

14. NCAC, Maria Moreno, Harvest House

Henry: The date today is Nov 24, 2014, the day after a date that will live in infamy, that most people have forgotten, but I haven't. JFK, in case that means anything to you young whippersnappers.

I was talking about a very ill-advised strike that took place in the winter of 1960-61, of the lettuce harvest in the Imperial Valley, the only place in the country that was producing lettuce in the winter, and so it was very profitable crop.

One of the fallouts was that the members of the union got into legal trouble. Some of them resorted to physical violence against the braceros in the area, and so they went to jail for that, and there were heavy legal expenses, which resulted in the entire financial support for AWOC being withdrawn in June of that year. But there was another fallout, and that was that the two Catholic with whom I had such very close relationships, Father MacDonald of San Jose and even more particularly Father McCullough of Stockton – they had gone down there to lend aid and comfort to the strike, by as usual reminding the workers who were Catholics, that they had not only the right to organize on their own behalf, but actually a moral obligation to do so, as part of what the Catholic Church calls the “natural law”.

Well, in the past, the priests had always had the blessing of their archbishop, but the archbishop in charge of the Imperial Valley had a very different idea about the Natural Law and the church's teachings about unions, and the growers of the Imperial Valley complained to him, and he in turn complained to the archbishop of San Francisco that these guys had come into his territory and caused him great grief because the growers had threatened to withhold their contributions to the Church, etc.

And as it happened the archbishop in San Francisco was on his deathbed at this time, and his duties were being filled by some functionary who was not on the same plane at all as the archbishop who was in San Diego, and to make a long story short, both fathers were removed from their duties and reassigned to totally different areas, and also told to stop their activism on behalf of the farm labor movement. And this, as it turned out, was in my opinion more harmful to the fate of AWOC than the withdrawal of financial support from George Meany, although it did open up some possibilities that would probably have been closed otherwise.

What happened is that Norman Smith, the head of AWOC, still had some money in a trust fund, which he had been husbanding ever since the whole thing began in May of 59. It amounted to some thousands of dollars, I don't know exactly how much. But it had enough for him to keep open the headquarters in Stockton, and to hire a secretary to keep up with Smith's personal correspondence. Smith himself is on the payroll of the national AFL/CIO, but he had enough to keep a couple of people on his own local payroll. I was one of them. I think I was the only one in Stockton, in addition to the secretary. I think he had another person on the payroll in Fresno, a woman named Maria Moreno, who was one of the few really good organizers that Smith ever hired. She was pretty darned good, and she was of course Spanish-speaking. So she continued to function in ways such as counseling members or prospective members in that area who had

problems with the braceros taking their jobs, or problems of taking advantage of a new program which had recently come into existence, called “disability insurance”, a program under which employees contributed 1% of their pay to this program that paid for disability off the job. They were in theory covered by workman’s compensation for job-related illness or injury, but this new program something that farm workers had never been covered by before, thanks largely to the efforts of Dolores Huerta, who had been a lobbyist for an organization called the CSO, Community Service Organization, after she left AWOC. She was a very good lobbyist – a tough woman, I knew that through personal experience. So she got this passed in the state legislature. But most farm workers didn’t even know it existed.

But in ways such as that, Maria could continue to function in her area. But that left open all the rest of the great Sacramento/San Juaquin Valley, and I do not to this day have any idea what Norman Smith had in mind for me. He had never really understood what I was doing as the director of research. Maybe he just like me personally, maybe he felt sorry for me because of the breakup of my marriage and the fact that I was having to spend time going back and forth to Berkeley, which I hadn’t been doing before, and paying child support and so on.

In any case, it did open up the possibility of doing some things which had not been done under the direction of Norman Smith himself. But apparently it was OK with him if I tried doing them myself on an experimental basis. In short, it was an opportunity to take a different approach to organizing than he had used, which as to spend all his time on Skid Row, signing up the least stable members of the farm labor force. He just didn’t understand the possibilities of working with the so-called Home Guard, of people who had a permanent commitment to farm laborer, if only they were able to get jobs doing it. But with the bracero program, they had great difficulty getting such jobs.

So it was an opportunity to start trying some of the things that Father McCullough had been talking about, and which Dolores Huerta had been advocating before she got fed up with Smith.

