

20. KPFA politics

Henry: Last time, I believe we ended with my being invited to lunch by Dorothea Lange, the well-known photographer. I was about to remark on a major change in the commentary series I had been doing at KPFA, which had been devoted exclusively to farm labor subjects, including one that got me in a bit of trouble. My commentary before the one dealing with an exhibit of photographs (including Dorothea Lange's, which led to my meeting her) consisted of my reading an open letter I had sent to Governor Edmund G. Brown, in which I pointed out to him that the bracero program was scheduled to end Dec 31, 1964, that there had been tens of thousands of braceros used in all the California harvests up until that point, and that it behooved him to do something about replacing them. Otherwise, the farmers in his state would be without harvest hands, and that would affect the prices of fruits and vegetables. I recommended that he call a special session of the legislature, and lean on them to pass some bills that would make farm labor more attractive than it had been during the bracero years. I worded this somewhat trenchantly, and some people weren't too happy about it, beginning with the governor's staff. I heard by word of mouth that the letter never did reach the desk of the governor, and that the staff were sending notices out to the media that many of the things I had said were unfair or untrue.

I will say this about KPFA: they never leaned on me, or pre-censored anything that I talked about. It was really an open forum. There weren't many of those then, and there still aren't. My open letter certainly never had any effect on political decisions up or down the line.

But to move on to the point: these events led to a very dramatic change from my being a member of the stable of commentators at the station who specialized in talking about one particular social issue. Some events came about that forced me to go into totally different subjects -- namely, the subject of the station itself, and its governance. KPFA had been founded back in the 1940s by some conscientious objectors who were at liberty after the end of World War II (they had been in prison during the war). A group of them had the idea of establishing an FM station which would be supported entirely by listeners rather than by commercial sponsors, government aid, or any other source. This group, being the founders, naturally ran the station. I suppose they called themselves a board of directors, or trustees, or some such thing. That's the way it continued to function. Most of them were Quakers.

By the time I got to KPFA in the early 1960s, the station manager was Trevor Thomas, who also had a Quaker background. The staff all seemed to get along reasonably well. The director of the Dept. of Public Affairs was Elsa Knight Thompson. They had other people in charge of music, of drama, and so forth, but Elsa was in charge of public affairs, and that included me. She was an irascible woman, and she and Trevor Thomas clashed on lots of things. I didn't know all of this background. It reached the point that she devoted more of her time to working on other members of the staff to turn them against Trevor. She would have liked to have him fired. Apparently she made some headway with some of the staff members. There are always things to complain about in any structure. The technical staff were all members of a union

called the National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians.

Well, Trevor fired Elsa. She really wanted to become the station manager, if you want to know the background. She had the support of these people, but they didn't have a vote. There was still a self-appointed Board of Trustees over everything else -- a self-perpetuating Board, really. They were not subject to any constituency. Elsa, of course, was a member of the union. It wasn't limited to engineers and technicians, despite the name of the union. Other staff members were free to join, and I guess most or all of them did. Elsa's power within the local was so great that she was able to prevail upon the majority of them to go on strike. First time in the history of KPFA, and as it has turned out through the years, the last -- only it was not the last [laugh].

I was very interested in this development. I felt it was very unfortunate, that it was not really a question of either/or, black or white, that there was something missing from the whole structure of KPFA, which I thought might really be the heart of the problem. That is, that there was really a third party involved, who had nothing whatever to do with this contest between labor and management. That was the program contributors and the subscribers (or listeners), who had nothing whatever to say about this contest between the other two factions.

So, on Apr 03, 1964, I deviated for the first time from my usual subject of agricultural labor, and did a commentary upon KPFA and its very nature, entitled "Communication without representation". All of us in the commentary series were, of course, volunteers -- we got paid nothing, and served entirely at the pleasure of those above us in the hierarchy -- namely, Elsa at the level immediately above us, and above her was the station manager. It had absolutely nothing to do with the objective quality of our comments, or how well we might be thought of by the listeners who were "paying the freight" for the entire operation. At this point, I didn't have any recommendations for how to deal with this problem as I saw it. I left it open, and ended the commentary by asking people to write to me if they thought I had [unintelligible] ... question, and if they had any suggestions.

