
The McCloud River Affair of 1909

A Study in the Use of State Troops

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NEARLY ALL OF THE LEGISLATION with respect to this country's militia or national guard has been concentrated on the problem of making it an efficient instrument for repelling invasion. Yet as a state force the militia makes its greatest contribution to the community by coming to the aid of civilian authorities during emergencies — emergencies that may arise out of civil disturbances or out of natural calamities. In the spring of 1909 the California National Guard was called upon to quell a riot of several hundred Italian lumbermen in the Siskiyou County town of McCloud.

Late in May a dispute over labor conditions had broken out between employes of the McCloud River Lumber Co. and the management. Within a few days the controversy developed into a strike which threatened to become serious. Some 700 Italian workmen not only refused to work but also threatened to prevent non-strikers from doing so unless the lumber company acceded to their demands.¹ On May thirty-first the company officials appealed to Charles B. Howard, Siskiyou County sheriff, for protection from the strikers.

Sheriff Howard responded immediately and appointed about sixty special deputies to aid him in the protection of the property of the McCloud River Lumber Co. The sheriff and some of his posse stationed themselves in the company's box factory, hoping to prevent the strikers from interfering with that operation. But the strikers surrounded the building and, after informing the sheriff that any person who attempted to work in the plant would be killed, demanded that the peace officers leave the building. At this point, the sheriff decided to abandon the attempt to hold the building. He was convinced, as he afterwards stated, that resistance on the part of himself and his deputies would have "caused a riot with which he could not have coped, and that the starting of such a riot would have meant the destruction of life and property."² Therefore later that day (May 31) he wired Gov. J. N. Gillett, stating

that the McCloud affair was serious and requesting that a company of soldiers be sent to assist in protecting life and property.³ Gillett was reluctant to send state troops without further information on the necessity of such a move and he advised Sheriff Howard that the state would not comply with his request until it was definitely shown that the sheriff's office could not cope with the situation.⁴ After sending the telegram, Gillett apparently made up his mind that it would be politically unwise to delay sending the troops, for he dispatched the following message to Adj.-Gen. J. B. Lauck:

Communicate at once with the sheriff of Siskiyou County at McCloud. If he advises you that he cannot control the situation and requests troops to prevent rioting or breaches of peace, take at once a sufficient number of troops to McCloud and restore order immediately, disarming all who are bearing arms. In accomplishing this use your own judgment.⁵

Later in the day, Lauck received word from Sheriff Howard urging that troops be sent. The sheriff reiterated the seriousness of the situation and added that the strikers had "just taken possession of the powder-house, undoubtedly for use as bombs or like service."⁶

Adjutant-General Lauck was not convinced of the seriousness of the situation but ordered Col. A. W. Bradbury, assistant adjutant-general, to proceed to McCloud for the purpose of making a thorough investigation, and he indicated that he would then act on Colonel Bradbury's report.⁷ Bradbury arrived in McCloud on the afternoon of June 1, 1909. The lumber-company officials informed him that the strikers had seized the mail train running from McCloud to Bartle over the McCloud River Railroad, and had, in addition, seized a logging train belonging to the same railroad. Furthermore, the striking Italians, according to the company officials, had made threats to destroy the mills, the store, the homes of certain company officials, and other company property unless "their demands were complied with by a certain time."⁸ It was also stated that by threats of violence the Italians had driven men from their work in the mills and the box factory and had actually beaten two men. Finally, Bradbury was told, the strikers had attempted, though unsuccessfully, to break into the powder house where much black powder and dynamite was stored. Once again the sheriff explained that he was powerless to cope with the situation, and both he and the company officials implored Colonel Bradbury to recommend to Governor Gillett that troops be sent to McCloud at once.⁹

At first, Coloney Bradbury seemed to be unconvinced as to the necessity of using national guard troops. He states in his report:

I informed these gentlemen that I was by no means satisfied of the necessity of the presence of troops, and until I had seen some demonstrations or acts of violence on the part of the strikers, and had made certain investigations which would be justified in my own mind in recommending that troops be sent, I most certainly would not suggest such a thing to the Governor or to the Adjutant-General.

