

11. AWOC, Dolores Huerta, Norm Smith, final Bracero report

Henry: Well, this job that I was stepping into was in many respects a dream of heaven for me. I would be surrounded by people who felt as I do, or did, about the Bracero Program, the need for organizing domestic farm workers to take back their jobs, and so forth. I began at \$75 a week, which represented a substantial reduction from what I'd been getting from the University but I didn't give a damn about that. I also had available to me anytime I wanted it, the counsel of some of my dear friends and advisors. Father Thomas McCullough was one, he didn't have any formal position with the union, but the director of the union had a lot of respect for him and I had reason to believe that he would listen to McCullough's advice seriously.

AWOC (in case I haven't made it clear, that was the acronym for Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee), was financed by the national AFL-CIO, to the extent of an initial grant of \$100,000—more by far than had ever been committed to the organizing of farm workers in the past. Another one of the principals—well, I thought deserved to be one of the principals in the organization—was Dolores Huerta, who by now is internationally famous. But at that time her bona fides were largely that she had been a very effective organizer within the City of Stockton and had a lot to do with the organization called AWA—Agricultural Workers Association—which was one of the priest's ideas and which was a going concern until the field was preempted by the AFL-CIO.

Logically, Dolores should have had a very prominent position in the organizing hierarchy, because that was her forte. But, Norman Smith—and I'm finally getting around to naming the director of the whole operation—was something of a sexist. He didn't think that women had any place as labor organizers, and so all he could think of for a job for Dolores Huerta was as his secretary. And she was very good at it; when she had nothing else on her hands she helped me by typing my manuscripts, and at one point she took it upon herself to organize the contents of my desktop, which of course was a mess growing incrementally every day, as is my established habit.

Well, as I believe I mentioned last time, Norman Smith had no idea how to use the services of a Research Director—that was my title. So it was largely left up to me to make of it what I wished. So, among other things, I began writing what I call a series of research papers, and I cranked them out at quite a rate. In the first couple of months, (I just went back and looked at my archives) I found that I had written eight of them total, with pages of 105, on legal sized paper single spaced, so that was a lot of verbiage. I had Dolores run off 100 copies of each one and I had them mailed out to interested people, some editors in the major newspapers; at that time, any self-respecting metropolitan paper would have a labor editor; none of them do any more. I sent them to various people in the government agencies, and various labor unions that were sympathetic. And I even sent copies to the grower's organizations.

I did other things as well. I designed a membership card, which had a white hand and a brown hand and a black hand picking tomatoes. I wrote a script for a 15 minute radio program, because there was a local station in the town of Pomona, which was looking for something to

fill the time other than playing records, so we put on that and it went over pretty well. I made a banner – a huge banner – at the time the peach harvest was coming in, because the growers of peaches were always claiming that they had to have braceros or else their crop would rot on the trees or on the ground. So I made this huge banner that we put on the outside of our headquarters which said: “Labor Shortage or Wage Shortage: A Peach of a Question”.

I was doing so many things of that sort, that when a book was written about the farm labor movement recently by a woman that was doing a revisionist version of Cesar Chavez – and she had a few pages devoted to AWOC, which most farm labor histories don’t even mention – but she called me in this brief section of her book AWOC’s director of public information, which I never was. Because within a month or two, Smith took on somebody who really was from that field, his name was Lewis F. Krainock. His background I think was with the ILWU, one of the left leaning unions in the Bay Area. He was always a little mysterious about his background, but he was full of energy and he was quite adept at handling phone calls from reporters who wanted to know what we were going to do to finally organize farm workers, after many efforts had been made which had failed. He and I got along okay for the time being; later on not so well.

Now, the family was living in public housing for the first couple of months, actually a little bit more than that. It wasn’t very satisfactory. It did have one advantage, it wasn’t too far from corner grocery stores, but it wasn’t a very congenial atmosphere for the kids because almost everybody else in that housing development was Spanish-speaking. So, we went looking for a house and found one in a middle class residential area, and the costs in Stockton were amazingly low. We had bought a house in Claremont for \$12,500 – 3 bedrooms, 2 baths – but this was a house, much older, it was funky, but it had room and all they were asking was \$7,000. So, we bought it.

