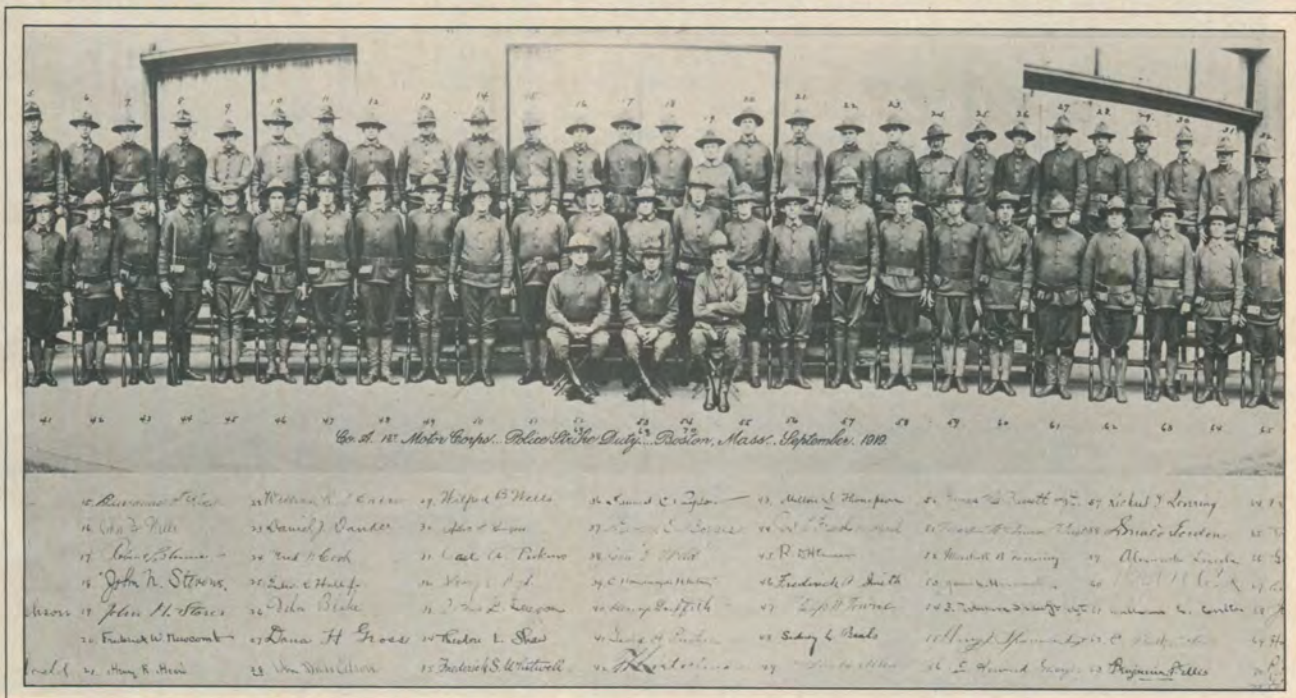


THE WAY WE WERE

By John Sedgwick

Boston 1919: Wild in the Streets



On a drizzly Tuesday evening in September, 1919, nearly the entire Boston police force walked out on strike. They'd had enough.

Crowds milling around the station-houses jeered the men as they left in civilian clothes. Several thugs tried to settle old scores by beating up some of the cops as they made their way home. Other toughs just wandered about the city smashing pedestrians' hats down over their eyes.

Before long, even normally law-abiding citizens got into the act. Motorists ignored traffic signals. Penny-ante gamblers started up sidewalk crap games. Children snatched spare tires off parked cars to use as hoops, and rolled them down the sidewalks.

Nothing serious, though. Justice was on holiday, and the city was celebrating. Governor Calvin Coolidge went to bed at his usual hour of ten o'clock, confident that the night would pass quietly.

It didn't.

The small force of volunteer policemen that had been rallied for the occasion proved no match for the rampaging civilians who were beginning to hit the streets

John Sedgwick is a regular contributor to Boston.

in legions. Charles Coolidge, no relation to the governor, was one of the volunteers on duty that night. Now an eighty-three-year-old lawyer with the firm of Ropes & Gray, Coolidge was then a twenty-four-year-old who upon returning from the war had enrolled in Harvard Law School and taken an apartment in the Back Bay. He reported to Station 4, in back of the old Touraine Hotel. A friend of his went with him. They, along with twenty or thirty other volunteers, were assigned to Park Square. A sergeant gave them a little lecture before they went out: He told them to stick together, stay in a corner so no one could get behind them. He said that if a mob crowded around the volunteers, the fellows in the front wouldn't do anything, but the fellows behind them would push. So the volunteers were supposed to pick the smallest man and go after him. That would break them.

