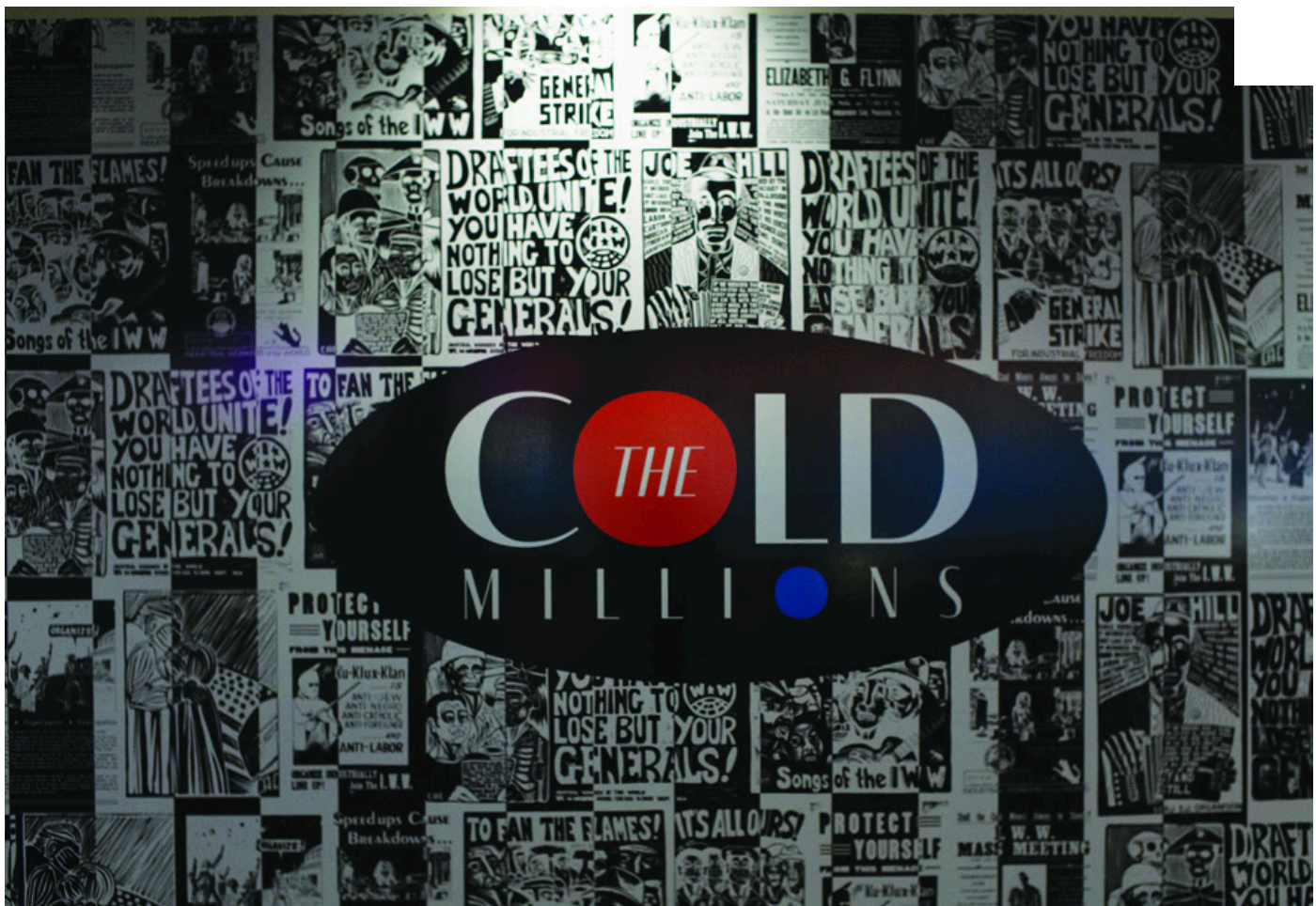


Examining Spokane's free speech fight

EWU history students highlight Wobblies' actions in exhibit at Central Library



RACHEL BAKER/FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW This wall design is part of the Eastern Washington University history student exhibit at the Central Library on Spokane's free speech movement, the setting for author Jess Walter's "The Cold Millions."



