

FIGHTING FOR THE UNION The Story of Min Matheson and

WHEN? 1940s

WHERE? Wyoming Valley, PA.

EVENT Min helped to locally organize the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).



VOCABULARY

garment
union
runaways
ILGWU

Due to the rise in the use of natural gas and heating oil, there was a decrease in the need for coal. As a result, miners worked fewer days which increased the financial strain on their families. Women and young girls who were already working in silk mills that supplemented income now in some cases became the primary breadwinner. Garment factories in New Jersey where the owners had to pay higher wages to union workers found a new home in Wyoming Valley where workers could be paid less. And the factory owners would not have to bargain with the ILGWU—the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and their cry for higher pay and safer working conditions. Valley men, women, and young children found much needed work in the industry.

In the mid-1940s Min Matheson and her husband Bill moved to Kingston, Pennsylvania. She became the General Manager of the Wyoming Valley District for the ILGWU and Bill took over as the Director of Education for eastern Pennsylvania.¹ She found many of the workers were in unsafe conditions, sometimes forced to work two and, at times, three shifts in order to keep up with the orders for garments. Hours were long—12-14 hours six days a week. Unsafe conditions led to many accidents as workers grew tired, they also were more easily injured. Bosses often belittled the worker to force compliance or pressure the employee to work faster. Wages were paid “by the piece.” The worker was paid only when she completed the stitching on one piece. If the worker did the work quickly and had high quality, she could earn more. However, the wages were frequently very low, and the boss often cheated the worker.²



The garment industry employed not only those who worked in the factories, but tailors, dressmakers, haberdashers (men’s clothiers) and milliners (women’s clothiers), as well as children’s clothiers. There were nearly 80 shops in Pittston that competed for the wallet of those who sought to buy clothes.³

The union garment shops were few (6) when Min came to the valley and there were only 650 workers who belonged to the union. She was able to organize employees in several areas around Pittston

like Kingston and Wilkes-Barre without too much trouble but in Pittston is where she encountered organized crime—the Mob. They were not going to let the union cut into their profits by raising wages. And they had the cooperation of the police to help keep the union out.

Min seemed fearless when confronting injustice no matter what the circumstance or who was involved. Her tireless energy and constant encouragement to get those sympathetic to the labor cause elected to political office such as school boards, work in civic causes, establishing a health center on South Washington street in Wilkes-Barre, and a mobile health care unit the first of its kind, endeared her to those who worked in the industry. So, when she called for a strike in 1958 in Pittston (known as the Dress Strike), over 6,000 workers walked off the job. They won several concessions including a 35-hour work week. By the time Min and her husband left in the mid 1960s, nearly 11,000 people were members of the Union in 140 shops. However, the surging number of imported goods and the movement of factories to the South where wages were lower created a decline in the garment industry in the following decades. With the loss of jobs, the number of union members also declined.

Endnotes

¹[Fighting the Mob](#)

²[Fighting the Mob](#)

³[Garment Strike in Pittston](#)

CHECK IT OUT ONLINE:

[Fighting the Mob](#)

[Garment Strike in Pittston](#)

PRINT SOURCES

Wolensky, Kenneth; Wolensky, Nicole; Wolensky, Robert. *Fighting for the Union Label*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2002.

1. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

2. Research how Min Matheson helped Wyoming Valley during the Agnes Flood of 1972.
3. How did Min go about winning the trust of garment workers?
4. Consider doing a living history impersonation of Min doing a speech about joining the union.