Best. Advice. Ever.

In 1937, Memorial Day had yet to be designated as a federal holiday that fell on the last Monday of May. Since the end of the Civil War, Memorial Day had been celebrated on May 30 every year, whatever day of the week that happened to be. That year it fell on a Sunday. So much of Chicago was celebrating with friends and families at picnics and parades.

For a gathering of striking steelworkers at Sam's Place, a tavern on the Southeast side of Chicago, it began uneventful. They had assembled at the bar to discuss the day’s activity – a union protest march which, in the depths of the Depression, was as common as soup lines.

When the demonstrators left the barroom that was serving as their union's headquarters they had no idea they were walking into history when they marched down south through a gray, gritty labyrinth of massive factories, modest homes, railroad yards and barge docks.

But at 118th Street and Burley Avenue, they confronted a phalanx of Chicago police drawn up in front of the Republic Steel plant, where the police and workers had clashed a few times since the current walkout had begun a few days earlier.

An AP photographer witnessed what happened next: "There was so much shouting I couldn't make out what was being said, but it looked like the police were trying to persuade the strikers to go home. Suddenly I heard a shot. The strikers immediately began throwing clubs, big ones, bricks and pieces of machinery. My picture shows the police ducking and trying to get behind a patrol wagon that was on the field."

When the dust settled, ten demonstrators had lost their lives and 60 more were injured; 40 police officers were hurt, too. Violence was not uncommon during these years of labor disputes, but this one was a little different. A Paramount News crew had also been on the scene and caught it all on film. As a result, the tragic encounter between the strikers and the authorities catapulted to national status with comparisons made to earlier labor struggles in Chicago, like the Haymarket Riot and Pullman strike decades before.

"Some of the police are shown swinging their clubs," noted a Tribune reporter after a screening of the footage. "Billows of gas are being wafted over the heads of the rioters. The motion picture is accompanied by sound effects, in which words are indistinguishable. Gun shots can be heard momentarily, perhaps a second or two. No shooting can be seen, and it is impossible to determine where the shots came from."

William Waltmire, pastor of the Humboldt Park Community Methodist church, eulogized at some of the slain strikers' funerals. "The men lying here had a dream of brotherhood," he said. "They sought to bring a new world, a good world in which men could live and be happy."

Forty-five years after that Memorial Day fracas, almost to the day, I began my college summer job at that same Republic Steel plant in East Chicago that by then had become something of a labor movement shrine. It was the summer of 1972.

It was an election year pitting the yet-to-be-disgraced incumbent Richard Nixon against the hapless lightweight George McGovern who had, to everyone’s astonishment, managed to wrangle the Democratic nomination, literally, against all odds. In fact, Jimmy the Greek, the popular Vegas odds maker of the day, was giving

20 to 1 odds early on in the primary season *against* McGovern making it to the nomination.

The United Steelworkers (USW) had formed on May 22, 1942, five years after the shootout in East Chicago. Since its inception, the union had always been firmly in the Democratic Party's corner. In 1972, they, once again, threw their support to the Democrat standard bearer and endorsed George McGovern.

To the rank and file, of course, this was a joke. The hard hat wearing salt of the earth that I worked along side at the steel mill *hated* McGovern. He represented all that was bad and anti-American about the sixties – hippies, drugs, peace marches, cowardly college kids - everything that was sending the country that they loved to hell in a hand basket.

And I looked like I had been sent from central casting to play the role of the object of their distain – a long-haired, college kid slumming in their backyard to make a few bucks on my summer break.

The first summer at Republic Steel I worked in the chemical laboratory right off the huge cauldrons mixing the vats of molten steel. Our job was to test samples of the steel to make sure the quality was consistent. My coworkers were all men, all white, all proud union members of the working-class who were, in some cases, second and third generation Republic Steelers.

The next summer, however, I could only get a job as a laborer. This was the bottom of the food chain in the steel mill. This is where the Mexican immigrants and African Americans worked. The working conditions were a full-on assault to the senses. The noise was so loud and piercing that my ears would remain ringing long after I got

back home. The dirt and dust stung my eyes and when I blew my nose black soot would come out into the Kleenex.

