

The Saint Thomas Economy in the 19th Century & the 1892 Coaling Strike

With the advent of steam ships, Saint Thomas became an important bunkering port, which was involved in the manual coaling of ships by mostly women. At that time, the currency used to pay the harbor workers was the Mexican silver peso, which slowly lost its value until 1892 when the coaling workers demanded to be paid in Danish currency; this led to a two-day strike, which was successful. There remains to elucidate who planned, initiated and led the strike through the use police court reports heretofore inaccessible.

The Steam Packet Companies & Bunkering

Saint Thomas was never a significant producer of tropical agricultural products. Instead, in the early 19th century, after the second British occupation (1807-1815), it became the trading center of the Caribbean Basin where tropical products were exchanged for European goods, thereby avoiding export/import taxes. The resulting economic boom slowly reached a plateau around 1850, as European and American ships found it more profitable to trade directly with the sources of tropical products, instead of using Saint Thomas as an intermediary. This situation came about as plantations became larger and concentrated on cultivating a single product. Also, as many Spanish colonies and Haïti gained their independence they were able to lower their onerous export/import taxes. Additionally, Spain followed suit with its remaining colonies of Porto Rico and Cuba.

Fortunately, Saint Thomas was able to adapt to the new business conditions, as steam ships were replacing sailing ships and the British Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC) chose to locate its wharf on Hassel Island and offices at the present Riise Mall in 1839-1843. Packet ships transported both passengers and cargo along interisland and intercontinental routes. They signaled a new economic activity based upon servicing steam ships by providing repair services and supplying coal, water, and food. This new activity was increased when two other packet companies chose to join the RMSPC at Saint Thomas: in 1862, the French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT) with its wharf at Havensight and offices at the present Finance Department building on Main Street; and, in 1874, the Hamburg-American Packet Line Company (HAPAG) with its wharf on Hassel Island and offices at the 75 Corner building, the present V.I. Inspector General building on Main Street. Also, in 1863, two major

maritime lines chose Saint Thomas as their main port-of-call: the North American-Brazil Line and the Liverpool Line. Additionally, in 1885, the Brønsted Coaling Company came into being with its wharf on Hassel Island and offices at the present VI Lottery building on Main Street, across from the Market Square. Marine repair capabilities were enhanced in 1843-1844 by the addition of the Saint Thomas Marine Repairing Slip for smaller ships, up to 100 feet long; and in 1862, a floating dry dock capable of servicing ships up to 300 feet long and weighing 3,000 tons. It was badly damaged by the 1867 hurricane but refloated in 1875 and functioned satisfactorily for about ten years. Finally, around 1870 Alfred T. Wharam established in Krum Bay a marine salvage yard.

After the Emancipation of 1848, the Saint Thomas economy saw a plateau in the 1850s and started to decline in the 1860s, until it saw a brief upturn during the American Civil War, followed, after the catastrophic 1867 hurricane, by a deep downturn, which lasted until World War II. With the economic decline came a reduced sailing frequency, which, in 1885, caused the RMSPC to decide to relocate all its operations at Bridgetown, Barbados, and sell its Hassel Island facilities to the HAPAG. By contrast, the HAPAG was experiencing a spectacular growth all along until 1914, when World War I started. However, this growth was artificial and strictly due to political factors rather than increasing revenues. It has been shown elsewhere that the HAPAG was heavily subsidized by Kaiser Wilhelm II and was nothing other than an appendage to the German navy, which ambited to control and take over Saint Thomas during WWI. In 1887, two years after the RMSPC departure, because of the general decline in economic activity, the CGT moved its headquarters at Fort-de-France, Martinique, but continued to use Saint Thomas as a port-of-call to bunker steam ships.

