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# Wesley Everest, IWW Martyr

Tom Copeland



*Wesley Everest, 1890-1919. (Hand-tinted photo, Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries, neg. 5754)*

A logger and union organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Wesley Everest played a small but dramatic role in the history of the Pacific Northwest labor movement in the early part of this century. He died on November 11, 1919, in Centralia, Washington, following a violent confrontation in which Wobblies killed four members of the American Legion. A mob seized Everest in retribution; seven of his comrades were later convicted of the murder of one legionnaire. The Centralia massacre, as this tragedy is known, and its aftermath represent the high-water mark of the suppression of domestic labor radicalism during the World War I era. At least 45 books—novels, plays, and nonfiction—and countless articles, pamphlets, and poems have dealt in some way with Everest's death.<sup>1</sup>

1. Books that mention the lynching of Everest include: Ralph Chaplin, *The Centralia Conspiracy* ([Seattle?], 1920), 63-64; Upton Sinclair, *100%: The Story of a Patriot* (Pasadena, Calif., 1920), 287; Walker C. Smith, *Was It Murder? The Truth about Centralia* (Seattle, 1922), 39-40; William D. Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood* (New York, 1929), 354-56; Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York, 1931), 302; Charlotte Todes, *Labor and Lumber* (New York, 1931), 170; John Dos Passos, *1919* (New York, 1932), 458-60; John S. Gamba, *The Decline of the I.W.W.* (New York, 1932), 31; Arthur Garfield Hays, *Trial by Prejudice* (New York, 1933), 265-66; Stewart H. Holbrook, *Holy Old Mackinaw* (New York, 1938), 216; Eldridge Foster Dowell, *A History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States* (Baltimore, 1939), 43n.76; Vernon H. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* (New York, 1945), 139-40; Nard Jones, *Evergreen Land* (New York, 1947), 158; Richard Lillard, *The Great Forest* (New York, 1947), 298; Oscar Osburn Winther, *The Great Northwest* (New York, 1947), 337-38; Ralph Chaplin, *Wobbly* (Chicago, 1948), 300; Archie Binns, *Sea in the Forest* (New York, 1953), 163; Lowell S. Hawley and Ralph Bushnell Potts, *Counsel for the Damned* (New York, 1953), 278; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *I Speak*

Unfortunately, most of these accounts are inaccurate. In fact, in the seven books published since 1980 that treat the Centralia tragedy and Everest's involvement in it, virtually everything said about Everest is false. This essay attempts to assemble for the first time the best evidence about his life and death and to disprove the misinformation that previous accounts have perpetuated. Everest's story is a case history of how historical myths are created and how they grow over the years.<sup>2</sup>

The Centralia tragedy grew out of a climate of a weakening economy, a rising militancy of loggers and miners over working conditions, a resistance among employers to any changes in the economic order, and a widely held fear that radicalism, foreign and domestic, threatened American values. As members of the IWW attempted to organize workers in Centralia, local businessmen prepared to oppose them. When the American Legion announced an Armistice Day parade that would march past the IWW headquarters, the businessmen planned to attack the hall and drive the Wobblies out of town. Some of the Wobblies decided to defend the place with guns and stationed themselves inside, at a hotel across the street, and on a nearby hill. The stage was set for a tragic showdown.

Historians and popular writers agree on the basic details of Everest's life: he was descended from pioneers who settled the state of Washington. A noted sharpshooter, he won medals for valor while serving in the United States Army in France during World War I. Upon moving to Centralia, he helped defend the IWW hall in 1919 when marchers in an Armistice Day parade attacked it. In resisting capture, he killed a former soldier. That night he was taken from his jail cell by a mob, castrated, and lynched. The mob then fired many bullets into his body, which was later buried in a secret, unmarked grave.

Such is the substance of the historical record about Everest. Little else about him has been published. Sympathetic labor historians have glorified him as an IWW martyr, but the details of his life and death remain heavily shrouded in myth. The only information in the pre-

vious paragraph that is accurate is that Everest participated in the defense of the Wobblies' hall in Centralia, killed a war veteran, and was hanged by a mob.

His great-grandparents settled in Newberg, Oregon (not in Washington), on 640 acres in the Willamette Valley, 40 miles south of Portland. They had emigrated to America from Kent, England, in 1835 and crossed the plains with their nine children in four wagons pulled by ox teams. Wesley Everest's father, Joseph, inherited 40 acres of the family land. He married Dora Westfall, whose ancestors came to America from Germany in the 1700s and fought in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. After their marriage, Joseph left farming and became a schoolteacher and postmaster.<sup>3</sup>

Wesley was born in 1890 on the family farm, the third oldest of the seven children—all boys—who survived infancy. Joseph died in 1903 at the age of 46. In the summer of 1904, Dora, while hitching a horse to a one-seat buggy, was killed when the horse became frightened and threw her to the ground. After the funeral the children were scattered, no two together, among the relatives. Everest stayed on the farm of his grandmother's sister near Portland, where he milked cows and did farm chores. At 17, he grew restless and went off to work in the woods cutting trees. It was 1907. He was 5 feet 7 inches tall, with dark red hair, blue eyes, and a medium build. During subsequent years, he also worked in sawmills and helped build the Northern Pacific Railway between Vancouver and Tacoma.<sup>4</sup>

