



## Leaving Texas to Take a Stand: The Lucy Parsons Story

by Scott Sosebee

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(OCT 24 2022) I have written before in these spaces about the life of Albert Parsons, a leading labor and political activist who was executed for his alleged role (most historians agree that he was blameless) in the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Square bombing. But, as former radio and television personality Paul Harvey used to (sort of) say, there is a “rest of the story,” and that is life and experiences of Albert’s wife, Lucy Carter Parsons. Parsons became a noted activist of labor and anarchist causes in her own right, and throughout her life struck a chord of admiration among working men and women throughout the United States.

Lucia “Lucy” Parsons was born to an enslaved woman, Charlotte, in Virginia in 1851. Her father was likely either the man who enslaved her mother—Dr. Thomas J. Taliaferro—or one of his relatives. She and her mother lived near Richmond, Virginia, but in 1863, like a number of other southern slaveholders who feared losing their slaves to advancing United States troops, Taliaferro sent a large portion of his slaves—including Lucy and her mother—to McLennan County, Texas. These so-called “refugee slaves” were to be kept in Texas until the war’s end, which at that point the intention was to send them back to their original plantations. Of course, the Civil War did not end with a Confederate victory and eventually enslaved people in Texas and the South gained their freedom, including Lucy Parsons.

Lucy and her mother left the farm they had been held on for Waco after their freedom. Charlotte married a free-Black man named Charlie Carter, and Lucy—along with her two brothers—took his name as their own. Lucy made ends meet in Waco working as a seamstress and domestic in white households, and even found time to attend school long enough to learn to read and write. She also met and began a relationship with another former enslaved man, Oliver Benton. She and Benton had a child together in 1869, but by the time her son—Champ—was born in 1870 Lucy had begun to live with former Confederate soldier Albert Parsons. Their living arrangements was made necessary by Texas’ strict anti-miscegenation law that forbade interracial

marriage. The fact that he could not legally marry Lucy may have led Albert to take what was then a drastic step—he openly joined and affiliated with the Republican Party. Albert became active in politics and worked to advance Republican candidates, and he also found a Republican County official that agreed to marry he and Lucy.

Lucy and Albert's chances at happiness in Texas was short-lived. By 1872 the Democratic Party had returned to power in the state and, following in the policy ideas of these White "Redeemer Democrats," Texas officials began to harass and try to arrest mixed race couples such as Lucy and Albert. That led the couple to leave Texas for Chicago in 1873. They settled in a German section of the northern city and both became active labor and socialist politics. Albert helped to lead the notable "general strike" calling for higher pay and better working conditions in the summer of 1877 and he became a featured speaker at gatherings of workers, socialists, and anarchists all over the nation. He and Lucy worked together to start an anarchist paper, *The Alarm*, and in October of 1884 Lucy wrote an essay titled "To Tramps" in which she denounced capitalism and urged unemployed workers to seek revenge on their former bosses. She ended her essay with the phrase, "learn the use of explosives," a turn of words that would soon cause trouble for her husband.

Workers at the International Harvester factory in Chicago had voted to strike against the company in the spring of 1886. Albert Parsons, in his role as a labor leader, had made a number of statements in support of the action and was one of the people who had called for a protest at Haymarket Square near downtown Chicago as a pretense for beginning a general strike in the city and state of Illinois. During that protest, someone threw a bomb in the middle of the crowd that killed more than twenty people—including seven policemen. Unable to determine who threw the bomb, the police arrested Albert Parsons and seven other labor and anarchist leaders and charged them with murder. The trial was a sham and in November 1887, Lucy Parsons lost her husband to the hangmen's noose.

A good number of women may have retreated from public life after the tragedy of losing their husband, but Albert's execution only steeled Lucy's resolve in pressing their mutual causes. She had traveled around the country giving speeches and attending rallies to raise money for Albert's defense and potential appeals. Her campaign of fiery speeches and anarchist principles made her famous among factory workers and other workingmen, and after Albert's execution she continued her campaigns and work on behalf of anarchist causes. However, she also underwent a curious transformation. Racism in the United States was a constant, and the South did not have a monopoly on antagonism based on the color of one's skin. While she had been accepted in some circles, her race was a negative against her with many of the groups she spoke for. So, she "invented" a new background for herself. She "rebranded" her name as the former Lucy Eldine Gonzalez of

Buffalo Creek, Texas, the daughter of a Native American mother and Mexican father. People believed her because, as a woman of mixed-race heritage, she had light skin.

Armed with her new backstory, Lucy began to make a name for herself as a “firebrand” on behalf of anarchist ideas. She wrote for and edited anarchist newspapers and further angered “polite society” when she began a very public relationship with George Markstall, a younger, married German immigrant. She also openly feuded with other “radicals” of her day. She called Socialist Party leader Eugene Debbs “timid” and “too tied to the partisan political system.” She publicly excoriated free-love advocate Emma Goldman, presumably for “corruption,” but likely because she saw her as a rival. She did play a role in helping to found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Chicago in 1905, but then promptly began to quarrel with her fellow Wobblies. By the 1930s she had become an open member of the Communist Party and campaigned more against Franklin Roosevelt than she did any of his Republican opponents. Lucy Parson’s long life of conflict finally ended when a fire swept through her home in March 1942. She was buried in Forest Home Cemetery near Albert. With apologies to the late Mr. Harvey, now you know the “rest of the story.”

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