Saint Thomas was not the only Caribbean harbor able to service steam ships. The main competing harbors were Saint George's in Grenada, Castries in Saint Lucia, and San Juan, Porto Rico. Clearly, this was a very competitive business where Saint Thomas had a slight advantage because of its central location and it was a free port with special tax rebates for steam packet companies. Until the 1910s, loading and unloading coal was done manually exclusively, with the use of straw baskets holding on average 80 pounds of coal. In 1890, it estimated that about 90,000 tons of coal were imported and exported: this required filling 2.25 million coal baskets twice. A typical shipload of 300 tons of coal was delivered with 7,500 baskets of coal by employing 75 women carrying each 100 baskets.

Since the coal was imported from England and America at the prevailing world market price, the coaling companies had no control over

the price of coal. Thus, the only significant way of keeping the price of coaling ships competitive was by keeping the wages of the coal carriers as low as possible. To keep labor costs at a minimum, the coaling companies found it profitable to hire only part time employees for loading and unloading coal, as and when needed, depending upon the arrival time of a ship and its tonnage. In this fashion, the coaling companies avoided paying full-time salaries and fringe benefits, when there was no ship in need of coal. However, this was contingent upon offering a relatively attractive salary and upon having a large pool of underemployed laborers.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the depressed economy caused men to seek employment elsewhere: on ships, in Panama, in America and in the Greater Antilles. On the other hand, employment opportunities abroad for women were far fewer, which left a large pool of unemployed and underemployed women in the Danish West Indies and the British Virgin Islands, available to carry coal on Saint Thomas as and when needed. Thus, an army of women was always available to bunker a ship in record time, day and night, on work days, Sundays and holidays; while only three or four men, the trimmers, per gang of women per ship were needed to fill the baskets and lift them on the women's head. According to the censuses of 1880 and 1900, it is estimated that, in 1890, there were about 120 declared coaling women. To this number should be added at least 50 women listed as laborers. Thus, at any time about 200 coal carrying women were available to be employed as needed.

The Mexican Silver Peso Crisis

It had become a standard practice for the coaling companies to pay the coalers with Mexican silver pesos, or dollars, as it was popularly referred to. Perhaps this practice started in 1858 when General Santa Anna came to settle on Saint Thomas during his third exile with at least 2 million Mexican pesos. Since 1864, the coaling women were paid one centavo or one cent in Mexican silver currency, less one third of a cent for the trimmers, per 80-pound basket of coal. Paying the coalers in Mexican silver currency was advantageous to the coaling companies because the Mexican peso could be purchased at a small discount with gold backed currencies (Danish rigsdollar, American dollar, French franc, etc...). Through its West India & Panama Telegraph Co. Ltd., Saint Thomas was kept informed daily of the value of the Mexican silver peso in New York. Initially, the discount was only one or two cents on the dollar, but as time went on and the world's silver supply kept growing, so did the silver discount. By 1880, one silver peso or dollar was worth only about 90 cents in gold. In February 1887, the Saint Thomas

Savings Bank announced that interest on Mexican peso deposits made after 1st January 1879 would be paid in the same currency. By 1890, the Mexican peso had fallen to 80 cents in gold; by 1891, it was worth about 77 cents; and by August 1892, it reached a low of 65 cents in New York. At that point, the Saint Thomas Savings Bank announced that it would no longer accept deposits in Mexican silver. This continuous fall in the value of the Mexican silver dollar could not be absorbed by the Saint Thomas merchants, who were forced to keep raising the price of their merchandise.