His many jobs as a laborer put Everest in contact with the Wobblies. Organized in 1905, the IWW was a militant labor union that was just beginning to make its mark in the western lumber industry. Between 1907 and 1912, IWW strikes met with heavy resistance. In almost every confrontation, local authorities used fire hoses, beatings, or mass arrests against the Wobblies. The IWW often suffered the brunt of official violence because of its uncompromising, revolutionary rhetoric and its efforts at organizing the working class to take control of industry, and because of management's determination to concede nothing to the workers. Wobblies came primarily from the ranks

of the have-nots—migrants, loggers, immigrants, miners, women, and blacks.<sup>5</sup>

The record does not tell when Everest joined the IWW, but by May 1913, he was

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*My Own Piece: Autobiography of "The Rebel Girl"* (New York, 1955), rev. ed. *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography* (New York, 1973), 263-64; Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch* (New York, 1955), 242; Murray Morgan, *The Last Wilderness* (New York, 1955), 151; Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare* (Minneapolis, 1955), 183-84; Fred Thompson, comp., *The I.W.W.: Its First Fifty Years* (Chicago, 1955), 132-33; David Lavender, *Land of Giants* (New York, 1958), 422; Joseph G. Rayback, *A History of American Labor* (New York, 1959), 289; Mary W. Avery, *History and Government of the State of Washington* (Seattle, 1961), 219; Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1964), 256; Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle* (New York, 1964), 177-78; Philip Taft, *Organized Labor in American History* (New York, 1964), 336-37; Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (New York, 1967), 210; Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene, Oreg., 1967), 161; Cecil Dryden, *Dryden's History of Washington* (Portland, Oreg., 1968), 264; Joseph Robert Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too* (Westport, Conn., 1969), 78; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York, 1969), 455; Irving Werstein, *Pie in the Sky* (New York, 1969), 111-17; Barry Pritchard, *Centralia, 1919: A Play* ([Seattle?], 1975), rpt. *Minnesota Review*, Vol. 8 (1977), 109; Norman H. Clark, *Washington* (New York, 1976), 125; Len De Caux, *The Living Spirit of the Wobblies* (New York, 1978), 137; Thomas Churchill, *Centralia Dead March* (Willimantic, Conn., 1980); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, 1980), 370; Virginia Gardner, "Friend and Lover": *The Life of Louise Bryant* (New York, 1982), 337-38; Peter Carlson, *Roughneck: The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood* (New York, 1983), 300-301; Jerry Lembcke and William Tattam, *One Union in Wood* (New York, 1984), 15; Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer, *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the IWW* (Chicago, 1985), 14; Chaim Potok, *Davita's Harp* (New York, 1985), 189-90, 199-200.

2. Two of the seven books are novels (Churchill and Potok), but they repeat the myths about Everest as historical facts.

3. Charles S. Everest to Tom Copeland, Sept. 21, 1978. Information about Everest's family and early life comes from a younger brother, Charles, who corresponded with the author in the late 1970s.

4. *Ibid.*; Police report, Nov. 12, 1919, Box 1.2, Luke May Papers, University of Washington Libraries.

5. See Dubofsky and Tyler for IWW history in the Pacific Northwest.

an active organizer for the union. That month, the Forest and Lumber Workers Union in the Coos Bay region of Oregon walked off the job to protest a lockout of Wobblies, who demanded higher wages, shorter hours, and better living conditions in the camps. During the summer the strikers were beaten, arrested, and their meeting halls destroyed. Everest and another organizer were arrested for vagrancy in Marshfield, Oregon. A mob of 600 armed citizens took the men from jail and dragged them through the streets of town, forcing them to kneel and kiss an American flag. When they reached the dock, the vigilantes pushed their victims into a boat, transported them eight miles up the coast, and dumped them with the warning never to return. The strike was eventually crushed.<sup>6</sup>

Everest's experience in Oregon probably strengthened his growing radicalism. Little is known of his activities from 1913 to 1916, although it is likely that he continued to work in the woods. In 1916 he visited an uncle, who recalled that he was "an apt scholar and honest, but that . . . he was so filled up with the I.W.W. teachings that he could talk of little else." Everest carried a Colt 45 revolver at this time, a habit no doubt acquired after his Oregon experiences; he was determined not to be humiliated by a mob again. Later that year he visited a brother in Vader, Washington, where he worked for a week bucking logs for a small sawmill outfit.<sup>7</sup>

In April of 1917 America entered the war against Germany. Although the IWW took no official stand against the war, its publications denounced the capitalist-created struggle and urged members to stay home to fight the "class war" in their own towns. For its antimilitarist stand, the IWW was accused of being anti-American, and the government stepped up its repression of the organization.

