

# “Queen City of the Hudson”

## *Yonkers in the Early Twentieth Century*

### Theodore Roosevelt and the Visiting Firemen

Shortly before the dawn of the twentieth century, the City of Yonkers rolled out the red carpet for a very distinguished visitor: Governor Theodore Roosevelt. The occasion was the twenty-seventh annual convention of the New York State Firemen’s Association. The selection of Yonkers to host this important gathering marked the coming of age of a municipality long overshadowed by its gigantic neighbor to the south. Perhaps no one was more keenly aware of this than Mayor Leslie Sutherland who declared that the firemen’s convention signaled the start of a new era for the “Queen City of the Hudson.”

In preparation for the arrival of more than three hundred convention delegates the city went all out. Flags were everywhere, and not just American flags. Flying side by side with the Stars and Stripes were the flags of Ireland, Great Britain, Germany, and France. Colorful bunting adorned shops and private homes. Huge pieces of canvas bearing paintings of uniformed firefighters hung from the facades of buildings. Although the quality of these brightly colored artworks varied, the messages they bore were consistently positive. “Welcome to the Gallant Firemen,” “The Town is Yours,” and “Honor the Brave” were some of the memorable sayings that enlivened the banners.<sup>1</sup> As if this weren’t enough to convince the visitors that Yonkers welcomed them with open arms, the city erected what *The New York Times* dubbed “Yonkers’s crowning glory, the pride of Yonkers’s heart.”<sup>2</sup> What the *Times* described so effusively was actually a triumphal arch in Getty Square. A sizable structure fashioned from plaster and wood, the arch was flanked by four Ionic columns, each of which

was topped by a white sphere. With flags of many nations adorning the arch and tricolor bunting wrapped around the columns, this must have been a sight to behold. "In the opinion of Yonkers," declared *The New York Times*, "this arch is a marvel of art, a thing of surpassing beauty, and there is general regret that it will not remain . . . a joy forever."<sup>3</sup>

The views of local residents notwithstanding, the delegates who gathered at the Music Hall at 10 a.m. on the morning of August 15, 1899, were less concerned with the city's festive new look than with matters directly pertaining to the state's firefighters. Following the invocation by the Reverend Dr. Charles E. Allison of the Dayspring Presbyterian Church, a rousing rendition of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" by sixty children accompanied by Murray's Military Band, and a welcoming address by Mayor Sutherland, the delegates got down to business. The first item on the agenda was the association's annual report, which painted a rosy picture of the organization's finances. Less positive was the information about the State Firemen's Home upriver in Hudson. There had been allegations about abuses at this facility and a committee of the State Firemen's Association had been appointed to investigate the charges. Its report stating that there was insufficient evidence for the allegations was presented to the assembled delegates by a trustee of the home but, then as now, suspicion of elder abuse was a serious and troubling matter.

That some of the delegates continued to mull this over even as the convention moved ahead with its agenda would not have been surprising, but the minute Governor Roosevelt arrived attention was diverted elsewhere. Accompanied by his wife, the governor had journeyed from his home in Oyster Bay, Long Island, where he had spent part of the summer, to Manhattan for luncheon, with a clergyman, at the Union League Club. At precisely 2:55 in the afternoon he boarded a train for Yonkers. At 3:31 p.m. he stepped off the train and was greeted by a welcoming committee consisting of Company A, First Regiment of the National Guard, and various dignitaries. Seated beside Mayor Sutherland, in a horse-drawn carriage, the governor proceeded to the triumphal arch and from there to the Soldier's Monument in Manor Hall Park. Standing on a specially constructed platform, Roosevelt spoke briefly to the assembled populace. From here it was on to the Music Hall, where his remarks were more substantive but not terribly lengthy. "Yours is a noble service. . . . It is not only that you save property and at times life, in the saving of property, but every man of you holds up to every one in so doing a high type of citizenship by rendering disinterested service to the public," Roosevelt told the appreciative delegates.<sup>4</sup>

Praise them though he did, the governor, whose visit was characterized by *The Yonkers Statesman* as “a great treat for the delegates and people generally,” did not stay around to mingle with the firefighters.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after 4 p.m. he was aboard a train heading for New York City. An hour later the delegates were at the Getty House hotel for a hook and ladder demonstration by the Yonkers Fire Department’s Life Saving Corps. Later that evening convention goers were treated to a vaudeville performance back at the Music Hall. The convention lasted another two days, ending with a parade of one hundred fire companies from all over the state. Prizes, donated by Yonkers businesses, were awarded to the oldest and youngest participants, as well as the tallest, shortest, fattest, and thinnest. The fireman with the biggest family was given a barrel of flour, while the one with the youngest wife received a box of perfume for his lady. For the grand finale, the “Queen City of the Hudson” treated the firemen to a spectacular fireworks display over the Hudson River.

