

Chronology of Crab Picker Struggles-Crisfield, Md.

Sept 8, 1931

Crab packing houses reduced rates from 35 cents a gallon to 25 cents a gallon. Nearly 300 crab pickers quit working and went on strike. They marched door-to-door through Crisfield enlisting support.

Between 700 and 800 crab pickers from 22 crab-picking houses, of whom 100 were white, joined the strike. The strikers had the support of a racially mixed group of oyster shuckers.

The owner of J.C.W. Tawes packing house demanded that Mayor William Bradshaw intervene in the strike. Bradshaw brokered an agreement where some packing houses agreed to a compromise rate of 30 cents a gallon. The deal failed and the strike ended in defeat.

The federal government initiated an investigation of intolerable working conditions faced by crab pickers. Worker advocates called for crab pickers and oyster shuckers to be classified as wage workers and paid an hourly wage.

In response to federal inquiries, the packers raised the rates back to the 35 cents per gallon level.

The courage of the Black women crab pickers is underscored by the wave of white supremacist violence that shook the Eastern Shore the same year, two years after the stock market crash of 1929. On December 4, 1931, a white mob lynched and set ablaze a twenty-three-year-old Black man named Matthew Williams. The story of the lynching and the complicity of powerful residents is recounted in *The Silent Shore-The Lynching of Matthew Williams and the Politics of Racism in the Free State* by Charles L. Chavis Jr.

Two years after the lynching of Matthew Williams, George Armwood, was lynched on the Eastern Shore. Once again, despite public knowledge of the perpetrators, no one was arrested for yet another deliberate and horrific crime.

December 1935

Crab packing houses unilaterally reduced rates. One hundred workers struck, temporarily closing all but three packinghouses that had not reduced rates.

1937

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) launched a movement that organize male and female, black and white workers into single industrial unions.

The first big battle in the seafood packing industry occurred at the massive Phillips packing plant in Cambridge, Md. Over 2,000 black and white workers waged a two-week struggle for wage hikes and union recognition.

In November, three organizers from the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America were run out of Crisfield by a crowd of 50 whites, while attempting to organize oyster shuckers.

The *Washington Post* reported that Mayor Bradshaw asked organizers to “withdraw peacefully” from the town because it “was not the proper time for their efforts.”

April 4, 1938

Crisfield faced dire economic circumstances. Three hundred garment workers had been thrown out of work when factories closed. One town official estimated that 90 percent of the Crisfield workforce was unemployed.

The town’s packing companies cut crab pickers pay from 35 cents per gallon to 25 cents per gallon.

April 6, 1938

Six hundred predominantly African American women crab pickers walked out on a five-week strike. They demanded that the rates be restored to 35 cents and that the packing companies recognize the CIO as their union.

Local stores were pressured to cut off credit to the strikers, but the CIO organized a food committee and began raising funds for food for strikers among unions and churches in Baltimore.

The workers—mostly African American women—held meetings to keep the strike organized and cope with their lack of income at the Shiloh United Methodist Church, just off Rte. 413 on N. Fourth St. at the entrance of town.

April 21, 1938

A white crowd, estimated at between 100 and 300 gathered near a black section of town on N. Fourth St. The mob broke into the home of two sisters who were on the strike committee, Eleanor Coulbourne and Martina Cooper.

The mob overturned the car of CIO organizer Mike Howard. The car, parked in front of Shiloh ME, was set on fire.

The *Afro American* reported that members of the mob threatened to “burn the whole block.”

Crisfield Sheriff William Dryden made no arrests for the mob action. The next day, CIO organizer Leif Dahl was forced out of town by vigilantes.

The *Washington Post* reported that another CIO organizer was taken down a dirt road by anti-union white workers and told to “get out of town.”

Maryland Gov. Nice assigned the state’s commissioner of labor to attempt a settlement of the crab pickers strike. Before the state officials arrived in Crisfield, anti-union workers drove Stanley White, a federal mediator who had been dispatched to Crisfield out of town. Then they escorted Howard out of town, while firing weapons in the air.

