top granted men social prestige.²²

Whether in the yards or on an engine, railroaders labored according to their places in the hierarchy. All were subject to the company’s discipline, but the promise of promotion motivated those at the bottom to climb the occupational ladder. Engineers and conductors – the “labor aristocrats” – supervised multiple workers, possessed a good deal of technical knowledge, and earned higher wages than other industrial workers. Railroading, however, was still dirty, dangerous work, highly circumscribed by the management structure of railroad companies. The men who worked on the railroads championed this danger as a badge of masculinity and viewed a job in the shops, yards, or on an engine as a privilege. Many railroaders continued to work after losing an arm to the crushing weight of a boxcar, and the “Empty Sleeve” symbolized their dedication to the job.²³ As firemen, brakemen, and switchmen looked up to engineer, conductor, and yardmaster positions, they saw paths to a more prestigious working life.

Railroaders formed labor unions within their crafts to exert control over these work rules and seniority lists. Founded as fraternal organizations in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE), the Order of Railway Conductors (ORC), the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF), and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (BRT) were the most powerful unions in the industry. Although they emerged as mutual protection agencies, the brotherhoods also served as fraternal organizations that buttressed the identities of white working men.²⁴ Quasi-Masonic and steeped in rituals such as initiation rites and secret oaths, the brotherhoods also restricted their membership to men, “white born, of good moral character, sober and industrious, sound in body and limb, not less than eighteen nor more than forty-five years of age, and able to read and write the English language.”²⁵ Other railroad unions that imposed racial barriers to full equality included the largest shopcraft unions, the International Association of Machinists, the boilermakers and blacksmith brotherhoods, and the unions representing the clerks, telegraphers, and maintenance-of-way employees.²⁶

The railroad brotherhoods were conservative in their dealings with railroad management and, most importantly for this essay, embraced racial exclusivity as an organizing principle. The engineers’ and conductors’ brotherhoods barred Black membership from their inception and successfully kept the occupations lily-white. The firemen and

trainmen brotherhoods banned African Americans later on but struggled to expel them from the crafts entirely. Considered in context, the brotherhoods' exclusion of African Americans mirrored similar conservative labor organizations in the nineteenth century. One racist rationale for this approach was the intelligence required to operate a steam engine, which in the opinion of one member of the BLE, "no Negro had, or could ever acquire."²⁷ Most craft unions in repair shops, in addition to the telegraphers, clerks, and maintenance-of-way employees, either prohibited Black workers or refused them full membership status. Even the federated American Railway Union denied Black railroaders membership over the strenuous objections of Eugene V. Debs. Outside of rare moments of interracial unionism, the railroad unions ensured that many crafts remained a "Nordic closed shop."²⁸

As white railroad unionists crafted racialized and gendered identities, they excluded workers across the color line. African American railroad workers thus found themselves "unorganized in the midst of a highly organized industry" and at the bottom of the occupational ladder.²⁹ Locked out of the top jobs, Black railroaders did not operate under the same seniority system as their white coworkers. Many Black railroaders worked as Pullman porters, firemen, and brakemen, as well as section hands and helpers in repair shops. Yet their exclusion belied their essential roles in creating and maintaining the nation's railway system. Before the Civil War, enslaved Black men had built railroads in the South, and African Americans continued to work on the construction and maintenance of way crews after emancipation. When the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad pierced the Appalachian Mountains in the 1870s, Black convict laborers laid track and bored holes for explosives. Many, like John Henry, paid with their lives.³⁰ Besides working as laborers, African Americans found work primarily in the more dangerous positions of firemen and brakemen in the South. Shoveling coal into the firebox or scrambling across the roof of a boxcar to twist the brakes seemed like fitting occupations for those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. At the same time, the coveted positions of engineer and conductor remained off-limits for African Americans well into the twentieth century. White railroaders gave firemen the nickname "blackie," and branded labor-intensive freight trains using racial slurs.³¹

Railroad companies, especially in the South, exploited racial divisions to control labor costs. "Negroes do work white men won't do," a superintendent in another industry in Kentucky explained flatly, and employers preferred Black workers "because they are cheaper."³² Although some lines paid out an equal wage regardless of race, earnings for a Black fireman usually ranged around a quarter less than that of a white fireman.³³ In this context, the relationship between a white engineer and a Black fireman took on more of a "master-servant" dynamic. Lloyd Brown's 1951 proletarian novel *Iron City* described fleeting moments as the train surged across miles of rail, when a white engineer "might see in the flashing light of the opened firedoor a fellow man," and forget for a moment "that he was black." However, once the train slowed to a stop, the trance of the road broke, and the author's Black firemen returned to their "proper" place. When a Black fireman asked when he could drive his own engine, a white railroader responded, "Company wouldn't allow it, and the Brotherhood neither. Never." Although a fictional depiction, the relationship between Black and white railroaders in *Iron City* reveals that the industry's hierarchy of race extended from written union rules to the cab of every steam engine.³⁴

Racial tensions between workers enabled railroad companies like the L&N to pit them against each other, usually affecting unions in a devastating manner. In 1891, Black brakemen started working on a previously all-white division of the L&N in Alabama, prompting a violent response from white railroaders. Black brakemen had to dodge

bullets, and a sympathetic white brakeman caught a beating for working alongside them. The L&N, however, did not back down. Like the Southern Railway and the Illinois Central, the L&N continued to employ Black firemen and brakemen in large numbers. Throughout the first century of railroading, Black workers often entered the industry as strikebreakers, which elicited disdain and violence from the white brotherhoods.³⁵

In addition to the L&N's "ample supply of negroes for firemen" that allowed it to ward off many a strike by white railroaders, its president Milton H. Smith carried out a personal vendetta against unions.³⁶ Smith, who ascended to the presidency of the L&N Railroad in 1891, viewed all unions as "threats to the prerogatives of management," full of dishonest, lazy "rabble-rousers." When L&N workers threatened to strike to oppose wage cuts with the backing of the brotherhoods in 1893, Smith laid plans to import strikebreakers and enlisted the services of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. After meeting with Smith, the brotherhoods accepted a wage decrease with the promise that they would be restored at the end of the year. Although the company was pleased, the compromise severely damaged the union's standing with the rank and file, especially when the railroad failed to hold up its end of the bargain. Wages did not return to 1893 levels for another six years. Shopmen in Louisville went on strike, which the L&N broke by importing European immigrant workers under the protection of armed guards. Soon afterward, Smith purchased a railroad car for his personal use. To say the least, management-labor relations remained "tenuous and often uncomfortable."³⁷

