

19. KPFA; Citizens for Farm Labor

Henry: Well, to recapitulate briefly, we have talked about a monograph I wrote entitled "Fields of Bondage", which (as the title suggests) was essentially a cry for a new abolition movement because I viewed the bracero system as a form of slavery. This apparently went over well in some liberal democratic quarters, and was used by certain liberal democratic representatives in Congress to help bring about a vote on May 29, 1963, in which an attempt to get the bracero program extended until Dec 31, 1964 was defeated -- meaning that the program would die in 1963. The thought that I had made some difference in this process got my juices flowing, and I started thinking of other ways in which I might make myself useful.

It wasn't easy, because I still had a full-time job with the Dept. of Public Health in something called the "Medical Care Studies Unit". At that time this unit was kind of treading water, looking for something to do under the leadership of Dr. Lester Breslow. He didn't really have his ducks lined up in the kind of bold, creative courses that came later. We were mostly just finishing up odds and ends of research by local health departments and other things that weren't very important, and so I didn't have to devote an awful lot of time to them.

At this point I was living in Martinez. On the 7th of May, my #3 son Eugene was born ...

Eugene: 8th.

Henry: 8th. Sorry! [*laugh*] So, I had to spend a good deal of time driving back and forth. But, in one way or another, I was able to embark on what I would call my personal golden age of productivity. One of the things that occurred to me was to offer my services (if that's the word) to Berkeley's listener-supported FM station KPFA. I may have mentioned it before. It was something of a local institution and was always on the liberal side of things. I thought that KPFA ought to be interested in the farm labor movement. So, I went to the director of the Public Affairs Dept. The whole station was managed by a man named Trevor Thomas who had become a friend of mine when I was with AWOC. His job at that time was as a lobbyist with the Friends' Committee on Legislation in Sacramento. He and I talked about the possibility of getting farm labor legislation passed. It didn't, but that's another story.

Anyway, I didn't go to Trevor Thomas with my ideas. I went to the Director of Public Affairs, who was a woman named Elsa Knight Thompson. I didn't know anything about the personalities at that time. She was a formidable woman. She chain-smoked, which as far as I know nobody else at the station did. She was a law unto herself, and a tough cookie. She wanted me to make a couple of test tapes of the sort of thing I had in mind. I worked on those for several weeks. I came up with one which was a broadside on the Giannini Foundation, which was a kind of think tank on the Berkeley campus, established by A.P. Giannini, the founder of the Bank of America. He had given all this money to UC Berkeley, and they had set up this -- they didn't call it a think tank in those days, but in practice it took as its function advocacy for agriculture and agricultural employers. So I wrote this commentary, which was going to be an exposé of the Giannini

Foundation being a tool of one particular industry, whereas the university was supposed to be open to various points of view, and I named names. That was going to be one of my test tapes for Elsa Knight Thompson.

Another one was based on the vote of the House of Representatives for the termination of the bracero program. I was going to call this particular commentary "Beyond the bracero system". I talked about what the employers would need to do to re-attract the people who had formerly done exactly the same work for which braceros were now being used. Those people mostly still lived in the shack towns around places like Stockton and Fresno. We knew from one of the exercises that we did during the volunteer period when we went around and did a survey of these fellows who were former farm workers and asked them "What would it take to get you back and do the jobs that you used to do", and found that on average \$1.25/ hr would be enough. So, I talked about these sorts of things that the growers would have to do in order to get their crops in without braceros.

My friend Ernest Lowe, who was on the staff of KPFA, played these tapes for her, and she called me back in with her decision. She said the one on the Giannini Foundation was libelous and [*chuckle*] she could not allow that one to be broadcast, but the other one would be OK. So, I can't recall exactly when, but it was probably broadcast in late July 1963. At that point, it was not thought of by me or anybody else as the first in a series, because KPFA had what they called a nightly commentary, every weeknight at 6 or 7 PM. The commentators were given 15 minutes to talk about their favorite subject.