Everest was apparently drafted into the army in November 1917. His militant union background made him a highly unlikely volunteer. Because of his work experience, he was stationed at the Vancouver Barracks in Washington, assigned to the Spruce Production Division, which supplied timber for building airplanes, railroad cars, and other vital war-

time equipment. Sending soldiers into the woods to cut timber had become necessary because two years earlier the IWW had called a strike that had shut down a substantial portion of lumber production. The industry had not recovered, so the spruce division would grow to 25,000 men before the end of the war. Everest, however, cut little spruce, for he spent most of his time in the Vancouver stockade for refusing to salute the American flag. According to one who served with him in the division:

*Every morning they'd let Everest out of the stockade just before formation or at reveille. Then we'd fall in and salute the flag as they'd run up the colors. Every morning Everest would refuse to salute and they'd haul him out of formation and throw him back in the stockade. When it rained, they didn't raise the flag, so Everest was out when the weather was bad or when we were out in the woods. When we were out in the woods, or when he wasn't in the "jug," he was constantly trying to organize the soldiers.<sup>8</sup>*

Contrary to virtually all published accounts, Everest never served in France and was never sent overseas. The Spruce Production Division remained in Washington and Oregon throughout the war; its express purpose was harvesting timber and neutralizing labor unrest. Nor did he ever receive medals for being a crack shot. That he was "an overseas veteran" first appeared in print in December 1919 when the IWW leader William Haywood published a fund-raising circular in behalf of the Wobblies jailed for their part in the Centralia tragedy. Ralph Chaplin, a well-known IWW organizer, poet, and songwriter, repeated the story ("returned soldier") in his book *The Centralia Conspiracy*. John Dos Passos embellished the tale in his popular novel 1919, published in 1932: "In the army Everest was a sharpshooter, won a medal for a crack shot." Subsequent accounts of Everest's mythical war record can be traced back to Chaplin or Dos Passos. Unfortunately, Everest's army records were destroyed in a fire in 1973 at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, Everest was not discharged until the following March. He then traveled north to settle in Centralia, Washington, a small but important lumber, mining, and railroad center. He

moved into the Queen apartment house, a hotel frequented by migrant workers, and began to organize for the IWW.<sup>10</sup>

Local lumber owners and town officials were violently hostile toward this militant union. In 1914 and 1915 the police and a group of deputized citizens drove IWW organizers out of town. Wartime fervor increased the antipathy, and the 1917-18 lumber strike had bitterly divided townspeople. As a result, in 1918, a mob raided the IWW hall during a Red Cross parade, destroyed union property, and deported the Wobblies from the county. Tensions were high when Everest arrived on the scene. The Seattle General Strike of early 1919 raised Centralia's fears of an IWW-inspired revolution. In June 1919, a blind news vendor who sold IWW papers was kidnapped and thrown out of the county.<sup>11</sup>

In September, the local IWW secretary, Britt Smith, leased space in the Roderick Hotel on Tower Avenue to open an IWW hall. The union hall was a second home to many migratory loggers and miners. Next to Smith, Everest was the most active IWW organizer in town; he often

6. Portland *Oregonian*, June 26, 1913; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, Vol. 4 (New York, 1965), 225.

7. *Centralia Chronicle*, Dec. 4, 1919 (quotation); Everest to Copeland.

8. Charles Sidney Everest testimony, March 6, 1920, in trial transcript, *State of Washington v. Britt Smith et al*, p. 2964 (microfilm), American Legion Records, University of Washington Libraries; Everest to Copeland; Harold M. Hyman, *Soldiers and Spruce: Origins of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen*, Monographs of the Institute of Industrial Relations, No. 10 (Los Angeles, 1963), 2; quotation from logger interviewed by Don Capron, February 1981.

9. Everest testimony, 2965; Everest to Copeland; William Haywood, "Will You Help Now?" (letter), Dec. 6, 1919, General Defense Committee, I.W.W. Papers, Wayne State University, Detroit; Chaplin, *Centralia Conspiracy*, 32; Dos Passos, 456; U.S. General Services Administration, St. Louis, to Copeland, Dec. 29, 1980.

10. Everest testimony, 2964; Everest to Copeland.

11. *Labor Defender*, Vol. 1 (November 1926), 191; *Centralia Daily Hub*, Feb. 4, 1915; *Chronicle*, April 6, 1918; *Seattle Union Record*, Sept. 23, 1919.

came to the hall to talk about the union. When his brother Charles visited him in Centralia at this time, Everest showed him a set of law books that he said he was reading. Charles was skeptical, since Everest had never attended high school.<sup>12</sup>

As soon as the IWW hall opened, rumors of an attack being planned on it began to circulate. During an October 20 meeting at the Elks Club, town officials talked openly about a raid. Everest may have attended this meeting, his presence probably passing unnoticed because he wore his old army jacket. Worried about the threat, Britt Smith had prepared and, probably assisted by Everest, distributed handbills asking for support from the townspeople in the event of a raid. Nonetheless, the local police refused to offer protection.<sup>13</sup>