### A City on the Move

With a population of 47,931, which was roughly double what it had been a decade earlier, a treasury surplus, a recent reduction of its bonded indebtedness to \$100,000, and not one but two cuts in the tax rate in recent years, the city could well afford to put on a good show for the visiting firemen. The financial picture was rosy, as evidenced by an array of public improvements, including new roads, an expanded sewer system, state-of-the-art garbage disposal consisting of an incinerator, new school buildings, and the erection of the second public bathhouse to serve the city’s growing immigrant population. By 1910 there would be a third bathhouse, this one an imposing Spanish Renaissance building on Yonkers Avenue at Oak Street. This structure, which featured a swimming pool, reflected the evolution in public thinking about such facilities. “Initially, the bath house advocates opposed public pools as they felt that they were wasteful of space, which could be better used for showers,” but by the early 1900s, the “conviction that organized public recreation not only strengthened bodies,” but “also molded good citizens,” led to the inclusion of pools.<sup>6</sup> With its tapestry brick façade and terra cotta trim, the Spanish Renaissance building had an eye-catching exterior, but the interior was equally impressive. The men’s side of the bathhouse had forty-three showers and the women’s twenty. There were also a half-dozen tubs set aside for senior citizens. Of these, four were for men and two for women. In

addition to the bathing facilities, the building had a heated, sixty thousand gallon swimming pool, whose depth ranged from a little over four feet to seven feet. Lined in tile, the pool was surrounded by marble and Terrazza. The total cost of erecting this modern marvel was \$40,884. In the opinion of many residents, and not just those who frequented the bathhouse, this was money well spent. Yonkers was, after all, a prosperous up and coming municipality, something the city's four newspapers of the early twentieth century frequently noted.

That *The Yonkers Herald*, *The Yonkers Gazette*, *The Westchester Observer*, and *The Yonkers Statesman* all managed to survive simultaneously may seem surprising, but in that pre-Internet and pre-radio and television era, newspapers were exceedingly popular as sources of information about international, national, state, and local news, as well as social news. Parties, debuts, births, betrothals, and marriages were noted in the pages of daily and weekly newspapers, with some of these events receiving extensive coverage. A case in point was the wedding of the editor and publisher of *The Yonkers Statesman* a fortnight prior to the dawn of the twentieth century. This was such big news that *The New York Times* ran two stories on the nuptials. The second piece bore the title "Aged Yonkers Editor Weds."<sup>7</sup> The widowed groom, John W. Oliver, was eighty-five; the bride (his third) was a tad younger—by thirty-two years. A clergyman from the Methodist Episcopal Church, of which the groom was a member, performed the ceremony in the parlor of the Oliver residence, Rose Cottage, on Warburton Avenue, and Mayor Leslie Sutherland, along with a city judge, was a witness. This was no small affair of a chilly December evening. The house was decorated with smilax and, appropriately enough, roses, and there were 130 guests. The bride wore "a dress of steel gray silk, which was very becoming" and, according to *The Yonkers Statesman*, when pronouncing their vows "the responses of the bride and groom were clear and emphatic."<sup>8</sup> Coming as he did from a long-lived family, the smitten bridegroom, whose father lived to the age of ninety-six, evidently expected to enjoy a decade or more with his new wife and he almost did. Oliver, who "was on duty every business day, almost to the very last," died at age ninety-three.<sup>9</sup>

In an era when the average life expectancy was forty, some Yonkers residents beat the odds, and when they did it was newsworthy. "Yonkers Woman Dies Aged 102 Years," proclaimed *The New York Times* in 1902 when reporting the death of Jane Russell Maxwell, an immigrant from Northern Ireland, who resided with her granddaughter.<sup>10</sup> In 1909 *The Times* published two lengthy articles about Alexander Herriott who was said to have looked no more than eighty but was actually 107! Mr.

Herriott appeared in Yonkers City Court to file a complaint against his daughter, who had seized his bankbook. Herriott had planned to use some of his savings to journey to his native Scotland. A merchant seaman who had been around the world, Herriott told a reporter that he had seen a number of famous people, including Napoleon Bonaparte, Prince Albert, the husband of England's Queen Victoria, and Abraham Lincoln. As for the secret of his longevity, he claimed that he did not adhere to a special diet but, instead, ate as much as he wanted, drank beer, and smoked. He also got around town quite a bit, disappearing from his daughter's residence for many hours as he roamed the city streets and tarried along the waterfront talking with people he encountered. His daughter contended that some of the men he chatted with obtained money from him, and this prompted a Yonkers judge to rule in favor of her continued oversight of his finances, lest his \$4,000 savings disappear completely.

### Greystone

To some Yonkers residents, a few thousand dollars constituted nothing more than small change. Among them was Samuel Untermyer, who in 1900 was busily restoring the home of the late New York State governor Samuel J. Tilden. Untermyer, a prominent attorney, had purchased the estate, called Greystone, the year before for \$121,000, considerably less than the \$225,000 hat manufacturer John T. Waring had paid to erect the home in 1870 and less than the \$150,000 for which Samuel Tilden purchased the house in 1879. Tilden was said to have spent another \$500,000 erecting various outbuildings on the property and buying land east of North Broadway. The latter, composed of fifty-five acres, remained a separate parcel and Samuel Untermyer obtained it by bidding \$50,500 at an auction held at Philipse Manor Hall following a lawsuit involving the late governor's estate. After spending a total of \$171,500 for a property that had seen better days, Untermyer proceeded to pour considerable money into the beautification of the house and grounds, both of which had been neglected in the years since Tilden's death. An oval lawn was created and the straight path running from North Broadway to the entrance of the mansion was replaced by a winding carriage road. The estate's greenhouses were restored and stocked with all sorts of colorful plants. For Untermyer, horticulture was "a consuming avocation, and Greystone allowed him ample opportunity to indulge in this hobby with a passion. He approached the task of landscaping his vast parkland as a therapeutic outlet for the fund of creative energy his legal duties barely tapped."<sup>11</sup> Although Greystone

quite literally blossomed into something resembling a botanical garden, both Untermyer and his architect, J. H. Freedlander, shared the view that the estate needed more than beautiful plantings to bring it alive. Therefore, electric lights were installed throughout the grounds. To brighten up the house itself, a beautiful porch of white limestone was added to the side of the home facing North Broadway. On the other side of the house, two bay windows were installed to provide more light and additional vistas of the Hudson River. A new retaining wall was erected on that side as well. The improvements also included a new green slate roof.