"They wanted me to dress in a uniform," Coolidge recalls, "but I just put a pistol in my pocket and went out. I had a billy club, too. And I guess I wore some kind of badge. I didn't feel too happy about the whole thing. We were all pretty scared." So young Coolidge took up his position in Park Square.

A little before midnight, things turned

ugly. Small gangs that had been roving around the city converged in Scollay Square, forming a boisterous mob. Shouting and firing pistols into the air, the crowd surged up Washington Street several thousand strong. The few policemen who hadn't walked off the job were powerless to stop it. When someone threw a rock through a cigar-store window, the night of violence began.

The crowd was held back at first, almost transfixed by the spray of glass. Then everyone made a vicious scramble for cigars. A man screamed—he'd sliced open his arm on a jagged piece of glass. The door was quickly battered down, and in minutes the store was stripped clean.

More rocks flew, smashing into liquor stores, grocery stores, clothing stores, gun shops, art galleries, even burlesque shows. An hour later, there was hardly a whole window left the length of Washington Street. Men sat on the glass-strewn sidewalks trying on shoes. Others prowled about looking for winter hats in their size. The more methodical thieves hired taxis to drive about the city collecting loot.

The violence spread. In South Boston, Roxbury, and the North and South Ends crowds of men roamed the streets. Women were assaulted, some gang-raped

THE WAY WE WERE

on street corners and in doorways. Automobiles and trolley cars were overturned and set on fire. Fire alarms were sounded, and when the firemen responded to the call, they were pelted with rocks.

In Park Square, Charles Coolidge soon found himself in the thick of it. "The mob was mostly in Scollay Square," he remembers. "There was a big do there. But they straggled back to Park Square in pieces. I guess they were on their way home. We volunteers stayed in a corner, like the sergeant said. Men jeered at us, but we held our ground. We waited until they started to press in on us, which they did a few times, then someone would yell 'Now!' and we'd run hell at 'em."

After they'd cleared off Park Square, Coolidge and his friend saw some gangs breaking into cars to steal their spare tires. They pursued them. Coolidge was faster than his cohort, and he caught up with one of the thieves. "I meant to hit him on the shoulder with my club," says Coolidge, "but I missed and hit him on the head. He went down like a shot. Blood was pouring out of his eyes. I'd seen quite a few men bleeding from their eyes during the war, and I knew they were done for." Coolidge set him up against a post. His face was all bloody. "I figured we'd use him as exhibit number one in case people started crowding around," Coolidge recalls. He and his friend stood by with billy clubs in hand. Finally, about three-quarters of an hour later, a wagon came by to pick the wounded man up. Coolidge said to the sergeant, "I'm pretty sure I've killed a fellow." He replied, "Good for you!"

By three o'clock in the morning, the ruckus had started to subside. Coolidge went off duty and returned to his house at 82 Marlborough Street. The place had been broken into. Coolidge's Colt forty-five automatic had been stolen, along with some jewelry. A few hours after he went to bed, he was awakened by the sound of glass breaking across the street. Coolidge leapt out of bed, grabbed a hunting rifle, and aimed it out the window. "I could just see them," he recalls. "They were on the roof across the way. I aimed just below them and fired. The shot made a helluva noise. The men took off so fast I didn't have time to get another shot at them." Coolidge went back to bed.

"Next morning," he says, "I went down to see my corpse. The fellow was up and around. All he had was a headache."

The city, however, was a shambles.

The same conditions that provoked the riots had also provoked the police strike. (The best treatment of these and of the strike itself is in Francis Russell's *A City in Terror*, published in paperback by Pen-

guin.) Economically, 1919 was a miserable year for everyone. Industrial production lagged after the war, and the work force was swollen with returning servicemen. The result: rising unemployment and runaway inflation. The 1914 dollar was worth only forty-five cents in 1919.

Union organizers had taken advantage of management complacency during the wartime prosperity to expand union rolls by 60 percent. More than four million workers, a tenth of the labor force, were now union men. Consequently, when the war boom turned bust, the union-run industries were in a position to do something about it. The New Jersey railroads

The Boston police were worse off than most wage-earners. For them, wage hikes came slowly, if at all.

struck, the Ladies Garment Workers struck, the coal industry struck, the whole city of Seattle struck. Altogether there were no fewer than 3,600 strikes involving four million workers in the U.S. that year.