KPFA had a spectrum of commentators. They had a guy named Casper Weinberger who was Republican -- I think he was on the faculty of San Francisco State at the time -- and he was willing to appear on KPFA even though they had a reputation of being ultra-liberal. I think part of this "liberalism" is that they wanted all different points of view. On the other side of the spectrum, the California Regional Director of the Communist Party was one of their regular commentators. They had somebody from the Socialist Party, and somebody from the Single Tax Movement, if anybody today remembers that. Even in 1963 not very many people knew what the heck he was talking about, but it was a big social movement at one time, and this old fellow was still hanging on. Anyway, at first it didn't occur to me that I might become one of their panoply of commentators. Later on I did become one, but not quite then.

Another idea occurred to me during this summer. In August there was going to be a street fair on Telegraph Ave. near the campus, with all kinds of exhibits by artisans and artists. I signed up to present a group of my own paintings on the subject of farm workers. I had to work on those. I had done paintings that were relevant from time to time in the past, so I didn't have to start from scratch, but I did have to produce a few new ones to round out a group of about a dozen paintings. That street fair lasted for a week. I had prepared some handouts for anybody who was interested in the subject, regarding the farm labor situation. I can't recall whether I had prices on any of the paintings. All I know is that I didn't sell any. [*Everybody laughs.*]

On Aug 22, 1963, there was a signal event in Washington DC called the "March on Washington" at which the principal speaker was M.L. King Jr., with his "I have a dream" speech. I found a friend who had a TV set (I don't think I had one at that time), and that speech had me bawling like a baby. I'll never forget that.

On Sep 17, in a little town in the Salinas Valley called Chualar, a flatbed truck owned by one of the lettuce growers in the area had been converted into a conveyance for braceros by installing some benches. The truck was packed, on its way to a field, and drove into the path of an oncoming freight train. 32 braceros were killed, and 25 seriously injured. Under the international agreement between Mexico and the U.S., any bracero who was killed, or died from sickness, while in the U.S. was entitled to a death benefit of \$1000. Well, this episode really got my juices going, and so I wrote another commentary -- not part of the Friday evening commentary series, but as a special case. I called it "Blood on the lettuce", and Elsa Knight Thompson worked it into the schedule somehow. It was received well by the people who heard it (I think), and was received well by the people at KPFA themselves. It was more hard-hitting than what they were getting from their other commentators.

Well, the ideas kept flowing. It occurred to me that there was no organization, at least in northern California, that advocated for farm workers to the general public. AWOC still existed in a sort of skeletal form. Cesar Chavez was down in the Delano area, with a new type of organization he called the National Farm Workers Association -- he deliberately avoided using the term "union" at that time. There was something in Los Angeles called the Emergency Committee to Aid Farm Workers, which was started with a grant of \$50,000 from a well-to-do liberal in that area -- so they were even able to pay their executive secretary. In fact, they put out feelers that led me to think they would consider hiring me as their executive secretary, if I were willing to move to Los Angeles -- which of course I wasn't. But I did feel the need for something like that committee, which would serve to lobby if necessary, or just to inform the public with speeches and writings. So I talked with some of my friends about the possibility of starting a citizens' group in the Bay Area.

On Oct 02, we met in the home of Ernest Lowe, my friend from KPFA, and started the group. We even gave it a name, "Citizens for Farm Labor", and elected a chairman and a secretary. We decided to put out a monthly magazine, and hold monthly membership meetings, once people started joining. We talked about the possibility of my continuing to produce commentaries about farm labor, and offer them to KPFA as part of their regular Friday evening series.