Inside the house, the upgrades were equally impressive. They included a new entrance hall of white limestone, complete with carved stone benches. The home's original hall was reconfigured by eliminating partitions and replacing them with Gothic-style wooden screens used to display Gobelin tapestries. A new mosaic floor was installed and wrought iron lanterns were substituted for old lighting fixtures. Wrought iron was also used for what was described as the finest andirons and fireback in the country. They were designed by Mr. Untermyer's architect, who was also responsible for a super-sized French Renaissance fireplace, fashioned of Caen stone, in one of the large rooms opening onto the newly refurbished hall. French influence was noticeable, as well, in the Louis XV-style reception room just across the hall. A Louis XVI salon, in white and gold, continued the French theme. A nearby den for the exclusive use of the wealthy homeowner was a bit more subdued, with its ebony and gold adornments.

Impressive though it was, the first floor paled in comparison with the second, where the hall had been transformed into an art gallery, its red tapestry walls covered with paintings. The second floor was also the location of a Turkish bath, adorned with stained glass and tile, and a swimming pool. To create this spa-like area, a number of small rooms were combined for the Turkish bath and the billiard room was eliminated to make way for the pool. After a relaxing swim and some time well spent in the Turkish bath, an ascent to the mansion's third floor tower room was a breeze. Here the style was Pompeian, and lovely though this interior space was, the real attraction was the river view, something that never failed to impress visitors. Of course, those lucky enough to be invited to Greystone found the house and grounds overwhelmingly beautiful as well. Richard Croker, leader of New York City's Tammany Hall Democratic Party club, who paid a return visit to Greystone in 1908, was positively enchanted by the place. He had been there once before, in the 1880s, to see Samuel J. Tilden but found the estate much more to his liking this time, thanks to all of Samuel Untermyer's improvements. Comparing Greystone to updated estates in Ireland, he exclaimed that

the modernized home was considerably more beautiful than it had been in Tilden's day. Given the time, effort, and money Greystone's proud new owner had devoted to improving the place, inside and out, this is not surprising, but despite the grand refurbishing project he had undertaken Untermyer found time for other things, including an unsuccessful effort to have Yonkers annexed to New York City.

### The Annexation Movement

The city's expansion movement was not limited to Yonkers. New Rochelle and Mount Vernon were to be part of a greatly enlarged Bronx. That borough had been created from the southern part of Westchester County as a result of two earlier annexations, one in 1874 consisting of the townships west of the Bronx River and the other, in 1895, consisting of the townships east of the Bronx River. A decade later it seemed only natural, to some people, including a former Yonkers mayor, John Peene, that the mega-metropolis to the south would just keep expanding. His motivation for favoring the dissolution of the independent city of Yonkers was a desire for rapid transit, something the New York Central Railroad would not provide. Peene's views were shared by E. K. Martin, president of the Yonkers Board of Trade, who blamed the railroad for lagging real estate prices and limited population growth. Martin insisted that Yonkers would have had 250,000 residents by 1905 had it not been for the inadequate and expensive New York Central rail service.

In all fairness, a few years earlier, in 1901, the New York Central had proposed a solution, namely direct service from the Battery, at the tip of Manhattan, to Yonkers. This plan would have entailed running trains on the tracks of the company that owned the Manhattan elevated railroad and then on the tracks of the Putnam Division of the New York Central. Before this could happen, electrification of the Manhattan elevated line had to be completed and an agreement worked out between the elevated company and the New York Central. Such an arrangement would have enabled the Central to provide better service to its suburban riders and would have alleviated congestion at Grand Central Station but, alas, this wasn't meant to be, and as a result, suburban residents suffered. By 1905 the situation was so bad that a committee composed of Yonkers citizens and members of the board of aldermen investigated the deterioration of rail service. The upshot of their work was a formal resolution demanding a fare cut. If the railroad would not accede to this demand, the next step would be for Yonkers to seek annexation to New York City.

It would be another six years before an annexation bill was introduced in the New York State Legislature. The proposed law called for making Yonkers the sixth borough of New York City, and it contained a provision for a citywide referendum on annexation. The merits of joining forces with the gigantic metropolis to its south were debated, in the spring of 1911, at the Yonkers Armory, before an audience of 2,500 “gathered from every section of Yonkers and from every class of the population.”<sup>12</sup> In the course of the debate, Samuel Untermyer insisted that New York was “a much-slandered city,” with a “government as good as any in the world . . . and better than that of any city in the United States.”<sup>13</sup> As for the belief held by many people that New York was a crime-ridden city, Untermyer blamed the press for creating this impression. He went on to argue that the annexation of Yonkers would be a good economic move. The real bottom line, as far as Untermyer was concerned, was that Yonkers had much to gain by annexation and that its development would be retarded if it passed up the chance to become part of the great city to its south. Although the audience was divided on the subject of annexation, just a month after the debate Yonkers residents joined citizens of New Rochelle and Mount Vernon to voice their opposition to annexation before the New York State Senate’s Cities Committee, and for the time being that was the end of the matter.

