

HISTORICA

# The Legend of a Fiend: John "Blackjack"

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Sometime in 1905, Yiannis Petrolekas arrived in San Francisco. No more than sixteen years old, Petrolekas faced all the same prejudices and opportunities may other Greeks of his generation were to experience on American shores. The choices Petrolekas was to make defined him as a man and as a historical figure.

There is no question that Petrolekas led a life far, far different from the average Greek-American. And I would be among the very first to advocate his life be reintroduced into the general historical accounts of Greeks in the United States. Petrolekas, who changed his name to John Jerome, became a wealthy very well-known public figure. And here is where we must move with some care. For by reviewing Jerome's life we are forced into an entirely new consideration of an old-American stereotype, the Greek immigrant as strike breaker.

By 1920, after years at various and sundry occupations, Jerome formally established the Jerome Detective Agency of Los Angeles. This agency was initiated for the expressed purpose of serving as a professional strikebreaker service. While employed briefly for an electric street car company Jerome quickly realized that a great deal of money could be made from the ongoing labor disputes between the tramway company owners and their workers. Consequently, Jerome specialized in "street railway strikes, his men, according to Tramway officials, being trained experts in the handling of electric cars (Denver Post August 2, 1920)."

Let us be clear, the Jerome Detective Agency was nothing less than an organization hired to sabotage any and all labor



On the dark side of the Greek-American immigrant experience: makis in 1927, 10 years before their marriage. Daisy's mother

strikes. Jerome would hire unemployed men, most often World War I veterans, who were desperately looking for a day's wage to break through the picket lines throughout the 1920s. As a professional strikebreaker, it is always asserted, that Jerome literally made millions. It also earned him the nickname 'Blackjack' because of a club he carried during the strikes. Jerome's later life, based on his earning as a strikebreaker, as a real estate investor and the owner/operator of a dog track (which was notorious for gambling) are not our concern here. To gain insight into this man and his methods we need only focus on one of the various strikes in which he was employed.

At 5AM on August 1, 1920, local division 746 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electrical Railway Workers in Denver Colorado voted for a

strike 887 to 9. The city had denied the union an increase in wages from 48 cents an hour to 75 cents an hour. A reported 1,100 individuals went out on strike. On August 2, Blackjack Jerome and his men arrive hired by Denver Tramway Company officials. To assure that street car services continue Jerome came prepared with "armored cars with heavy wire screen." Denver's electric street cars were being run by Jerome's men or with those going to the Army hospital by soldiers attached to that facility.

Without missing a step on August 2, Jerome and his men barricaded themselves in the eastside Tramway Company barn and "issued a public statement declaring that they were instructed to shoot to kill (Labor World (Duluth) August 21, 1920)." "Before the riots the Denver Trades Assembly marched to City Hall in a body

## LOCAL COMMENTARY

# Blackjack" Jerome and Violent Strikebreaking



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nce, John Jerome with Daisy Econoher, Pauline, stands on the left.

de- and called the attention of the  
e in mayor to the danger of such a  
r to procedure and requested him to  
ted remove the armed thugs. Of  
on course he refused (The Toiler  
ack Cleveland) September 3,  
red 1920)." And what did the aver-  
age citizen of Denver see? "Ar-  
mored motor cars with machine  
guns mounted on them are pa-  
trolling the streets, with guns  
manned by former soldiers who  
served in the American army  
machine gun outfits against the  
Germans (Sun and New York  
Herald August 7)." On August  
3, the killings began.

In truth it is difficult to sort  
out from all the subsequent  
news coverage how many indi-  
viduals were actually killed  
and/or injured. Accounts vary  
but at the very least six men  
were killed and more than 80  
severely injured. But all ac-  
counts agree on one point: "not  
one was killed by a member of  
organized labor, and that up to

date no member of organized  
labor has been arrested changed  
with shooting anyone. The  
shooting was done by "Black-  
jack" Jerome's gunmen (Labor  
World September 21)."

After the violence was over  
and the workers returned to  
their jobs with no increase in  
pay a report was issued by the  
federal councils of the Churches  
of Christ condemning the ac-  
tions of city and company offi-  
cials. This study was undertaken  
at the insistence of a group of  
Protestant, Roman Catholic and  
Jewish churchmen of Denver  
(Boston Herald October 24;  
World Herald (Omaha) October  
24)." The report especially con-  
demned "publicity methods  
which pictured the working  
man as a radical and violent in  
contradiction to fact (Cleveland  
Plain Dealer October 24,  
1921)."

In 1953, after returning from  
a trip to Greece, Jerome suf-  
fered a heart attack and was  
found dead in his San Francisco  
office.

His funeral was a grand af-  
fair, attended by over 1,000  
mourners, among who were  
many local officials and impor-  
tant personalities. His funeral  
was postponed for 18 days be-  
cause of reactions from the  
union of undertakers: They  
were angry because "Blackjack"  
had broken one of their strikes.

Jerome's documented career  
as the leader of hired men  
whose only purpose was to stop,  
by any means necessary, any  
strike by common workers is be-  
yond contestation. As such  
Jerome now enters a select  
realm of Greek-American immi-  
grants who consciously op-  
pressed and even killed their fel-  
low Greeks (or others) for the  
profit of the Robber Baron class.  
With even this short review of  
Jerome's life we come to a finer  
grain understanding of this so-  
cial system of oppression. There

were in point of fact, layers of  
villainy.

Traditionally, in Greek-Amer-  
ican historical accounts the prin-  
cipal subjects of "Greek-on-  
Greek" crime have been the  
Greek labor agents, known as  
patrons. Men such as Peter Mer-  
les of Grand Rapids, MI who  
sought to form a national shoe  
parlor trust or Leonidas Solaris,  
known as Czar of the Greeks,  
who was the Greek labor agent  
for the entire Western United  
States. By juxtaposing Jerome  
against the Greek patrons and  
educated rogues such as Tele-  
maque T. Timiyenis and Dr. P.  
G. P. Attias, who sought to be-  
come leaders among the newly  
arrived Greeks but only so long  
as it was to their personal ad-  
vantage we now have a more  
refined sense of the modes of  
organized labor oppression ap-  
plied against Greek immigrants  
of the 1880 to 1920 eras.

Yet, inexplicitly, two writers  
have recently presented the life  
and exploits of Blackjack  
Jerome as if he were some kind  
of 1930s noir hero figure (don-  
herron.com/tag/blackjack-  
jerome; ekathimerini.com/.../  
resurrecting-the-legend-of-john-  
blackjack). Anyone who actually  
reads published accounts report-  
ing on John Jerome's daily ac-  
tions can only come to one con-  
clusion—this man was a fiend  
who made large amounts of  
money by unlawfully attacking  
Americans who were exercising  
their civil rights as outlined un-  
der the law. There is history and  
there is fiction. In terms of doc-  
umented historical accounts  
John Jerome is a classic exam-  
ple of a new kind of Greek-  
American villain, someone who  
was paid to stop "by any means  
necessary" peacefully assembled  
citizens from exercising their  
constitutionally guaranteed  
rights.

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