

With an “X” They Made their Mark

by John Cantey Knight

For Gary Nash

Always the union he talked
 as other men spoke of last night’s drunk
 or secretaries in office dresses
 and what a man ought to do. He interrupted them
 at break repeating the same words,
 then moved on to cajole others and speak
 of the union like some god come down
 to right a thousand wrongs. He knew
 each man’s story: “They passed you over”;
 “They treat us like dirt”; “Too much overtime,
 not enough pay”; “Too hard the work.”
 Over and over, like the whirl of machines,
 his voice tumbled: “Sign the union card”;
 “Think about it”; “Let the Walpole bastards pay”;
 “With a union we’ll have a voice”;
 “Alone, they won’t talk to you”;
 “Alone, they do what they want”;
 “Sign the union card!—There will be an election”;
 “Sign, we’ll have a voice”;
 “Sign it, now! And the bastards will listen.”

By the tall wire fence, he’d stand
 to hand with care a hundred leaflets and a word:
 “There’s a meeting, Saturday”; “We’ll have
 coffee and donuts”; “Bring the wife”;
 “The union man from Atlanta is making the trip
 to speak and talk to each of us.”
 In the card room where fiber dust
 covered men, machines, and floor to spin
 in white-coated cotton dust nostrils and lungs,
 he’d speak in the murmur of cylinders:
 “Be at the meeting”; “Hear what we have to say”;
 “We need your support”; “Bring the family”;
 “These Yankees from Walpole treat us like dirt.”
 Words like fiber dust stuck,
 and like cylinders of cards turned around,
 ripping raw fiber for finished cloth.
 Men with missing fingers eaten by machinery
 may not be able to sign their names,
 but with an “X” they made their mark.
 That day they made the Walpole bastards pay.