When the Wobblies learned that the Armistice Day parade would pass by their headquarters, they determined to defend it against attack. In meetings to discuss their strategy, Everest was an outspoken proponent of armed resistance. He believed that a man's life was worth little if they didn't defend the hall in a raid: "When those fellows come they will come prepared to clean us[,] and this building will be honeycombed with bullets inside of ten minutes." Not all IWW members supported this position. Many were opposed to carrying guns, so the Wobblies could reach no general consensus on how to respond to the anticipated trouble. Everest, with a few others, made plans to arm. Evidently a fearless individual, he was ready to meet violence with violence. As one union man later recalled, Everest "didn't give a God damn for nothing. . . . He was really a desperate character and he didn't give a God-damn what happened to him or what he done."<sup>14</sup>

On November 11, parade marchers in army uniform did attack the IWW hall. Although the exact sequence of events cannot be determined from the record, union men, believing their hall was under siege, opened fire from the building and from two other locations. Three legionnaires were killed and several others wounded in the brief gunfire. Everest and at least two men inside had fired their guns; the other 4 to 15 men within had no firearms. A number of these Wob-

blies escaped in the confusion, but six were captured while hiding in the back of the hall. Everest did not surrender so easily. He ran out the back door and fled down a street. Someone saw him and mistakenly identified him as the IWW secretary, Britt Smith. A group of marchers gave chase. His escape cut off when he was unable to cross the Skookumchuck River, Everest exchanged gunfire with his pursuers and yelled that he would surrender only to the police. As the mob closed in, he fired again, fatally wounding Dale Hubbard, who died later that night.<sup>15</sup>

Everest's captors overpowered him, put a belt around his neck, and dragged him back into town. Along the way, the growing crowd punched and kicked him. His head was "badly beaten," and blood flowed down his mouth and nose, reported a local newspaper. According to eyewitness accounts gathered years later, the mob drove a spike through Everest's cheek, broke his jaw, and knocked out several of his teeth. Behind the town's jail, several men threw a rope over the crossbeam of a telephone pole and attempted to lynch him, but the police intervened and got him inside. "You fellows can't hang me," Everest told the mob, according to the *New York Times*: "I was sent to do my duty and I did it." However, it seems unlikely that Everest was in any condition to speak. He was thrown onto the jail cell floor where he lay in silence. When the county prosecutor attempted to question him, he refused to talk. By nightfall, 22 Wobblies had been arrested by roving bands of former servicemen.<sup>16</sup>

At 7:30 p.m. the lights in Centralia went out for about 15 minutes. A mob entered the jail without resistance from the police and seized Everest, who alone among the Wobblies defending the hall had shot his victim in front of many witnesses. Believing that they had Britt Smith, the men put Everest in an automobile flanked by six other cars and hurried toward the Chehalis River bridge outside town. There, they hauled him out of the car and put a noose around his neck. According to a newspaper reporter at the scene, Everest's last words were, "I got my man and done my duty. String me up now if you want to, damn you!" Yet,

Everest was probably too disabled to speak clearly. The lynchers tied the rope to a crossbeam girder and pushed him over the side. But the fall was too short to snap his neck, so they pulled him back to the bridge deck and substituted a longer rope. The second fall was successful. Headlights from the cars shone on the dangling body, and mob members fired about 30 shots at it.<sup>17</sup>

The next day unknown persons cut down Everest's body and left it on the shallow river bottom. At sunset the sheriff and deputies retrieved it, throwing it in with the Wobbly prisoners. The rope was still around the neck. On November 13 a coroner's jury briefly examined the body, by then identified as that of Everest, at an inquest in the jail. The *New York Times* reported the jury's findings, that the "deceased came to his death by gunshot

12. [Washington] *State v. Smith et al.* (No. 16354), 197 Pacific 770 (1921); Everest to Copeland.

13. Loren Roberts confession, Nov. 17, 1919, p. 349 (suggests that the prosecutor knew of Everest's attendance at the meeting), and Britt Smith testimony, Feb. 26, 1920, p. 1603, in trial transcript; Don Capron, "The Centralia Riot of 1919: A Study of Pre New Deal Labor Relations," M.A. thesis (San Francisco State University, 1981), 136.

14. Smith testimony, 1635; Everest quoted in Loren Roberts supplemental statement, Nov. 24, 1919, p. 358; Roberts confession, 343 (second quotation), all in trial transcript. As a result of the terror he experienced in jail following the November 11 shootings, Roberts was found by the jury to be criminally insane, and he served 11 years in a mental hospital.

15. *State v. Smith et al.*, 773; *Chronicle*, Nov. 12, 1919.

