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“The Girls Were All Faithful”:
Organizing Local Union 172, United Garment Workers of America, at Long-Hargrove Manufacturing Company

by Vicki Betts

The decades leading up to World War I had seen the rise of two major movements in the United States—organized labor and women’s rights. In Tyler those two causes came together when the women garment workers at the Long-Hargrove factory created a local union and went out on strike during the middle of a major military uniform contract. With the assistance of members of the Cotton Belt union and representatives of the American Federation of Labor on the state and national levels, the women and girls at Long-Hargrove won their right to organize, and for the next eight years their civilian products proudly bore the union label.

Long-Hargrove Manufacturing Company was chartered by the state in early February, 1909, with a capital stock of $10,000. Richard B. Long, John Ennis Hargrove, and Gus F. Taylor incorporated the new enterprise to manufacture shirts and overalls. The three men were related by marriage. Gus Taylor was the brother of Richard Long’s wife Mattie Jane Taylor and the uncle of John Hargrove’s wife, Byrdie Taylor Hargrove. The 1912 Sanborn map shows Long-Hargrove to be on the second floor of 102 West Erwin, on the corner of South Broadway. By January, 1913, the company had increased its stock to $25,000.

At that point the factory moved to a two-story extension behind the five-story Moore Grocery Company, still standing at 408 North Broadway. Long-Hargrove used a 419-423 North College address according to the 1913 Tyler city directory. They filed a patent in October for Dragon Brand overalls and trousers, and by October, 1915 had been steadily increasing their workforce to be operating almost one hundred sewing machines. They advertised for seventy-five women and girls, no experience necessary.

Almost as soon as the United States declared war, Long-Hargrove seized the opportunity to secure a government contract to make uniforms. “Two hundred patriotic women are wanted at once to help [the] government clothe United States troops. . . Here is a chance for the women folks to show their patriotism and help their country as well as offering remunerative [sic] employment to them.” Factory owners agreed to turn out 20,000 complete uniforms per month, about...
one complete uniform every half minute. A govern-
ment inspector would be on hand to make sure that all
garments met the standards. Additional sewing ma-
chines were installed and more floor space arranged.3

The first uniforms were summer weight khaki
 drill. One Quartermaster Corps tunic for the Amer-
ican Expeditionary Forces survives in the Australian
War Museum. It includes a white calico label in the
lower right pocket printed “Long-Hargrove / Mfg. Co,
/ May 8th, 1917 / Spec. No. 1136, / St. Louis Depot, / Q.M.C.” All seams are double-stitched, and the jacket
features blackened bronze buttons embossed by the
Great Seal, manufactured by R. Liebmann in Newark.4

By June 6, the government contract had been
extended. Long-Hargrove agreed to produce 100,000
to 120,000 uniforms in Tyler by August 31, which was
the estimate of “all the uniforms it can turn out . . . in
time allotted.” That, of course, depended on the work
force. Five weeks later the Tyler newspaper headline
read “Employes [sic] of Uniform Factory Quit Work
Early This Morning.”5

According to a later report, on June 30 “the
girls” had met to organize a union “to secure better
working conditions and better pay.” When the manage-
ment heard about about the meeting, the girl who had
hosted it was fired. Other workers went out until she
was rehired, and when that happened they all went back
to work. The workers then approached J. M. Bogard,
blacksmith at the Cotton Belt, a unionized company,
to help them get a charter as a branch of the American
Federation of Labor. Ike Haskell, international orga-
nizer, spent several days in Tyler. Hargrove stated that
if every girl signed a petition to unionize, he would
consider it, but when the girls gathered signatures
during work hours, he ordered them from the building.
When they delivered a completed petition, he fired the
committee members, and his entire workforce went out
on strike. During negotiations they presented him with
a proposed wage scale and contract, but he “declined”
to sign it, stating “he will work whom he pleases and
pay wages he wanted,” which he declared were good
for the industry. Experienced machine operators
averaged $7 to $12 per week, and he was paying seven
cents per dozen more than similar factories and “never
discharged an employee except for infraction of work-
ing rules.” “We feel that there are enough patriotic
women who will be glad to work for the wages we have
been paying.” Hargrove backed up his challenge to the
patriotism of his employees by publishing a letter from
William E. Horton, Office of the Depot Quartermas-
ter in which “all concerned are requested to do nothing
which would in any way hinder or delay the progress of
the work.”6