If I had been capable of working along the lines that Father McCullough had been advocating, everything might have been different, but the fact that he was no longer physically present, and wasn’t able to give me day-to-day advice, I of course was fatally handicapped by being totally unable to communicate in Spanish. So I took advantage of my freedom to start looking at other ways as best I could, but the possibility of finding whether McCullough’s model would have worked in that area will never be known.

Except to the extent that it had in fact been tried during the period that I talked about in an earlier session, called the Agricultural Workers Association, AWA, which was quite successful until Smith came along and there couldn’t be two organizations competing against each other. AWA went out of existence in favor of AWA.

So I dreamed up other things to do in this vacuum that now existed. I dreamed up the idea of attracting volunteers, principally from UC Berkeley, where I already had some contacts – I had helped organize something called Student Committee for Agricultural Labor (SCAL) and we were recognized as a campus organization, with regular meetings and public relations on behalf of the farm labor movement.

The use of volunteers had always been anathema in AWOC's structure, and in fact all structures of the AFL/CIO, because volunteers were frequently thought of as being loose cannons. They were uncontrollable. As the saying went, since they hadn't been hired they couldn't be fired. But I didn't believe in that necessarily, so I dreamed up the concept of a residence, a hostel, a place where volunteers could come from Berkeley, from Stanford, or from anyplace else for that matter, and could make themselves useful in various ways to help with the movement. I was going to call it Harvest House, and I thought it would be possible to have somebody in charge who would make sure that it wouldn't be used for drugs or other illegal or immoral activities.

But I did find people in Berkeley who were interested, and one of them was not really a student, I don't know what her connection in Berkeley was, but was at liberty. So she came out with a friend of hers and they found a big old two-story house that was not being used, and the rent was very cheap. In fact real estate in general in Stockton was very cheap compared to Berkeley. And so Harvest House was in fact started. And the young lady who became the house mother, so to speak, was known as Pat Bellamy, or Pattie, not frequently known by her real name, which was Sara; her full name was Sara Patricia Bellamy. And her friend was named Starry Krueger. The two of them were willing to devote full time help with the movement, with the Harvest House as their base of operations. It was plenty big enough for people to come and spend their weekends, if they had to go back to studies the rest of the time. A couple of guys came from I don't know where, and they were also prepared to spend full time to helping. And others came and went.

So one of the first activities was one which Father McCullough himself had tried when he first began in Stockton way back in the late 1940s. And that was simply to go door to door in the shanty towns on the peripheries of Stockton, and take a census. In this case, the census was primarily concerned with locating good Catholics who had dropped away from participation in the church because they were not welcome in the downtown churches. But our purpose in the activities of Harvest House was to do a census of farm workers and former farm workers, with the specific purpose of finding out what would be required to get them back into the farm labor market if things could be made acceptable in terms of wages and working conditions.

So this was the kind of activity that could be done at odd hours, it could be done with the help of students who would come out only on weekends, and we got a lot of data, which seemed to say basically that if it were possible to make only \$1.25 an hour, instead of the prevailing wage which at that time was about \$1/hour, that a number of people would be willing to go back to working in agriculture. One of these volunteers, who helped with that survey, was a fellow named Marv Sternberg, who had been present very early in the game, in August of 59, I think I spoke about this earlier. We had the first public meeting of AWOC. I tried to introduce the singing of labor songs, and Marv Sternberg came out from Berkeley and played a little guitar, so he did that while I led the singing of these songs, including one by Pete Seeger.

So Marv helped with our survey, and then he later used that as the basis for a Master's thesis.

Well there were a lot of other things that we found. For example, Father McCullough had built, to a large extent with his own hands, a church in one of these shoestring communities, as they were called, in the outlying areas around Stockton. It had formerly been known as Dogpatch, but it became known as the St. Linus district after he established this church. It had about an acre of land, which was undeveloped, in back of it. So we put together work parties to help clear the land of weeds and sinkholes and bumps and whatnot, to use it as a playground.

There was a child care center which catered to the families of farm workers in the Tracy area, Tracy being about 15 miles away from Stockton, in an area that was filled with tomato fields; it had a huge Heinz cannery which gave employment to the wives of the workers in the fields, and they needed a child care center, and so the priest in the area, who also became a good friend of mine, Father Dugan was his name, they devoted part of facilities of the church to this child care center, and they could use volunteers to help with the preparation of meals for the kids and so on. And so we found students who were able to spend a day or two here and there to help with activities of that sort.