16. Chehalis (Wash.) *Bee-Nugget*, Nov. 14, 1919 (first quotation). In 1936, the defense committee for the last Centralia prisoner, Ray Becker, gathered a series of affidavits in support of his release. Several men who signed affidavits claimed to have witnessed Everest's capture. The passing of the years and the partisan nature of the affidavits dilute the trustworthiness of this evidence. See affidavits of J. M. Eubanks, Nov. 5, 1936, and Glenn LeBoron, n.d., Ray Becker Papers, Oregon Historical Society, Portland; *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1919; *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, Nov. 13, 1919; C. D. Cunningham to Governor Roland H. Hartley, Feb. 18, 1927 (microfilm), American Legion Records; *Centralia Chronicle*, Nov. 12, 1919.

17. *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1919; *Morning Olympian*, Nov. 13, 1919 (quotation); *Oregonian*, Nov. 12, 1919.

wounds and by strangulation caused by persons unknown." Town undertakers refused to bury Everest, so shortly after the inquest, the body was put into a wooden box and loaded onto a moving van owned by James Lynch. On the side of the vehicle was a painted sign reading "Lynch, for quick work call us." Seventeen armed national guardsmen (who had been brought in by the governor to restore order and to end the vigilante activity), four of the Wobbly prisoners, and a handful of newspapermen escorted the van to the paupers' section of a local cemetery, where the union men dug a grave and buried Everest without ceremony.<sup>18</sup>

Outside working-class circles, few mourned Everest's death. "It was rough and ready justice of the old-time Vigilance Committee," said the *Four L Bulletin*, an anti-IWW Portland labor journal. His lynching was "the natural result of a red-handed revolutionist getting his just deserts without loss of time or the painfully slow process of law," wrote the *Centralia Chronicle*. In *Centralia*, Everest's death had become a joke: the coroner reportedly told a meeting at the Elks Club that Everest "had broken out of jail, gone to the Chehalis river bridge and jumped off with a rope around his neck. Finding the rope too short he climbed back and fastened on a longer one; jumped off again, broke his neck and then shot himself full of holes."<sup>19</sup>

In the nation's press, Everest's death was only occasionally mentioned. "Too bad to swing there, Wesley, for being a fool," wrote the *Review*, a weekly journal published in New York. In a short time the incident was largely forgotten. No one was ever charged with his murder. But the IWW and the labor press hailed Everest as a hero, a fallen martyr to the working class. They kept his name alive in numerous pamphlets, articles, and poems that were published as part of a growing campaign to urge the release of Everest's comrades, seven of whom had been sentenced to 25- to 40-year prison terms for the murder of one of the marchers. The IWW often used Everest's lynching as a powerful symbol of the suppression of and injustice to loggers and their imprisoned fellow workers. The campaign to release the prisoners

continued without stop until the last man was set free in 1939.<sup>20</sup>

The picture that we have today of Wesley Everest comes from Ralph Chaplin's book, *The Centralia Conspiracy*. Chaplin covered the trial of the *Centralia Wobblies* for the Federated Press, a labor press service. After the trial had ended, in March 1920, he went to Seattle, where he wrote his pamphlet in a skid-road hotel. Published in May 1920, it was the first and most complete account of the *Centralia* case, and it became the standard IWW interpretation of the raid and shootings. The first edition of 40,000 copies sold out within a month. Three revised reprints closely followed.<sup>21</sup>

How Chaplin portrayed Everest is critical to the growth of the myth. The pamphlet is a colorful polemic, written in a melodramatic good-vs.-evil style. It presents Everest as an "earnest, sincere, quiet" logger who bravely died a hero's death. Chaplin apparently fabricated the story that Everest was from "old Washington pioneer stock." Chaplin also falsely claimed that Everest did most of the shooting in the hall. In fact, the trial transcript reveals that a number of union men fired their guns on the marchers attacking the hall and that it was impossible to say who fired the most. Chaplin reported that many believed Everest had killed not only Dale Hubbard but also Arthur McElfresh, one of the legionnaires who broke into the building. At the trial, however, the bullet that killed McElfresh was not traced to any specific gun.<sup>22</sup>

Chaplin further enhanced Everest's heroic image by putting words in his mouth as he was being dragged from jail to be lynched: "Tell the boys I died for my class." It was Chaplin who said that Everest's body was buried in a desolate spot that had since been obliterated. He wrote, "Rumor has it that the body has since been removed to Camp Lewis. No one seems to know why or when." Yet, *The Centralia Conspiracy* includes a photo showing Everest being buried in the paupers' cemetery. In fact, on Memorial Day in 1921, while a military parade was being held in downtown *Centralia*, IWW members gathered at the site of Everest's grave and planted American flags in his honor. Not until years later was the grave

neglected and then "lost." Chaplin also spread the rumor that another man was lynched the night Everest died. No evidence has ever been uncovered to support this tale.<sup>23</sup>

Chaplin's book, by his own admission in his autobiography, *Wobbly*, was not unbiased. "I tried to be fair in my reporting of the *Centralia* trial," he wrote. "But having been so close to the picture of I.W.W. persecution, I found it almost impossible to be objective." His account is anything but objective and cannot be relied upon as a historical record. After all, Chaplin was using one of the principal weapons the IWW employed in its fight against hostile authorities and the media: propaganda. Although he attended the trial and presumably interviewed some of the defendants and defense witnesses, he clearly called on his imagination in preparing his remarks about Everest.<sup>24</sup>

Among the myths spawned in Chaplin's book, however, the most outrageous was that of Everest's castration: "In the automobile, on the way to the lynching, he was unsexed by a human fiend—a well known *Centralia* business man—

18. Cunningham to Hartley; *New York Times*, Nov. 13 (quotation), 14, 1919; police report; *Oregonian*, Nov. 16, 1919 (Lynch).