Media Commentary:

The *Baltimore Sun* editorialized: "One need not pass judgment on the merits of the strikers' demands to insist that a community has failed in its duty when its police do not protect a labor organizer or an official interested in settling the strike. The situation in Crisfield is confused by the race issue, since the crab pickers are almost entirely Negro women, but that fact, while it may explain the antics of the vigilantes, does not excuse them."

The *Afro American* reported; "Observers here point out that the defiance of the packers is one of the most open revolts against the National Labor Relations Act and are watching to see what the NLRB will do in the Crisfield situation where both labor and racial rights have been invaded.

On April 30, the *Baltimore Sun* filed an in-depth article by Alfred Charles, an Eastern Shore resident. Entitled, "Crisfield Merchants and Citizens Lay Crab Pickers Strike to CIO," the article gave the impression that packers might be willing to settle the strike, but not to bargain or sign a contract with the CIO.

Vigilantes began stopping all cars coming into Crisfield attempting to stop food shipments destined for strikers. The *Afro American* reported that "Crab packers, who have openly defied all constituted authority, together with local officers and leaders, have resorted to the tactics of starving the striking crab pickers in order to force them back to work."

May 3, 1938

Three of the striking crab pickers, along with CIO organizer Mike Howard traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with elected leaders, Labor Department representatives and federal mediators. Sen. Robert LaFollette (Prog.-WI) promised to carefully consider their request for an investigation.

The *Afro American* reported that "Packers have let it be known that the women sent to Washington to complain to the government won't be safe if they return to Crisfield.

The same day, the union filed charges that 11 Crisfield packing companies were violating the National Labor Relations Act.

The packers did not attend scheduled meetings to meet with the union claiming the plants were closed, not because of the strike, but because of unprofitable operations.

As the strike moved into the crab season, watermen were forced into longer, more expensive trips to sell their crabs elsewhere and the Crisfield packinghouses were losing money to packers in other towns.

May 9, 1938

Most of the large packing houses broke ranks and gave in to the workers' demands. Representatives of eight packinghouses met with Mike Howard and agreed to the terms of a contract.

May 10, 1938

An agreement was signed restoring rates to 35 cents a gallon and recognizing the CIO cannery union as the bargaining agent for the workers. Howard, whose auto had been burned and who had been run out of town more than once, signed for the union.

The agreement was among the first large seafood worker contracts on the East Coast.

1942

The cannery union organized oyster shuckers in several Crisfield plants.

1944

The cannery union became the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America and was by then a leader among unions for the rights of women. Sixty-six percent of the contract nationwide contained "equal pay for equal work" provisions, 75 percent contained maternity leave without loss of seniority provisions, and 44 percent of its elected representatives in the food service division were women.

The union came under attack after World War II for being dominated by communists and was expelled from the CIO in 1950.

1948

Seafood Workers Local 453 was voted as the exclusive bargaining agent for all packinghouses in Crisfield. The union made significant gains in wages and working conditions from the 1950s until the end of the 1980s. However, the ongoing decline of the Chesapeake Bay crab and oyster harvests and the related closure of nearly all packinghouses meant a long, slow decline in membership. The closure of Mrs. Paul's frozen fish plant put an end to the union in March 1990.

Note:

All information in the chronology is drawn from an article, "600 Black Women Stand Strong: The 1938 Crab Pickers Strike" by Craig Simpson, former Secretary-Treasurer of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, and a graduate of the National Labor College. Simpson can be reached at: Washington_area_spark@yahoo.net

<https://washingtonareaspark.com/2012/12/05/600-black-women-stand-strong-the-1938-crab-pickers-strike/>

Another important reference to crab-picking on the Eastern Shore is "The Smith Island Crab Coop: Women's Work in the Chesapeake Bay" by Paulina Guerrero.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/1bb157c83b93b12b1626f96359d22ef1/1?pg-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