Bradbury also severely criticized the sheriff for not performing properly his official duties. The colonel contended that if the sheriff had made an attempt in the "beginning of the trouble to arrest the leaders, the strike would have ended then and there."¹⁰

Despite his disgust with the situation, Bradbury continued his investigation. During the afternoon of June first he talked with several non-striking workmen around the plant. For the most part they corroborated the sheriff's statements. About 5:00 p.m., Colonel Bradbury sent Lauck the information he had obtained and explained that he had not yet talked with the strike leaders. He advised the adjutant-general to alert four guard companies for possible action in case the situation grew worse.¹¹

On the next day (June 2) Bradbury urged the sheriff and company officials to attempt to load a few cars, so as to determine what the rioters might do. This request was rejected by the officials on the grounds that such action would mean the destruction of the plant and perhaps bloodshed. It was apparent by this time that the sheriff and many of his men did not relish a fight and could not be relied upon in case a riot or disturbance broke out which might necessitate resistance by force.¹²

Following this interview, Colonel Bradbury secured the use of an interpreter and made an attempt to confer with the leaders of the strike movement. He was informed, however, that these leaders would not meet or confer with him. He tried again later in the morning but met with the same answer. This time the strikers sent word, through the interpreter, that they intended to make a demonstration that afternoon and proposed to prevent the operation of the electric light plant that night. The leaders also stated, according to the interpreter, that regardless of the wishes of the governor or any other person, they would "do as they pleased."¹³

The demonstration took place as scheduled at about 2:00 p.m. with some 600 strikers in attendance. Threats were made to destroy the mills and the factory unless their demands were met, the strike leaders reiterating their plans to close the lighting and power plants by 5:00 p.m. After the meeting was over, the strikers advanced on the machine and car shops where they forced the men working there to halt operation. Some of the rioters broke into the lighting and pumping plants and

forced the engineer to draw the fires under the boilers,¹⁴ thus depriving the town of McCloud of lights and fire protection.

Bradbury now had to make a decision. Greater violence could, very likely, be expected. The sheriff seemed unable or unwilling to enforce law and order. After considering these facts, Colonel Bradbury felt the situation was sufficiently serious to recommend that troops be rushed to McCloud. Late in the afternoon of June second the adjutant-general was notified of this decision.¹⁵

Companies A, E, and G, 2nd infantry, and Troop B, cavalry, California National Guard had been held in readiness for active service since June first. Upon the receipt of Colonel Bradbury's telegram, the adjutant-general ordered these troops, along with Col. H. I. Seymour, commanding the 2nd infantry regiment, and staff, and a detachment of the regiment's hospital corps, to proceed at once to McCloud. Lauck assumed personal command of the movement.¹⁶

At 8:20 p.m., June second, nearly 200 members of the above-named units boarded a special train in Sacramento. Company A, 2nd infantry, was picked up at Chico. The troop train was met at Sisson by Colonel Bradbury who reported to General Lauck and outlined the situation at McCloud.¹⁷

Precautions were taken to guard the train from possible violence. A few miles from McCloud, three flat cars were placed in front of the locomotive and ten national guard sharpshooters from companies A and E under the command of Capt. John F. Sherburn, the regimental commissary officer, were posted "thereon for the purpose of protecting the train." A fully armed soldier was placed at each window and on the platforms of the several coaches. Both these and the sharpshooter detachment were ordered to fire upon anyone seen tampering with the track or the train during the remainder of the journey. Thus armed and protected, the train bearing the state troops arrived in McCloud at 12:15 p.m., June third.¹⁸

As it pulled up to the station, Company A was ordered to drive back some fifty strikers who appeared to be making their way to the back of the train. A line of troops was quickly thrown across the tracks and the order executed. In the fracas one striker was slightly wounded by a national guard bayonet. Fortunately, the injury was not serious.¹⁹ The guardsmen immediately detrained and established camp.²⁰ Because of the necessity of communication facilities, General Lauck established his own headquarters in a house belonging to President Quale of the McCloud River Lumber Co.²¹

On the afternoon of June third, Sheriff Howard requested a permanent guard for the pipeline conveying water into the town and also a guard for the powder house, located just south of the town. Small detachments commanded by non-commissioned officers were sent to take over these duties. Other guard units were assigned to various parts of the McCloud River Lumber Co. plant.²²

The whole operation took on somewhat of an international complexion on June third when Lauck received the following telegram from Governor Gillett:

The Consul-General of Italy has by telegram just received requested me to caution the Militia to afford the most constant protection and security to the subjects of his country. If there are any Italians at McCloud who are not engaged in riotous action and in violating the laws of this state and need protection from anyone who is doing so, see that this protection is extended to them.²³

Lauck replied that "any Italians not engaged in riotous action will have our best protection."²⁴ But not all Italian groups seemed to be satisfied by this statement. The city editor of *La Voce Del Popolo*, an Italian language newspaper published in San Francisco, left for McCloud on June fourth.²⁵ On June fifth Governor Gillett informed Lauck that Consul-Gen. Salvatore Rocco "is leaving tonight on the Oregon Express for McCloud," and went on to say, "you will kindly meet him."²⁶ Gillett was thus doing everything possible to avoid an international incident.