Even after a landmark piece of legislation, L&N railroaders near the bottom of the ladder faced an intransigent management that was hell-bent on denying them recognition. The Erdman Act of 1898 prevented companies from firing workers on interstate railroads for joining a union and promoted a voluntary – yet binding – arbitration system to settle disputes, with the company, the union, and an agreed-upon third party as the three members of the arbitration board. Now that the brotherhoods had a permanent seat at the table, the act granted them "an unprecedented level of security," especially for the engineers and conductors.³⁸ Milton H. Smith came to tolerate dealing with the engineers and conductors, whose measured and conservative tactics he viewed as beneficial to managing the labor force. He did not, however, view the junior brotherhoods of trainmen and firemen as worthy of a seat at the table. When L&N firemen attempted to organize a lodge after the Erdman Act, railroad management resorted to bribery, coercion, and intimidation to keep the union out. A company official promised one of the aspiring unionists a promotion if he withdrew his support, which he declined. When President Smith declined to meet with the grand masters of the BLF and BRT, the leaders deduced that the L&N "are determined to destroy the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen on their system."³⁹ Smith stood as a "striking illustration" of the power of a railroad president, particularly one with a "resolute anti-brotherhood attitude" that hindered the progress of collective bargaining on the line. Along with other major roads, the L&N recognized the BLE and ORC after the Erdman Act of 1898, but it refused to deal with the trainmen and firemen until World War I.⁴⁰

Seemingly wedged between powerful railroad executives and the Black workers that companies exploited to drive down their wages, white unionists in the firemen and trainmen brotherhoods perceived enemies everywhere. Rather than organize with African Americans, however, white railroaders sought to eliminate the competition. As early as 1897, Frank P. Sargent, Grand Master of the BLF, advocated equal wages to achieve this end. If Black workers were no longer cheaper to employ, he reasoned, railroad companies would hire white men instead due to their "superior intelligence." Sargent stressed the need to obtain the support of engineers in the matter, who were "to some extent

responsible for the employment of the negro firemen." "It will only be a matter of time," he warned, "until the white engineer will also be displaced by the negro."⁴¹ When it came to whether or not to admit Black railroaders into their ranks, however, letters of protest poured into the firemen and trainmen brotherhood journals. An engineer from Birmingham stated plainly, "I don't want to be affiliated with any organization when I have to be on an equality with the negro."⁴² In response to northern railroaders calling for the admission of Black railroaders, a fireman from Louisiana argued that Southerners had done "far more to advance and uplift the negro" than Yankees had, but they would "draw the line when it comes to taking him into our worthy order."⁴³

Allowing African Americans into the union would grant them social equality, a conundrum that undermined railroad labor solidarity throughout the Gilded Age. White railroaders made this clear in the pages of the *Railroad Trainmen's Journal*. One writer asserted that "the Negro ... cannot be fitted either by birth, education or otherwise to fill any position of trust," not just those on the railroad. He proceeded to spew forth many of the stereotypes of the day, including that Black Americans were "of an exceedingly low order of intelligence ... naturally vicious, slothful, filthy, and indolent." These imagined deficiencies supposedly disqualified Black men for the jobs of trainmen and switchmen, endangered their fellow workers, and put the company at risk. A fellow union member agreed, stating that "where there is life at stake, the negro should not be tolerated." When a writer rose in opposition to point out that African Americans were "born in a free country" and should be judged equally to white men, he was derided as a "champion of the monkey tribe." Embittered by racially discriminatory wages, some white railroaders blamed company policies that gave them little choice other than to hire Black workers. The remedy that many advocated was to organize white men together and "eliminate at once and forever this degraded element" from all jobs on the railroad.⁴⁴

On several occasions, white railroaders hit the picket lines in attempts to expel Black workers from the industry entirely. In 1909, white firemen on the Georgia Railroad struck over the presence of Black firemen on preferred passenger train runs. The policy of seniority, they contended, entitled them to the cushy positions since Black firemen were barred from becoming engineers. They also viewed the lower wages paid to Black railroaders as an employer bulwark against walkouts. Under the Erdman Act, however, a panel decided against the white firemen and called for eliminating the wage gap. White firemen struck the Queen & Crescent line two years later for a similar reason. Passenger service ceased, and freight trains fired by Black men faced considerable violence from mostly white communities along the Q&C. In the end, the white firemen were again stymied, as the company agreed not to employ Black firemen in specific sections and limited their numbers via quotas but kept them on the company payroll. To say the least, white railroaders in Tennessee were frustrated at the outcome. As an editorial in a Tennessee newspaper proclaimed, "Americans have determined that neither the negro, the Chinaman nor the Japanese will 'run' either this country or its railroads." For the time being, however, white railroaders could not exclude Black workers from the industry.⁴⁵

In their attempts to force powerful railroad companies to recognize their right to bargain, railroaders in the brotherhood unions embraced a "whites-only" view of labor organization. The highly skilled, "labor aristocrat" positions of engineer and conductor pioneered this approach and used it to keep their occupations lily-white. However, for railroaders in lower-paying, less-skilled positions, rejecting interracial unionism weakened their bargaining power. Railroad companies exploited these divisions by employing Black firemen and brakemen at lower wages and refused to back down when pressured by the unions. Throughout these struggles, white railroaders came to view Black workers as

“natural strike breakers” with no place in the labor movement. Even when they were not their direct competitors, white railroaders thought Black laborers were determined to “undermine white living standards.”⁴⁶ As workers in an industry that incentivized climbing the ladder and represented by unions that discouraged cross-craft and interracial organization, white railroaders came to resent the very presence of Black labor.

