

Railroad Strikes in Arkansas

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COMMON SEARCH TERMS

- railroad strike
- great railroad strike
- Knights of labor railroad
- big strike railroad
- railroad protest
- railroad Harrison
- railroad strikers
- train strikers
- railroad labor union
- Gould strike



1890 portrait of Jason "Jay" Gould, railroad tycoon who owned railroads across the U.S., including the largest railroad in Arkansas, the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway. He died just a few years after this portrait, in 1892, from tuberculosis. Arkansas State Archives PHC00003098.

As industrialization increased across the U.S. in the late 1800s and early 1900s, so did efforts to improve working conditions and pay. Workers formed unions, banding together to negotiate with their employers. Railroad workers were some of the first laborers in Arkansas to unionize. Labor strikes, that is withholding labor, were one of the tactics used by employees and unions during negotiations for better treatment. Strikes often turned dangerous, as workers resorted to sabotage and clashed with company men, law officers, and government militia. During the railroad's Golden Age at the turn of the 20th century, there were many minor and two major railroad strikes in Arkansas.

In 1886 a southwestern railroad strike became one of the largest labor strikes in the U.S., with over 200,000 protestors from Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas. The impetus for the strike occurred in Texas, when a Knights of Labor member was fired by Union Pacific for attending a union meeting on company time. The Knights responded by declaring a strike against Union Pacific and other southwestern lines owned by Jason "Jay" Gould. Gould was one of the richest men in the late 1800s and had a monopoly on railroads in the southwest, largely due to his unscrupulous business practices.

In Arkansas, Gould owned one of the largest railroads in the state, the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway, running across the state through Little Rock to Texarkana. Workers in Little Rock joined the strike by sabotaging trains, removing parts and sometimes even whole engines. Arkansas courts issued injunctions against the strikers' activities, even the peaceful protests, as the train delays negatively affected other Arkansas businesses that relied on the railroads to ship their products. Many people were unhappy with the strikes, and several towns organized groups to restore train traffic. In Texarkana, a committee retook the train shops from strikers.

As the strike continued, Gould's company brought in help from state governments. Just outside Little Rock, strikers had multiple shootouts with deputies guarding the trains. The strike ended after six months when Gould hired non-union workers to run the railroads, and trains resumed their normal schedules. At that point many union members turned against the Knights of Labor, and membership declined.

The longest railroad strike in U.S. history began in 1921 on the Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad (M&NA) line in Arkansas. Worker protests stemmed from government policies implemented during World War I. In 1917 the federal government took control

of the nation's railroads for the war effort, paying railroad workers a flat rate across the country. For the M&NA workers in Arkansas, this rate was well above what they were previously paid. When the federal government gave control back to the railroad company, the low wages returned, and M&NA workers protested. Strikers burned dozens of M&NA railroad bridges to sabotage operations. In Harrison, the prolonged M&NA strike led to conflicts between the townspeople and workers, culminating in the Harrison railroad riot in January 1923. Originally the people of Harrison supported the quest for better wages. However, as the strike dragged on, many local businesses that had depended on the railroad were forced to close. While businesses suffered, railroad strikers received financing from national supporters of the strike, causing resentment in town. M&NA announced they would close the railroad line through Harrison unless the town either removed the strikers or helped fund repairs of the tracks. Despite this warning, the bridge-burning continued, and a mob of almost a thousand people gathered in Harrison to search for the people responsible. Many railroad strikers were attacked by the mob, pulled from their homes and whipped and beaten. Ed C. Gregor fired a shotgun in an attempt to disperse the crowd, but the mob returned fire. Gregor was arrested after being falsely accused of injuring the attackers. Masked men later kidnapped Gregor from jail and lynched him on a railroad bridge outside of Harrison. The remainder of the almost 200 strikers and their families were rounded up by the mob and forced out of Arkansas into Missouri, putting an end to the protest. This riot was analogous to the race riots and lynchings in Arkansas during this era, as Gregor and many of the other strikers were Black.

With mounting pressures from workers and unions over the decades, the Fair Labor Standards Act was eventually enacted in 1938 to provide some worker protection. This included a standard minimum wage, a 44-hour workweek, and restrictions on child labor.

RELEVANT EDUCATION AND LESSON PLANS

Chronicling America: Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886 Research Guide
<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-railroad-strike-1886>

Chronicling America: Eight Hour Day (1916) Research Guide
<https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-eight-hour-day>

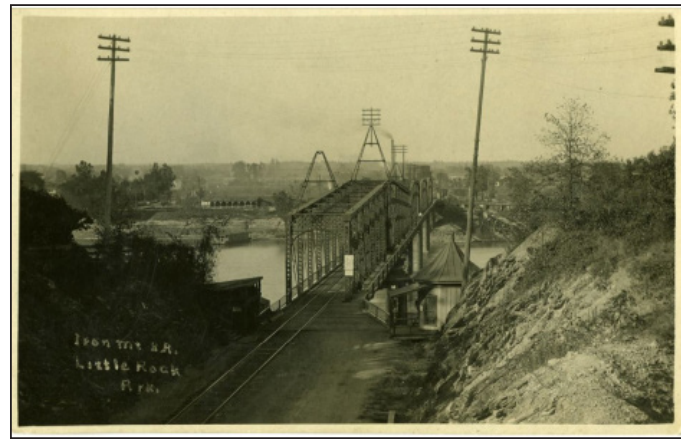
Arkansas State Archives: Railroad Development Lesson Plan
<https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/lesson-plans/6/>



1874 map of the land grants of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railway and the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad routes in Arkansas. Arkansas State Archives Map0097

St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway.

