

Swedish Roots

On October 7, 1879, Joel Hägglund was born to an impoverished family but in a home enriched by music. A railway conductor by trade, his father Olof was a skilled organist and sang alongside his wife, Margaretha Catharina, in a choir associated with the Free Church Movement.

Surrounded by music, Joel learned to play the organ and the violin. As a young boy in Gävle, he sang parodies of Salvation Army hymns to amuse his family and would tell absurd tales imagined from snippets of news stories.

After Joel's 8th birthday, tragedy struck the Hägglund family when Olof died. His mother struggled to raise the family and they often went hungry.

At age 12, Joel helped his family by working in a Gävle rope factory, processing flax into ship rigging. Within five years, Joel developed tuberculosis – a common industrial illness among those working with flax.

After years of intermittent odd jobs and treatments culminating in emergency surgery, Joel eventually recovered. He then worked alongside two of his brothers at the local shipyard where they joined the Gävle Workers' Federation, a lively union that also functioned as a social center.

After the death of their mother on January 1902, Joel and his brother Paul headed for America. They disembarked in New York City on October 28, 1902. 33,000 Swedes immigrated to the United States that year, most, like Joel and Paul, embarking from the port of Göteborg.

The brothers found life in America as hard as life in Sweden had been. As Paul wrote to family back in Sweden, he and Joel lived "a dog's life" their first year in America before parting ways. Joel, adopting the name Joseph Hillstrom, tramped across the country to find work.



Joel Hägglund, 1898
Photo credit: Arkiv Historik, 1908



Tuberculosis patients wrapped in blankets, late 19th century. Treatment included exposure to sunlight and fresh air.
Photo credit: Swedish Heart and Lung Foundation



Emigrants bound for England and America on steamer at Göteborg, Sweden, 1905
Photo credit: Library of Congress



Hägglund to Hill

After parting from his brother and joining up with fellow Gävle immigrant Oscar Westergren, Joel landed in San Francisco in time for the famous San Francisco Earthquake and fires of 1906. Disturbed by the tragic events, he wrote a lengthy account detailing his fear and survival, including how he used his childhood hymns as comfort during the catastrophe. Later, his account was published in his hometown Swedish newspaper, *Gefle Dägblad*. Not long after the earthquake, Hill and Karl Rudberg, a Gävle sailor who had jumped ship in San Francisco harbor, rode the rails to Portland, Oregon.

At some point as he trekked across the Western United States working whatever jobs he could find, Joel started using the name Joe Hill. The exact date is unknown as records of his life during these early years are sparse. Decades later, Wobblies told tales of Hill being part of a group who, in 1908, wrote song parodies in Spokane, Washington. These parodies, reminiscent of his old songs written to amuse his family, were used in IWW street meetings.

Founded in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, also known as “the Wobblies”) was actively organizing in many of the jobs available to recent immigrants (agricultural work, construction, dock work, timber). IWW halls served as libraries and cultural centers where union members shared tips on job conditions and who was hiring. Already familiar with unions from his membership in the Gävle Workers Federation, Joe Hill joined the IWW sometime between 1908 and 1910 and published his first article in the union’s Western newspaper, *Industrial Worker*, on August 27, 1910.



San Francisco Mission District burning in the aftermath of the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906.
Photo credit: Public Domain



Ten boys and young men hoe a field in Spokane, Washington, circa 1910.
Photo credit: Public Domain



The Wobblies' 1911 journey from Portland, Oregon, to Fresno, California, draws a crowd during their stop in Ashland, Oregon.
Photo credit: The IWW




Battle Songs and Blacklist

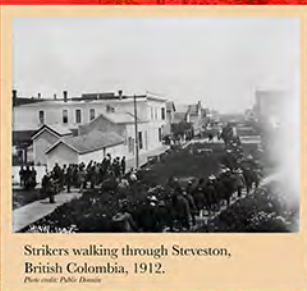
Eager and hardworking, Joe Hill quickly became active in the IWW, joining IWW free speech fights, fighting with an IWW battalion in the Mexican Revolution, writing articles for the IWW press, serving as a union organizer, and of course writing songs. One of his best-known songs, "The Preacher and the Slave," was published in the IWW's Little Red Songbook in July 1911. In September, a nationwide strike of more than 40,000 railway shop men inspired Hill's song "Casey Jones – the Union Scab."

In March 1912, Hill spoke at a giant San Francisco rally in support of Wobblies tortured and deported by vigilantes in San Diego. Soon after, he traveled to British Columbia to assist with the Fraser River Strike, an eight-month strike by railroad construction workers. He wrote songs to bolster morale along the 1,000-mile picket line, including "Where the Fraser River Flows."

He soon returned to San Pedro, California, a major shipping port, and in July 1912 was elected secretary of the San Pedro IWW longshore strike committee. After the strike was defeated, Hill and other Wobblies were blacklisted. He remained for several months, living in a shack on the edge of town and writing songs for the IWW press. But the bosses and police were determined to drive him out of town, and a year later, Hill left San Pedro after serving a 30-day jail term for vagrancy.

