



Funsten Nut Strike Manuscript (S0098)

Collection Number: S0098

Collection Title: Funsten Nut Strike Manuscript

Dates: 1974

Creator: Fichtenbaum, Myrna

Abstract: In May 1933, employees of St. Louis-based dried fruit and nut dealer Funsten Nut Company demanded and received higher wages by striking. The collection consists of a thesis by St. Louis University student Myrna Fichtenbaum, entitled “The Funsten Nut Strike May, 1933”. The paper discusses the local historical setting, the sequence of strike activities, and the connections with the labor movement and Communist Party.

Collection Size: 0.01 cubic foot
(1 folder)

Language: Collection materials are in English.

Repository: The State Historical Society of Missouri

Restrictions on Access: Collection is open for research. This collection is available at [The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis](#). If you would like more information, please contact us at stlouis@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

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Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *Funsten Nut Strike Manuscript* (S0110); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-St. Louis [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-St. Louis].

Donor Information: The papers were donated to the University of Missouri by Myrna Fichtenbaum on May 29, 1974 (Accession No. SA0407).

Related Materials: Additional materials related to the Funsten Nut Strike Manuscript can be found in the following collections:

St. Louis Women’s Labor Conference Collection (S0110)

Notes: The thesis was later revised and published in 1991 by International Publishers, New York as *The Funsten Nut Strike* (ISBN 978-0-7178-0696-6).

Processed by: Emery Cox and AJ Medlock February 19, 2020.

Historical Note:

In 1974, Myrna Fichtenbaum wrote a paper entitled “The Funsten Nut Strike May, 1933” as a senior thesis in the Department of History at St. Louis University. The thesis documented a series of labor disputes in the nut industry in St. Louis during the Great Depression that culminated in the doubling of some wages and equal pay for black and white workers.

The R. E. Funsten Company (Funsten Nut Company) was a St. Louis-based corporation that dealt in dried fruits and nuts, especially pecans. They employed workers, chiefly black women, to separate nutmeat from the shells. These workers, called “nut pickers,” labored under poor, unsanitary conditions and had had their wages cut up to five times between 1931 and 1933.

An unidentified African American member of the Communist Party, who had family members who were employees of Funsten, approached nut pickers in early 1933 about organizing their workplace. The workers elected committees and decided on demands of wage increases, equal pay for black and white workers, and union recognition. Employee Carrie Smith, described as “a middle-aged, dynamic, black woman, with a strong sense of determination and justice,” became the face and overall leader of the strike actions. At a mass meeting on May 13, 1933, she held a Bible in one hand and a brick in the other and said, “Girls, we can’t lose.” The workers voted to strike beginning on Monday, May 15.

Picketers, strikebreakers, and police scuffled over the next several days, and about one hundred women were arrested. After further demonstrations and a meeting mediated by the mayor’s office, management and employees reached an agreement on May 23, and nut pickers soon joined the Food Workers Industrial Union. There were additional labor disputes in subsequent months, following layoffs and disagreements over union policies.

The St. Louis Women’s Labor Conference met in November 1973 to discuss working women’s issues, such as organizing the unorganized and equal pay on a gender basis. Fichtenbaum, who was on the conference committee, wrote the paper soon after the conference convened. In the introductory pages, she mentions the labor conference and compares social and economic circumstances in the 1970s to those in the 1930s. In her conclusion, she states that the nut pickers’ strike was a result of workers’ material conditions, labor unionism as a movement, and the activities of the Communist Party/Unemployed Council.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged into one folder.

Scope and Content Note:

The collection comprises one document, “The Funsten Nut Strike May, 1933”, that was written by Myrna Fichtenbaum as a senior thesis for the Department of History at St. Louis University. Appendices I through IV are mentioned in the text but are not present in the collection. Fichtenbaum discusses the historical background, including economic conditions (with a

particular focus on women and African Americans) and an overview of the nut industry in the St. Louis area. She then gives a detailed timeline of labor actions and negotiations. In Fichtenbaum's analysis, she explains the roles of other organizations, such as the city government, Communist Party/Unemployed Council, and the Urban League of St. Louis.

Container List:

f. 1 Funsten Nut Strike Manuscript, 1974

Index:

Index Term	Folder
African American women--Missouri--Saint Louis--History--20 th century	1
Communism--Missouri--Saint Louis--History	1
Communist Party of the United States of America	1
Fichtenbaum, Myrna	
Funsten Nut Company Strike, Saint Louis, Mo., 1933	1
Saint Louis (Mo.)--Commerce--History--20th century	1
Saint Louis (Mo.)--Economic conditions--20th century	1
Saint Louis (Mo.)--History--20th century	1
Smith, Carrie	1
Strikes and lockouts--Missouri--Saint Louis	1
Urban League (Saint Louis, Mo.)	1
Working class women--Missouri--Saint Louis--History--20 th century	1