There was another factor aggravating this financial crisis. For change in Mexican currency, only three coins were available: 75, 50 and 25 centavos. For smaller change, the coaling companies issued tally coins worth one cent (really one centavo) stamped with their company name and redeemable only by the company that issued them. The coaling women were paid one tally coin on the spot by the tallyman after emptying each basket. Later, when the coaling process was completed each coaling woman would exchange her tallies less one-third for Mexican silver pesos. In this fashion, through their employees, the coaling companies put so much Mexican silver pesos in circulation on Saint Thomas that it became the main currency and the merchants were forced to accept the Mexican peso. For small change, not wanting to use Danish currency, which would have been a losing proposition, they petitioned the King to be authorized to issue their own coins. Authorization was granted and at least 22 merchants issued their own tokens worth 1, 2, 3, 5 and 10 cents (really centavos) redeemable only at the store where issued. This made it very inconvenient for the bunkering workers. Inevitably, some merchants abused the system by issuing more coins than they were able to redeem, thereby hoping to save their failing business. In particular, at the same time that the value of the Mexican dollar was falling precipitously in 1891, two important stores went into bankruptcy, leaving many customers with unredeemable tokens. Finally, upon many complaints, the government published an order that as of 15 September 1892, merchants would no longer be allowed to issue and use their tokens. The reaction of the merchants was immediate: on 6 September, 22 merchants voted that they would no longer accept Mexican pesos or dollars after 12 September. A few merchants gave notice that, beyond the 12th, they would accept Mexican dollars, but only at their current New York value in gold. This financial crisis was hard on the Saint Thomas merchants but it hit hardest the poor coalers, dock laborers, stevedores and boatmen, since their real income had been eroded slowly over a period of about 30 years until its purchasing power was reduced by more than 40%.

Additionally, they had to carry worthless or soon to be worthless tokens for each store they had been catering.

The Coal Strike

Consequently, it is not surprising that, four days after the notice given by 22 merchants and only two days before the deadline of 12 September, the coalers decided to refuse to work unless paid in full in Danish currency, instead of Mexican silver pesos. According to the Police Court reports, on Saturday morning the 10th of September 1892, two full teams of coalers reported at the CGT Havensight wharf and at the HAPAG Hassel Island wharf, but they refused to work unless paid the same salary in Danish currency, instead of Mexican dollars. The packet companies did not accede to the coalers' demand and so no work was performed.

On Sunday the 11th of September 1892, the strike was suspended: one ship was bunkered at the HAPAG dock. Some coaling women, such as Dorothea Scatliffe, demanded to be paid 40 cents in Danish currency for 60 baskets of coal; but others, such as Mary Andrew, accepted to be paid 25 Mexican centavos plus 15 Danish cents for the same 60 baskets and thereby be cheated of about 10 Danish cents.

On Monday morning, the 12th of September, at the CGT wharf, French Consul and Agent Lucetti offered to pay the strikers 75% in Danish currency and 25% in Mexican currency, which would have cheated the strikers by about 16%. This unsatisfactory offer only angered the strikers all the more and led them to demonstrate in town to attract additional followers and to pressure the Danish administration to intervene in their favor. Meanwhile, at the HAPAG wharf, all the coalers present, without exception, insisted that they would not work unless fully paid in Danish currency. They were angered that, on the previous day, the German company had broken the resolve of some strikers and was able to pay them only partly in Danish currency. Nevertheless, the German company agent, Captain Becher, refused to accede fully to the strikers demand, so they decided to go join the CGT strikers in town and demonstrate.

Thus in town, there were two protesting striker groups; they were kept apart by the police and armed soldiers. One group was confined at the present Roosevelt Park, the other at the Market Square. Both groups became enormous, vociferous and threatening, as many were armed with sticks and stones. However, neither side resorted to violence against persons or property. Still, it was effective since, early that afternoon, Italian Consul and Brønsted Agent Edouardo Moron formed a committee involving himself, the Policemaster and Judge H. M. W. Fisher, CGT Agent and

French Consul Lucetti and a deputation of 6 coalers (3 men and 3 women) to negotiate the strikers' demand away from the crowd in the Brønsted Company offices near the Market Square. Soon E. Moron emerged and announced loudly to the awaiting crowd that the coaling companies agreed to the strikers demand. Upon this good news some coalers went back to work, while others partied until a heavy rain dispersed them. Thus ended the strike and the demonstration.