Well, a number of them did, and I took it upon myself to answer each one of them, and suggest that we meet together and kick around ideas as to how the subscribers (that's what they were called) could become more involved in the station. Up until that time, they weren't involved at all, except for paying their monthly dues. I can't recall how much the dues were; it was very modest. About 20 of them replied, and we set up a meeting at the home of one of them. On Apr 15, we had our first subscribers meeting. I didn't think that it was incumbent upon us, or even helpful, to take a stand on one side or the other of the conflict between labor and management, or in the strike. I thought that our job was to think of some positive role that the subscribers themselves could play to help with the general direction of the station, in the area of quality. One of the things that occurred to me was that people could prepare sample tapes of their own voices commenting on issues of interest to them, because there were a number of issues that were not covered by the current crop of commentators. A number of the current commentators were, in fact, getting long in the tooth and were beating dead horses. For

example, the fellow who liked to talk about the single tax movement, which had died about a half century earlier [*general laughter*].

Other people at the meeting thought of various actions we might take. Somebody suggested that a fund be set up to give fellowships to people who might want to do a special program, a "documentary in sound" of some important subject, or whatever. Somebody suggested that we needed to have a few spokespersons appointed from within our group of ~20 people, and somebody suggested me. Nobody else seemed interested in taking the lead, so I accepted, temporarily at least. The whole thing was to be conditional on how it might go as time went by. A name was adopted which made it all sound temporary: "Subscribers Interim Committee", or "SIC" for short, which of course has a Latin equivalent.

This was pretty foolish on my part, because I already had so many things going. I was already chairman of the organization called Citizens for Farm Labor, and usually editor of each issue of the magazine we produced, although sometimes I had a guest editor. I had the commentary series on KPFA. I had two families -- one in Berkeley, one in Martinez. I should have said that I just couldn't do it. I guess the group would have had to select somebody else, or maybe forget the whole thing.

In addition to all those extracurricular activities, I had a full-time job at the State Dept. of Public Health. In fact, that job was becoming more and more interesting and important to me. Dr. Breslow, whom I've mentioned before, had succeeded in getting funding to set up on a regular basis a unit within the department which he called the "Medical Care Studies Unit". That was a subject of great importance to me because I had a Master's degree from the School of Public Health at UC Berkeley. I had been able to talk the Head of that unit, another public health physician named Bruce Walter, into an idea of mine. It was a follow-up to and enlargement upon a little project that we had been fooling around with for several months: how much were people over 65 having to spend out of pocket for their health care, if they didn't have health insurance?

Kaiser already existed at that time, but a lot of people were not covered by health insurance. Those people were, in theory, entitled to health care at county facilities (clinics or hospitals), but those facilities were often of substandard quality, they were inconveniently located and the people didn't have transportation, etc. It was therefore a fact -- everybody knew it -- that they frequently had to spend money out of pocket, but nobody knew how much, for what purposes, etc. Up to that point, we had had to rely on a ragtag assortment of sources and try to put them all together into a whole, which was very unsatisfactory and very inaccurate.

I had the idea of selecting a community of a manageable size, and with a reasonably good representation of people over 65. Instead of going with the vagaries of a sample, we would interview every person in the community who was over 65, and get their story. By doing some research with the most recent census available, I thought that the town of Capitola, in Santa Cruz County, was just about the right size to be manageable, and had a nice representation

group of the elderly, some of whom would be on public assistance and some not, etc. We wouldn't bother with a sample; we'd try to get 'em all.

I laid this idea before my immediate supervisor, Bruce Walter, and he loved it. Then we had to sell it to Dr. Breslow. As long as he had some money in the kitty, he went along with it also. Anyway, that was also on my plate along with all the extracurricular activities.

Speaking of my family obligations, we were now in the month of May, and lo and behold I was about to become a father again. On May 30, my youngest child -- a daughter! -- named Dorothy was born. Driving back and forth between Martinez and Berkeley, and then between Martinez and Santa Cruz, got to be a bit much. More than a bit much -- I had to begin thinking of moving to Berkeley.