19. *Four L Bulletin*, Vol. 1 (December 1919 extra), 2; *Chronicle*, Nov. 12, 1919; Chaplin, *Centralia Conspiracy*, 66 (quotation).

20. "Cutting Down the Corpse," *Review*, Vol. 1 (Nov. 22, 1919), 596; Albert F. Gunns, "Ray Becker, the Last *Centralia* Prisoner," *PNQ*, Vol. 59 (1968), 88-99. The prosecution had charged the defendants with the murder of only one of the four legionnaires, Warren Grimm, for several reasons. Hubbard's slayer, Everest, was dead. Another legionnaire had been killed in close proximity to the hall and thus could not be portrayed as an innocent bystander. Of the two other dead men, Grimm was the better known and more popular. His wounds also indicated that he had been shot by Wobblies firing from either the Avalon Hotel or Seminary Hill, which strengthened the prosecution's case for an IWW conspiracy to fire on the parade.

21. Chaplin, *Wobbly*, 300-301.

22. *Idem*, *Centralia Conspiracy*, 32, 58.

23. *Ibid.*, 60, 65; Dos Passos, 461, repeated the myth that no one knows where Everest was buried; *Union Record*, June 13, 1921.

24. Chaplin, *Wobbly*, 301.

who used a razor on his helpless victim." Over the years, dozens of historical and popular writers have picked up and repeated this assertion. Of 45 books that mention Everest's lynching, 36 also assert that the victim was castrated. Each of those cites Chaplin or some other book that uses Chaplin as the source.<sup>25</sup>

The castration story first reached a broad audience in 1932 with the publication of John Dos Passos's novel *1919*. Closely weaving historical headlines and scenes into his fiction, Dos Passos likened Everest to the mythical Paul Bunyan. He wrote of the castration episode: "As Wesley Everest lay stunned in the bottom of the car a Centralia business man cut his penis and testicles off with a razor." The book was a major influence in shaping the public's belief in the myths about Everest. Half a century later, Chaim Potok quoted extensively from *1919* in his novel *Davita's Harp*, presenting Dos Passos's account as historical fact. The father of Potok's heroine, having witnessed Everest's lynching, becomes a radical for the rest of his life.<sup>26</sup>

Close examination of the historical evidence, however, fails to justify the conclusion that Wesley Everest was castrated. A careful review of the facts strongly suggests that the castration never took place. There was no published account of it at the time of the lynching. Numerous newspaper articles described how Everest was beaten, hanged, and then shot, but none of them—not even in the IWW publications—mentioned castration. The jailed Wobblies who saw the body said nothing about mutilation in interviews with the press at the time. The coroner's jury, which examined the body on November 13 and filed its report, was likewise silent.

Before the trial of the Centralia Wobblies began, the national IWW organization sent out letters and flyers appealing for money and support for the defendants. A circular letter by William Haywood dated December 6, 1919, described Everest being lynched and shot, but nothing more. A pamphlet by Frederick Blossom called *The Truth about Centralia*, published a month later, gives similar information. Yet, the IWW had the most to gain from the story that Everest was castrated. It would have generated sympathy

for the men on trial and helped raise much-needed money for their defense. Their lawyer, George Vanderveer, spoke at length about Everest's death in the courtroom during the course of the three-month trial, which began in January 1920. He had close contact with the prisoners and conducted his own investigation of the case, but he never said anything about castration at a time when it might have done his clients some good. None of the defendants, some of whom saw Everest's dead body in jail, testified that the corpse was castrated.<sup>27</sup>

The first published report of a castration appeared in the *Seattle Union Record* on March 15, 1920, four months after the lynching and on the same day that the verdict was announced. Frank Walklin, the reporter, covered the trial for the pro-labor paper. Hearing the testimony of more than 300 witnesses, he said, gave him "the whole wretched picture" of the night the mob dragged Wesley Everest from the jail: "Then out of this howling, demoniacal [sic] mass of debased intellects there came the idea of the rope and the razor and I saw a mob rush that little jail and take Wesley Everest out and torture him in the most brutal manner known to the civilization of respectable business man." Walklin, a union supporter, was not at the lynching. His story is unbelievable because it implies that Everest was castrated in the streets of Centralia in full view of the crowd that surrounded the jail at the time. No other account of any kind supports this story.