Transportation Towns

Within the sprawling networks of rail, many railroaders made their homes in regional hubs situated at crucial junction points. Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians between Cincinnati, Ohio, and Knoxville, Tennessee, the town of Corbin, Kentucky, was one such hub on the L&N. Laborers carved it out of an area near the Laurel River called the “Big Swamp” in the 1880s, and according to legend, the L&N postal agent named the fledgling settlement after a local minister.⁴⁷ Traffic from four divisions of the L&N converged daily in the town. Trades on the Cumberland Valley line came out of the mountains, filled with coal mined out of southeastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia. Freight from Virginia and West Virginia, in addition to Tennessee and points farther south, passed through the station on the way to Cincinnati and Louisville. Likewise, southbound traffic to Knoxville, Tennessee, and Atlanta, Georgia, routed through Corbin. By the mid-1910s, the L&N shops operated a roundhouse that could service up to twenty-five locomotives, which, combined with the yard’s large amount of track, fashioned it as one of the most important terminals in the region. Its role as a conduit of industrial activity led one observer to describe it as “the gateway to the coal fields.” In the constant movement of coal trains through Corbin, the writer observed “the pulsations of the development of Southeastern Kentucky.”⁴⁸

Corbin was not alone in its position as a railroad junction. Some seventy miles north, the L&N established another railroad hub to receive coal from new ventures in 1910. That year, the giant Maryland-based Consolidation Coal began to acquire lands in the Elkhorn Coalfield of eastern Kentucky.⁴⁹ With this investment, L&N acquired rights to the Lexington and Eastern Railroad, which ran from Lexington to Jackson, Kentucky. The L&N set about extending its line to reach Perry and Letcher counties and built a new coal route from Winchester. The L&N selected land in Estill County near the Kentucky River for the switching yard and repair shops. To avoid the high tax rates imposed by the county, the L&N built a new town and named it Ravenna. Construction crews built the shops and roundhouse between 1910 and 1915. Meanwhile, the Ravenna Realty Company, organized by the L&N, sold lots to railroad employees and business owners. The influx of northern capital saw the “railroad gem” blossom from an outpost to a bustling town of about 1,000. Although younger than Corbin, Ravenna followed a similar developmental trajectory.⁵⁰

Their reliance on the railroad and their role as a conduit of industrial activity qualify Corbin, Ravenna, and similar communities as “transportation towns.” Historians have previously identified similar places as “railroad towns,” or places whose “very existence was predicated on the location of railroad shop and service facilities.” Dependent on the railroad for their livelihoods, residents of these towns exhibited ironclad loyalty towards railroad workers.⁵¹ Transportation towns were important nodes in what a scholar of political economy has described as “narrow, purpose-built channels” along which flowed “great volumes of energy.”⁵² In Corbin, one-third of its population worked for the L&N in its heyday as freight handlers, conductors, engineers, firemen, and repairmen. Most of

these men lived within sight of the smoke of the steam engines, either in modest family homes on the east end of town or in boarding rooms at the Railroad YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). Those who weren't employed by the L&N were tied to the railroad in some way, either in the service industry or as merchants. Clustered together in neighborhoods, the families of railroaders formed close-knit communities. Children of second-shift workers in Corbin played together as they watched their fathers, clad in overalls, walk to the yards. The shared experiences of work and the home life needed to support it gave many the impression that the railroad was a family of its own. "There were so many lives that it [the L&N] touched," one Corbin resident remembered years later, "it was just a railroad town."⁵³

The makeup of railroad communities mirrored the racialized occupational hierarchies of the workplace. From its inception, the workforce in Corbin consisted of mostly native-born white men from Kentucky and adjacent states. Many of these men and their families arrived in Corbin with the coming of the railroad. Whitley County native W. A. Hood started working for the L&N as a section hand in the 1880s and saw Corbin become a rail center over his decades-long career.⁵⁴ In the 1890s, Joe Doody of Marion County, Kentucky, worked as one of the first conductors on the Cumberland Valley line to Cumberland Gap. Known as "Captain," Doody was active in the ORC and became known as one of the town's founders. An Irish Catholic, he also helped establish the Sacred Heart parish in Corbin in 1899.⁵⁵ Doody and other members of the brotherhood unions in Corbin served in elected positions, owned homes, and invested in local real estate. Described as "good-souled, clever fellows," in the words of one union member, railroad men thought of themselves as the backbone of the town. One Corbin conductor estimated that "ninety percent of railroad men" owned their own "humble home in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky."⁵⁶

On the other hand, only a small number of African Americans called Corbin home. By 1910, the town still comprised almost 95 percent white residents of native birth.⁵⁷ Long-time resident Thomas W. Gallagher recalled that there had only been "a few local negroes" in Corbin for many decades, possibly "because they could not find work in a railroad town." Meanwhile, the surrounding county seat towns of London, Williamsburg, and Barbourville boasted modest Black populations.⁵⁸ The 1900 census for Corbin listed forty-three Black residents, most of whom hailed from the Bluegrass State. Women worked in domestic service as laundresses and cooks, while the men worked as porters, bell boys, or laborers for the L&N. By 1910, sixty-four "black" or "mulatto" people resided in Corbin, all but seven of whom hailed from Kentucky. Corbin did not have a formal system of segregation, with Black families scattered across the town's different wards. Clustered on either side of its downtown center and railroad depot, Black residents worked jobs similar to those of a decade earlier. Minnie Parks, known to white Corbin residents as "Aunt Mitt," ran a laundry on Railroad Street, near the L&N yards. Years after her death, she was remembered for tending to sick and ailing railroaders. Parks's grandsons lived with her and worked as laborers for the L&N. Another laundress, Emma Woods, lived with her daughters and one granddaughter on nearby Poplar Street. Orville McKee and his family lived on Center Street, close to the depot. He worked as a porter while his brother was a laborer for the railroad. All of these families lived in rented houses, with one exception. George Smith, a "mulatto" cook for the L&N, owned a home on Kentucky Avenue with his wife, mother, five children, and a boarder.⁵⁹ In the transportation town, African Americans' overall social and economic standing did not threaten white residents.

As it emerged as a town built by and for railroad workers, white railroaders ascended to the top of the occupational ladder and served in positions of prominence in town. Much

like their working lives, railroaders' social circles reflected the influence of the labor hierarchy.⁶⁰ Younger railroaders looked up to these men and aspired to ascend to their positions. By following the rules and biding their time, it was possible for them to do so. Key to white railroaders' ascent, however, was their embrace of racism and exclusion. Everything in a transportation town revolved around its lifeblood, the steam engines and steel rails that employed men and gave the town its purpose. A job on the railroad gave men a sense that they were providing for their families and the town as a whole. "That black smoke from them steam engines looked good," a veteran switchman remembered, "and that's what Corbin lived on, was the L&N Railroad."⁶¹ Railroaders' social lives, politics, and religion came to reflect the ideologies of the workplace, as they and members of the community equated well-paying jobs and full citizenship with white skin. The result was a town run by and for white railroad workers.

