Episode 4, Lucy Parsons Book, Chicago, Illinois and Middletown, Connecticut

Elyse Luray: Our next investigation examines how this slender book may be intimately connected to one of the most violent incidents in labor history. As the 19th Century drew to a close, an American landscape of family farms and small scale industry was rapidly being transformed to the urban clamor of smokestacks and machinery. And no city was growing faster than Chicago, where millions of immigrants poured into the stockyards and steel mills looking for a better life. But many of these workers found only long hours and low wages, and turned to a radical ideology imported from Europe – anarchism. The labor agitators promised workers freedom from wage bondage. But to most factory owners, they were wild eyed terrorists and a threat to the established order. One of the most notorious and feared figures was a home grown revolutionary named Lucy Parsons. Now a man from New Haven, Connecticut, thinks he's found a rare anarchist manifesto from the front lines of Chicago's labor upheaval, which seems to bear the fingerprints of Parsons herself.

Stephen: When I saw the book I did a double take. It seems almost too perfect, with the stamp on the front, you know, kind of like a kid's stamp.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. And I'm headed to meet Stephen in Middletown, Connecticut where he found the pamphlet buried deep in the library stacks at Wesleyan University. So tell me, how'd you discover this book?

Stephen: Well, I was doing a research project and I finished up a little bit early and thought I'd, you know, check out the collection, see what was there. And I was just browsing, and I noticed this book, kind of an odd trim size between two, you know, bigger books and, there it was.

Elyse: Oh, it is small.

Stephen: Yes.

Elyse: Alright. So what else about it, besides its size, came to your attention?

Stephen: Well, the Lucy Parsons stamp on the cover.

Elyse: Lucy Parsons. Her name sounds familiar. I'm not sure what to make of this, but it certainly looks like the kind of stamp someone would use to mark a book as their own. The author's name is Spies and inside is a collection of his writings – an autobiography and something about a speech he made in courts. Stephen is a student of anarchist history, but he says original anarchist literature is hard to find. And that although Lucy Parsons made headlines at the end of the 19th Century, she's also been somewhat lost to history. What can I find out for you?

Stephen: Well, was this book really owned by Lucy Parsons? And, what can this book tell us about who she was as a person?

Elyse: Well, I'm going to have to check the book out.

Stephen: Here you go.

Elyse: It seems the library acquired this book in the early 70s from an unidentified donor. But I wonder what clues the book itself has for me. Here's the publisher's preface and it's dated Chicago, 1887. I'm pretty certain that's the around the period when Lucy was alive. And the stamp does seem to suggest she may have owned it. The book has some condition problems. Somebody put it in cardboard, which unfortunately drastically takes away from the value of the book. But, the cover does look indicative to the late 19th Century. The author, August Spies, appears to have been an active member of several radical labor organizations. And here's something from that speech in court. Listen to this. This is interesting. "But if you think by hanging us, you can stamp out the labor movement, here you have tread upon a spark. But there and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up! It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out." Well, that was a pretty fiery speech. I want to find out more about this trial our author was involved in. But my first job is to confirm that it is an authentic book from the period and that this is Lucy's stamp. I'm headed to Chicago to meet with antique book dealer Paul Garon. He deals in first edition books on radicalism and African American studies. Here's the book that we talked about.

Paul: Oh, boy. This is quite a book.

Elyse: Really? Now I was thinking it's 19th Century, but I wanted to get your opinion.

Paul: Oh…definitely. The age of the paper is consistent with that and…

Elyse: Paul says that the typography, and in particular the layout of Stephen's book, suggests it's an authentic anarchist tract from the period.

Paul: Well, let me show you some examples. This is a story of manual labor, and you'll see some similarities here.

Elyse: Oh, yeah.

Paul: Starting with the frontispiece.

Elyse: Yes, the photographs.

Paul: And the title page…the same business. Its type fonts changing every line. Very typical late 19th Century typography.