Well, I was still spooked by my experience from having been elected to something at Paly High. But nobody else was willing to step up to the chairmanship of Citizens for Farm Labor. I therefore did it because I had to, if there was to be any organization at all. Our secretary was a lady named Wendy Goepel, who had just graduated from Stanford. She was very attractive, but also very dedicated. Between the two of us, she and I put out the magazine practically single-handedly at the beginning. I put in a lot of time at night, which didn't make my wife out in Martinez too happy. I typed out stencils using typewriters at the Dept. of Public Health, which

[chuckle] didn't make Lester Breslow too happy. He caught me one evening at work on the magazine, and I couldn't very well claim I was doing state business. He told me to be careful, but he didn't come right out and say I couldn't continue to use the typewriters, and so I did. Later on, I went too far and allowed you and Stephen to use some of the machines there, and I was then ordered to stop using them in the evenings. I had to start using a manual typewriter, and the quality of our stencils went downhill. Anyway, in the latter part of October we came out with Volume 1, No. 1 of Farm Labor Magazine, which had an article by Wendy herself on the use of parathion in the peach harvest, and my script for "Beyond the bracero system" was reproduced. One way or another, we produced a magazine of some 40 pages, mimeographed and stapled, with a few photographs. We sent out 300 initial copies to people we thought might be interested in subscribing, and in joining the organization itself. So, those were rather heady times.

A few days later, on Oct 31 (Halloween), the House of Representatives revisited the subject of Public Law 78, the enabling legislation for the bracero program. There are ways, I don't exactly how they do it, but they are able to call back something that has already been voted on, if they get enough signatures on a petition, or something of that sort. Lo and behold, the vote was almost exactly the reverse of what it had been back in May. At that time, the extension of Public Law 78 was voted down 156 to 174, something like that. On Halloween the vote was 173 or 174 in favor of extending the program, and only 156 or so against, so it was extended to Dec 31, 1964. I was really unhappy, because the swing votes were Democrats -- most of them liberal Democrats! They made the difference. I promptly sat down and wrote a really scathing commentary called "The liberals will get you if you don't watch out", which was a takeoff on a popular poem by James Whitcomb Riley which nobody remembers now, but at that time Riley was very popular. As it happened, it wasn't my time of the month to do this commentary, but I did it in November. I rather regret it now because I have somewhat mellowed, and I don't think the liberals were all bad [chuckle].

David: What states were the swing votes from?

Henry: Mostly California.

David: Did you ever unravel what lobbying activities had brought about that change?

Henry: No. Well, I don't think that lobbying was necessary. I think that these guys (they were mostly from the San Joaquin Valley) were able to count the votes in their district. The lobbying which must have taken place probably came from their local constituents who were engaged in agriculture, including sellers of farm equipment, fertilizers, and pesticides. They were all dependent on the health of their local agriculture. If they all got into a letter-writing campaign, it made a lot more difference than a diatribe by me, in Berkeley [chuckle]. They didn't give a damn about liberals in Berkeley. I think that must be what happened.

That was a rather intemperate commentary, I must admit. But KPFA never censored me once I began that series. It was my very early experience with Elsa Knight Thompson and the Giannini

Foundation. I never again personally attacked somebody like one of the so-called professors at the Giannini Foundation.

In Nov 1963, another extremely important event took place outside the Bay Area, and outside the subject of farm labor. That was Nov 22, which was a Friday. As it happens, at 10 in the morning Wendy Goepel and I were taking a coffee break to talk about the forthcoming issue of Farm Labor Magazine. Somebody came in to say the President had been shot. The head of the Farm Worker Health Services, which is where Wendy worked at that time, was close by. We asked him, "Do you think it's serious?", but he didn't know. According to the early reports it was a head wound, so he said it might be very serious indeed, and so it was.

About half an hour later, the word came from Walter Cronkite that the President was dead. At the time, we were too stunned to think about the possible consequences of the Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson, taking over -- what might the effects be on the population group of most interest to us? A little bit later, when I had time to get my thoughts together, I learned that Johnson himself had hired braceros on his ranch in Texas, and I feared the worst. If I had waited a little longer, I would have found out that Johnson was a good deal more liberal in many ways than Kennedy had ever been.

That afternoon, I picked up Stephen, David, and Rachel, because it was their weekend to visit. We went out to Martinez, and I played the Funeral March from Beethoven's Eroica Symphony on our phonograph. David was very impressed, and I still remember what he said: "He must have worked very hard on that".