### The Millionaire Straphanger: John Emory Andrus

Annexation wasn’t the only political issue to surface in the early 1900s. Another important matter facing Yonkers was the city’s status as a third-class city. This became a cause célèbre during the term of the so-called Millionaire Straphanger, Mayor John E. Andrus, who, despite his vast wealth and position as founder and CEO of the Arlington Chemical Company, one of the city’s major businesses, rode the subway. Under New York State law, municipalities with populations of 250,000 were first-class cities while those with at least 50,000 inhabitants were second-class cities. Municipalities with fewer than 50,000 people were classified as third-class. Yonkers met the population requirements to become a second-class city, a designation that would have resulted in greater governmental autonomy. In 1904, Yonkers aldermen voted to revise the city’s charter in preparation for securing second-class status. Mayor Andrus, who had been elected the year before, was all for it. Under the revised charter, the lines of wards or voting districts were redrawn and the number of aldermen was reduced.



This was not to everyone's liking, including the New York State Citizens Committee, which advised Yonkers to apply under the uniform charter for second-class cities. Andrus, however, branded the uniform charter "inadequate" but he conceded that "our charter can't pass"; in the end his recommendation was to "shelve the whole proposition."<sup>14</sup> Andrus then pushed through a measure postponing the charter issue for two years. His explanation for this about-face was that "it would have cost the city \$30,000 more a year to operate" under the new charter.<sup>15</sup> Some of the aldermen refuted this, but Andrus was adamant.

He had demonstrated similar tenacity soon after taking office by shelving plans for a new city hall, which he deemed too costly. He also refused to sanction the long-standing practice of distributing end-of-year paychecks to city employees before Christmas. In Andrus's view it was "contrary to business practice to pay people in advance."<sup>16</sup> The mayor proceeded to cut municipal spending and in the process incurred the wrath of many Yonkers residents, including the president of the school board, who initiated legal action that resulted in the State Supreme Court ordering Andrus to restore funds for badly needed school repairs. Despite his fiscal conservatism, when the city found itself in the position of not being able to borrow money, except at a high rate of interest, Andrus saved the day by signing for a loan at a favorable interest rate, reflecting his own sterling credit rating.

Other positive developments during Andrus's tenure as mayor were a new sewer system and the opening of the first Yonkers Public Library. Yet, despite the praise he received for moving the library out of the high school and into a splendid new building donated by steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, Andrus found himself on the firing line because of divisiveness on the board and commissioners of the Yonkers Police Department. While the commissioners engaged in verbal duels, "a point of tragic-comedy was reached when the Democrats complained that the two heaviest men in the department . . . had been placed on horseback because of politics, presumably increasing wear and tear on animals bought by the taxpayers."<sup>17</sup> Andrus reconstituted the board and commissioners but more opposition awaited him, this time from the Anti-Saloon League, whose leaders expected the teetotaling Mayor to "crack down hard on saloons," and when he didn't they interpreted his inaction as tolerance of "the easy drinking that went on in political circles around him."<sup>18</sup> The Anti-Saloon League then "organized anti-Andrus factions," which persuaded some of the city's churches to designate an evening in November 1905 "as a special time to pray for the city."<sup>19</sup>

Despite everything he endured as mayor, John Andrus remained active in politics. From 1905 until 1913 he served in the House of Representatives where he proved to be

a better listener than a talker. . . . Unlike many colleagues, his idea of conversation was not a filibuster . . . he was a legislative toiler, one of the troops who keep the regiments in motion. Of him, it can be pointed out that he believed in the GOP and backed it with his vote.<sup>20</sup>

### The Industrial Elite

The Yonkers to which Andrus returned following his years in Congress was a more robust city than the one he had presided over as mayor. The Alexander Smith and Sons Carpet Company, Otis Elevator, the Federal Sugar Refining Company, the National Sugar Refining Company, the Habirshaw Cable and Wire Company, and many smaller firms manufacturing products ranging from beer to dry goods were doing well. Some of these companies had been mainstays of the city's industrial base since the mid-nineteenth century; others had been established in the late 1800s. In the early years of the twentieth century a changing of the guard occurred in some of these firms. At Alexander Smith and Sons, for example, one era ended and another began when Warren B. Smith died while on a trip to Algiers in 1903. The bulk of his \$40,000,000 estate went to relatives, with five nieces and nephews receiving \$1,000,000 each. There was a bequest of \$50,000 to St. John's Hospital, \$250,000 to his stepmother, \$100,000 to his sister, Eva Cochran, \$50,000 to a cousin, and sums ranging from \$200 to \$5,000 to his servants. Seventeen employees of the carpet company received amounts ranging from \$5,000 to \$200,000, with the largest sums going to a former president and a former treasurer of Alexander Smith and Sons. Warren Smith's nephew, Alexander Smith Cochran, who became head of the company following his uncle's death, received the very considerable residue of the estate.

Six years later, when Eva Smith Cochran, daughter of Alexander Smith, founder of the carpet company, and mother of Alexander Smith Cochran died, employees who had worked at the carpet company for a minimum of twenty years received \$1,000. All told, after a meticulous review of personnel records by the company's paymaster, three hundred employees were rewarded for their years of service. Genuinely interested in improving the lot of Yonkers residents, Mrs. Cochran and her husband

William F. Cochran, who predeceased her, had funded local institutions, including St. John's Hospital, for which they provided the land as well as an endowment. A few years before her death, Eva Smith Cochran was characterized by *The New York Times* as "one of the best known women in Yonkers on account of her various charities and benefactions," in a front page account of a freak accident that had befallen her at her summer home in Maine.<sup>21</sup> While seated next to a window during an electrical storm, she was struck by lightning and blinded.