Someone identified only as E. M. wrote the next published versions of the castration story. His article of April 3, 1920, for the *Survey*, a weekly national magazine, and another in the *New Republic* for April 14 say that Everest was "abused" or "cruelly abused" before he was lynched. This could refer to Everest's having been severely beaten before being jailed. If the writer meant that Everest was castrated, his assertion lacks supporting evidence. Although E. M.'s whereabouts during those three days in November 1919 are unknown, he apparently based his writing on the trial (the *Survey* piece is subtitled "A First Hand Report from Montesano"), and it seems unlikely that he ever saw Everest. The next month Chaplin launched the castration story. Perhaps

the newspaper and magazine stories provided his inspiration.<sup>28</sup>

After Chaplin's book appeared, several other accounts of the Everest castration surfaced. An undated pamphlet by Frank Walklin titled *A Fair Trial?* which was advertised along with the second edition of *The Centralia Conspiracy*, probably in June, notes that Everest had been "brutally unsexed." But Walklin was not an eyewitness; by his own admission, he did not arrive on the West Coast until late December 1919. In July 1921, a man signed an affidavit, claiming to have talked to a witness to the lynching who said Everest had been castrated. This secondhand account carries little weight. Obtained as part of a campaign to free the Centralia prisoners, it was signed by the brother of one of the defendants. In 1930 the Council of Churches conducted an extensive investigation of the Centralia case to evaluate whether the defendants received justice. The report is a relatively objective account of the Centralia events. As for the treatment of Everest, it concludes: "The story, widely circulated, that on the way to the bridge where he was hanged Everest was atrociously mutilated, while it had a tremendous emotional effect, has not been clearly established."<sup>29</sup>

In 1936 members of a committee orga-

25. *Idem*, *Centralia Conspiracy*, 32.

26. Dos Passos, 460, 456; Dubofsky and Renshaw have cited Dos Passos as a source on Everest in their historical books; Potok, 189-90.

27. Haywood, "Will You Help Now?"; Frederick Blossom, *The Truth about Centralia* (n.p., January 1920), I.W.W. Papers.

28. E. M., "Centralia before the Court: A First Hand Report from Montesano," *Survey*, Vol. 44 (April 3, 1920), 14; *idem*, "Centralia," *New Republic*, Vol. 22 (April 14, 1920), 218.

29. Frank Walklin, *A Fair Trial?* (n.p., [1920?]), 6 (copy in Box 1.2, May Papers); Harry Smith affidavit, July 16, 1921, Becker Papers; *The Centralia Case, A Joint Report on the Armistice Day Tragedy at Centralia*, Washington, November 11, 1919, Issued by the Department of Research and Education of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the Social Justice Commission of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (New York, 1930), 18.










POLICE DEPARTMENT, TACOMA, WASHINGTON					MALE
NAME <u>Everest ( Man Lynched at Centralia )</u> No. ....				CLASS <u>1 R 00 9</u> <u>1 U 10</u>	
Aliases .....			Ref's .....		
					
					
Date of Arrest .....		Crime .....		Age <u>33</u>	
Ht. <u>about 5-7</u> Wt. <u>abt 150 lbs</u> Comp. ....		Hair <u>Drk Red Hair</u> Eyes <u>Blue</u>		Build <u>Meduim</u>	
Occup. ....		Where Born .....		P. C. No. ....	
Result .....		Sup. C. Disp. ....		Date .....	
Bertillon <u>no scars that could be located on the body outside where rope cut neck with this</u>					
Arresting Officers <u>hole that looked like bullet hole</u>					
Arrested by <u>Majerus</u>		Date <u>11-12-1919</u>		Classified by <u>H.M. Smith</u> Date <u>11-12-1919</u>	
Prev. Records: <u>Prints taken in the Jail at Centralia Wash. room very dark to see any thing</u> <u>on the body in line scars;</u> <u>rope was still around the neck of t he man</u>					
Signature .....					

Figure. Police report, Nov. 12, 1919. The official record notes only a bullet hole and rope marks on the body. (Luke May Papers, UW Libraries)

nized to work for the release of Ray Becker, the last remaining Centralia prisoner, obtained statements from three people who said they had witnessed the lynching. Two of them, Charley Eagles and Bob Burrows, made no mention of castration. The third, Claude Clifford, whose affidavit has recently been used by some writers as proof of the castration story, claimed to have

jumped into the taxi out of curiosity, not knowing that Everest was in it; it was in a line of cars headed for the Chehalis River bridge. Just after the cab crossed the railroad tracks, Everest hollered and screamed, and at the bridge he was taken to the front of the car

where its lights shone upon him, and I was able to get a full view of him. The front of his clothes had been torn off and his privates had been cut off; Dr. David Livingstone [Livingston] had said privates in his hand and laughingly said he would pickle them in a jar. Livingstone's hands were bloody and I saw that he had his doctor's instrument case with him.<sup>30</sup>

Clifford's story, the only firsthand account, has no support. That it was given 17 years after the event, and in response to defense efforts, seriously reduces its credibility. According to Clifford, he was called to testify for the defense during the trial but denied permission to speak about the castration; however, his name does not appear on the list of witnesses.