Back to the subject of the Subscribers Interim Committee. At the second meeting we held, the people who had come the first time were still interested, and we now had ~50 people -- once again, just to exchange ideas. Some strong ideas began to emerge, in the form of what might be called the Berkeley left wing. I think they were all former Trotskyites, or Maoists, or Stalinists, or [chuckle] one stripe or another of authoritarian personalities. I laugh, but it wasn't a laughing matter to those who were trying to start organizations in Berkeley which were relatively liberal in the best sense of the word, meaning "open" -- open-minded, open to possibilities, open to suggestions -- rather than based on fixed ideas. The left-wingers were the death of many and many a Berkeley organization, such as the Berkeley Co-op. Now that I look back on it, I didn't know all this at the time. The thing that saved KPFA since its founding by the handful of Quaker conscientious objectors was that the decision-making was done by this self-appointed and self-perpetuating group of people who agreed on one thing, which was that they weren't rigid ideologues beholden to any particular political agenda.

To make a long story short, the Subscribers Interim Committee was taken over by the red-hots -- another term that some of us used to refer to these people. One of them was a program contributor on KPFA itself. His program was slightly different from the commentary series. This fellow, whose name was William Mandel, had taught himself Russian, and subscribed to Pravda, Izvestia, and other Russian publications. He had a half-hour program rather than the 15 minutes that I and the other commentators were allowed, and he was on every week rather than once a month. So, he was one of the red-hots. He had an acolyte -- a follower -- named Jeremy Jenkin, who had no attachment to the station but was ideologically attached to Mandel. The two of them became real powers among the Subscribers Interim Committee, and were able to dominate. They were very articulate, persuasive, and persistent. I just could not see myself turning from all my other obligations to engage in this fight. So I resigned, and within a month or so the Subscribers Interim Committee went out of existence.

I had followed up my initial commentary about the KPFA situation with a couple of further commentaries on the subject of organizational democracy. I felt liberated from any necessity of continuing as a commentator on a single subject, *i.e.*, farm labor. I had never signed a contract

saying that I would be identified as a specialist in such a way. I took it upon myself to commenting about various things. I began having an announcer on the station staff introduce me at the beginning of each commentary as a social analyst, or something very broad like that. At the end of each commentary, I had the announcer issue an invitation to any listener who would like a copy of my script to write to me c/o KPFA Berkeley. People started doing so. There came a time after a few months of this that the little announcer's squib at the end got lost, and for several months I didn't get any letters. I didn't know why. I started telling the listeners at the end, myself, that if they were interested they could get a copy of the script by writing to me at my PO Box. So, the letters started coming in again.

I think I've come to the end of what I wanted to say tonight. Any questions, comments, or criticisms?

David: The Vietnam war was going on by this time, right?

Henry: Oh, very much so.

David: Did you comment on that?

Henry: Wait a minute. It was not going on "very much so". It was going on. We're talking about 1964.

David: U.S. involvement hadn't started yet? Was it ramping up?

Henry: There were several thousand troops there. But it was not the subject of demonstrations or anything like that, at this point. We've gone up to May 1964. To get ahead of ourselves a bit, around Sep 1964 all hell broke loose on the Berkeley campus. The free speech movement began. That will be part of my discussion next time. That was nothing like the Vietnam demonstrations, although they were certainly powerful in Berkeley. Vietnam had a lot to do with the fact that LBJ didn't run for President in 1968. He would certainly have done so, and would have been overwhelmingly re-elected, if it hadn't been for Vietnam. That war was almost as disastrous as the one in Iraq, but not quite.

Eugene: What happened with the strike at KPFA?

Henry: The strike was resolved by the Board of Trustees, which as I mentioned was not elected, but they were all-powerful in their own way. They ordered management to give the union whatever it wanted.

David: Was the union striking for any issue other than the firing of Elsa Knight Thompson?

Henry: I can't recall the details.

David: Did she get reinstated?

Henry: Yeah, she got reinstated.

David: And Trevor Thomas stayed on too?

Henry: Trevor Thomas resigned.

David: So, she won.

Henry: Oh, in a way. There were probably some issues of overtime, recognition of shop stewards, blah blah blah. It was a truce, really. The station has gone through agonies ever since. At the moment, it seems to be relatively quiescent. But it's always been controversial and divided by factions. They have a library of past programs, which has some pretty good stuff in it, about farm labor and so forth. I don't know whether they have any of my commentaries in there or not. I have quite a few tapes of my own. I used to mimeograph the scripts and send out copies. I got 200-250 letters asking for one of them -- that was my most popular. I lasted longer than I thought I might, before they fired me. I lasted nearly 10 years there -- longer than I did at any of my paid jobs.

Relevant web pages:

History of KPFA: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/KPFA>

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

William Mandel: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Mandel