On the morning of June fourth, Adjutant-General Lauck was successful in arranging a conference between the strike leaders and the lumber company officials. At the meeting, Lauck emphasized strongly that the national guard was at McCloud "simply to preserve order, maintain peace, and prevent destruction of property." He went on to impress upon all concerned that the guard was "just as much the friend of the strikers as the company; and would assist the sheriff to prevent the company from doing unlawful acts just as quickly as assist him to prevent strikers from committing violence." The strike leader, Frank Levati, seemed duly convinced and promised no further violence would occur. Another conference held later in the day proved barren of results.²⁷

The next morning the troops were advised that the sheriff would make an attempt to arrest the strike leaders. A cordon of national guard troops was secretly thrown around the entire camp of the striking Italians to prevent their escape and also to prevent reinforcement from another Italian camp south of McCloud. When all was in readiness the

sheriff and his posse entered the strikers' camp and quietly arrested three of the strike leaders. With this task accomplished the state troops returned to their own camp. The three Italians were taken to jail and at a hearing the following day, were held for trial under \$1000 bail.²⁸

With the arrest of the three strike leaders, quiet prevailed in the lumber camp. On June sixth the Italian consul-general arrived and after conferring with Lauck moved to take a hand in settling the dispute. In a conference with company officials, Rocco discovered that much bitterness prevailed²⁹ and decided it would be wise simply to have his countrymen leave McCloud and seek employment elsewhere.³⁰

Operations at the lumber camp were gradually resumed and the next two days passed without incident. With the situation apparently well in hand, the adjutant-general decided to withdraw the troops on June ninth. At the request of Sheriff Howard, however, the withdrawal was postponed until the following day, to allow the majority of the departing Italians to leave McCloud. On June tenth, the California National Guard units returned to their home stations.³¹

Strike duty is perhaps the most disagreeable and controversial task which ever confronts the national guardsman. Seldom is he permitted to take the initiative but must show patience and tact, even when subjected to insults and derisive name-calling. In the performance of its duty at McCloud, the California National Guard was afforded no unusual opportunities to distinguish itself. On the other hand, the fact that no opportunity was supplied is a strong indication of the high caliber of service rendered, for the rioters made no attempt at violence toward either civil or military authorities after the arrival of the troops.

NOTES

1. San Francisco *Chronicle*, May 30, 1909.
2. Calif. Adj. Gen.'s Office, *An Rept.* [hereafter cited as *AGO Rept.*] 1909-10 (Sacramento, 1910), p. 54. Much of the McCloud River material, in the original, is filed in the adj. gen.'s office. Where possible, citations are made to the material published in his report of that year rather than to the originals. Unless otherwise stated, telegrams and letters cited are filed in his office.
3. Under California military law the highest officials of state, city, and county governments may request the governor to call the national guard.
4. Telegram, Gillett to Howard, May 31, 1909.
5. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 45.
6. Telegram, Howard to Lauck, May 31, 1909.
7. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, pp. 45-46.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

9. *Ibid.* Sheriff Howard's May 31 telegram to General Lauck, stating that the strikers had "just taken possession of the powderhouse," seems to have been in error. Howard had either confused the powderhouse with one of the other buildings taken by the strikers or had deliberately misinformed Lauck in order to speed up state action.

10. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 54.

11. Telegram, Bradbury to Lauck, June 1, 1909. Also see *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 46.

12. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 46.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 56. 14. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

15. Telegram, Bradbury to Lauck, June 2, 1909. See also *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 57.

16. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 48.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 49. 18. *Ibid.*, p. 59

19. *Ibid.* See also medical report contained in letter from Seymour to Lauck, June 4, 1909. 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

21. As Lauck informed Governor Gillett, he chose the company's house not only because it was equipped for telephone and telegraph communication but it also afforded a place where Lauck could hold conferences in private when necessary. *Courier Free News* (Redding), June 4, 1909.

22. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, pp. 59-60. 23. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

24. Telegram, Lauck to Gillett, June 3, 1909.

25. Memorandum in AGO files, undated.

26. Telegram, Gillett to Lauck, June 5, 1909.

27. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, pp. 50-51. 28. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

29. The president of the McCloud River Lumber Co. indicated that his firm did not intend to employ Italians again. *Courier Free News*, June 8, 1909.

30. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 7, 1909.

31. *AGO Rept.*, 1909-10, p. 61.