In 1900, fate dealt an even worse blow to Halcyon Skinner, the brilliant inventor of various looms for manufacturing carpet and a man "whose long connection with the Smith Carpet works made his figure a familiar one to thousands of the operatives of the factory, while his democratic and unassuming ways made him many friends."<sup>22</sup> As a young man working at Alexander Smith and Sons at the company's original location in West Farms, one of the communities annexed by New York City, Skinner tinkered with the factory machinery, vastly improving it. He then went on to invent a loom for weaving figures, rather than the customary stripes, into carpet. Other innovative looms followed and no sooner had he invented something new than Skinner set about improving it. In some instances he managed to double the output of looms he had invented. His inventions were of utmost importance in the expansion of Alexander Smith and Sons from approximately three hundred employees in 1874 to nearly seven thousand in the early twentieth century. Sadly, when the new century was not even a year old, Skinner was struck by a New York Central Railroad train in Yonkers and killed. The tragedy occurred when Skinner, whose home was located on the Hudson, strolled through his back gate, and as he had often done before, "went down to the tracks, either to go to his boathouse or else with the intention of walking to . . . the Corinthian Yacht Club, of which he was a member."<sup>23</sup> Seeing a southbound train heading in his direction, he attempted to get out of harm's way, only to be struck by a northbound train. For another famous Yonkers resident, Robert P. Getty, who had built the city's famous Getty House hotel in 1851, death came quietly, in 1902, following several years of declining health.

Less than a decade later Yonkers was mourning the passing of yet another prominent resident, Ervin Saunders, one of the principals in the firm of Saunders & Sons, Incorporated, manufacturers of machinery, a company founded by his father. Ervin Saunders was sixty-one when he died suddenly after having been "in delicate health for more than 20 years."<sup>24</sup> A lifelong bachelor, Saunders left his shares in the family company to his brother and small bequests to two nieces, but the bulk of

his estate went to various Yonkers institutions. Saunders considered it his “duty as well as a privilege and pleasure to devote a substantial portion of my estate to what seems to me to be the best interest of my home city.”<sup>25</sup> Toward that end, he bequeathed \$50,000 to the Yonkers Public Library with the stipulation that the income from the gift be used to purchase nonfiction books. Like many other communities that received splendid new library buildings from Andrew Carnegie, Yonkers had to supply the books. In addition to funding the purchase of books, the will of Ervin Saunders provided a \$450,000 permanent endowment for the Yonkers Homeopathic Hospital and Maternity Institution, in memory of his mother. To memorialize his father, he left the rest of his estate to the City of Yonkers for the creation of a trade school under the auspices of the board of education. His will required the school to offer evening classes for the benefit of students who worked during the day. The will also stipulated that \$60,000 was to be used to build the new school and another \$60,000 to equip it, with the remainder as an endowment for the upkeep of the institution. As a public school, what would become known as simply “Saunders” was open to all, including the city’s growing immigrant population.

## The Working Class

Joining English and Scottish immigrants, who were recruited by Alexander Smith when his company was in its infancy, were Irish, Poles, Slavs, and Ukrainians. As time went on, the first generation of skilled workers from the British Isles moved into supervisory jobs and unskilled newcomers were employed to tend machinery, which performed the tasks once done by skilled laborers. When economic slowdowns occurred and domestic and foreign orders for Alexander Smith and Sons carpets dwindled, unskilled workers and recent hires were especially vulnerable. During the panic or depression of 1893–97, John Masefield, who became England’s Poet Laureate after returning to his native land, was one of those dismissed from the carpet company. According to Masefield’s estimate, five to six thousand workers were jobless but at least double that number were affected when one took into account the impact of the layoffs on workers’ families. “Most of the married men could not see beyond the mill; it was their life,” Masefield declared in his book *In the Mill*, describing his experiences at Alexander Smith and Sons.<sup>26</sup> He went on to say: “Few of the unmarried men ever saved money. Few of either party had expected any horror of this kind; their ship went from under their feet.”<sup>27</sup> Trauma-

tized though they were by the sudden closing of the mill, workers and their families managed to survive, thanks to the generosity of their fellow citizens. Masefield was so impressed by this that he stated:

I shall never forget the universal sympathy in that stricken town; how kind all people were in those days; how gladly they shared what they had, and how the tradesmen . . . lowered their rates at once, to the cutting off of all possible profit to themselves, so that their clients should not have too hard a time.<sup>28</sup>

Given the fact that most of the workers lived within walking distance of the mill, some of them in company housing, layoffs and strikes at the carpet company had a profound effect upon the City of Yonkers. Far less significant than the layoffs of the 1890s, which continued to influence the thinking of workers into the next century, was a lesser-known incident in American labor history, involving the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, a little more than a year before the dreadful fire that claimed the lives of 146 workers at its headquarters in Greenwich Village. When fire broke out in March 1911, Triangle workers, most of them young women from the Lower East Side, were trapped because the factory's owners had locked the doors to the fire escapes to prevent union organizers from getting into the building. Prior to the fire, in the midst of a strike called by the Shirt Waist Makers' Union in 1909, the Triangle Company opened a factory in Yonkers. The new facility was staffed by strikebreakers sent up from New York. When union pickets arrived in Yonkers, some of the girls quit only to be replaced by other strikebreakers. Yonkers police became involved after fighting broke out between pickets and strikebreakers. Everyone was hauled into Yonkers Police Court where they got off with only a warning, mainly because of conflicting testimony. At that point, the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company threw in the towel and announced that they would close the Yonkers factory.