Railroaders and the transportation towns they inhabited were riven by differences of status at work and in the community. Highly structured and supervised, railroaders worked according to a strict, racialized hierarchy in which men at the bottom aspired to the jobs at the top. Railroaders' unions drew on this work experience, with the craft-based model of the brotherhoods reigning supreme. The railroad unions excluded Black workers and strove to achieve industrial democracy for white men only. As a result, railroaders' family life, politics, and religion reflected the ideologies of the workplace, with racism and exclusion as key organizing components. Yet the powerful railroad companies, ever in search of ways to dilute union power and control workers, continued to employ Black workers at the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. Squeezed between the company and their competition in the labor force, white members of the brotherhood unions – especially the firemen and trainmen – scapegoated Black workers whenever they failed to win concessions from management. Frustrated white railroaders excluded African Americans from their brotherhoods, but they could not extend this ban to the workplace. As residents of transportation towns, they would come to embrace their power to expel their racialized competitors, not through organized labor, but coordinated violence.

Race and Labor on the Railroads during the War

When the United States entered the war in Europe in 1917 to make the world "safe for democracy," workplaces around the country proved to be important battlefields in their own right.⁶² Just as in other industries, federal takeover of the railroads changed the relationship between workers and employers. Under the strain of a national economy geared toward global combat, shippers, government officials, and union leaders battled issues ranging from labor and freight car shortages to implementing the recently won eight-hour day.⁶³ In December 1917, President Woodrow Wilson established the U.S. Railroad Administration (USRA) to alleviate the "transportation crisis," placing his son-in-law William McAdoo in charge.⁶⁴ On February 21, 1918, McAdoo issued General Order No. 8, which barred railroad companies from discriminating against employees based on union membership. The ranks of the brotherhoods swelled almost immediately as the federal government endorsed unionization. Furthermore, McAdoo established three separate boards to settle workplace grievances in the operating trades and shops and to maintain way crews. All three boards included union representation.⁶⁵ That same month, the U.S. Employment Service offered services to secure "workers of all classes for the railroads." C. H. Markham, regional director of the USRA's Southern

district, informed railroad executives that they should not engage in labor practices that would compete with the U.S. Employment Service. Competing companies should not solicit railroad workers or competing industries without the director's approval. McAdoo explained that difficulties securing labor necessitated this stance, as railroads were "essential to the successful conduct of the war." The railroads, as McAdoo declared, "are now a government institution."⁶⁶

Wartime government control also brought changes to the racialized hierarchy of railroad labor. Higher wages in industries nationwide attracted Black labor out of the South and away from traditional occupations. Black brakemen and firemen could now find employment in a shipyard, for example, with higher pay and more appealing working conditions than their posts at the bottom of the railroad hierarchy. McAdoo and the USRA released General Order No. 27 in May 1918 to keep the railroads competitive in the increasingly tight labor market. The order commanded that "colored men employed as firemen, trainmen, and switchmen shall be paid the same rates as are paid white men in the same capacities." Order 27 and its supplements mandated wage increases across the board, equal pay for equal work regardless of the employee's race or sex, and time-and-a-half for overtime. The order was a substantial boon for railroaders at the bottom of the occupational ladder. Firemen received a 35 percent raise, while flagmen's earnings rose by half. Only the lily-white "labor aristocrats" at the top saw little benefit from the order. It also staved off the impending labor crunch, as Black railroaders found the jobs attractive once again. McAdoo, a southerner and ardent segregationist, certainly seemed an unlikely vehicle for racial equality. Yet he described the order as "an act of simple justice," Black railroaders and labor leaders hailed his actions as a step toward democracy. As the wartime boom continued, the USRA helped to usher in the "first black industrial working class."⁶⁷

On the other hand, white unionists in the trainmen and firemen brotherhoods gave the orders a mixed reception. Thanks to General Order No. 8, railroaders for the stubbornly anti-union L&N, which had only bargained with the engineers and conductors since the Pullman Strike, joined the brotherhoods by the thousands. Railroaders around the country recognized McAdoo as a hero, with the vice president of the Pullman Conductors declaring him "the emancipator of the white race."⁶⁸ By April 1918, the *Courier-Journal* could report that for the first time in a quarter century, "practically all of the employees in the operating departments of the Louisville & Nashville are members of a union."⁶⁹ Many decisions of the USRA's adjustment committees favored railroad workers over management, with the board assigned to oversee the repair shops siding with labor more than 60 percent of the time.⁷⁰ Regarding the equal wage order, some white unionists – in reasoning reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century debates – had hoped eliminating the discrepancy would disincentivize companies from hiring Black railroaders. Yet when Black workers began to reap the benefits of the wartime economy and government intervention, "unease about the present and uncertainty about the future" started to seep into the halls of the brotherhood unions.⁷¹ In protest of Order 27, the journal of the BRT resurrected old rhetoric to describe African Americans as "illiterate" and "incompetent." Allegedly, a Black railroad employee occupied a "privileged class" and "could do pretty much as he pleases without any apprehension." White railroaders, on the other hand, had to be "perfect in every particular, and be ever ready to respond to the call of duty, even to the extent of protecting the negroes' position or be summarily discharged."⁷² The BRT, newly emboldened by the USRA, became a vehicle used by frustrated white brakemen and switchmen amid a rising tide of unionism.

Black workers still faced many obstacles, but the war years afforded opportunities in new locations, in different occupations, and at higher wages. The expansion of the wartime regulatory state, seen in the USRA, seemed to buttress African American progress with the federal government's authority. According to historian Eric Arnesen, the USRA represented a "dramatic change" source for Black railroaders. "Not since the Freedman's Bureau during the turbulent Reconstruction era," Arnesen argues, did African Americans have the authority of government "with the capacity to intervene and order improvements in their working lives."⁷³ Letters from Black railroaders streamed into the USRA office, thanking McAdoo for issuing decisions that granted them better pay and a sense of job security. Labor also won concessions from the capital through the National War Labor Board, implemented in April 1918, which brought the nation closer to achieving industrial democracy.⁷⁴ After seeing its acceptance by the wartime state, civil rights organizations began to embrace labor organizations as a means to an end. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) concluded that "the Labor Union is no panacea, but it has proved and is proving a force that in the end diminishes race prejudice." The NAACP urged workers to join unions whenever possible, for the struggle "to live like men" would ultimately unite white and Black labor under the same banner.⁷⁵