In the process of reading the documents that we needed to sign for making the legal transfer of title, we noticed that the deed carried with it ever since the house was built back in 1919, what they call a racial restrictive covenant in which the buyer had to affirm that he was not a member of anything other than the white race. But my wife of the time, whom I have called Pamela because that’s what she liked to be called, said we’re not going to sign that. So we prepared a wording and we told our agent that the deal was off unless this wording was accepted, and it goes as follows: “We do hereby declare and affirm, that we, together or severally, are or may be persons not wholly of the white Caucasian or white race.” The sellers and the agent and everybody else were willing to go along with us. So, I’ve kept that all the years.

This is of some interest I believe. After I’d been on the job for a little over a month, there was a need for somebody to testify on behalf of AWOC at some congressional hearing back in Washington. Norman Smith didn’t want to go, and Ernesto Galarza didn’t want to go, and so I was elected to go, and I had never been to Washington DC – I had been to Washington DC for my bracero study, but I always enjoyed going back East, so I went to that. Then, I took it upon myself to go up to New York and to call Pete Seeger who lived in a town called Beacon, a little bit up the Hudson River from the big City. Now, Pam had an enormous crush on Pete Seeger, and I suppose so did five million other women, but it was all perfectly innocent, he was devoted

to his wife Toshi. So I said that we were in the process of organizing farm workers, and would love to have a song that we could sing at our rallies to fire up the troops, and if I came up on the bus could he give a few minutes to composing such a thing. It would need to only be very short and simple based on some existing tune, which is the way the so-called folk movement of the time usually functioned.

So, they said come on up. And I did – I believe I went up on a Friday evening and ended up spending the whole weekend there. One of the peak experiences of my life. Seeger not only turned out a song about farm labor based on the tune “When the Saints Go Marching In” – the substitute words were “When the Crops Come Rolling In” – and also I carried with me, somehow or other I guess I had the idea when this whole trip started, that I might be able to see the great man; so I took with me a song that Pam had composed, about a wild flower in the forest and I asked Seeger if he could take that, which he did. I was able to help to some extent; he was in the process of doing some mason rework and I was able to help a little bit because he had a professional mason helping him who was kind of a protégé; he played the guitar and he himself composed songs based on hymn tunes and things like that. His name was Ernie Mars. He and I met again a little bit later down the road.

Anyway, after that weekend I returned to Stockton and had hoped to organize a membership meeting of AWOC – there weren’t very many members yet, but anybody was welcomed. As it turned out, there were spies from the grower’s organizations. The things that we said and the songs that we sang were later lampooned in the grower’s publications. I had the notion that this might be a singing union, because I believed that in the glory days of the CIO in the 1930’s, when they were organizing other unorganized workers, that they made good use out of songs based on tunes that everybody could sing along with because they were so well known. And usually at mass meetings they would hand out a song sheet which had the new words set to those tunes. I had the idea that we could do that, and maybe we would start having the kinds of successes that the CIO did back in its salad days.

So I got some of my friends from the University to come out to this meeting and bring their guitars. Norman Smith went along with this – to tell you the truth, I wanted to have a meeting that would not be dominated by Smith himself, because he was an orator of the old school, who once he got started didn’t know how to stop and he would easily go on for an hour or more. People would get bored and would drift away, and I didn’t want that to happen. So we sang a number of songs, including the one that Seeger had contributed. Most of them in the audience were not familiar with the folk – so-called folk song revival – and most of them I dare say had never heard of Pete Seeger, but the singing went off all right.

And then, a couple of guys in the front row who were Anglos, who were evidently fruit tramps as they say, that is guys who were specialists in ladder work. And the most recent crop involving their skills had been in Lake County picking pears, and so they volunteered to come up and tell us about their experiences at the pear harvest. Well, I saw no harm in that, and he then suggested that we form a local union, right there on the spot, with an election of officers and the whole bit. Totally unplanned as far as I knew; maybe this fellow had had it in mind all along, but I was in no position to say he was out of order, and so that is actually what happened. It

won't surprise you to hear that this fellow himself was elected chairman, or head of the local – whatever was the title. And the guy sitting next to him – I was chairing this meeting, unaccustomed as I was to any such thing, and I asked if there were any nominations for an assistant secretary or whatever was the title and the only nomination was for the guy sitting next to the guy who had done the talking. So, he was elected.