Boston was not immune. Local munitions factories and shipyards had attracted great numbers of unskilled workers during the war, paying them handsomely—and driving up local prices. In 1919 other Boston industries struck to keep up: the Elevated Railway, the fishermen, the New England Telephone Company, the textile mills. When these workers walked off the job, there was massive disruption in the city. To many it seemed like anarchy.

The Boston police were worse off than most wage-earners. Since their salaries had to be approved by the mayor—and thus squeezed out of a tight municipal budget—wage hikes came slowly if at all. In January, 1919, although prices had risen 87 percent since 1914, policemen were still being paid their 1914 wages. A rookie policeman worked an astonishing eighty-seven hours a week for an annual salary of \$730, or sixteen cents an hour, out of which he was expected to pay \$200 for his uniform and equipment. After a year, he would get a raise to \$900, or nearly twenty cents an hour, which was still less than a third of the salaries of the unskilled factory workers he was arresting after their Saturday night sprees.

As if this weren't bad enough, the policemen's working conditions were appalling. Stationhouses were cramped and vermin-infested. One had only four toilets and a single bathtub for 135 men. Officers staying over for night duty had to sleep two to a bed. Oftentimes when they woke up the next morning, there were cockroaches nesting in their clothes. Some found that bugs had eaten all the leather off their helmets.

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something like a union, called the Boston Social Club, but it was ineffective. Only after a long struggle did it secure an across-the-board \$200 raise in May, 1919. By that time, most officers felt \$200 was too little, too late. When the American Federation of Labor (AFL) voted the following month to admit municipal police departments, the Boston police paid attention. Joining the AFL was a very tempting proposition.

Boston police commissioner Edwin Curtis denounced the AFL idea as soon as he heard of it. He'd be damned if his police were going to be subject to outside influence: their loyalty was to the department and to the citizens of Boston. "I disapprove of the movement on foot," he declared. "It is not for the best interests of the men themselves and . . . it is not for the best interests of the general public, which this department is required to serve."

Curtis had hoped that his firmness would persuade the police to back off. In fact, it made them more determined than ever. Encouraged by news of police strikes in Liverpool and London, the Boston police defied Curtis by formally requesting an AFL charter on August 10.

Curtis didn't give an inch. As was his prerogative as commissioner, he quickly wrote another rule into the department rulebook, Rule 35, Section 19: "No member of the force shall belong to any organization . . . which is affiliated with . . . any organization . . . outside of the department." In other words, no Boston policeman could join the AFL. Then, to make himself perfectly clear, Curtis announced he had printed up two thousand suspension and discharge forms. The commissioner needed only fill in the offending officer's name at the top, sign at the bottom, and the man was out.

The police didn't scare. Supported by the Boston Central Labor Union, they voted unanimously on August 15 to form Boston Police Union, Number 16,807 of the American Federation of Labor. And they elected eight officers.

Curtis was furious. He notified the eight that they were to be tried for violating Rule 35, then threw in eleven other unionizers for good measure. The police threatened to strike if the nineteen were penalized. Curtis quickly announced plans to round up a volunteer police force to replace them. The Boston Central Labor Union promised a citywide sympathy strike if Curtis took any action against the police union. Clearly, things had gotten out of hand.

What had gone wrong? For one thing, Curtis didn't understand the police and the police didn't understand him. Curtis's predecessor, an Irish Catholic from Charlestown named Stephen O'Meara, was regarded by the men as one of their own. Curtis was an English Protestant from upper-class Roxbury. Most of the men were immigrants; Curtis's family

had been here since 1632. The police were all Democrats; Curtis was a staunch Republican, and a career politician to boot.

That Curtis could be so detached from the department he served owed something to city politics. Until 1885 the police commissioner had always been appointed by the mayor. Then the city elected an Irish mayor, and the state legislature decided that it might be "safer" if the responsibility for appointing the police commissioner was transferred to the governor. Although the mayor retained control of the police budget, this move had the effect of making the police commissioner virtually independent of higher authority: what the commissioner said, went. Governors were always reluctant to mess with city politics.

Calvin Coolidge, the governor in 1919, was reluctant to mess with anything. A canny politician, the Vermont-born Coolidge was a master of watchful waiting. His reputation for taciturnity is still unrivaled. (It is said that after he proposed to his wife on an afternoon stroll and she accepted, he didn't say another word for fifteen minutes. When she asked him why he was so silent, he replied that he thought he'd said too much already.) Right up to the day of the strike, Coolidge would say nothing that would compromise his commissioner's position. In fact, he would say very little at all.