The Investigation of the Strike

Subsequently, Policemaster and Judge H. M. W. Fisher conducted a thorough investigation to determine who were the leaders of the strike and whether the strike was related in any way to the 1878 'fireburn' on Sainte Croix, which caused great loss of life and property. The investigation lasted 13 days during which 9 coaling demonstrators—4 trimmers and 5 coaling women—were interrogated, some on several days, and stood accused of criminal behavior by 9 police officers. The four trimmers were:

- Alfred Civil who on 14 September testified that all he wanted was to be paid in Danish currency and that he had become irate when the CGT Manager Camps told him that when he got hungry he would come back and accept 75 Danish cents for one Mexican dollar; he was released and was not interrogated further;
- Moritz de Nully who, on 14 September, denied that he ever threatened to commit arson or encouraged others to do so; he was released and not interrogated further;
- James Petersen who, on 14 September, denied that he ever threatened to commit arson or encourage others to do so; on 29 September, coaling woman Clothilde Simonet testified that he had given her the flag she was holding on the 12th; on 1 October, he denied carrying a flag and giving it to Clothilde Simonet; also, he denied threatening coaling women who were willing to accept part of their pay in Mexican currency; he was released and not interrogated further;
- Thomas Philips who, on 14 September, denied threatening the military with a stick and encouraging the striking women to break through a military cordon; that same evening he was arrested and sentenced to 12 days in jail for his defiant attitude and for resisting arrest; on 1 October, he was accused of wearing a headband, as a sign of rebellion, but he answered that it was to keep coal dust out of his hair and eyes; on 4 October, he testified that on the 12th of September he was wearing a hat; he was sent back to jail; on 13 October, he maintained that all he wanted was that his salary be paid entirely in

Danish currency; that same day, he was released after having served a total of 21 days in jail.

The five coaling women were:

- Catherine Benjamin who, on 14 September, emphatically denied to have threatened with arson and to have encouraged others to do so; she was released and not interrogated further;
- Dorothea Scatliffe who, on 14 September, stood accused of being one of the most conspicuously agitated and defiant woman in the mob with a large stone in her hand; the stone was taken out of her hand just as she was about to throw it at the Police; she denied intending to do so and claimed she had taken it from Margaret Andrew to prevent her harming anyone; she was summoned again on 1 October when she was accused of carrying a short thick stick, of having tucked her skirt at her knees and of wearing a head tie in the fashion of a 'fireburn' queen; on 4 October, in court she admitted carrying a thick stick just like many others, but her head tie was not meant to be a sign of rebellion; all she wanted was to be paid in Danish currency; on 13 October back in court she admitted insulting officer Cruise and apologized; she claimed she had no other intention but to get her rightful wages; the same day, she was finally released after having served 12 days in jail;
- Elizabeth Sylvester who on 14 September joined others in emphatically denying to have threatened with arson and to have encouraged others to do so; she only admitted to being in the tumultuous crowd from which it was not easy to get away;
- Clothilde Simonet, 21 years old, born on Saint Thomas, who on 26 September was summoned in court; she had been punished many times in the past for prostitution; on 12 September, she was one of the noisiest in the crowd of strikers by the Park, screaming, shouting and gesticulating; she admitted that she held a flag which was taken from her by the Police, who attempted to arrest her, but she was able to pull away and lose herself in the crowd; on that same day, she was rearrested and jailed; back in court on 29 September, she recounted how the strike started on the French wharf on Monday the 12th when the trimmers refused to work unless paid in full with Danish currency; the flag she held had been given to her by James Petersen; she denied that she or any other striker was intoxicated on that day; at the end of her testimony she was returned to jail; in court again on 4 October she testified that, like the other strikers, all she ever wanted was to get her wages in Danish currency without resorting to violence; she and the

others intended to tell French Agent Luchetti that if he didn't pay them with Danish currency that he could keep the Mexican silver; that same day, she was returned to jail; on 13 October, in court again she said that she regretted having participated in the demonstration, that she was only following the example of the other strikers and did not want them to shame her for not participating; on the same day, she together with Dorothea Scatliffe and Thomas Philips was finally released after having served 17 days in jail.