I continued my commentaries on the general subject of farm labor. I worked them into such things as the fact that the period around Dec 11, which was my day on the air, was in the middle of "Human Rights Week", in recognition of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which had been passed largely through the efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt. I went down that list of rights to comment on the extent to which they were, or were not, honored in the case of agricultural workers.

On Jan 08, 1964, another of my days, my commentary consisted of an open letter to the Governor of California, Edmund G. Brown Sr., asking him to call a special session of the legislature (which he had within his power) to consider the forthcoming end of the bracero program, and what California could and should be doing to develop a domestic farm labor force.

The magazine was still coming out. By about the third issue, we had to start fudging on the concept of a monthly magazine, and started putting out a "double issue" every two months.

In Feb 1964, I commented upon a photographic exhibit in San Francisco called "The bitter years". It pulled together a couple of hundred photos that had been taken in the 1930s by a group of professional photographers. Maybe they had been hired by the WPA -- I don't know where the funding came from, exactly [*editor's note: it came from the Farm Security Administration (FSA)*]. They were given broad freedom to go out and photograph rural America.

The group included a number of very good photographers, one of whom later became very well known -- her name was Dorothea Lange. I was particularly impressed by her contributions to this large exhibit.

I commented on the whole thing, and I titled my commentary "The bitter years go on". I said, in so many words, that if you go out into the hinterlands in California you will see conditions still very much as deplorable as they were in the 1930s. I named Dorothea Lange as the photographer who was able to reach the heartstrings of the viewer more effectively than any of the others. A few days later I got a letter from Dorothea Lange inviting me to have lunch with her and talk about our mutual interests. I might mention that Dorothea was married to an economics professor at UC Berkeley named Paul S. Taylor who was kind of the grand old man of farm labor research, dating all the way back to the 1920s. He knew me because he had been on my advisory committee during my ill-fated bracero study for the university. So, everything seemed to be falling together.

I called the number that Dorothea had suggested I use to line up a time for this lunch. I discovered that she and her husband lived in a wonderful, rambling, spread-out brown-shingle house in the Berkeley hills, built around an oak tree in the middle. It was all very picturesque. I can't remember anything I might have said at this meeting. I was so tongue-tied -- more than usually tongue-tied, let's put it that way. I didn't call her "Dorothea". She showed me her darkroom and her photographic process. It was very memorable. Of course, I followed her career even more carefully after that than I had before. She became something of an icon by the time of her death. She was not well during the time that I spent with her. She was suffering from cancer, and chemotherapy made her hair fall out, so she wore a turban. She was weak and moved slowly, but she was certainly mentally alert as ever. That was a "peak experience" of mine, to use a phrase from Abraham Maslow, the humanistic psychologist.

I think I'm going to stop at this point, because in Apr 1964 there was a sea change, in which I deviated for the first time from the subject of farm labor in my commentary series. I deviated very far, and afterward there was no turning back. I spent the remainder of my time at KPFA, which continued for nearly another 10 years, hardly ever talking about farm labor from that point on.

If anybody has any questions ...

David: Gene?

Eugene: (to David): Do you have memories of Martinez?

David: Oh, yeah. Very clear memories. Also, we made that home movie on the hillside above the house. I remember the Little League baseball stadium that was down in the town. I don't remember the Eroica Symphony. Maybe if you played the Chopin funeral march, I might have been more enthusiastic.

Henry: Oh, you were enthusiastic.

David: Really? I'll have to give it a listen.

Relevant web pages:

Lester Breslow: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lester_Breslow

Elsa Knight Thompson: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elsa_Knight_Thompson

A.P. Giannini: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amadeo_Giannini

Giannini Foundation:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Giannini_Foundation_of_Agricultural_Economics

Sep 17, 1963 Chualar bus crash: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1963_Chualar_bus_crash

Dorothea Lange: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothea_Lange