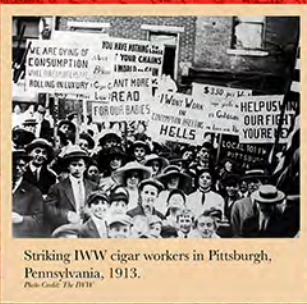
Knowing IWW organizers were active in Utah, Hill headed for Salt Lake City in 1913. Not long after he arrived, gun thugs broke up an IWW street meeting, and employers maintained a blacklist of known union men, including Joe Hill.

 A selection of songs and other audio elements can be heard at our listening kiosk located along the opposite wall.



Strikers walking through Steveston, British Columbia, 1912.

Photo credit: Public Domain



Striking IWW cigar workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1913.

Photo credit: The IWW



Hop pickers at Durst Ranch in Wheatland, California, August 1913. Hundreds of workers were arrested after deputies shot up a union meeting considering a strike vote.

Photo credit: The IWW

Frame-up and Execution

On January 10, 1914, former police officer John G. Morrison and one of his sons were murdered in Morrison's grocery store in Salt Lake City, Utah. As nothing from the store was found stolen, the murder was declared a revenge killing. Police had a career criminal in custody who they released in order to bring charges against Joe Hill, a person who had no motive, no prior record of any serious offenses, who did not match witness descriptions, and whose injuries were inconsistent with the crime scene. All available evidence suggests that this was a decision made by police on the theory that as a unionist, Joe Hill must be a dangerous man. Police shot, and nearly killed, Joe Hill in his bed on January 14 and then arrested him on murder charges.

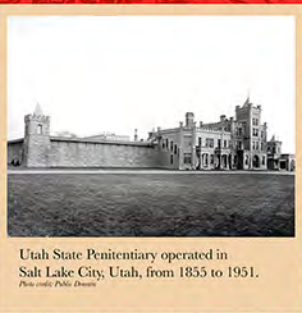
The prosecution's case turned on two pieces of evidence: Joe Hill's IWW membership card and the fact that Hill had received a gunshot wound the night the Morrises were killed. The evidence was flimsy, and authorities "lost" the transcript of the preliminary hearing. After months of delays, the trial began June 10 before a packed jury and a judge who "corrected" testimony from the stand when it contradicted the prosecution's case. Although Hill testified that he could not have been shot during the Morrison robbery, he was convicted and sentenced to death on July 8, 1914.

During his imprisonment, Joe Hill continued writing songs, and his case drew international attention. He also corresponded with IWW organizer and orator Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the Swedish minister to the United States, and many other friends and notable persons. Unions and other organizations held massive protests, and Helen Keller, President Woodrow Wilson, and religious leaders raised questions about the fairness of the trial. The Swedish government intervened after Utah's Supreme Court ruled that the state had no obligation to prove its charges, affirming the death sentence.

Joe Hill was killed by a firing squad on November 19, 1915. Tens of thousands of workers packed his funeral in Chicago on November 25, 1915. In accordance with his deathbed poem, "My Last Will," his body was cremated and the ashes were distributed around the world.



The Morrison Family, circa 1909. John, left, and his son, Arling, right, were murdered.
Photo Credit: Social Security Death Index



Utah State Penitentiary operated in Salt Lake City, Utah, from 1855 to 1951.
Photo credit: Public Domain



Joe Hill's ashes were placed in many small envelopes. These were sent to IWW members and sympathizers all over the world. Joe Hill's ashes were scattered over the earth with fitting ceremonies and the singing of his songs on May 1, 1916.
Photo Credit: Joseph A. Labadie Collection



The Man Who Never Died

Joe Hill's legacy was carried on by the IWW and by labor activists around the world. In 1930, Alfred Hayes wrote the poem, "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," which Earl Robinson turned into a song in 1936. The song has been sung around the world by artists such as Joan Baez, Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, Bruce Springsteen, and others.

Hill also appears prominently in poems and songs by Joan Baez, Paul Robeson, Ralph Chaplin, Chumbawamba, Otis Gibbs, Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, Kenneth Patchen, Carl Sandburg, and in John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy and several other novels. Hill's songs have become part of the folk canon, sung by generations of folksingers including Utah Phillips and Ani DiFranco, and introduced "pie in the sky" into the common American lexicon.

Even today, Joe Hill's ideals are seen as a threat. In 2004, Neo-Nazis firebombed the Hägglund family home in Gävle in 2004, but thankfully only caused limited damage. The family home has been restored by the Swedish Workers Centralorganization (SAC) and is open to the public as a museum.

But for all those who see his beliefs as a threat, many more see Joe Hill as a symbol of hope for the future of workers and immigrants around the world. In 1988, decades after Joe Hill's death, Chicano artist and poet Carlos Cortez distributed a packet of Joe Hill's ashes at a memorial to six IWW miners killed by Colorado state troopers during a 1927 strike. The strike had been called to demand the eight-hour day and the release of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants executed on similarly scanty evidence.

2015 marks the centenary of Joe Hill's death and it is being commemorated by concerts, exhibitions, labor conferences, and other events in countries including Bangladesh, Denmark, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States.



Paul Robeson sang the song "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night" for workers building Sydney's famed Opera House on Nov. 9, 1960.
Photo credit: The American



To honor Joe Hill, the Swedish postal service issued this stamp in 1980.
Photo credit: Andrew Jones



Linocut by Carlos Cortez, 1979
Photo credit: The IWW