DATE	RECEIVED	BY	AMOUNT	REMARKS
Sept 16	Auto. list forward	Lipana bill	628.84	261.07
1879	Alabama	Little Rock	300	
1879	"	"	12.51	
1879	"	"	290	
1879	"	"	110	
1879	"	"	300	
1879	"	"	5.57	
1879	"	"	2973	
1879	"	"	300	
1879	"	"	1967	
1879	"	"	1674	
1879	"	"	190	
1879	"	"	287	
1879	"	"	1712	
1879	"	"	421	
1879	"	"	300	
1879	"	"	50	
1879	"	"	197	
1879	"	"	571	
1879	"	"	130	
1879	"	"	158	
1879	"	"	138	
1879	"	"	3784	
1879	"	"	22.55	
1879	"	"	153	
1879	"	"	244	
1879	"	"	307	
1879	"	"	12.05	
1879	"	"	1407	
1879	"	"	387	
1879	"	"	479	
1879	"	"	50	
			487.41	
			214.78	
			502.29	
				21.17
				502.29



Left: St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad station ledger for the Texarkana, Arkansas station on September 16, 1880. Jay Gould bought the Iron Mountain Railroad that year from Thomas Allen. The Texarkana station was the last station opened under Allen's ownership. Arkansas State Archives MS.000265, Item 01.

Above: Iron Mountain Railroad Bridge at Little Rock. Courtesy of the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System.

SOME SIGNIFICANT DATES

- 1869 Knights of Labor union organization is founded.
- 1880 Railroads enter their "Golden Age," when trains were the most common transportation method for shipping and passenger travel.
- 1880 Jason "Jay" Gould buys the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway, part of which runs through Arkansas.
- 1881 Gould purchases the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railway, making his railroad company the largest in Arkansas, and giving Gould control of all the railroads to Little Rock.
- 1886 Southwestern railroad strike, backed by the Knights of Labor Union, to protest low wages on Gould's railroad lines. The unsuccessful strike lasted six months and shut down railroads in Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Texas, and Missouri.
- 1892 Jay Gould dies from tuberculosis.
- 1916 Congress enacts the Adamson Act, establishing an 8-hour workday for railroad workers and additional pay for overtime work.
- 1917 The St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway merges into the Missouri Pacific Railroad.
- 1921 Arkansas workers on the Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad line go on strike to protest low wages, gaining national attention.
- 1923 In January, the Harrison railroad riot occurs after strikers burned more M&NA railroad bridges. In December, the Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad workers strike formally ends, becoming one of the longest railroad strikes in U.S. history.
- 1930 End of the Golden Age of trains and railroads, though they remain a significant part of the shipping industry.
- 1938 Congress passes the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), setting the standard work week to 44 hours, with overtime pay past that. It also set regulations for child labor and created a federal minimum wage.
- 1940 Congress amends the FLSA to a 40-hour work week.

SELECT ARTICLES FROM CHRONICLING AMERICA

- "Labor vs. Capital" *The Russellville Democrat*, August 2, 1877, Image 2, Column 2
- "There was a big strike last week..." *The Russellville Democrat*, April 19, 1883, Image 2, Column 2
- "The Big Strike" *Nevada County Picayune*, March 10, 1886, Image 2, Column 1
- "Railroads and the People" *The Russellville Democrat*, April 1, 1886, Image 3, Column 4
- "A Little Mixed" *Nevada County Picayune*, April 7, 1886, Image 2, Column 1
- "Shop Employees May File Protest" *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, January 26, 1913, Image 7, Column 1
- "Big Strike Impends on All Railroads" *The Newark Journal*, August 3, 1916, Image 6, Column 1-2
- "Strike Paralyzes M.&N.A. Railroad" *The Log Cabin Democrat*, February 26, 1921, Image 1, Column 2
- "M.N.&A. Stops Train Service" *The Prescott Daily News*, March 18, 1921, Image 1, Column 4
- "Union Officials Leave Harrison" *Judsonia Weekly Advance*, April 7, 1921, Image 1, Column 4
- "Men to Remain in Joplin" *Daily Picayune*, April 9, 1921, Image 1, Column 5-6
- "Operation of M. & N. A. To Cease" *The Mena Weekly Star*, July 28, 1921, Image 3, Column 1
- "Latest Developments in Railroad Strike Crisis" *The Little River News*, October 22, 1921, Image 1, Column 2
- "Strikers Driven from Harrison; One Lynched" *The Little River News*, January 20, 1923, Image 1, Column 3
- "Railroad Union Men are Driven Out" *The Little River News*, January 20, 1923, Image 2, Column 4
- "North Arkansas Farmers Aroused over Mob Rule." *The Nevada County Picayune*, May 3, 1923, Image 2, Column 1-5

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Further information about this topic can be found in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, courtesy of the Central Arkansas Library System at <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>.

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