As time went by we started thinking about organizing ourselves into something which had a name of its own. We know that it was verboten to use the word "local", as in local union, because that had a very special meaning in the lexicon of the AFL/CIO. It was reserved for those that were chartered by the main organization, and we were not asking for that, we were not aspiring to that, it would not have been granted even if we had asked for it.

So, somehow or other, we came up with the idea of calling it an "area council". We didn't want it to be confused with AWA, we didn't want to use the word "association". Then the question was, what area are we talking about? We didn't want to restrict it to Stockton, or to San Joaquin country. We didn't know of anything like it that was going on anywhere closer than Modesto, or farther north. So we called ourselves the "northern California area council".

We had a number of permanent local people in addition to these volunteers. Raul and Trini Aguilar, Stella and Manuel Juarez, and others.

We had a meeting at which there was to be an election of leaders, and I felt strongly that it should be one of these local people who had a background in farm labor. We had a long meeting at which this was debated, and although I naturally didn't go into my personal history, and my horrible year as a senior at Palo Alto high school, in a position that I didn't want and was totally unqualified for. But all of the people who I thought should be eligible for a leadership position declined to serve, and so by default everybody looked at me. The best I could get out of the group was that I was to be known as an acting chairman. We then elected a vice chairman and secretary/treasurer, both of whom were local Spanish-speaking people. But here I was once again in a position that I really didn't want.

We started putting out a newsletter every couple of weeks, bilingual, and we learned by the grapevine that there were other groups which trying to hold out and continue an existence whatever were the machinations going on in Washington DC. There was one in Modesto, several in Tulare County. They were formerly AWOC groups. They were then cut off without any paid person at all. But we established contact with them, and convinced them that they

could also operate with volunteers. They also could use the same rubric that we did, calling themselves and area council. And so by the end of the summer we had a half-dozen of them functioning or a greater or lesser extent. As it turned out there was one in Tulare County, centered in a little town called Strathmore, which was the most active of all of us. That's a story that I'll get to later.

So we started trying to communicate with these people, soliciting information from them as to what they were doing, what their problems were, and putting this kind of information into our newsletter.

We kept ourselves busy in one way or another. I can think of a couple of other prime examples. In September we heard, again by the grapevine, that a group of Filipino farm workers in Santa Cruz County were engaging in a wildcat strike in the Brussel Sprouts harvest. So we went down there and asked if there were any way that we could help, and they said sure - they're trying to take our jobs with braceros, as strike-breakers.

Now the Filipinos are, or were at that time, a very distinctive group in the farm labor force. They were all single male, and they were all getting along in years. They had all come to this country, in many cases by way of Hawaii, back during the time when immigration laws somehow permitted them, but not women to accompany them. In any case, they were superb farm workers – that taught themselves the skills involved in certain crops, such as asparagus. They functioned as a well-oiled machine that knew how to cut the asparagus when it was due to be cut, and how to wash it and so forth, always with a minimum of wastage. And they were also uniquely skilled in the harvest of Brussel Sprouts, which people have seen in the supermarket in the form of little balls that look like miniature cabbages, but that's not the way they grow. They grow in a plant that's sort of the equivalent of a giraffe in the animal kingdom. In the vegetable kingdom, this plant puts up a large stalk, maybe 3' high, from which these little balls grow at spaces from the bottom to the top. But to harvest them you have to have a strong thumb, and you pop them off as you go up the line, and it can't be done by machine, and somehow this group of Filipinos became uniquely skilled at this. But when they asked for \$1.25 an hour, the growers said we can get all the help we need at \$1/hour by calling braceros.

Well, these fellows knew it wasn't right, but they didn't know the ins and outs of the law, and so we offered to help them plead their case with the department of labor, because the enabling legislation for the bracero program states very clearly that braceros are not to be used to fill vacancies that exist in the course of labor dispute. It requires some finesses to get the government to certify that a labor dispute exists. We found that out in the Imperial Valley the previous winter, where they dragged their feet about withdrawing braceros in that case. In this case we had a volunteer lawyer who went directly to the headquarters of the department of labor in San Francisco, and by George after a couple of week we did get the braceros removed, and even though the Filipinos lost a certain amount of time and some income because, as is the case with many crops, it's relatively short-lived, but they did get their \$1.25 toward the end of the strike, and we were some help in that case.