- Mary Andrew who on 10 October was summoned in court; she testified that she worked at the German wharf on Sunday the 11th of September and was satisfied being paid 25 Mexican cents plus 15 Danish cents for carrying 40 baskets of coal; on Monday morning the 12th, she went back to work at the German wharf and found the trimmers not working and not doing the preparation work before the coaling women could start carrying baskets of coal; a short time later the German Agent Becher came and, without any discussion on the mode of payment, gave notice to the strikers that if they did not intend to work, they would have to leave; they then all went to town and joined the strikers from the French wharf; when she and Dorothea Scatliffe were told by the Police to disperse, they followed the order and went walking up and down town; she admitted that, as she saw strikers around her with sticks or stones in their hand, she too took up a stone, but Merchant Lockhart took it from her; afterwards neither she nor her friend Dorothea Scatliffe carried any weapon; subsequently, she was released and she was not interrogated further.

Additionally, three sympathizers were questioned and jailed for noisy and unruly behavior, as well as carrying a stick; they provided no further information concerning the strike or the strikers:

- Philip Dogharty, 15 or 16 years old was jailed on 17 September and released on 20 September;
- Syranus de Graff, 19 years old was jailed on 17 September and released on 20 September;
- Octavia Hall, 21 years old maid was jailed on 26 September and released on 28 September.

Policemaster and Judge H. M. W. Fischer also deposed eight members of the bourgeoisie (merchants, shopkeepers and professionals), who were not part of the tumultuous mob, hoping that they might have some information concerning the strike and the strikers, which they did not:

- Merchant Levin and Trade Commissioner Titley denied having urged the mob to refuse Mexican silver;
- Sailmaker Albert Baa denied inciting the mob and encouraging the coalers to refuse Mexican silver;
- Edouardo Moron, Italian Consul and Agent for Brønsted & Co., plead not guilty to the charge that he had loudly insulted the strikers thereby agitating them further; he did admit using foul language and was fined for it; when Policemaster and Judge Fischer came on the scene, he changed his attitude toward the strikers and organized negotiations with the coaling companies and the strikers, whose demand was met;
- Sostènes Luchetti, French Consul and Agent for the CGT, was at first opposed to the strikers' demand, but as part of the negotiation team he changed his mind and he acceded to the strikers' demand;
- Rumshop owners Henry Meyer and W. Nesbitt denied having incited the strikers by selling them some rum when forbidden to do so; they did not think that the strikers had a leader;
- Accountant Adolph Sixto denied knowing anything about the flags that he used to advertise a comedy at the Apollo theatre and testified that he was unaware that Clothilde Simonet had used one of the flags;
- Pharmacist Valdemar Riise denied having made efforts to abolish the Mexican currency and to have encouraged the strikers; he did admit to clapping his hands with the strikers after the coaling companies decided to pay the coalers only in Danish currency; he admitted telling Policemaster and Judge Fischer that the main cause of the noisy demonstration was Edouardo Moron loudly insulting the strikers.

Queen Coziah

J. Antonio Jarvis, when writing *Brief History of the Virgin Islands*, did not have access to the court reports of Policemaster and Judge Fischer; all he was able to use was the *Sanct Thomæ Titende* and the lore. When writing about the 1892 coal strike, Jarvis conjured up the stage name 'Queen Coziah' in the following context: "[In the coal strike demonstration,] the men were sullen and dangerous, but they were in the minority and to a large extent followed the leadership of 'Queen Coziah', a bamboula dancer. Since more women than men had always worked at coaling ships, it was natural for a woman to lead a labor riot". This leads to the following comments:

- Jarvis is the first to put in writing the stage name 'Queen Coziah' in his *Brief History* published in 1938. However, he gives no surname,

nor does he give the source and origin of this stage name, which does not appear in the Danish archives, in travel accounts or in histories of Saint Thomas written before 1938. The exotic name Coziah, can only be found in Romania where there are a famous medieval monastery and a national park named Cozia. Was this name chosen because Jarvis meant her to be an allegorical, or typical figure representing more than one coaling woman?

