

Katherine Paterson Speaks at VHS on the Bread and Roses Strike

BY STUART STROTHMAN

According to Katherine Paterson, “Some issues are too difficult to tackle through anything but young adult literature.” On October 20, 2006, Addie Minott, Jen Kramer, and I attended a Community History Partnership conference at the Vermont Historical Society, as part of our two-year project to digitize the entire collection of Guilford Historical Society photos, and attach stories and research to the images. One of our speakers was Katherine Paterson, author of numerous famous works of young adult fiction, winner of the Newbury Medal and more recently, the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. When Katherine moved to Vermont, she left her friends in Virginia behind, her youngest daughter went off to college, and for the first time in many years she was alone with no children and no friends. Her husband was a minister, and it was sometimes hard for people to make friends with the minister’s wife, and it was difficult to meet people in the ordinary way. So, when she saw that a league of Vermont women writers were having a symposium with governor Madeline Kunin speaking, Katherine thought to herself, “that place is going to be full of interesting women.” The discussion was about primary source letters from girls who had gone to work in Lowell factories and left their homes in the countryside. She wondered why no one had written about these things, and the seed of the idea for her recent book, *Bread and Roses, Too*, was [REDACTED]. However, Katherine did not have much background in New England history, and was starting from scratch. She had been advised to “tell what you know,” but unfortunately that wasn’t much! So she began to research, and wrote the book, and has been very pleased with the reception and acclaim it has received.

Her idea developed further after Katherine saw a pamphlet containing a photo of a group of children from her town of Barre, Vermont, who were refugees, of sorts, from the strike. She knew she had to begin with a story of the Bread and Roses strike (one worker allegedly carried a sign saying “We Want Bread and Roses, Too!”)

in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where the largest textile mills in the world were located. The owners knew they could get lots of cheap labor from the poor countries of Europe, and advertised with such things as flyers showing men traveling from the mills with bags of gold to deposit in the bank. The people came from all over, and spoke over 35 different languages. The mill owners figured with this “tower of Babel” situation, that the workers could never organize for a strike. The law had stated that women could not work more than 54 hours a week, and workers were concerned that wages would be cut as well. Fuel and food costs were a major concern, and it was hard to get by. An Italian man named Rocco was smart enough to realize that he needed some labor organizers, and called them in from the IWW. On January 12 the pay was cut, and the mill workers walked out (25 – 28 thousand people). They united, in a wonderful way—the women had been united from sharing of food and childcare, and singing. Their singing terrified the authorities, and as the strike wore on (with its associated starving and freezing) they used a technique that had been used in Europe: they advertised for other people to take in children of the striking workers, and that is how the group of children arrived in Barre, Vermont, for five weeks. By this time the national newspapers had been covering this, and the city had a “terrible black eye” for not taking care of their children. A group of people were sent to stop the exodus, and women were allegedly beaten, and were thrown in paddywagons along with children. This made the town reputation considerably worse, and a trial began. President Taft came to meet the children, as did his wife, and she attended some of the Congressional hearings. One girl, named Camilla, had received false working papers, and just before the last day of work, she had taken down her hair, and it was caught in the machine and she was scalped. Katherine tells her story because for many years, the people of Lawrence spoke of this extremely successful strike, in which the workers received everything

they asked for, in a shamed and reserved manner. One gentleman went down and interviewed Camilla’s daughter, who did not even know her mother’s own story. The daughter heard the story, and said “you have given me back my heritage.” Most of the workers, however, remain nameless, and it is sad to Katherine that the event was almost lost in American history.

Why wouldn’t the daughter know this story? Why wouldn’t her mother brag of this huge victory, and the fame of testifying before Congress? Was it the pain of the experience? In any case, it was sad to Katherine that her story was nearly lost. Apparently, the people of Lawrence had made an effort to shame the strikers, saying they were godless, anti-American, anti-Christian, and thereafter there was very little pride in this strike. The workers, subsequently, did not tell their stories. Last year, finally, the first full length fiction book came out about it, by Bruce Watson, called *Bread and Roses*. And the most wonderful thing for Katherine, since writing, has been the letters that came to her from people whose family stories were part of the larger story of the strike.

Katherine proceeded with a reading from the book, describing a daughter named Rosa who was smothered with affection by her mother and another worker. The blank pasteboard was there in front of her, for making a sign for the striking workers. Rosa was reluctant, but she asked “what do you want the sign to say?” They all agreed it should be the best sign in the parade, so Bill Hayward (the boss) and all the reporters could see it well. They discussed their need for bread, and her mother played with a curl of Rosa’s hair. She said “I think we want more than bread for our bellies...we want food for our hearts, and souls...we want for our beautiful children, some beauty. We want roses...Rosa picked up the brush, and reached toward the inkpot.” She began to make the letters, and included a perfectly made comma between “Roses” and “Too,” in case her teacher saw the sign. This sign became the symbol for the rights of these mill workers, and now, for their decades of struggle for the dignity they richly deserve.