Mayor Andrew Peters could have exerted his influence to head off the impending police crisis, but for most of August he was off sailing in Maine. Peters was known for being weak-kneed. Politically an anomaly as an aristocratic Democrat, Peters was personally rather peculiar as well. It was discovered many years afterward that, two years before the police strike, he had seduced a distant relative, an eleven-year-old girl with the enchanting name of Starr Faithfull, by giving her ether. The relationship continued off and on for fourteen years, until the girl drowned off of Long Island, an apparent suicide.

Mayor Peters returned from his vacation cruise on August 27 to find the police threatening to strike and the police commissioner threatening to fire them all. He appointed a committee headed by James J. Storrow, a wealthy investment banker with a reputation for fair-mindedness, to work out a compromise. Then Peters returned to Maine, much pleased with himself.

Storrow managed to get Curtis to defer his decision on the nineteen unionizers until his committee had looked into the matter. Two weeks later, on September 6, the committee announced its conclusions: the police should give up their AFL affiliation, but they should be allowed to form a union of their own, and the case against the union officers should be dropped.

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upper-crust *Evening Transcript* supported the plan. Governor Coolidge was out of town for the weekend and couldn't be reached for comment, but Mayor Peters, who was back in the city, endorsed it heartily.

Curtis rejected it out of hand. In his view, the unionizers were committing treason against the department and ought to be punished. On Monday, September 8, he suspended the nineteen indefinitely.

They hadn't been fired, to be sure, but even the slightest reprimand would have outraged the now militant Boston police. They assembled their fledgling union that night for a strike vote. By midnight the decision was clear. The final tally had it 1134 to 2: strike.

Curtis never expected so many policemen to walk off the job on Tuesday. Of the 1,500-man force, barely 400 stayed on. The Metropolitan Park Police, which Curtis had counted on, refused to get involved.

Given the police force's determination and the commissioner's intransigence, the result was inevitable. Still, Curtis never expected so many policemen to walk off the job Tuesday evening. Of the 1,500-man force, barely 400 stayed on duty. And the Metropolitan Park Police, which Curtis had counted on to take up any slack, refused to get involved. The volunteers weren't due until Wednesday morning. The cautious Governor Coolidge didn't dare call out the state guard for fear he would antagonize the labor vote. Curtis had assured him it wouldn't be necessary. Mayor Peters, who was more worried about the strike, was unaware that he retained the power to call out the Boston portion of the state guard. In his frustration over the whole situation, Peters rushed up to Coolidge during a drill at the Commonwealth Armory and slugged him, giving the governor a shiner he would wear the whole week. When the police walked off their jobs that evening, the city was left defenseless.

Public opinion, which had favored the policemen during the period of negotiations, turned against the men when they struck. Hence the jeering (and even mud-throwing) the night the policemen left. As the facts of the night's rioting emerged, the anti-police sentiment hardened. The Boston Central Labor Union began to have second thoughts about a sympathy strike. No longer were the policemen's wages and working conditions the issue, nor was their AFL affiliation. Now the walkout was the issue, and everyone was against it. The striking policemen were deserters; it was as simple as that. To

many people. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge among them, the strike was a step toward communism in America. (As it turns out, the Soviet government had channeled \$85,000 into the strikers' relief fund.)

After the first night of violence, Bostonians responded by the hundred to the call for volunteers to defend the city. In the vanguard was the Old Guard—middle-aged blue bloods, Somerset Clubmen, and the like. They wanted to make up for missing the Great War. No less a local personage than Godfrey Lowell Cabot appeared, wearing a naval cape, a brace of six-guns strapped around his waist. After thirty years of Irish domination, the WASPs were in charge again. Huzzah!

Responding to a personal appeal from President Lowell, a regiment of Harvard students just back from vacation signed up. Harvard football coach Bob Fisher told his team: "To hell with football, if men are needed to protect Boston." Each volunteer was issued a night stick, a revolver, a badge, and a white armband.

Stores and offices opened for business as usual on Wednesday while the volunteers and the state guard, which Coolidge had called out that morning, took up their positions around the city. There were a few nasty incidents during the day. Irritated by the volunteers flaunting their badges, a gang of Scollay Square toughs beat up some Harvard undergraduates. But the students escaped serious harm when the First Troop of Cavalry came to the rescue. State troopers cordoned off downtown Boston into manageable sections later that evening, and for the most part, the rest of the night passed quietly. Charles Coolidge was on duty again that night. With the state militia out in force, he saw much less action than he had the night before. But he did see the commander of one unit of the state guard ("a pretty sloppy-looking outfit," says Coolidge) shoot and kill a man who was causing some trouble over a crap game near the Park Street subway station.