The same month that McAdoo issued the consequential Order 27, however, railroaders in East Tennessee used violence to create an all-white transportation town. Erwin, the county seat of Unicoi along the banks of the Nolichucky River near the North Carolina border, had served as the headquarters of the Clinchfield Railroad since its arrival in 1909. The railroad's financier, George L. Carter, owner of thousands of acres of coal lands in southwest Virginia, reorganized the failing road in 1908 and extended its lines from Pike County, Kentucky, to Spartanburg, South Carolina. Throughout the teens, Erwin became a vital conduit for Appalachian coal bound for the Atlantic coast.⁷⁶ Home to the Clinchfield's yard and repair shops, Erwin attracted railroad workers from other lines and saw its population increase steadily throughout the 1910s. One of these men was L. H. Phetteplace, a former trainmaster on the Norfolk and Western, who became the general manager of the Clinchfield. In Erwin, as in Corbin and other transportation towns, railroading was "a way of life," with white workers and their families taking immense pride in a job on the Clinchfield.⁷⁷

The growth of the railroad during the Great Migration tested the community's commitment to a racialized hierarchy. In 1915, the Erwin lodge of the BLE protested to the Clinchfield Railroad that an engineer did not meet the racial requirements to work on a preferred run. The union alleged that I. S. Cousins was "not a full-blooded white man" and demanded that the railroad move him from his usual train. The railroad obliged, and Cousins sued the union lodge for libel and damages. The Johnson City Staff described the case as "one of unusual interest," making it to federal court, where the jury deemed Cousins white and awarded him \$3,000 in remuneration.⁷⁸ Race would only grow more salient in Erwin, as between 1910 and 1918, around 100 African Americans took jobs as laborers in the railroad's repair shops. Most of these new workers hailed from South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, and lived in houses below the railyard near the river. One of these men was Tom DeVert, a Black man born in North Carolina who worked as a construction laborer for Phetteplace. Although relatively small, this migration to a largely white transportation town produced the conditions for anti-Black violence.⁷⁹

On the afternoon of Sunday, May 20, 1918, DeVert won some money gambling with white men near the railyard. An argument ensued over his right to the winnings, and

DeVert fled through the woods near the river. During the chaos, DeVert ran headlong into Georgia Collins and her brother, the children of a blacksmith for the Clinchfield. DeVert grabbed the young woman in an apparent attempt to use her as a shield, plunging into the river with her in tow. One of the men in pursuit shot and killed DeVert, while Collins drowned.⁸⁰ Collins's brother ran for help, and word of her death spread quickly. A group of white men pulled the bodies from the river and proceeded to drag DeVert's body more than a mile and a half back to town. By then, the small group had swelled into an angry mob who sought revenge for what they thought was interracial murder. They summoned the town's entire Black population to the railyard and burned DeVert's body on a makeshift funeral pyre of railroad ties. Some members of the mob then moved to burn down the entire Black section of town, but they were stopped by L. H. Phetteplace, DeVert's employer and the manager of the Clinchfield. After he convinced the mob not to carry out additional violence, they settled on a forced exodus. If any of Erwin's Black residents were still in town in the morning, the mob warned, they would meet DeVert's fate. Over the next few days, the African Americans who lived and worked in Erwin left their homes, never to return.⁸¹

The fallout from the lynching and expulsion exposed a debate over the role of Black labor. Some days after the lynching, the *Johnson City Staff* newspaper pointed out that "at a time when labor conditions are growing more and more critical," Erwin lost "nearly a hundred skilled laborers," some of which were "high-priced machinists." African Americans of "the best of reputation, sober, industrious, and owners of property" had been forced out. Many had moved to Dante, Virginia, farther into the coalfields, or had returned to the Carolinas. The paper predicted that the town would be hard-pressed to recover from the blot it now had on its reputation.⁸² Yet some white railroaders in Erwin took offense at the newspaper's characterization of the former residents as "skilled machinists." Clinchfield Railroad officials notified the newspaper that "no negroes have ever been employed in the Erwin shops or elsewhere as machinists, but simply as day laborers and helpers." The newspaper soon corrected its mistake.⁸³ The notion that Erwin permitted Black skilled machinists might give the wrong impression, as railroaders and members of the community equated well-paying jobs and full citizenship with white skin.

White railroaders across the South bristled at other attempts to unsettle the hierarchy. After General Order No. 27, railroad companies circumvented the equal wage provision by twisting job titles and duties that had long been defined by race. BRT President William Granville Lee brought the issue before Congress at a hearing before the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions. He explained that some railroads in the South employed Black men as porters but required them to do the tasks of passenger brakemen. On top of their usual duties, these Black "porter-brakemen" were often tasked with cleaning, sweeping, and even shining the shoes of the white conductor. By classifying the workers in this manner, and in some cases even placing the brakeman badge on their caps, railroads could avoid paying the higher wages afforded to actual brakemen, including white brakemen. Porters, almost always Black, did not command as high of pay as white brakemen and were not part of the railroad labor hierarchy. BRT President Lee argued that if the railroads continued to use Black railroaders in this position "in preference to white men," they should also enjoy "every right that should be theirs as brakemen, including promotion to a conductorship." Lee claimed to want "a square deal" for Black railroaders, but this argument caused railroad companies to fill the positions with white trainmen.⁸⁴

By the war's end, African American labor had seen remarkable yet tenuous advances. In addition to the progress made at workplaces across the country, more than 367,000

African Americans served in the military, with 200,000 overseas in Europe. Most of these men worked as laborers and stevedores, but some units, like the Harlem Hell-fighters, distinguished themselves in battle.⁸⁵ To Emmett J. Scott – President Wilson’s Special Assistant for Negro Affairs – the war allowed Black Americans to gain a “keener and more sharply defined consciousness, not only of his duties ... but of his rights and privileges as a citizen of the United States.” Black soldiers “performed to their utmost of their ability the duties which the war imposed upon all citizens,” and distinguished themselves as a result. If conditions on the home front did not improve accordingly, the country’s Black citizens would question if “the war have been fought in vain.”⁸⁶ Soon, however, the impetus for industrial expansion and the requisite demand for labor and government regulation would evaporate. If the Erwin expulsion and the opposition to General Order 27 were any indication, Black workers would face a determined effort to turn back the clock.