The frequently adversarial relationship between labor and management was evident not only during strikes but on one extraordinary occasion in 1903 when labor leaders accepted an invitation from industrialist John C. Havemeyer to appear on the stage of the Yonkers Music Hall for a "discussion of the principles and methods of labor."<sup>29</sup> Like many business leaders of the time, Havemeyer, a sugar refiner, was concerned that the balance of power between capital and labor was tipping toward the latter and he decided to challenge union leaders by publishing a pamphlet containing sixteen specific questions. Havemeyer then rented the Yonkers Music Hall and invited three prominent labor leaders to appear on the

stage to respond to the questions. Havemeyer, accompanied by family members, occupied a box close to the stage and remained stoical as some of the speakers made vindictive comments about the rich. Havemeyer did not respond. Indeed, prior to the meeting, which *The Yonkers Herald* claimed was “captured by the captains of Socialism and turned into a Socialistic pow wow,” an attempt had been made to persuade him to take questions from the labor leaders during the gathering but he refused, saying he might be willing to do so at a later date.<sup>30</sup>

In advance of the much-anticipated event, a thousand tickets were distributed and when the big day arrived, every seat in the house, including two hundred on the stage, was occupied. So many people were eager to attend that the city issued a permit for a simultaneous meeting on the street. As soon as the labor leaders replied to questions inside, other labor representatives paraphrased their answers and presented them to the crowd outside. The first few questions dealing with the rationale for unions were answered by J. T. Windell of the Federation of Labor. He noted that Standard Oil and other trusts raised their prices without consulting the public, implying that unions, which he conceded were sometimes called the Labor Trust, had the right to organize workers without consulting the management of the companies employing those workers. As for the goals of unions, Windell said that they “were to secure for those who produced the greatest part of the country’s wealth a proper share in that wealth, and to protect the laborers and their families.”<sup>31</sup> When asked whether labor’s intention was to oppose the accumulation of wealth, Windell replied: “This is a foolish question. It is far from the intention of any sane man to oppose the accumulation of wealth, but we do intend properly to regulate theft. Regulating the man who can pile up a thousand millions is just as necessary as regulating pickpockets and gamblers.”<sup>32</sup>

In answer to a question, which was prefaced by the statement that it was Mr. Havemeyer’s understanding that fifteen different occupations composed the Yonkers branch of the American Federation of Labor, Windell said that if one category of workers went out on strike, other members of the Federation would not join them. Another speaker, D. L. Russell of the Commercial Telegraphers of New York, pointed out that most union members were “level-headed.”<sup>33</sup> He also addressed the subject of child labor, noting that “the time to enjoy life is when you are young, and not when you have grown old laboring after the dollars.”<sup>34</sup> Toward the end of the meeting, Mr. Windell looked John C. Havemeyer straight in the eye and demanded that he answer sixteen questions about the sugar trust in particular and trusts in general. Windell was amenable to Havemeyer taking his time in arranging a future meeting to respond to questions posed by

labor leaders, but he was adamant that such a gathering be held. Nothing came of this, but nearly a decade later the sugar trust was subjected to public scrutiny by a Congressional committee investigating the American Sugar Refining Company, which was generally regarded as the sugar trust.

Claus A. Spreckels, president of the Federal Sugar Refining Company, which operated a huge plant in Yonkers, testified that at several of his firm's plants, including the one in Yonkers, men who were actually in the employ of the American Sugar Refining Company had damaged machinery and deposited dead animals in barrels of refined sugar. Spreckels said that his company had experienced these problems as soon as it opened the Yonkers plant in 1902. Problems persisted for a year and were so bad that one night he himself went to the plant where he had workers open sealed barrels, only to learn that they contained foreign matter. He fired the workers, who promptly demanded their pay. "I told them they better go to the people who had employed them to do the dirty work," he recounted.<sup>35</sup> The men threatened to sue, and Spreckels would have actually liked the judicial process to take over because it would have enabled his own attorneys to cross-examine the men, but the suit did not materialize. His problems with industrial sabotage notwithstanding, Spreckels continued to operate the Yonkers plant, producing three thousand barrels of refined sugar each day or roughly twice what another firm, the National Sugar Refining Company, made during the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1917, Federal's eight hundred employees were turning out refined sugar twenty-four hours a day. Both Federal and National closed soon after the Great Depression struck but the economic debacle wasn't the only thing that caused them to cease operations. Tariff legislation resulted in many refineries moving offshore to Cuba. In 1938, a company producing liquid sugar took over the Federal Refining Company's plant.

### Strikers and Strikebreakers

At one point during its heyday the Federal Sugar Refining Company was forced to shut down, when the City of Yonkers obtained an injunction restraining the company from burning soft coal and permitting dense black smoke and cinders to escape from its soaring chimney. Extremely diligent in safeguarding the health of its citizens, the city intervened whenever the board of health felt it was necessary. In 1907, during an especially nasty strike by trolley car workers employed by the Yonkers Street Railway Company, several hundred strikebreakers imported by the company were found to be living in squalid conditions in the trolley barns. After touring

the barns, the city's health officer concluded that an epidemic was likely to occur if the premises were not cleaned up immediately. The president of the company was subpoenaed that very day to answer charges of violating the Yonkers sanitary code. He was fined ten dollars but this was the least of his problems, because the day after the trolley barns were inspected, company trolleys were badly damaged as strikebreakers attempted to put them back in service.