By July 27, 1917, Tyler community leaders
became involved in the negotiations between labor and management at the factory. Employees met at the Tyler Labor Hall with Nat Gentry, representing the Chamber of Commerce, and John Bryant, a machinist working for the Cotton Belt, speaking for the women. The Chamber of Commerce committee went back and forth between the two sides, presenting terms, and declared that they were not far apart. The main sticking point was creating a closed shop, which management opposed. On July 28, the newspaper reported that “If both sides stand firm the strike will probably not be settled and Tyler will probably lose the factory.”

The women workers finally brought in Myrtle Berry of Dallas, representing the Garment Workers Union, to negotiate for them. Berry was the highest ranking female labor officer in the state, serving as second vice president of the Texas State Federation of Labor, vice-president of the Dallas Central Labor Council, and director of the Dallas Labor Temple Association. She also had personal experience as a financial secretary and business agent of the overall workers union in Dallas, and she was active in organizing women workers in Galveston, McKinney, Corsicana, Sherman, Houston, Denison, and San Antonio. On August 2, fifteen days after the women walked out, James E. Hargrove of management, and Myrtle Berry, representing the union, signed an agreement satisfactory to both sides. “The girls were all faithful, not even one deserting.” Local Union No. 172, United Garment Workers of America, became official.

Workers returned to their sewing machines the next day, with all old employees taken back without discrimination. Berry urged all union men to support both the women’s union and the factory. Hargrove announced that all efforts would be focused on producing uniforms to fill the government contract.

By late fall, 1917, Long-Hargrove advertised for six additional women to sew hooks and eyes on uniform coats, which was handwork, no experience necessary. They would be paid six dollars per week, for short hours. That might have been part of an additional contract that ended in mid-March 1918 with the completion of 50,000 uniforms. At that point the newspaper noted that the government inspector had gone home, and the factory, with a payroll of 100 women and girls, would go back to producing overalls. Two months later, however, they were working on a “still larger” contract, and Hargrove was discussing an additional contract with the quartermaster at Fort Sam Houston.

During the last week of September 1918, Hargrove traveled to New York City to put in a bid on 20,000 pairs of olive drab wool trousers. He returned home, evidently convinced that he had won the bid, and died on October 13, 1918 from influenza. After the war the company placed a claim for reimbursements for its expenditures on that bid, but were denied by the War Department Board of Contract Adjustment.

Also during the fall of 1918, Effie Slaughter and Amy Currie, representing Local Union 172, travelled to Cleveland, Ohio to the convention of the United Garment Workers. They presented a report from Tyler signed by Helen Edwards, president, and Nautie Parker, recording secretary, in which they related the history of the strike and its settlement. The report also noted that now Long-Hargrove was insisting on the union organizing in their branch factory in Shreveport—“They found the union worked to better advantage for both employer and employee [sic].” All of their members were in good standing, and they met every first Saturday with good attendance. As of August 30, 1918, when the report was compiled, they were still working on a government contract.

After the war ended Long-Hargrove returned to producing overalls, jumpers, unionalls, shirts, and pants. The newspaper advertisement of April 9, 1920, proudly proclaimed their products were “UNION MADE.” In 1923 The Garment Worker noted that Long-Hargrove was still authorized to use the union label. However, after wartime labor shortages and government contracts disappeared, across the country corporate management began establishing open shop
associations, and labor power faltered. By 1924 Local Union 172 had failed—Long-Hargrove no longer employed union members nor used the union label. The company still advertised in 1925, but by 1926 Lipstate’s Department Store announced a sale of the entire stock of the company bought at fifty cents on the dollar. Evidently the company had closed.¹³

Of course that was not the end of clothing manufacturing in Tyler. A. F. Sledge, president of Moore Grocery Company which occupied the adjacent building facing Broadway, bought Long-Hargrove’s machinery and equipment and had the building and sewing machines overhauled. Sledge Manufacturing organized in November 1927 beginning with 25 to 30 sewing machines overhauled. Sledge Manufacturing continued in operation until the early 1960s.¹⁴

Footnotes