Railroaders and Reaction

The November 11, 1918, armistice signaled the end of the wartime economy and the arrival of much uncertainty for capital and labor. The labor market that spurred the Great Migration tightened as industries pulled back from wartime production. Jobs became increasingly scarce. White veterans reentered the workforce fully expecting to resume their occupations, while the return of Black soldiers, according to W. E. B. Du Bois, heralded an effort to “Make way for Democracy.” Du Bois declared that African Americans had helped save democracy in France and would “save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.”⁸⁷ Well aware that it was the great overseas conflict that had incited these social and economic changes, NAACP Secretary James Weldon Johnson wondered, “Can the Negro hold what he has gained when the war is over?”⁸⁸

Almost immediately after the armistice, rank-and-file white railroaders moved to expel African Americans from the job by any means necessary. In January 1919, disgruntled white workers in Memphis formed a committee to demand that Illinois Central and one of its subsidiaries remove all Black yardmen from the service. Labeling them “inefficient, disorderly, and boisterous,” the switchmen objected to Black workers being paid at an equal rate. When the company refused, all of the white switchmen walked out and were soon joined by workers on other systems in the city, some 600 in total. One of the organizers stated that theirs was not an organized labor movement “though all are union men.” President Lee of the BRT disapproved of the walkout, as did the other leaders of the brotherhood unions. The so-called “Memphis Hate Strike” failed, but not before some white workers grew increasingly violent. Bounties, beatings, and, in some cases, blatant killings of Black trainmen in the area forced many out of the railroad industry.⁸⁹

Taking a lesson from their employers, railroaders then twisted the language of their contract and appealed to the regulatory state to finish the job. The BRT took the matter to the USRA, and in September 1919, six major railroads in the South agreed to a series of rule changes.⁹⁰ Ostensibly color-blind, the rule changes ensured that seniority, the bedrock of railroad employment, extended whites-only provisions into new positions. Decades of custom had established that Black railroaders occupied the position of brakeman, with the position of flagman at the rear of the train reserved for white men. When railroads imposed a reduction in the workforce, the rules allowed white railroaders with seniority to claim the jobs of Black brakemen, who were barred from filling the

position of flagman. Officials of the USRA acknowledged they had assuaged the trainmen, citing their preference to “inconvenience” a few railroad workers rather than risk a strike.⁹¹ The BRT celebrated the developments in the pages of its journal, pointing out that “a large number of white trainmen” could choose new positions due to the new rules.⁹² The newly formed Colored Association of Railway Employees resisted these changes to no avail, and the new contracts spelled disaster for Black railroaders.⁹³

Through a multipronged attack, white railroaders’ decades-long campaign to eliminate Black workers from their occupations began to come to fruition. Where violence failed, as it did in Memphis, USRA-backed contracts proved to be effective. What a difference a year made for Black railroaders and McAdoo’s organization. The regulatory agency that had once been seen as emancipatory now helped drive Black workers out of the industry. Across the country, unions invoked their whites-only clauses to demote and fire Black railroaders who had made advances during the war. Yet the railroad companies’ manipulation of job titles, seen in the porter-brakemen dispute of 1918, blurred the lines of race, occupation, and seniority. These tactics put into conflict railroaders who had little reason to oppose each other before the war and the USRA orders. In this context, white railroaders came to view all workers across the color line – not just those with whom they were in direct competition – with distrust and disdain.

The efforts of railroad unionists to expel African Americans from the workplace occurred during a nationwide epidemic of anti-Black mob violence. From April to November 1919, at least twenty-five major riots or mob actions occurred across the United States, resulting in hundreds of deaths and at least fifty-two lynchings. The violence prompted James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the NAACP, to dub the period “Red Summer.” Du Bois described the circumstances of 1919 as akin to being “on the Great Deep,” amid a “vast voyage which will lead to Freedom or Death.” The war had illuminated a fight for justice to labor, in which Du Bois saw Black people across the globe as crucial actors. “But of all laborers cheated of their just wage from the world’s dawn to today,” Du Bois explained, “[the Negro] is the poorest and bloodiest.” In the United States, the typical Black worker had “taken his fastest forward step” from slavery to wage labor, from “scab to half-recognized union man.” Yet the opposition exemplified in the Red Summer threatened to roll back this progress. Du Bois cast the struggle as part of the “battle of Industrial Democracy” worldwide. In that struggle, white workers had to decide whether to consider Black labor as their ally. Although Black workers had been “reluctantly” invited into some unions, Du Bois wondered if a Black member would now be considered “a man – a fellow-voter, a brother?” Finally, he remarked on the rise of communist Russia, which represented the “one new Idea of the World War.” *“It is the vision of great dreamers that only those who work shall vote and rule,”* Du Bois explained, an idea Americans often misunderstood thanks to the “maledictions hurled at Bolshevism.” In his mind, communism had the chance to become “the one thing that made the slaughter worthwhile.”⁹⁴

Thus, in 1919, African Americans became the targets of the twin reactionary currents in postwar America. From Bisbee, Arizona, to the nation’s capital, the violence of the Red Summer announced the arrival of a terrible backlash. At the same time, the anti-Bolshevism of the Red Scare targeted African Americans and other racialized groups deemed as dangerous to the nation. The war had dismantled hierarchies in labor and American society writ large, and in 1919, white workers on the railroads and other industries aimed for their reconstruction. To settle matters of workplace conflict, they fell back on the tried-and-true tactic of racism. It was, as Du Bois called it, “the logic of the broken plate, which, seared of old across its pattern, cracks never again, save along the old

destruction.” The old pattern was a way for railroaders to put the hierarchy back together.⁹⁵

“Plenty of White Men to Do the Work”