RACHEL BAKER/FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW “The Rebel Girl” Elizabeth Gurley Flynn led marches for free speech at the age of 19, while pregnant. These materials and more are part of the Eastern Washington University history student exhibit at the Central Library on Spokane’s free speech movement, highlighted in author Jess Walter’s “The Cold Millions.”

BY RACHEL BAKER FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

In 1909, Spokane became home to a landmark event in the United States labor movement.

Nov. 2 marked “Free Speech Day,” as declared by local members of the Industrial Workers of the World, and people gathered around a soapbox in the street, stepped onto it one at a time, said a few words to the crowd, and awaited arrest. Speaking on the street had been made illegal in Spokane through a city ordinance, with exemptions made only for religious organizations.

Arrest was the intention, overwhelming the city’s jail the consequence, and

the eventual repeal of the ordinance the result.

Today, this collective action is known as the Spokane free speech fight, and the real events and people surrounding this period of our local history is the setting of Jess Walter's 2020 novel, "The Cold Millions."

Now, the novel has come to life through a new exhibit at the Central Library.

The exhibit, "Cold Millions: The History of Spokane's Free Speech Fight" is open through March 31 and features photos, flyers, artifacts, books, and other displays, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the world of Spokane as it took its first steps into the 20th century.

It was curated and designed by a handful of Eastern Washington University students, under the guidance of history professor Larry Cebula.

Spokane Public Library adults services manager Vanessa Strange helped facilitate the collaboration.

"With all of my experience in doing exhibits in libraries, I gave them a framework to follow in terms of timeline, printing guidelines, space planning and how to keep their costs low with maximum impact," said Strange in an email.

What results is an immersive experience that helps visitors grasp how the city has transformed, but to also feel how impressions of history still linger.

At that time, Spokane was a town marked by the material and ideological growing pains of the Industrial Revolution. Railroads and resources brought investors and workers to Eastern Washington, and employment agencies seized their opportunity to connect the two, for a price.

"They were called job sharks by workers," said Benjamin Gallon, one of the EWU students who led the efforts in the creation of the exhibit. "The job sharks would make deals with work camps and companies to basically be recruiters in these cities to get these itinerant workers to go out to these far job sites. In exchange, they would get paid for every worker."

The agency charged a fee of about a dollar. If the job they paid for did in fact exist, as sometimes they did not, the worker would be sent out to a job site, usually north or west of town.

“You would work for about a week, and then the foreman would fire you.

They would charge you a little bit of money to get back to town, and you’d come back making barely enough to survive until you can pay for another job,”Gallon said.

Around this same time, a new union formed under the concept of “One Big Union,” uniting workers of all trades across the U.S. and internationally. The Industrial Workers of the World emerged in Chicago, and eventually made its way west to Spokane a few years after its founding.

The arrival of the IWW in Spokane focused the workers’ frustrations into collective action, eventually culminating in the free speech fight. All of the right elements had been in play for this influential moment to play out.

“After the Big Fire of Spokane in 1889, the whole city had been flooded with new money investments. A bunch of rich people from across the country saw their opportunity to get in on the ground floor. So we really had a huge income gap between the people who are doing the work and the people who own the work ... And this, I think, is kind of the perfect way to look at Spokane. It is the city of sixmonth millionaires and the poorest people that you can think of,” Gallon said.

Many Spokanites know of this time in the city’s history by the namesakes of the day’s notable capitalists carried on through our neighborhoods and landmarks, like Browne’s Addition and the Campbell House, or the Cliff/Cannon Neighborhood and Glover Mansion.

“The free speech fight is probably the most historically significant thing that ever happened in Spokane. It was very much a national phenomenon. It attracted the attention of the press from all over the world, Cebula said.

“The Cold Millions” author Jess Walter said it’s history that isn’t taught in schools here.