The following month we of the NCAC attempted to be of help in another aspect of the bracero problem. There was a bracero camp in the outskirts of Stockton, operated by a labor partnership called the LoDucca and Perry camp, and it was pretty notorious for the way that it treated its braceros, particularly over the question of shorting their pay. So we had a couple of volunteers in our little area council who had the idea of leafletting that camp, and informing the braceros who were behind chain-link fences that they had certain rights, for one thing they had the right of going to the nearest Mexican consulate if they could, and even more likely, they had the right of going to 805 E Weber Ave in Stockton, which is where the old AWOC headquarters were, and in fact Norman Smith was still there, and it was also where the area council had its headquarters, and we would be happy represent them in a labor dispute or whatever they might have on their minds.

So we put down in some very diplomatic language that they had these options, that they had the right to these things if they had a problem, and mimeographed hundreds of copies, and these two young fellow went out one late afternoon, when all the guys had been brought back from their day in the field, and went to the front gate of the camp and started handing out these leaflets.

Well, the first thing was that the gates were locked, so then these two young fellows started throwing them over the fence, and the proprietors of the camp sent out a team of bouncers or goons, or whatever you might want to call them, who confiscated the leaflets and beat up on these two young guys, and placed them under arrest.

We got them out of jail and paid the bond, until such time as the trial could be held, and it wasn't very onerous compared to those down in the Imperial Valley, which involved different types of felony. There wasn't a felony involved in this case. In any event, it opened up for the first time what seemed to us to be very clearly a case for the ACLU, and by George the SF chapter of the ACLU took the case. It seemed to be open and shut, because there were many well-established precedents. I think that probably back in the 1930s they had gone all the way up to the Supreme Court and it seemed to settle once and for all that in a company town, in a situation in which it's impossible for a union representative to communicate with workers without going onto the property of the employer, that the union representative has that right, always assuming of course that it's non-violent.

So in due course of time this case went to the superior court in Stockton, and the presiding judge had been appointed by a Democratic governor, which again we thought made it an open-and-shut case, but lo and behold, somehow or other she figured it out, that these two young men were trespassing and committing a public nuisance, and so on, and so the case was dismissed. We tried to bring this to the attention of the public at large, but weren't able to get the media interested.

To bring ourselves to the attention of the public, I guess you could say that was our main purpose, we organized a very unusual type of picket line, to be held outside the Fairmont Hotel in SF, where the secretary of labor, under the Kennedy administration, was going to make a speech. Instead of our picketing the secretary of labor in protest about anything that he had

done, this was to be an educational picket line, to thank the secretary for the good efforts of his department in removing the braceros from the strike of the Brussel Sprouts workers in Santa Cruz county. So we had placards "Thank you mister secretary" and I don't think anybody had ever seen anything quite like that before.

I myself was not able to be there, but I believe that the secretary, Arthur Goldberg was his name, in crossing and entering the hotel, must have seen this reverse picket line, and may have shaken hands with one or two of the people involved. So that was something noteworthy.

I talked to Norman Smith about something I was working on, a booklet, longer than my average research paper for AWOC, and I had a title picked out: "To Build a Union", which was borrowed from the short story by Jack London, "To Build a Fire", which used to appear in anthologies of the great American short stories, and I'd come across it when I was in high school, and was so powerfully affected by it that I'd never forgotten it through the years.

In the course of my work as director of research for AWOC, I'd spent some time in the library of the state federation of labor in SF, where the librarian was a woman named Joan London, who was the oldest of the two daughters of Jack London, and she and I became good friends, because she was a long-time friend of the farm labor movement, so I told her about my feelings toward her father and his famous short story.

I asked Norman Smith if there were anybody in the power structure in Washington DC that might be interested in my story, with some of the background of the efforts to organize farm workers, the present situation, and some thoughts about future possibilities. It would not be critical of the mistakes that had been made, and no names were named. It was a positive look at the problem, and it was in so many words and appeal that help be restored to AWOC.

Smith said that the only hope was with Walter Ruther, who was head of the CIO half of the AFL/CIO, although he was the junior half, the real big cheese was Meany. Meany was impossible, and Ruther was so busy with being the head of the United Auto Workers, as well as head of the CIO, that the facilitator was a brother of Walter Ruther named Victor Ruther, and that if I were to send a copy of my writing to Victor, that it might possibly shake up the interest of Walter himself, and that maybe he could somehow re-open the whole question of whether AWOC would continue to exist, or fade from view.