And at that point Norman Smith felt that things had gone far enough, and he took the floor and gave his stump speech in which he inveighed against what he called a licensed and legalized slave bracero program. Eventually the meeting broke up, and the next day when Smith had to report to his superior Jack Livingston, head of the organizing department of the AFLCIO, Livingston hit the ceiling and said that was absolutely out of line; the organizing committee did not have the authority to establish locals, only the national organization could do that, and the national organization was not prepared to do that. They were very leery about giving power to people such as these ladder workers who for all they knew might be tainted with left wing memberships, and some of the organizations on the attorney general's list, so they wanted to keep us all unaffiliated.

Now, I've already talked about the purchase of the house on Ramona Avenue; I've talked about Dolores Huerta, and I'm now going to return to the subject of Dolores. She and I were kind of an undercover team because our ideas about organizing were 180 degrees different from Norman Smith's. Norman Smith's conception of organizing the unorganized was to get them to pay dues, which were set at \$2 a month, payable only one month at a time. And the idea that Dolores had and which I shared, the idea also shared by Father McCullough, was to get people meeting in small groups – house meetings, maybe half a dozen people meeting at a time, who knew each other and trusted each other, and shared ideas about things that they might do working together on a small scale, in the way that AWA had during its brief months of existence. We thought that the success of that organization was so self-evident that Smith would surely get the idea that he should try it. And in fact he did try it, once. He went to a house meeting that was set up by Father McCullough, and he launched into his standard speech which went on for an hour and everybody was turned off, including Smith himself, since they didn't all flock around and sign their membership cards and so he never held another house meeting during the entire existence of AWOC.

Well, I had plenty of other things to do which I did to make myself useful to the movement, but Dolores didn't. And so she gave up her position as secretary, and went down to Southern California to work with Cesar Chavez, who at that time was Director for organizing for the CSO, the Community Service Organization, an organization composed largely if not entirely of Spanish-speaking people. At that time, Dolores had a bunch of kids, eventually she had seven or eight I believe but at that time she had five. And she didn't have a car. I had the same car, it was a Dodge station wagon, that I had used to move my three kids and wife up from Claremont to Stockton, but I didn't particularly need it in my new job and I wanted to help Dolores. So I offered to sell it to her for whatever she could afford to pay. She said she could afford \$250; I said okay. Just give me \$50 down, and a note for the rest, and so she did. In the process of moving, I asked her about a painting which she had seen in my office which she thought was good and asked if she could borrow it, and I said okay. So, when she was in the process of

moving I asked where was my painting. And she said she didn't have any idea. I was not too happy about that. In the fullness of time of course, that was the last I heard of the \$200 note as well.

So, through the years I've had rather ambivalent feelings toward Dolores. I tried to establish contact with her on a number of occasions; when I wrote a book some years later in 1970 I sent her a copy which she never acknowledged. I asked a mutual friend at one point whether she had ever read it, and he said she didn't like it because it didn't praise Cesar Chavez sufficiently. I thought I had embarrassed myself by being excessive in my praise. And then, when she was beaten up by some cops in San Francisco at some demonstration at the Saint Francis Hotel and was hospitalized with a ruptured spleen, I sent her some flowers and a little note; trying to revive the memories of our few weeks together on the staff of AWOC when we commiserated with each other, but again she never responded to that. In the long run as you may know, she is now lionized as the co-founder of Chavez's union, which is a gross distortion of the facts. However, I digress.

During all of these events, I was still responsible for finishing up my report on the bracero study. I had permission from Norman Smith to spend up to half of my time on that, including trips to Berkeley if necessary, so I made pretty good progress in spite of the fact I was cranking out these research papers, and so forth and so on. So that on December 14, 1959, which is an anniversary of sorts in my life, I wrote the last page of what had turned out to be a 750 page manuscript. Which I had done my level best to keep objective, to keep colorful words and adverbs and adjectives to a minimum, to keep value judgments to an absolute minimum, although I indulged myself to the extent of my final sentence in this 750 page tomb. I said, "what happens when a group from a third world culture comes into a first world with its own medical ideas and practices; do the ideas and practices of the third world group change?", and my final phrase was: "No, if they are not free men." And that was the end of my manuscript, and at that point I entered into the job of dealing with the secretarial pool at the University in Berkeley, where they were responsible for jobs of this sort from all kinds of other departments and I had to wait my turn, and so it took quite a long time for them to do the stencils; that was the way this was going to be reproduced, in those days that was the most advanced system they had.