In the summer of 1919, the transportation town of Corbin was still experiencing the wartime boom. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* described it as a “live town” that was “bustling.” “If the L. & N. continues to build and add to Corbin,” it noted, “that little city will be a metropolis yet.”⁹⁶ A year after federal control of the railroads, the USRA’s action to ban employer discrimination against union workers allowed the Corbin chapter of the BRT to build a membership of 250 with “five to ten candidates” joining each meeting.⁹⁷ One brother in the BRT lodge at Corbin remembered with little fondness “how unjustly” they were treated before they organized. “Like an old crippled dog,” the railroaders found themselves with little recourse to oppose the power of the company. Thanks to McAdoo and the USRA, he acknowledged, “It is not that way now.”⁹⁸ Corbin’s shop employees also organized a Brotherhood of Railway Carmen lodge in May of 1918. One year later, the lodge reported “one hundred percent membership.” It was clear that these new brotherhood members thought highly of the USRA. “We realize that the government gave us freedom when it took over the railroads, and [W.] McAdoo said that we had a right to organize,” a member of the Corbin Lodge wrote to the national journal. “Now is the time to quit politics on account of party affiliation,” he urged his fellow workers, “and uphold the men that stand for the laboring men regardless of their politics.” He commended the journal for taking up the issue of continued government control, which the Corbin lodge supported.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the USRA wage hikes were a boon to the few African American railroaders who now made their homes in town. Among them were Alex Tye, a thirty-four-year-old-year-old porter in the L&N master mechanic’s office, and his ten-year-old stepson Cearney Parks, who worked as a machinist helper in the L&N shops.¹⁰⁰ The only other Black employee of the shops was Albert Stone, who painted the head end of steam engines.¹⁰¹ Other occupations for Black Corbin residents included railroad and hotel porters, as well as janitors. Roscoe Lyttle, born in nearby Clay County, worked as a porter at the Wilbur Hotel. In July 1918, Lyttle shipped off to France as part of the 317th Supply Train unit. When he returned in April 1919, he and his wife moved to Corbin.¹⁰² After the war, the Lyttle, Tye, and Turner families lived close to one another on the Whitley County side of town. For those at the bottom of the railroad hierarchy scale – brakemen, trainmen, flagmen – the rising stature of the Black working class posed a perceived threat.

The matter of wages took on increased importance as postwar inflation soared. In the summer, McAdoo’s successor at the USRA, Walker D. Hines, wrote to President Wilson to recommend that Congress create a board to adjust railroaders’ pay. The cost of living was “rapidly rising,” Hines explained, which threatened the purchasing power of railroad workers. Wilson concurred and sent a letter to the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce chairman that stressed the need for “real relief” for railroad employees. In the end, however, no wage increases took effect. Hines eventually argued that the higher cost of postwar life should be viewed as only transitory and not in need of serious action to mitigate its effects.¹⁰³

Lastly, the specter of Black labor as competition grew in the midst of rapid Black migration. In February of 1919, when U.S. Steel was well along in constructing its model extraction town of Lynch in Harlan County, the L&N committed over \$1 million to

expand the capacity of the Corbin yards.¹⁰⁴ The John T. McKinney Construction Company of Lynchburg, Virginia, went to work with steam shovels and draglines, moving earth to make way for crews of tracklayers.¹⁰⁵ For the next step, the L&N imported several “extra gangs” of African American laborers from further south, around 200 in total. While in town, they lived in rail cars on L&N property, pulling track and driving spikes around the clock.¹⁰⁶ An all-Black road paving crew from the George M. Eady Construction Company in Louisville also set up a tent camp, and the town’s Black population more than tripled, seemingly overnight.¹⁰⁷ As the *Courier-Journal* noted of southeastern Kentucky in August, “the surplus labor which a few months ago seemed imminent is more than taken up by the mines, the mills and road-construction projects.”¹⁰⁸ These changes marked Corbin as far more than a destination for coal and freight, or in the words of a correspondent for the *Courier-Journal*, a “yard for human beings.”¹⁰⁹ White railroaders saw the arrival of hundreds of Black workers, too, and soon devised a plan to ensure the racial hierarchy of the transportation town would remain intact.

It took until the fall, but the Red Summer finally reached southeastern Kentucky. Like other such incidents, the Corbin expulsion began with rumor and falsehood. On the night of October 29, 1919, Ambrose F. Thompson, a thirty-four-year-old switchman for the L&N, walked home from attending a carnival near the railyards. The story, as told in the newspapers, was that two Black men from the work crew ambushed him in the woods. After he crossed the Cumberland Valley division bridge, they stabbed him, robbed him of his four dollars, and left him for dead. Thompson made his way to a nearby house, where a physician deemed his condition to be critical.¹¹⁰ Later, it was discovered that it was actually white men, possibly donning blackface, who were to blame for the assault of Thompson.¹¹¹ Yet the rumor spread that it was “two negroes” to blame. On the morning of October 30, 1919, brakeman Steve Rogers and a group of railroaders approached L&N construction foreman William Fugate and the crew of Black workers. They demanded information on which of the men had waylaid Thompson. Much to the railroaders’ chagrin, the foreman and the crew denied any knowledge of the incident. Pete Frakes and his brother Will, two Black men employed as baggage agents at the passenger depot, heard rumors “that all the negros [*sic*] would be driven out of Corbin that night.” When they encountered Steve Rogers, he snarled at them and ensured they saw the two pistols tucked in his pockets. Later that day, another construction foreman overheard white workers plotting to expel the Black crew, and a sign posted in the roundhouse warned of the coming forced exodus.¹¹²

When the sun set, rumor turned into action. At around 9 o’clock, an African American worker came to Fugate with reports of gunshots in the south end of the yards. Beset by Steve Rogers – who earned the nickname “Pistol Pete” – and the mob, the construction foremen sent the workers to the passenger depot and purchased them train tickets in all directions.¹¹³ The trouble that began in the railyard then spilled over into the streets of Corbin. In a sequence that was repeated throughout the night, the mob descended on hotels, houses, and businesses where they knew African Americans lived or worked. After taking anything of value and destroying the rest, Rogers rounded up the Black employees and marshaled the procession to the depot. Inside, when the night baggage agent complained to the mob that he would be in bad shape without them. In response, one man told him, “there were plenty of white men to do the work.”¹¹⁴ Over several hours, some 500 shots were fired, but there were no reported casualties. Some fled the town on foot, while L&N trains with extra passenger cars left Corbin in all directions. The last train, No. 31, departed for Knoxville in the early morning.¹¹⁵