Elyse: Yeah. Paul's familiar with our book. It concerns one of the most famous incidents in American labor history, the Chicago Haymarket bombing. In that incident, several police were killed when a bomb exploded at a labor rally. Following the tragedy, eight anarchist leaders were convicted for the bombing and four were sent to the gallows. One of those men was our author, August Spies.

Paul: This is a memoir written at the time that the Haymarket anarchists were in jail. He married Nina Van Zandt, who published the book.

Elyse: Paul says our book is quite rare. The reason? Following Haymarket, anarchist pamphlets like these were swept up and confiscated by police.

Paul: In the early 1920's, Attorney General Palmer raided hundreds, if not thousands, of radical headquarters. Many copies of books like these would have been completely destroyed.

Elyse: Well, I think it's even more unique, because it has a stamp on it.

Paul: I've never seen a Lucy Parsons stamp before. That is amazing. Let me take a closer look at this.

Elyse: Okay. It makes sense that Lucy Parsons would have owned this book, Paul says. Along with August Spies, Lucy's husband, Albert Parsons, was one of the anarchists convicted for the Haymarket bombing. And the stamp appears authentic.

Paul: It looks aged and worn and as it would if it was from the late 19th Century. I don't see anything stamped under it. I don't see anything erased. I don't see any tampering.

Elyse: Paul is curious how our book survived all these years. But he says understanding why the book was written can help us learn more about Lucy herself. I'm meeting with Professor James Green, author of “Death in the Haymarket”. He spent years unearthing information about Chicago's anarchists.

James Green: I know this book well, it was a famous book at the time and, indeed, Lucy Parsons was a famous person.

Elyse: James says that like Lucy, our book is no longer as well known as it once was. Tell me a little bit about her.

James: She was born a slave near Waco, Texas, and met Albert Parsons after the war. And they got married at a time when Texas was in turmoil and emancipated slaves were fighting for their rights. Eventually they had to flee Texas for their safety and they came to Chicago.

Elyse: In Chicago, Lucy Parsons was drawn to the front lines of the struggle for better labor conditions.

James: Well, these were tough times in Chicago. People were going through depression after depression, there were wages cuts, there were strikes. There was a lot of confrontation with the police. People were killed in the streets. And the anarchists were there protesting this. They had started out, Albert and Lucy Parsons, as reformers. And they became socialists and said, well, we'll run for office and we'll get elected and we'll get the working people in. And then they felt they were cheated out of those elections and they became more and more militant. Told workers that they had to arm themselves to protect themselves. So there was really a kind of pressure cooker atmosphere building in Chicago on the eve of May 4th 1886.

Elyse: The anarchists and labor organizers had gathered in Haymarket Square to protest the shooting of workers at a factory the previous day.

James: The rally was peaceful. It was breaking up, it was beginning to rain and then the speakers noticed that a large squad of police were marching anyway to disperse it. But just as that was happening, someone threw a bomb and it landed in the ranks of the police, killing one of the patrolmen instantly, six others died later. There was wild firing by the police, probably hitting some of their own officers. Civilians were killed. It was a very tragic and bloody event. And people really feared that this was the beginning of some kind of revolutionary phase in American history.

Elyse: The courtroom speech in our book had been delivered during the Haymarket trial. Spies told the judge and jury that he had nothing to do with the bombing. James says although there was little evidence to convict the accused, hostility towards the anarchists from the Chicago media was deafening.

James: There were eight dailies and they were all condemning the anarchists. And they really called for this trail and a speedy execution, even though the police never found the person who actually threw the bomb. But because these anarchists were giving the violent militant speeches, they were the ones who were going to have to pay for it.

Elyse: I'm curious, did Lucy's husband or August Spies play any part in the bombing? James had something he wants to show me. Okay, so what are we looking for? His book includes a reproduction of a flyer published the day before the Haymarket rally.