There was trouble in River City with a number of the staff, what Norman Smith called his organizers, which of course I always felt was a misnomer because they didn't know how to do anything more than tell farm workers look how much good the union did for automobile workers. That was the technique Smith recommended they use. Well, it wasn't very effective. And a number of these so-called organizers began coming to my office from time to time and unburdening themselves with their dissatisfactions. Well, I made it a point not to bad mouth Norman Smith; I felt that as long as he was paying my salary I owed him a certain kind of loyalty, so I just listened to these fellows usually and said don't give up.

It was a rag tag bunch that Smith attracted into what he called his organizing staff; there were a couple of self-appointed preachers who didn't know anything about the labor movement. There were several that Smith inherited from Galarza that had been trying to organize for

years, but Galarza didn't have the idea of beginning small and working outward; he felt that the eloquence of his speech making would be enough to move people and that was not sufficient. He would take on anybody as a member of his staff, he was so short of funds I don't know if he paid them anything.

One of them was a labor contractor who developed a burning hatred for bracero users who put him out of business; he was providing them with domestic workers up in the Marysville area, until the growers found that they could do better by using braceros because they didn't have to pay a commission to the labor contractor for his services. The recruitment and provision of this new labor force was provided free of charge by the government agencies, the state and federal. So Dewit Talahill (sp?) which was his name, developed this hatred for bracero users and for braceros themselves. So he conceived the idea of intimidating the workers by going in and knocking over their ladders and other forms of violence, which Smith tolerated, I don't say he approved of it, but he didn't discipline Dewit Talahill in any way.

Another one of Ernesto's contributions was a man named Delmer Berg (sp?) who distinguished himself by using a staff car to go up to Reno and run up some expenses on a credit card – a few of the staff members had a credit card. Well, Delmer Berg abused his, but it was also found in the process of looking into his background that he had been a member of a number of left wing organizations, which were anathema to the AFL-CIO. That organization was paranoid about the possibility of being tainted as being sympathetic to communism, so Berg had to be fired for that reason if nothing else.

Another one of Smith's recruits was an elderly gentleman named Vance Ambrose who was a veteran of the farm labor wars of the 1930's, and in some cases they almost literally were fights between workers and deputy sheriffs, sometimes gun fire but more often axe handles and weapons of that sort. And Vance Ambrose had been beaten up on occasion and had some notoriety for that reason. But in the years that had gone by since then he had become an alcoholic and so he was absolutely ineffective as a member of the AWOC staff, so he had to go. It was as I say a rag tag group, not one of whom was a qualified community organizer, which is a specialty in its own right. It's not as though there weren't any, because the CSO had at this point organized some 22 local chapters around the state, and they were staffed by people who would have been happy to have joined AWOC staff if they had been invited, but they never were.

[Pause]

I'll tell you another one of my activities. I functioned as a speech writer – or a ghost writer – for Smith himself, who was frequently called on to make appearances at conventions and conferences of do-gooders and in some cases grower's organizations to prove their open-mindedness; they would invite Smith to give the laborer's point of view to their gatherings. And on a number of occasions he asked me to prepare some remarks for him to deliver. Well, I did so, and I know for an absolute fact that he never read a single word of them.

But more happily, fairly early in the game, I think when I had been on the job for maybe a month, a fellow named Fred Van Dyke came into the AWOC headquarters one afternoon, all

dusty from having worked on his tractor plowing a field in the morning. He had a manuscript of his own which he wanted to have me edit so that he could submit it for publication somewhere. And it consisted of his opinion that the existence of the bracero program was actually working against the best interests of growers themselves. Because, with an almost unlimited pool of cheap labor available, they began planting excessive acreage of things like tomatoes in the Stockton area, which of course under the iron laws of supply and demand meant that the price that they got for their product went down; there was a surplus of canning tomatoes. And to make up for their loss of income, they planted more tomatoes because they had access to more braceros.

