

## Teaching American History Project

### Homestead Strike Songs

From Lisa Romasanta

Grade-8

Length of class period-60 minutes

Inquiry- What can contemporary songs of a historical time period (Homestead Strike) teach us about history?

Objectives- Students will learn about different perspectives of individuals during the Homestead Strike through songs.

Materials- Four songs (see attached)

1. Father was killed by the Pinkerton Men
2. The fort that Frick built
3. Song of a Strike
4. The Homestead Strike

Activities:

1. Students have prior knowledge of the Homestead Strike through textbook reading.
2. Students are randomly selected and placed into four corners of the classroom.
3. One song is provided to each corner of the room.
4. Every student has a copy of a song.
5. Teacher Directions:
  - a. Everyone has 15 minutes to accomplish the following:
    - b. Read the song
    - c. Provide as a group a two sentence summary of the assigned song on one piece of paper.
    - d. Prepare to present the song in a creative format (rap, sing, act out, etc.) to the entire class.
6. Once students are ready- (5-10 minutes each group)
  - a. They present the summary of their song
  - b. Present the actual song to the class
7. As a whole class (5-10 minutes), ask students to discuss the differences or similarities of viewpoints among the four songs and interpretations of the Homestead Strike.

Assessment:

This will occur when students provide the summary of the song, so corrections can be provided in response to any misconceptions about their interpretation of the song.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards-

Content Standard 1- Historical Thinking:

- Gather information from multiple sources, including archives or electronic databases, to have experience with historical sources and to appreciate the need for multiple perspectives
- interpret data in historical maps, photographs, art works and other artifacts.

## **“The Homestead Strike”**

Now, boys, we are out on strike, you can help us if you like,

But you need not till I tell you what it's about.

They want to lower our wages, we think it is not right;

So for union's cause I want you all to shout.

We will sing the union's praise while our voices we can raise,

With noble Mr. Garland at our head,

Hugh O'Donnell's good, that's true, we give him all the praise;

We can't go wrong when by such men we're led.

The struggle may be long, there's no one yet can say,

But we'll take it as it comes for a little while;

We will fight both night and day, for we're bound to win the day,

And down this great steel king in grandest style.

Now let us all stand firm and take things very cool,

Then, you bet, we're sure to win this little strike;

But if men don't mind and start and act a fool,

That's sure to cause no end of care and strife.

My advice to you is this, let us work with a cool head,

And try and do the best thing in our power;

We'll have the good will of all, which will bring us back our bread,

And drive the demon Hunger from our door.

Let us unite with heart and hand and spread the news through this broad land,

We'll not give in until the company yield,

And fight with might and main and travel hand in hand

To win this strike or die upon the field.

**“The Fort that Frick Built”**

Twixt Homestead and Munhall

If you’ll believe my word at all

Where once a steel works noisy roar

A thousand blessings did pour

There stands today with great pretense

Enclosed within a white washed fence

A wondrous change of great import

The mills transformed into a fort.

**“Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men”**

'Twas in a Pennsylvania town not very long ago

Men struck against reduction of their pay

Their millionaire employer with philanthropic show

Had closed the works till starved they would obey

They fought for home and right to live where they had toiled so long

But ere the sun had set some were laid low

There're hearts now sadly grieving by that sad and bitter wrong

God help them for it was a cruel blow.

CHORUS:

God help them tonight in their hour of affliction

Praying for him whom they'll ne'er see again

Hear the orphans tell their sad story

“Father was killed by the Pinkerton men.”

Ye prating politicians, who boast protection creed,

Go to Homestead and stop the orphans' cry.

Protection for the rich man ye pander to his greed,

His workmen they are cattle and may die.

The freedom of the city in Scotland far away

'Tis presented to the millionaire suave,

But here in Free America with protection in full sway,

His workmen get the freedom of the grave.

(CHORUS)

## **“Song of a Strike”**

We are asking one another as we pass the time of day,  
Why workingmen resort to arms to get their proper pay.  
And why our labor unions they must not be recognized,  
Whilst the actions of a syndicate must not be criticized.  
Now the troubles down at Homestead were brought about this way,  
When a grasping corporation had the audacity to say:  
"You must all renounce your union and forswear your liberty  
And we will give you a chance to live and die in slavery."  
Now this sturdy band of workingmen started out at the break of day,  
Determination in their faces which plainly meant to say:  
"No one can come and take our homes for which we have toiled so long,  
No one can come and take our places—no, here's where we belong!"  
When a lot of bum detectives come without authority,  
Like thieves at night when decent men were sleeping peacefully—  
Can you wonder why all honest hearts with indignation burn,  
And why the slimy worm that treads the earth when trod upon will turn?  
When they locked out men at Homestead so they were face to face  
With a lot of bum detectives and they knew it was their place  
To protect their homes and families, and this was neatly done,  
And the public will reward them for the victories they won.

Source: "The Homestead Strike": *The Homestead Strike Songster* (New York: n.d.).  
Reprinted in Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana:  
University of Illinois Press, 1975), 243.

“The Fort that Frick Built”: Printed card (1892), AFL Archives, Washington, D.C. Reprinted in Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 243.

“Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men”: Sigmund Spaeth, *Weep Some More, My Lady* (Garden City, N.Y.: 1927), 235–236. Reprinted in Phillip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 244.

“Song of a Strike”: George Swetnam, “Song of a Strike,” (1892). Reprinted in Linda Schneider, “The Citizen Striker: Workers' ideology in the Homestead Strike of 1892,” *Labor History* 23 (Winter 1982): 60.

### **The Musical Saga of Homestead**

Workers sang during strikes not only to state their beliefs and goals, but because singing helped bind workers together. The Homestead strike of 1892 even had its own *Homestead Strike Songster*, and the story of the strike can be traced in the lyrics of the following four songs. “The Homestead Strike” explained that Carnegie’s efforts to “lower our wages” was the basic cause of the strike. “The Fort That Frick Built” described Homestead manager Henry Frick’s transformation of the mill on the eve of the strike into a fortress with barbed-wire fences. The death of nine strikers was chronicled in “Father Was Killed by the Pinkerton Men.” And “Song of a Strike,” written by George Swetnam, retrospectively commemorated the Homestead strikers' courage in defending their homes and their jobs against the overwhelming might of the Carnegie Steel Company and their hired “bum detectives.”