Everest's death generated other wild stories. According to one, Everest's testicles were put in a jar and displayed in Dr.

Livingston's Centralia office. Another said that Livingstone repeatedly washed his hands in a Macbeth-like effort to rid them of Everest's blood years after the event. None can be taken seriously.<sup>31</sup>

If Everest had been castrated, his mutilation would have been noticed by the dozens of men at the lynching, by the deputies who brought the body back to the jail, by the prisoners in jail, by the jailers, by the coroner's jury, and by those who placed the body in the coffin. Too many

30. Charley Eagles, July 11, 1936, and Claude Clifford, Dec. 30, 1936, affidavits; and Bob Burrows statement (1936; notes taken by Julia Ruuttila), all in Becker Papers.

31. Julia Ruuttila interview with Copeland, Sept. 7, 1972; Edward Coll interview with Copeland, Nov. 6, 1974.



people would have seen evidence of the castration for it to have stayed hidden.

One significant piece of evidence, never before published, appears to disprove the castration story conclusively. It is a police report on Everest, filled out on November 12, after his body was returned to the jail following the lynching (see figure). The unsigned document includes a set of fingerprints and a description of the body. It correctly identifies the dead man as "Everest (Man Lynched at Centralia)." It estimates the height and weight. Then it notes: "No scars that could be located on the body outside where rope cut neck hole that looked like bullet hole Prints taken in the Jail at Centralia Wash. room very dark to see any thing on the body in line [of] scars; rope was still around the neck of the man."

If the police took fingerprints and looked for scars, they could hardly miss evidence of castration. The room was dark, yet the color of Everest's hair and eyes was noticed and is recorded. (Only one bullet hole is mentioned. Many historical accounts report that Everest's body was "riddled" with bullets while it hung below the bridge.) Nor does the police report mention Everest's broken jaw, missing teeth, or a hole in his cheek, thus casting doubt on the statements of those who claimed to have seen these injuries inflicted during Everest's capture.<sup>32</sup>

The only argument that could be made to support the castration theory in light of this police document is that the police deliberately hid the fact. But why would officers cover this up? The police and town leaders hated the IWW, and those who had lynched Everest were being publicly praised. There seems little rea-

son to hide his castration, if it had happened.

Another piece of evidence suggests how the castration story might have begun. In February 1937, the chief prosecuting attorney for the case, Charles D. Cunningham, wrote to Stewart Holbrook to refute parts of the latter's recent article about the Centralia tragedy. In his letter, Cunningham said that a man who worked for the publisher of a Portland magazine, *Pacific Legion*, had been brought into the jail to identify the body. This unnamed man apparently knew Everest. He took a knife and cut away part of Everest's clothing to look for identifying scars. According to Cunningham, he joked with the jail guards about cutting off all the clothing and then castrating Everest. It is a good possibility that this man filled out the police report. Perhaps one of the prisoners, overhearing this man's talk, unwittingly or intentionally planted the seed of the story.<sup>33</sup>

Cunningham claimed to have watched from the sidelines when parade marchers raided the IWW hall and when the mob captured Everest. He had tried to question Everest in jail and was among the spectators who saw the mob abduct Everest that night. Cunningham insisted that no castration took place. The story, he said, was spread for the purpose of exciting sympathy for the imprisoned men. His view is a biased one, of course, in light of his personal involvement, and his letter to Holbrook is suspect because it was written so many years after the event.<sup>34</sup>

This review of the evidence clearly indicates that historians are in error when they continue to assert that Everest was castrated on November 11, 1919. What can accurately be said is that castration

rumors first appeared months after Everest's death but that none of them is supported by enough evidence to be believable.

Laying to rest the myths about his castration and his war record does not change the fact that Everest was a hardworking IWW organizer who was hanged by a mob. Nor does it weaken the view of most historians that the Wobblies suffered a terrible injustice in the aftermath of the Centralia shootings: eight men spent up to 20 years in prison largely because they belonged to a radical labor union that refused to back away from a violent assault upon its headquarters. The truth about the Centralia tragedy need not be embellished to make a point about injustice. Wesley Everest's death need not be sensationalized in order to insure his place in labor movement history. □

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32. For example, see Chaplin, *Centralia Conspiracy*, 64; Zinn, 370; Werstein, 117; Carlson, 301; O'Connor, 178; and Renshaw, 210.

33. Cunningham to Holbrook, Feb. 9, 1937 (microfilm), American Legion Records. Holbrook's article was "The Wobblies," *Oregonian*, Feb. 7, 1937.

34. Cunningham to Hartley, and to Clarence E. Spencer, April 12, 1960 (microfilm), American Legion Records; J. M. Eubanks affidavit, June 10, 1936, Becker Papers.