

# 100 years later, forgotten 'Girls' are honored

CHEHALIS — Washington unions donated time and money to help build a monument at the unmarked grave of eight young women — “The Girls” — killed in a flash fire in 1911 at the Imperial Powder Company. The tragedy transformed enforcement of workplace safety regulations and worker rights in the United States, yet it's gone virtually unrecognized for nearly a century.

That all changed Nov. 1, with the unveiling of a memorial for Ethel Tharp, 20; Tillie Rosbach and Ethel Henry, both 18; Sadie Westfall, Bertha Hagle and Eva Gilmore, each 16; and Vera Mulford and Bertha Crown, both 14 — “The Girls.”

“As young as these girls were, their deaths served a purpose — it contributed to an aggressive push to reform labor and workers' compensation laws in our state,” said Jeff Johnston, president of the Washington State Labor Council, who spoke before more than 100 people at Pioneer-Greenwood Cemetery in Chehalis.

The story of “The Girls,” was rekindled a few years ago following mention of it in a column in the local newspaper. The article prompted local historians to research the incident, which resulted in more articles in the local newspaper.

In 1911, Chehalis was booming. New businesses were moving in along with European immigrant labor and



**Cemetery owner John Panesko, a semi-retired attorney and anti-union conservative talk radio host, addresses the crowd and acknowledges several members of a local group who banded together to make the memory of the eight, now commonly known as “The Girls,” a reality.**

plenty of unskilled workers anxious to earn a paycheck. The Imperial Powder Company was welcomed to a location on Coal Creek Road to supply explosives for underground coal mines and for farmers to remove stumps to clear fields for needed crops. Workers were routinely subjected to long hours, hard work, and dangerous conditions.

That same year, the Washington Legislature enacted laws protecting workers from unsafe conditions. Child labor laws were already on the books,

but none of the laws were enforced.

On the afternoon of Nov. 1, 1911 — less than eight months after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City killed 146 workers — a flame ignited the powder dust in the packaging room of the Imperial Powder Company. The intense fire flashed so quickly that the eight girls packing powder into boxes didn't have time to run for the door. Seven died at their work benches, their bodies burned beyond recognition.

The entire community was in shock.

A hastily-called coroner's inquest jury was made up of town leaders who had invited the powder company to the area. Even though company managers were known to smoke cigarettes near the packing room, in half an hour the inquest jury ruled they didn't know the cause of the fire — but the company was without guilt. The news of their decision enraged citizens throughout the country,

and public pressure forced governmental agencies to begin serious enforcement of workplace regulations.

“It was one of the last straws. It created a feeling nationwide that this could not go on,” said newspaper columnist Bill Moeller, who in August shared the story of the tragic event, the discovery of the group gravesite, and the efforts to raise money to memorialize “The Girls” with delegates of the Thurston-Lewis-Mason Counties Central Labor Council.

In those days, Moeller said, labor was in extreme trouble, with unions fighting for a 10-hour day, 6 days a week, and the right to be paid in dollars and not company scrip.

“This turned the tide for organized labor,” he said.

The community, however, was anxious to forget the whole event, and did nothing to memorialize the girls' deaths. The location of the graves was quickly forgotten. The cemetery where they were buried was abandoned and became an overgrown jungle of impenetrable brush and rotting trees.

The land was purchased some 20 years ago by John Panesko who, ironically, is an anti-union, conservative local radio talk show host in Chehalis. Panesko was with Moeller at the labor council meeting in August. He told del-



egates that following an illness in 1993 in which doctors told him to start putting his affairs in order, “I made a deal with God; I basically said, ‘you keep me alive, I'll clean this (the cemetery) up; I'll put it back the way it was 100 years ago.’”

The Thurston-Lewis-Mason Counties Central Labor Council donated \$1,000 and began spreading the word in the labor community. The Washington State Labor Council, Washington State Building Trades Council, and many locals donated funds. Jared Ross and Peter Lahmann, members of Laborers Local 252, volunteered to place a four-ton concrete pad for the foundation of the monument. Ross is an organizer for the Laborers District Council and Lahmann is the apprenticeship coordinator for the Laborers for SW Washington.

“I had no idea about these girls or this story,” said Lahmann, 55, a life-long resident of Lewis County and recently-elected vice president of the Lewis County Historical Society. “Once I heard the story, I knew we had to do something to get the story told.”

Donations are still being accepted for signage, benches, and upkeep of the memorial. Donations can be made to: “The Girls Monument Fund,” Security State Bank, P.O. Box 900, Chehalis, WA 98532.

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