In Ravenna, another L&N transportation town on the edge of the coalfields, a rumor of violent Black residents was yet again the reason for mob action. The town had experienced growth similar to Corbin's as the L&N hub for coal along the railroad's Eastern Kentucky division. By January 1920, forty-six African Americans lived within the town's limits, around half hailing from farther south. Outside of the Bluegrass State, Alabama was the most common place of birth. Their occupations ranged from cooks to porters to housekeepers, but the majority worked as laborers in the L&N repair shops. Outside of the few domestic servants and cooks who lived downtown, all of the Black families listed the railyard as their residence. Jackson Carew, an Alabama native, lived on railroad property with his wife Francis and their five children.¹¹⁶ Unlike the white railroaders, Black families did not own their own homes, or even live outside the boundaries of L&N property. This left them vulnerable to the whims of the company and the vicissitudes of the Long Red Summer. According to the Richmond *Daily Register*, a "young negro" attacked the son of Ike Chanler, a car repairman for the L&N, in late March 1920. After placing the young man in jail along with his father and brother, all of the African Americans living in Ravenna "were notified to get out of town quick."¹¹⁷ On April 2, word of their removal reached Lexington, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* described the expulsion as peaceful, with "motor cars and trains" being used in an orderly fashion. In Texas, the *Dallas Express* reprinted the story, noting that "the Colored men" accused of assault had "simply defended themselves."¹¹⁸

Whether this was a deliberate act of mimicry on the part of white residents is impossible to know. Other scholars of sundown towns have claimed that some communities were envious of nearby locales, and "went sundown simply because a neighboring town did so."¹¹⁹ Census data does reveal that Ike Chanler moved his family from Corbin to Ravenna at some point between 1910 and 1920. The coincidences in the historical record stop there, however. What is more plausible is that Ravenna experienced the same pattern of development that manifested in Corbin: expansion and job growth for white railroaders, followed by a sudden influx of Black workers during the war years. The racialization of railroad labor, coupled with the context of Black migration and postwar labor conflict, resulted in a powder keg that only lacked a match.

Over the Long Red Summer, white railroaders employed a variety of tactics to expel Black workers from their social lives altogether. Due to the actions of the USRA – and in no small part to Black railroaders who petitioned the agency – Black railroad labor advanced during the war and threatened the status of white workers. In response, white railroaders manipulated job descriptions, invoked whites-only union clauses, and pressured railroad companies to employ only white men on their lines. When all else failed, they turned to violence. The Long Red Summer expulsions were the result of decades of experience – both with their employers as well as their unions – that conditioned railroaders to see Black labor as a detriment to their cause. Race and status also saturated railroaders' social lives, as they inhabited transportation towns composed of workers stratified at points along an occupational hierarchy. It was fitting that Steve Rogers led the charge in the Corbin expulsion, just as other railroaders did in the Appalachian coal hubs of Ravenna and Erwin. The occupations of these men – a flagman, a car repairman, and a blacksmith, respectively – exposed them to the particular racial ideology of railroad workers. In the context of the war, migration, the Red Scare, and the Red Summer, their attempts to rid their workplaces of Black labor transformed into something else entirely. Now, they sought to extend these efforts to their communities writ large and, by 1920, the Black industrial working class of these places had been removed wholesale. At the end of the Long Red Summer, these transportation towns truly belonged to white railroaders.

This transformation was indeed Du Bois's "logic of the broken plate" at work. The railroad industry's dynamics of race and labor channeled railroaders into racially homogeneous associations along the lines of craft, skin color, and status in the labor hierarchy. Beyond craft unionism, however, it was their particular roles and contexts within a larger division of labor that laid the rails that ultimately carried them to their destinations. By putting labor back at the center of this history, we can consider geography, logistics, the organization of capital, the social history of communities, and the effects of anti-labor strategy as explanatory. At issue was not just their organizations – whether we deem them to be good, bad, or otherwise – but a long history of material lived experience that drove Black and white workers apart. If we look elsewhere, we may find that such an approach helps us understand other acts of violence in the history of the working class.

Notes

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- 4 Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780–1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 121.
- 5 Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 19–21.
- 6 Chad L. Williams describes the period from the end of World War I to the Tulsa Massacre of 1921 as the "long Red Summer." I propose that we can extend that distinction to 1917, beginning with the East St. Louis race riot. See Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 225.
- 7 Adam J. Hodges, "Understanding a National and Global Red Scare/Red Summer Through the Local Invention of Solidarities," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18 (Jan. 2019): 81–98 (quotation, with emphasis, on 81). Most studies of the Red Summer attempt a synthesis of several, or all, of the major riots. See Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-in, 1919 and the 1960s* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); Lee Williams, *Anatomy of Four Race Riots: Racial Conflict in Knoxville, Elaine (Arkansas), Tulsa, and Chicago, 1919–1921* (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1972); Jan Voogd, *Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011); David Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans Fought Back* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Others ground their analysis in one place, using a local story to reflect back on the national. See William Tuttle Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
- 8 Eric Arnesen, "Charting an Independent Course: African American Railroad Workers in the World War I Era," in *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience*, ed. Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 295.
- 9 John F. Stover, *American Railroads* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 148.
- 10 Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977); Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
- 11 Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 79. Licht draws on E. P. Thompson's classic "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (Dec. 1967): 56–97.
- 12 *Report of the Eight-Hour Commission, Commission on Standard Workday of Railroad Employees* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1918), 385.

- 13 Reed C. Richardson, *The Locomotive Engineer, 1863–1963: A Century of Railway Labor Relations and Work Rules* (Ann Arbor: Bureau of Industrial Relations, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Michigan, 1963), 104; Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 161.
- 14 Chauncey Del French, *Railroadman* (New York: MacMillan, 1938), 61.
- 15 *Report of the Eight-Hour Commission*, 386; Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 82; Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 109–11.
- 16 *Report of the Eight-Hour Commission*, 384, 387; Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 182–85.
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- 20 Paul Michael Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men: Railroad Brotherhoods, 1877–1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 6; Stromquist, *Generation of Boomers*, 106–07.
- 21 Quoted in Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 28.
- 22 *Report of the Eight-Hour Commission*, 274.
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- 24 The most important work on this subject is Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men*.
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- 26 Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 284–85; Davis, *Power at Odds*, 27–30.
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- 28 Quotation from Eric Arnesen, “‘Like Banquo’s Ghost, It Will Not Down’: The Race Question and the American Railroads, 1880–1920,” *American Historical Review* 99 (Dec. 1994): 1602. Theresa Ann Case details the biracial unionism of the Knights of Labor strikes against the Gould system in her *The Great Southwest Railroad Strike and Free Labor* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010). Many of the railroad workers who joined the Knights were those in the non-operating trades.
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- 53 Willard McBurney Oral History, Corbin Railroad Museum Oral History Project, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.
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