Intending to make a bold statement, the company's president decided to run the cars in the middle of the day. The timing could not have been worse, because the streets were thronged with factory workers on lunch break. Sympathetic to the striking employees of the Yonkers Street Railway Company, they immediately began shouting when the first trolley emerged from the barns. Although a mounted police officer rode directly in front of the trolley, he and other members of the Yonkers police force were no match for the crowd, which was "in ugly humor."<sup>36</sup> As the trolley slowed to avoid hitting a disabled wagon, the mob hurled bricks and stones at the trolley, breaking all of its windows and sending it back to the barns. Other trolleys dispatched by the company met a similar fate. Mobs set bonfires in their paths, causing derailments, and some of the strikebreaking crews fled for their lives. An especially large bonfire had to be extinguished by the Fire Department and several injured policemen were hospitalized.

As the situation deteriorated, the entire police force was called up and officers were told, in no uncertain words, that if they failed to do their duty there would be serious repercussions. The police arrested a number of young men in connection with the attacks on the trolleys, and the youths became local folk heroes cheered by sympathizers lining their path to the police station. The Yonkers Street Railway Company attempted to run several trolleys later in the afternoon, but angry mobs once again attacked the cars. In the opinion of *The New York Times*, which reported that three thousand people had been involved in the attacks, the day would "go down as the worst, from a standpoint of rowdiness and rioting, that Yonkers has ever known."<sup>37</sup>

The attacks on the trolleys prompted Mayor Frank Coyne to issue a proclamation calling upon the citizenry to maintain the peace. As rumors that the Yonkers Street Railway Company was planning to ask the governor to remove Mayor Coyne circulated, the mayor requested help from the sheriff of Westchester County. The next day the sheriff conferred with Yonkers officials, who by then had been informed in writing that the Yonkers Street Railway Company would hold the mayor and the city responsible for damages suffered by the company. The mayor was reluctant to see the New York State Militia called out until other means



of maintaining order were tried. With strike sympathizers filling ash cans with heavy items and installing them on trolley tracks along Warburton Avenue, Riverdale Avenue, and Main Street, as well as stockpiling rocks and other potential missiles on the Croton Aqueduct path in preparation for attacks on Tuckahoe Line trolleys, which ran through an arch in the aqueduct, it appeared that the mayor was being too cautious. Perhaps he held out hope that clergymen, who were said to have met with the strikers at Hibernian Hall, could broker a settlement between the workers and the company. The mayor's delaying tactics paid off, because a day later the Yonkers Street Railway Company threw in the towel and not only recognized the union but agreed to take back the strikers without penalizing them for anything done during the strike. A committee, which included the clergymen who had been instrumental in bringing the two sides together, was appointed to determine wage increases for the rehired employees. This proved to be a win-win situation for everyone, including five thousand Yonkers commuters who relied upon trolleys to get to their closest New York Central Railroad stations.

Three years later, commuters had to don their walking shoes again when nine trolley lines serving Yonkers were shut down by striking employees demanding wage increases. The eight-day strike ended when a judge, acting as arbitrator, recommended a two cents per hour wage increase, which the strikers accepted. In 1913, employees of the Yonkers Street Railway Company were hopeful that a strike, which began when a handful of Yonkers trolley men were dismissed after refusing to break in a new man sent up from New York by management, would be settled by arbitration. The Yonkers Chamber of Commerce arranged a conference but the ten delegates selected to represent the striking workers withdrew, claiming that the company's president had demeaned them. A formal statement issued by the strikers characterized the president as a petty tyrant and asked him to retract statements he had made questioning the intelligence and integrity of the strikers. As the strike was about to enter its third week, hope resurfaced when the company president made a verbal promise to the Public Service Commission, in the presence of strikers' representatives and the mayor of Yonkers, to accept arbitration. Although he refused to put anything in writing, the commission's stenographer had taken everything down and when this was released to the public, the president had no choice but to abide by what he had said. This meant accepting the recommendation of the Public Service Commission that arbitration be employed to settle matters upon which the workers and the company could not agree, and that the strikers return to their jobs, without penalty, under the terms of their prior contract.

Even before the dust settled in the 1913 strike, the Yonkers Street Railway Company was amenable to the idea of a buyout by the City of Yonkers. As far back as 1906, proposals for the elimination of the company had surfaced. That year, a group of concerned Yonkers residents, led by a Wall Street attorney, investigated the possibility of forming their own company to run trolleys on the tracks of the Yonkers Street Railway Company. Since their demands for better service had been ignored, they considered taking advantage of a provision of the New York State Constitution that forbade the granting of exclusive franchises. They interpreted this to mean that although the Yonkers Street Railway Company had a franchise from the city to run its cars, other companies could use the same tracks by compensating the city. This plan was scrapped in favor of one calling for municipal ownership of trolleys, something that made sense to many residents when the Yonkers Street Railway Company experienced financial problems in the aftermath of the 1907 strike. From 1908 through 1911, the company was in receivership. Although the line regained its independence and provided new cars and upgraded tracks, Yonkers riders, who had endured three strikes in six years, were not overly impressed by these enhancements. What they really desired was reliable and safe service.