So I did write this piece, it turned out about 60 pages long, sent a copy to Victor Ruther, as well as other interested persons, but I never heard from Victor Ruther, and that was the end of that, but it was still a piece of work worth doing, because it had some good ideas in it, I think.

All of this should be looked upon as a kind of holding action. I was afraid that Norman Smith's "kitty", the trust fund that he had accumulated, was going to die out, be exhausted, and that AWOC itself would no longer exist, even as a paper organization, it would have to give up the rent on the building it had occupied, it would be nothing but a memory. That was my fear. Just keep the kettle bubbling a little bit, simmering at least.

And so along about November, another idea came to me, and that was to hold a convention, actually I called it a conference, an agricultural worker's organizing conference, which would draw in representatives of all the Area Councils, and as many people as we could find who had been involved in previous efforts to organize farm workers, going all the way back to the 1930s, as there had been many, many efforts, all of them had failed, but we would be happy to hear from all these old-timers, if we could find them, who could tell us about the things they had learned, the things to avoid, and maybe things that could be tried in the future. So I began going around and talking to people about this idea, and a number of them thought it was a good idea. I got very good reaction from the head of the Central Labor Council in Fresno county, who said he'd be happy to serve as a speaker. I think maybe it was he who suggested that the best place to hold this conference would be in Strathmore, because he knew the people in charge of that operation, and they were all very good people, very experienced and level-headed, and they had smarts and energy.

So it was decided that we would, in December, hold a conference with the acronym AWOC – what a coincidence. It was to be nominally an activity of AWOC itself, although Norman Smith had no part in it. He didn't oppose the idea, but it was our baby. And it was not just a coincidence, but in the back of our mind was the fact that the national AFL/CIO was going to hold its biennial national convention in Miami Beach about a month after our conference, and maybe we could get some mileage out of that. So we made plans, a lot of people pitched in and helped. I used my contacts in the Socialist party to see if we could get Norman Thomas to be our keynote speaker. If it had been an official AWOC enterprise I don't think that would have been possible, but since we had a certain amount of independence I thought it was worth a shot. And lo and behold, we got an acceptance from Norman Thomas himself, that he would be our speaker on the second day of the conference. It was to be a 2-day affair, Saturday and Sunday, Dec 2 and 3.

That conference turned out to be of such importance that a woman, even as we speak, is in the process of trying to make a documentary built around the personality of Maria Moreno, who I mentioned a while ago, as one of the organizers, the best organizer that AWOC ever had, who played an important role in the Strathmore conference.

Eugene: You mentioned the student organization at Berkeley that you helped organize. When was that?

Henry: That would have been 1960.

Eugene: I don't think you mentioned that before.

Henry: There's a lot of things I haven't mentioned!

Eugene: Want to say more about that? Who else might have been involved?

Henry: A guy named Fritjof Thygeson. I mentioned him before when I talked about my meeting with your mother, that was at a student federalist meeting at which Thygeson was the chairman. By 1960 he was no longer using his considerable charm to recruit people into the

student federalist movement; he was recruiting them into the Socialist party, and into a political movement on the Berkeley campus called SLATE, which was devoted to the notion that the so-called student government of Berkeley was “sandbox politics”, as they liked to put it, and it was time that they grew up and started dealing with real issues. So he and a couple of others – he could charm a bird out of a bush, as we used to say in Texas – he was very good at that, so I think he organized SLATE, primarily, and SLATE in turn led to things like taking stands on racial hiring and farm labor.

When you had an interesting in some particular subject like farm labor, you could apply to the administration for recognition as a bona-fide student organization, which would entitle you to meeting and campus facilities.

So I’ve got a list somewhere of the officers they elected, and the kinds of things that they did. I know for a fact that they had Norman Smith come out from Stockton to speak at an evening gathering in Wheeler Hall, sponsored by SCAL, in which Smith gave his usual stump speech, and then they would organize work parties. They would go out to Stockton, and by pre-arrangement they’d find someplace where they’d be allowed to try working, cutting grapes or doing something that wasn’t too demanding, just to get them a taste of what it was like. I’ve got several boxes of materials from SCAL in my attic, if anyone ever wanted to do a history of that. I’ve got so many different side-paths that one could take. There’s a poem by A.A. Milne, a man who had so many things to do that he ended up by not doing any of them.