James: This was the leaflet that August Spies had authorized. Another one was put out by his assistant that said, "Working men, arm yourselves." And Spies saw that and he said, you have to take that off, because this is going to provoke the police and I don't want any violence. Only about 100 of those calling for arms were sent out.

Elyse: And, what did the judge have to say about all this?

James: Well, let's see. "And the law is common sense. It holds that whoever advises murder is himself guilty of murder."

Elyse: Oh, that's pretty powerful.

James: Yes, it was. It set a powerful precedent and some people felt a very dangerous one.

Elyse: The crackdown on radicals following Haymarket lasted for decades. James says Lucy herself remained under police surveillance for the rest of her life. And when she died in a home fire in 1942, the police carted off her remaining belongings.

James: She died of smoke inhalation. And all of her books and papers and letters were confiscated by the police when they came to investigate and were never seen again.

Elyse: If the police were seizing anarchist books and Lucy's own possessions were taken when she died, how did this book survive all these years to wind up at Wesleyan? I'm meeting Bill Adelman, a labor activist and expert on the history of the anarchist movement in Chicago. This is the book that we've been talking about. And I wanted to know your opinion. What do you think? Bill thinks he knows how the book escaped the clutches of the police. But first, he explains why he's brought me here.

Bill: The words at the base are those of August Spies. His last words, "The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today." Now I want to show you something at the back of the monument.

Elyse: The monument was built to commemorate the anarchists who were executed for the Haymarket bombing.

Elyse: Okay. Oh, it's Lucy. She ended up right next to her husband.

Bill: And we'll give her a rose.

Elyse: As a labor activist, Bill pays homage to Lucy's memory. But surprisingly, although the stamp may be authentic, he doesn't think our book ever sat on Lucy's shelves.

Bill: I don't think this was ever any of Lucy's personal property.

Elyse: Our book may be evidence of Lucy's desperate struggle to keep her husband from the hangman's noose.

Bill: Well, you have to remember that when this book was written, Lucy was trying to raise money to save the life of her husband and the other Haymarket martyrs.

Elyse: Bill says a likely reason why our book was stamped with Lucy Parsons' name and had survived all these years can be found at the Chicago History Museum buried in news accounts and anarchists documents of the day.

Bill: Well, this is an article from the newspaper dated July 18th. That would be four months before the execution date of Friday, November 11th.

Elyse: What he showed me in the article gave me my answer for Stephen.

Elyse: First you asked me did Lucy Parsons own this book. And I can tell you that the book is authentic. It's from the 19th Century. But the book wasn't exactly Lucy's own personal property.

Stephen: I guess I'm curious about its providence and why that stamp is on there.

Elyse: The article Bill Adelman had showed me told a heroic tale of Lucy's devotion to her husband. As the clock ticked down on Albert's life, desperation drove her to a crowded park where she took possession of a refreshment stand to sell photographs of the Haymarket anarchists. But that wasn't all she was selling.

Bill: "She also had for sale a number copies of Spies' biography."

Elyse: Our book was evidence of Lucy's single-handed struggle with the Chicago newspapers.

Bill: And this was a way of her making money as well as telling the story of the Haymarket martyrs.

Elyse: Why was the book stamped with her name? Lucy often included contact information on her merchandise, 785 Milwaukee, so that people always knew where to come for more anarchist material.

Stephen: Wow. Now that's amazing. I'm just thinking about whose hands this must have passed through. I had no idea that it would lead to this.

Elyse: Well, the book's almost past due…so what are you going to do with it?

Stephen: Take it to special collections.

Elyse: Well, I think that's where it belongs.

Stephen: Yeah.

Elyse: After serving a six year sentence, the three remaining Haymarket convicts were pardoned by the State's newly elected governor, John Altgeld. He exposed a trial that had been wrought with abuses. That same year, the Haymarket martyrs monument was unveiled, four years after a statue commemorating the slain policemen was erected.