So, Fred Van Dyke argued that this was a kind of lunacy, but the only way to make them see common sense would be the power of a countervailing force – he didn't use that term – would be the force of workers organizing themselves, and to use their power, their potential power. And he wanted me to re-write this in such a way that it adequately represented his thinking, because I guess he had somehow or other come upon some of my writing and liked my style. Well, of course my style was not his style, so I had a challenge ghost writing his article in a way that didn't make it sound as though he had two master's degrees.

It was not easy, but I finally produced something that he thought sounded like him, and that opened up a friendship. He and I co-authored a number of other pieces of writing. And he became rather well known back in the Eastern liberal establishment as the one and only grower in the whole country which actively supported the idea of a farm worker's union, and more specifically, which supported AWOC, and used AWOC members on his own crops whenever they were of the appropriate type, such as wine grapes. Where incidentally I myself put in half a day cutting grapes, and so on my resume I mentioned that as well as the various other things I did in the fields, none of which were very taxing but at least I had a better idea of what it was like. When the time came for me to write a book, I put a chapter about Fred Van Dyke in that book, as well as a chapter about Ernesto Galarza, and one about Father McCullough, and two chapters about Chavez.

Well, I mentioned Ernie Mars a little while ago, a stone mason by trade, but what he really dreamed of was to become another Pete Seeger, and he was a pretty good guitar plucker and he wrote a number of pretty clever parodies of popular hymn tunes and so forth. And, to his credit, he wanted to find out what it was really like being a serious farm worker, and he came out from New York to Stockton and he started going down to skid row which is where unattached men congregated in the pre-dawn hours to see if they could get a job with a labor contractor. The bracero users, under the law were supposed to make what they called reasonable efforts to recruit domestic workers before hiring braceros; and to satisfy that requirement they had these contractors go down with buses to skid row in the early morning hours to pick up whoever was willing to work at the same wages as braceros and the same working conditions.

So, Ernie Mars put himself with that, and I greatly admired his spunk. Well, I didn't like the idea of Ernie Mars having to spend good money on a flop house on skid row, probably fighting against bed bugs and cockroaches, and so I suggested to Pam that we take him in as a boarder.

There was room in that funky old house on Ramona Avenue and she went along with that suggestion; I think that Ernie appreciated it. I don't think we charged him anything. Later on, it became a little tense. Because Pam thought that Ernie was starting to make eyes at her, so we had to ask him to find other accommodations. But he stayed around the area for long enough to appear in a program called "Harvest of Shame" which was narrated by Edward R. Murrow, and that got a lot of attention. The crew that was filming this documentary happened to be in the Stockton area at a time when we were having a rally with music provided by Ernie Mars; and they got him in a fairly extensive segment of this film which was shown nationally at Thanksgiving time in 1960. It was the high point of Ernie Mars' life, I believe.

I might as well jump ahead to I think it was May of 1960 when the stencils had all been typed on my magnum opus and it came time to order copies. I apparently was given carte blanche; my immediate superior Edward Rogers had a problem with me and that broad side of conscience, but after a compromise on my continuing the project, he once again left me to my own devices and I don't think he himself showed very good judgment in that respect. Looking back on it now I think if he had known about the question – how many copies should we run off of this 750 pages and who will receive them – he might have said about half a dozen, because that's how many members there were on the advisory committee that was supposedly overlooking my project. Including a member of the anthropology department, who himself had something of a reputation on the folk medicine of Mexico; there was a health educator from the staff of the school of public health; there was Paul Taylor of the economics department, a grand old man of farm labor studies; there was Herbert Blumer, I guess it had been my suggestion that he be included because of course I knew him well from the year at Hawaii, one of my two years out there he was a visiting professor; and then there was Lester Breslow of the State Department of Public Health, not to be confused with the School of Public Health. I had gotten to know Lester Breslow to some extent while I was still there on a research project on home accidents, and found that Breslow was a very open minded and forward thinking person; for example, he I think was one of the very first to make a crusade out of doing something about smoking. And beginning by gathering the scientific statistical evidence that it was damaging people's health in a big way.