In South Boston, however, crowds of ordinary citizens, encouraged by some hoodlums, were sweeping down West Broadway, smashing windows and looting stores just as they had the night before. This time, however, Company G of the state guard's Tenth Regiment was ready for them. Captain Hadley had his men fix their bayonets and spread out across the street. Then he commanded the crowd to turn back, but it paid no attention. Someone threw a brick, hitting Hadley in the forehead. He was stunned for a moment. "Make ready!" he yelled to his men. "Aim!" They leveled their guns at the crowd. Then, before Hadley gave any signal, several shots rang out. Women screamed. Bodies slumped to the ground. The mob broke and ran off in terror. Behind them, three young men,

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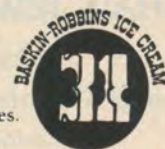
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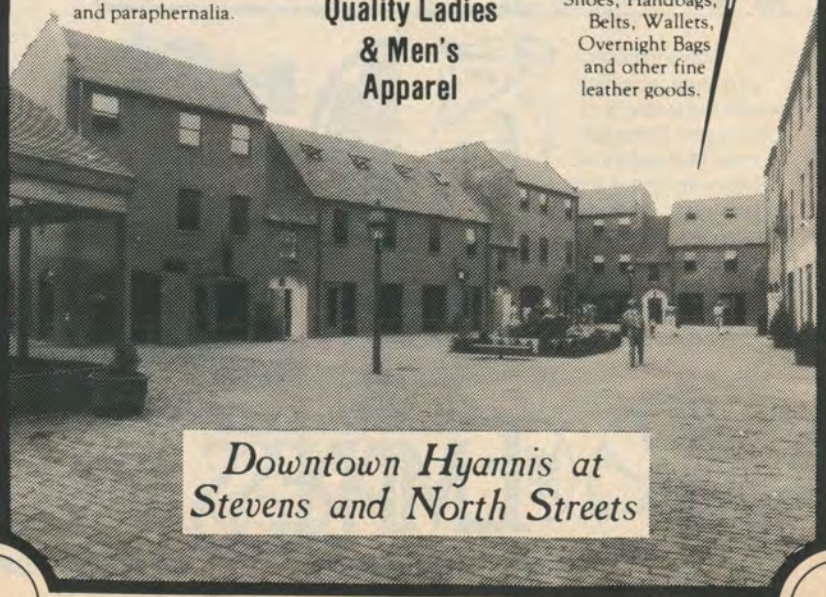
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one only sixteen, lay dead. There was no more violence in South Boston.

Elsewhere in the city, a striking policeman was shot and killed as he ran off after beating up a Harvard volunteer, and a sergeant was accidentally shot in the thigh by a young guardsman during presentation of arms.

On Thursday, seven thousand guardsmen patrolled the streets, turning Boston into an armed camp. They didn't leave for three months. In the two nights of rioting that prompted the police state, eight people had been killed, seventy-one had been injured, and a third of a million dollars' worth of merchandise had been stolen.

Boston was finally secure, but the national newspapers were just catching on to the excitement: "Terror Reigns in City," "Troops Turn Machine Guns on Boston Mob." The press blamed the striking policemen for the rampage of lawlessness. President Wilson called the strike "a crime against civilization." Citizens everywhere echoed these sentiments. AFL president Samuel Gompers, who happened to be in Boston for his father's funeral, telegraphed Coolidge to say the striking police should be reinstated because they were only exercising their rights as free Americans. In the clipped and snappy prose that was his trademark, Coolidge put Gompers in his place. "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time." Here was an attitude people could latch on to. And they did. After all Coolidge's wary inactivity during the crisis, this one bold declaration made him a hero. It propelled him to a landslide victory in his gubernatorial re-election bid two months later. And it thrust him into the Vice-Presidency the following year. Three years later, Warren Harding died, and Calvin Coolidge became President.

As for the striking police, they were fired, every last one of them. The Boston police never again tried to affiliate with an outside labor organization. It wasn't until 1965 that they formed a union at all. Called the Boston Police Patrolmen's Association, it is considered a militant union, but it is prohibited by state law from striking.

Today, the city still feels aftershocks of the police strike. To replace the strikers, the city had to hire 1,100 new policemen. Eleven hundred good men are hard to find—particularly all at once. Many of the new men had to be fired; there were borderline recruits that probably should have been dismissed but weren't. Since all of them were required by statute to be between twenty-five and thirty years old when hired, all of them retired together some thirty years later, whereupon the city again hired a new batch of a thousand or so policemen. Now, as we near the sixtieth anniversary of the Boston Police Strike, the city is hiring again. Anyone want to join up? □