We wore hard hats and goggles, thick gloves and special steel-toed boots to protect us from our work-a-day activities. Part of our job involved separating the two foot by eight inch chunks of steel that a truck would dump out in a pile on to the cement floor. We used steel tongs that were about three feet long to pull the chunks of steel out from the big pile so another worker could chisel a serial number on the side of the chunk. From there the chunks would be sent on to places like the chemical lab where I had worked in the previous summer to be analyzed.

On breaks and at lunch the different ethnic group would congregate together. The Hispanics with their own, the whites and the blacks with their people. The white workers were grade school graduates, maybe. Many of them, like in the Chemical Lab, were second and third generation Republic Steel workers. But these guys really felt the pressure of the Hispanics and blacks encroaching on their turf. An issue their fathers and grandfathers had never had to be concerned with.

And as much as the white men I worked with the previous year didn't like me, these guys *really* didn't like me. The foreman would wait for me to do something wrong and slap me on the side of my hard hat saying "You fuckin' college kids, you don't know how to *think*!" It never bothered me, though. I felt I had it coming. I represented a middle class affluence they would never know. And, of course, I was just passing though. A tourist.

The individual I remember most was an older African American man. His name was Amos. He was turning sixty that year and was about to retire. He was built like a fit

and trim 35-year-old. I used to watch him hold court with the younger black men. He'd sit and listen to them with an earnest look on his face. He would offer his thoughts when they finished talking and they would usually nod in agreement.

Amos gave me the best advice about work and, really, life itself, that I think I ever got. Here's how it happened.

Sometimes when you were trying to pull free one of the chunks of steel from the pile they would get stuck. And I would pull and tug and curse like a crazy person trying to free it. One day while I was in the midst of my struggle, sweating from the infernal heat of the mill while I tugged and cursed at that the uncooperative lump of steel, this enormous hand came down gently on my wrist. It was Amos. I looked up at him through the dust and grime on my googles and he calmly said in his deep, rich voice: "Don't let that piece of steel make an asshole out of you."

Words to live by.

Which is not to say that I always followed his advice. I can't tell you how many times I let a job or a relationship or some other situation make a fool out of me. But I've always come around to remember what Amos said. Even if it were after the fact, I'd admonish myself, "Damn, I let that piece of steel make an asshole out of me."

At the time Amos gave me that advice I had no idea what was in store for everyone I worked with at the steel mill. The unique world that had been forged by the proud men of steel who marched, and sometimes died, to make it possible for me and my fellow steelworkers to have a job, was destined to go the way of the horse and buggy in a matter of a few years.

The sudden decline of American steel stunned the employees of mills across the Chicago area. Between 1979 and 1986, about 16,000 Chicago-area steelworkers lost their jobs. Wisconsin Steel closed abruptly in 1980 after attempts at a financial bailout failed. My own place of employment, Republic Steel, lasted until 1984 when it was bought out by a Texas-based steel conglomerate which itself declared bankruptcy two years later.

I've often thought about those lives that were so casually brushed aside, ruined, by the callous hand of fate. The worlds that were destroyed and the lives forever changed by that cruel turn of events. The steel workers' American Dream had run out of steam. And the government with its politicians, and the corporations with their bailouts, didn't give fuck-all about it or them. They just slinked away while these jobs, this way of life, this iconic American institution, just disappeared in a rusty cloud of grey and brown dust.

Poof!

I've often wondered where those 16,000 workers went. They were essentially unskilled. They didn't have a marketable talent except for the fact that they worked hard and believed in America, God and The United Steelworkers union. Where did they turn when all three, all at once, let them down? Did they wind up in the service industry earning pennies on the dollars they once took in? How many just gave up and retreated to a bar stool at Sam's Tavern where their fathers and grandfathers had once gathered before their marches?

I feel lucky and grateful for having been given the opportunity to dwell in their midst for a few short months. I got to know the pride of these working-class heroes up

close and personal. And I will always remember the sage words of Amos, that imposing figure with the shaved head and chiseled torso.

Don't let that piece of steel make an asshole out of you.

Best. Advice. Ever.