Safety was a major issue because going back to the very beginning of the century, there had been serious accidents. In 1900, at approximately 9 p.m. on a June evening, nearly two dozen passengers ended up sprawled all over the interior of a Yonkers house after the trolley in which they were riding went out of control while going downhill on Park Avenue. A mechanical malfunction rendered the brakes inoperable and the car went flying across an intersection, demolished a wall of a private home on Ashburton Avenue and came to rest inside the house. Miraculously, only two people were injured, and very slightly at that. Happily, the occupants of the home were not in the front room where the trolley ended up. Initially, they believed there had been an earthquake. Three months after this accident, two Yonkers trolleys traveling in opposite directions on the same track collided with considerable force. Three women occupying the front seat of one of the trolleys received minor injuries when they tried to jump off. Other passengers on both trolleys suffered serious cuts and bruises and a man who jumped to avoid the collision hit the ground and was critically injured.

In 1901, a motorman's decision to proceed rather than wait for a late trolley coming from the other direction to pass, led to a crash near the Dunwoodie station on the trolley line running between Yonkers and Mount Vernon. Two passengers were badly injured. In 1902, a trolley

headed for Yonkers from Hastings-on-Hudson had just made it across a bridge spanning a deep ravine on Warburton Avenue when the steel superstructure of the span slipped. Heavy rains and melting snow had swollen the stream flowing through the ravine and the rushing water undermined the bridge's supports. The precipitation was so heavy that many streets in the Saw Mill River Valley were under water. The moquette works of the Alexander Smith and Sons Carpet Company, where carpet with a deep tufted pile was manufactured, were closed when water rose to the level of the firepits at the division's riverside location. The resulting uncompensated layoff was a hardship for the workers but it paled in comparison with the suffering of the sixty-one people involved in a 1906 crash of a Yonkers Street Railway Company trolley linking Fordham and Yonkers.

Heading down Horseshoe Hill in Lincoln Park, the trolley jumped the tracks after its brakeroad failed. A seventh-month-old child suffered repeated head injuries as a result of being crushed underfoot by fleeing passengers scrambling to get out of the car at the bottom of the hill. The baby died a short time later. The child's mother and an older sibling had cuts, bruises, and internal injuries. Much to their credit, passengers and crew of another trolley that arrived on the scene pulled the injured from the wreckage and three drivers of a new type of private vehicle, the auto, which was still quite rare in Yonkers, piled some of the injured into their cars and drove them to St. Joseph's Hospital. One Good Samaritan, a woman who lived near the scene of the accident, arrived with sheets and linens and began bandaging the wounded. While she was working on a female passenger, someone grabbed a gold watch that had been affixed to her blouse by a stickpin. The thief ran off with both the timepiece and the pin and disappeared in the crowd. In the aftermath of the accident, the Yonkers Common Council discussed the possibility of requiring trolley companies seeking to extend their franchises to operate within the city to substitute air brakes for the less reliable hand brakes then in use.

Safety was of utmost importance, but riders were concerned about other things as well. When trolley lines linking Yonkers with the Bronx eliminated transfers and began to charge additional fares, the City of Yonkers filed a complaint with the Public Service Commission. Compounding the problem was the fact that Yonkers residents bound for New York had not only been accustomed to paying a five-cent fare for the entire trip but they had been able to remain in the same car even though it traveled over the lines of different companies. Along with the elimination of transfers came the phasing out of through service. Twenty-five thousand unhappy commuters were required to pay double fares and change cars as well.

## Riding the Rails

When it came to mass transit, Yonkers residents of the early twentieth century had legitimate grievances against not only the trolley companies but the New York Central Railroad. Like the trolleys, the railroad was not immune to accidents, whether because of mechanical malfunctions or human error. The latter was responsible for the death of the driver of a wagon who was heading down to the docks to pick up a load of coal. Having stopped at the railroad's Ashburton Avenue grade crossing, waiting patiently for a southbound train to go through, he proceeded to drive across the tracks after the gateman raised the barrier only to be hit by a northbound train. The wagon driver's horses were severed in two and he himself was ejected from the vehicle and killed. The driver left behind eight children. Two years later, at the Washington Avenue crossing, a southbound express train hit an engine that was attempting to get out of a switch by going in reverse. As the engine crossed the main tracks it was hit broadside by the express train whose engine was sliced in half. A number of its passenger cars derailed, causing pandemonium. Amazingly, only one person, a Yonkers man, was injured. He suffered a concussion but came to, as did six female passengers who fainted. In 1903, two freight trains collided near the Glenwood station during a major snowstorm. The result was "tracks blockaded for two hours."<sup>38</sup> Given the poor visibility, one train plowed into the other and sparks from its engine ignited the second train. Although this accident was weather related, the fact that accidents at grade crossings had occurred going back to the nineteenth century resulted in a concerted effort to deal with this problem. In 1906, the New York State Assembly enacted legislation requiring public hearings on any future expansion or alterations involving the crossing of existing thoroughfares. Following the hearings, the New York State Railroad Commission could either permit new grade crossings or require that the tracks be elevated with the railroad bearing the full expense.

Besides safety, commuters were concerned about fares. With Mayor Coyne taking the lead, Yonkers commuters were determined to force the New York Central to lower fares on its lines running through Yonkers: the Hudson River Division, the Putnam Division, and the Harlem Division. Toward that end, a conference involving the mayor, the Yonkers Board of Trade, delegates from taxpayers' associations, and representatives of the New York Central was held in 1906. At this gathering the railroad assured the people of Yonkers that fares would be reduced as soon as the new Grand Central Terminal had been completed. In the interim, the Harlem Division was electrified. This meant comfortable new cars, with beautiful