All of those people would have been very logical candidates to receive copies of this 750 pages; there may have been one or two others that I can't remember at this point. But – since I was given carte blanche, I ordered 100 copies. I don't really know in retrospect whom I thought would plow through that massive verbiage; I sent some copies to the people at the State Department of Employment Bureau of Statistics who had been helpful to me in providing data on workers and various crops in various counties, etcetera, etcetera. I guess I had in mind sending them to people in the liberal organizations back East, the national advisory committee on Farm Labor, and so forth. Probably I would send one to Dard McAllister (sp?) even though he'd gotten me into a lot of trouble. I didn't send out very many.

Until the stuff hit the fan. At this point it should be understood that I was no longer on the payroll at the University; my grant from the National Institute of Health still existed on the books and there still was quite a bit of money in it, but it was not being used. We had already paid for the services of the secretarial pool as part of the overhead, which the University takes

out of every grant from every source; it's quite a large chunk as some of you may know. So, technically, Rogers had no power over me; he couldn't fire me. So he put it on a personal basis – he asked me to come into his office and he closed the door and said “you have really disappointed me, Henry”. And that cut me to the quick.

What he objected to was a chapter that I called “The Social System” in which I identified all of the organizations which were lined up on both sides of the issue and as a result of the interplay between them the bracero program existed and was renewed year after year by the Congress. I observed that in this interplay of forces the agricultural interests were more powerful than labor interests, which I thought was a perfectly objective statement. But he – I don't know if Rogers really read it – but he interpreted it as my advocating the workers' position, weak as it was, and that this would open up his being attacked by the grower's lobby, and he was not going to stand for that. And therefore he demanded that I recall all the copies I had sent out, turn them over to him, as well as all of the other roughly 90 copies that had not yet been sent out. And that is a lot of paper, as you might guess.

Well, I'll just end on this note. The irony of it is that at the very first meeting of that advisory committee, way back in 1956, Herbert Blumer himself had said be sure to put the whole subject into a social context. And I thought that I was doing that. But there was no arguing with Dr. Rogers, and so they [the copies] were all called in and destroyed, with the exception of a copy that he kept for himself in his filing cabinet under lock and key; I'm telling you he was practically paranoid with the thought that this manuscript was so inflammatory that it would get him into a knock down and drag out fight, so that will be the end of today's session; we'll continue with this and other exciting developments.

David: I assume you kept a copy of it?

Henry: No, I was not allowed to keep a copy, but I was allowed – well, I wasn't allowed to, I simply went to the secretarial pool and said what did you do with the stencils? And they said, they're sitting over there, do you want them? I said, sure. So I had the stencils.

David: These were mimeographed stencils?

Henry: Yes. I don't think they exist anymore but they did at that time and I made use of them later. But that is another story.

David: So, how long did you work for AWOC, in total?

Henry: I began in July of 1959 and I was asked to leave in May of 1962.

David: So presumably it became evident to you that their approach to organizing was thoroughly ineffective. So they were organizing domestic agricultural workers. How many dues paying members were there at the max?

Henry: Norman Smith didn't keep very good records. He spent all his time down on skid row, and he would talk some wino into joining the union, and if the guy didn't have two bucks Norman Smith himself would pay it. And I don't think there's any record of that guy's name,

and over the course of the years, I seem to remember he might have talked about 2,000 members, but I don't believe there was ever a time when there were anywhere near that all at once being members.

David: So the amount of dues collected in a given month was probably a couple hundred max.

Henry: Maybe. One other thing – well maybe I should wait. One of my disillusionments was that Jack Livingston and his assistant, a guy named Franz Daniel, would come out from time to time from Washington to Stockton, and Smith would take them into his office and describe how well everything was going and they would then report back to Walter Reuther who was their boss and say that AWOC was solid; it's solid, it's finally going to do the job. It was just blowing smoke, and so I learned something more about bureaucracies and how you cannot believe everything they say. It was really sad, but there came a time when I was given the opportunity to try some of my ideas, so we can talk about that later.

Eugene: About the meeting with Pete Seeger... are there any photos, mementos, recordings?

Henry: I took some photos. I took some photos of Pete Seeger washing dishes. I thought that was neat. He's a wonderful guy, or was a wonderful guy.

Eugene: Any recordings?

Henry: Well, I have a recording that I gave to Pam. I assume she still has it.