“And yet you can’t understand Spokane without understanding that time,” Walter wrote in an email. “And the issues of that time mirror the issues we face now.”

What Walter spends an entire novel exploring, Cebula's students were tasked with compiling into a single exhibit.

"We sort of hashed it out in class. 'What are the major themes of the book?' And those became the themes of the exhibit," Cebula said.

"We each did a specific section of, like, Spokane, or the people, or the characters" said Holly Claypool, another lead EWU student on the exhibit. "A lot of it was learning how to whittle it down, but still keep the heart and soul." Walter said, "It was inspiring to see students work so deeply to understand that era, and to bring their research techniques to a book that I wrote as fiction, but that I hoped would spark people in the Northwest to return to this important time in our history."

One of the featured figures in the exhibit is famed orator and organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

She arrived in Spokane as a pregnant 19-year-old, and was arrested along with the other demonstrators during the free speech fight.

"This is noticed immediately as a game-changer, to the point where I have found transcripts from the police saying, 'Well, we have to get her,' because she puts, quote, 'the fight into the men.'" Gallon said.

One of Claypool's favorite finds for the exhibit was the Spokane County jail registry from the Washington Digital Archives.

"I have some scans of it in there, and actually you can see Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's name and her description, and how much they put up for her bail and all of that," Claypool said. "And the fascinating part that I thought about it was in her description they don't describe her as pregnant."

Her first-hand accounts of the conditions of the jail were instrumental in building pressure on the city council, in particular, her reports of the female inmates being used for prostitution in the jail.

Two artifacts featured in the display, a leather flogger and a pair of handcuffs, speak to the way inmates were handled by police during this period.

"They are very different than the handcuffs we have today," Claypool said.

“They were separated. They were not really for containing your hands behind your back. They were more for grabbing you and then putting you in a position to where they could haul you away.”

Claypool and Gallon partnered with EWU graphic design student Jaeden Ives-crow to arrange this story into digestible and attractive panels and banners. Although Ives-crow’s work is majority web design, print design is his passion.

Ives-crow chose a simple color palette of black and white to harken to the print materials of the time, punctuated by contrasting red and blue to visualize the battle between the IWW’s “Wobblies” and the city. He carefully added iconography to highlight the exhibit’s themes.

“I landed on this idea of a big ladder in the background to represent the upwards momentum,” said Ives-crow.

Another visually and emotionally stunning aspect of the exhibit is tape recreation of the 8-by-6-foot jail cell dimensions, which were used to detain up to 28 people at one time standing chest-to-chest.

“It hits you on a different level,” said Gallon when asked what it was like to see a visual representation of the small dimensions.

The exhibit also includes a QR code to a virtual map of significant locations and events from “The Cold Millions,” created by high school students at the Community School, led by social studies and history teachers Nathan Seaburg and David Egly.

“ ‘The Cold Millions’ is really a great vehicle for students to be able to learn history,” Egly said.

“When we’re looking at ‘The Cold Millions’ and, for example, some of the jail scenes ... to be able to tell the students, ‘Hey, let’s look it up. Oh wow, the jail is where the Carrousel is now.’ ”

After reading through the book, Seaburg’s and Egly’s students picked one historical reference from the book to study, with their research culminating in plotting each reference on a map for public use. The map centers on downtown Spokane, but be sure to zoom out to see relevant location markers all over the world.

The city of Spokane was just in its beginnings, but it, and the world, would never be the same after the free speech fight which became a model for worker empowerment in the rapidly changing labor landscape.

“Spokane was home to perhaps the first successful nonviolent protests in American history – led by a 19-year-old pregnant labor activist who didn’t even have the right to vote.

I hope, as people dip into early 20th century Spokane, they also think about our own time, to see how much has changed, and yet how little,” Walter said.

For Claypool, she hopes visitors walk away with a new interest in their hometown, whether that’s Spokane or somewhere else.

“Just kind of taking a closer look, like, ‘Oh, what has my town been hiding away all these years?’ ” Claypool said.