- The coaling women at work were a popular sight and an important tourist attraction, as they chanted in unison while working and, sometimes after work, they would perform the bamboula dance for the cruising passengers for monetary rewards and even for the sailors with whom they entertained friendly relations. Thus, most, if not all, coaling women could dance the bamboula and identifying a coaling woman as a bamboula dancer does not point to a particular coaling woman.

Conclusion

- Although the strike occurred on two days, September 10 and 12, a demonstration in town occurred only on the morning of the 12th of September.
- The strikers' demonstration was tumultuous and therefore not peaceful, but neither did it involve violence with loss of life or property, nor was it connected in any way to the 1878 'fireburn' on Sainte Croix. Thus, it never was a riot, only a loud and threatening protest or demonstration.
- Policemaster and Judge Fischer seemed to believe that there was more than a single strike leader. It is not known who were the six coalers involved in the negotiation, but the fact that six were chosen implies that there was more than one strike leader.
- In the demonstration, the coaling women were generally shrieking and gesticulating boisterously more so than the trimmers, but this does not necessarily mean that the women were the leaders at the exclusion of the men, as the lore would have it.
- The strike was a concerted, but almost spontaneous, action that occurred simultaneously on two separate French and German wharves on two days, the 10th and the 12th of September 1892. Obviously, on both mornings the strikers, or at least the trimmers, met before reporting to work and agreed not to work unless fully paid in Danish

currency. This is surmised by the fact that the Police was informed that James Petersen threatened anyone accepting anything less.

- The coaling men—the trimmers—were the ones who initiated and instigated the strike, since they came to work early, but refused to do the preparation work necessary to enable the coaling women to do their work. There were far fewer trimmers, as they made up only about one tenth of the workforce; thus, it was easier for the men to organize themselves just before the appointed work time. Also, since the men were better paid than the women, they had more at stake in the strike and they would naturally be more determined to have their demand met.
- Beside initiating the strike, the men seemingly instigated and orchestrated the demonstrations, as they appear to be the ones who handed a flag to a coaling woman—Clothilde Simonet, who urged the women to break through the military cordon, who urged the women to threaten with arson, and who threatened those women who might be willing to accept some Mexican silver for a part of their pay. To some extent, the trimmers were hiding their instigating and orchestrating role behind the coaling women, who, they knew, would be treated with greater leniency than the men by Policemaster and Judge Fisher. Thus, the leaders of the strike must have included trimmers, as well as coaling women.
- The coalers' negotiating team involved three men and three women, thereby showing that the men were given a negotiating power equal to that of the women. Significantly, the Policemaster and Judge Fischer deposed four coaling men and five coaling women; of these, Fisher gave the longest jail terms to those he felt were the main leaders of the strike—one man and two women: 21 days to Thomas Philips, 17 days to Clothilde Simonet and 12 days to Dorothea Scatliffe. Two other trimmers—James Petersen and Moritz de Nully— seem to have had a leading role too, but Fischer did not send them to jail because he could not prove to his satisfaction that Petersen had threatened those coalers who might accept some Mexican currency and that de Nully had urged the women to resort to arson. Also, three additional coaling women may have had a leading role in the strike: Catherine Benjamin, Elizabeth Sylvester and Mary Andrew. They were interrogated by Fischer because of their conspicuous and threatening behavior in the demonstration, but they were not jailed.
- The demonstration attracted many sympathizers and three among them were sent to jail for a few days for carrying sticks and being too

boisterous. These depositions clearly show that, except for the three coaling companies, the business community was eager to do away with Mexican currency, and was therefore in sympathy with the strikers, but they did not want Policemaster and Judge Fischer to think that they had encouraged them. Thus, when the coaling companies saw that practically the whole community was in favor of the strikers, they had no alternative but to accede to the strikers' demand.