

## Flying Squadrons <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Flying Squadrons

by George W. Troxler, 2006

Flying squadrons, or motorcades of union picketers, were first used widely in North Carolina by the [United Textile Workers of America](#) <sup>[2]</sup> (UTWA) in the industry's massive [General Textile Strike](#) <sup>[3]</sup> of September 1934. Francis Gorman, vice president of the UTWA and chairman of its strike committee, developed the idea of organizing motorcades of workers who had succeeded in closing their own [mills](#) <sup>[4]</sup> and sending them to mills that were still operating. When the "flying squadron" of picketers arrived at a mill, they would call on its workers to join them. If persuasion failed, they would picket the mill. The workers' ownership of [automobiles](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and [trucks](#) <sup>[6]</sup> made possible the rapid movement of large numbers of union picketers from one community to another, and their arrival often took mill owners and law enforcement officials by surprise.

On 4 Sept. 1934 an estimated 2,500 picketers from Shelby shut down four mills in Spindale, and a flying squadron influenced the closing of the [Loray Mill](#) <sup>[7]</sup> in Gastonia. The same day, 30 members of a flying squadron were arrested in [High Point](#) <sup>[8]</sup> for trespassing. Flying squadrons also managed to stop operations in most of the textile mills in [Alamance County](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. On 5 September workers closed their own mills in Burlington, then made a "motor dash" to mills at Graham, Haw River, Ossipee, and Altamahaw before proceeding to Glen Raven. The local newspaper, sympathetic to management, described how the flying squadron "swooped down" on the Glen Raven Mill, where a handful of anxious employees "were driven from their work after a door had been battered down." Also that month flying squadrons helped spread the strike to mills in Asheville, Black Mountain, Shelby, Kannapolis, Concord, and Charlotte.

Contemporary sources do not present a consistent picture of the flying squadrons' impact, their composition, or their disposition to violence. A [University of North Carolina](#) <sup>[10]</sup> economics professor, speaking at the time of the strike, characterized the use of flying squadrons as an "unfortunate" strategy that had more than anything else alienated public sympathy for the striking workers. Although critics often described strikers as younger males who were prone to violence, women workers also took part in the squadrons, and oral history interviews with former strikers indicate that the squadrons represented a cross section of mill employees. Participation in a flying squadron was an exciting and invigorating experience for many previously unorganized mill workers.

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