

28. The Ranch, Joe Murphy, Gene Nelson, Vincent St. John

Henry: Well, last time we covered my brief career in real estate and I'm happy to move on to other subjects. I was only in the real estate racket (if you'll permit the expression) because I had certain financial obligations to meet and had no other source of income, but there were a couple of important developments in the late 1970's. One took place on December 14th of 1977 when I turned fifty years old and was thereby entitled if I wanted to start drawing my pension, based on the years I had spent working for the State of California. And I opted for that, even though it meant my monthly payment was a lot less than it would have been if I had waited. And then two years later than that in 1979 I turned 62 [*ed. Note: these ages and dates need to be checked for accuracy*] which entitled me to Social Security if I wanted, and once again I opted for the lower figure, despite the fact if I had been in financial straits I may have waited and gotten a bigger pay-off eventually.

In any case, it relieved some of the need for me to spend time on houses and to start thinking about other things. And lo and behold, in the early 1980's, I don't recall the exact date, I got an inquiry from a publishing house in New York City asking if they could reprint something that I had done for the University of California many years before on the Bracero program. They wanted to issue it as part of a series on the Chicano experience or something like that. And what they were talking about was a truncated version of the long (overly long) report that I had done on my Bracero study for the school of Public Health. The one that had the unfortunate demise at the hands of my project supervisor, who thought that I had wandered too far from my announced subject, and had become involved in muckraking.

Well, that was not the last of that project as it turned out. About a year after I thought the whole thing was dead and buried and was working for the AFL/CIO, I heard from my old project supervisor, who wanted me to issue a much briefer and much more objective report. Because evidently he was under pressure from the National Institutes of Health which had funded the project – largely because of his personal influence, and they wanted to see something for the investment they had made.

Well, I could have told him I was too busy doing other things; he had no power over me at that point, but I still thought there were some findings from my survey, which involved interviews with over a thousand braceros. Nobody had ever done anything like it and nobody showed any signs of doing anything like it, and so I agreed to have another crack at it. And this time I hit upon a device which could get a lot of raw meat into the report without raising the objections that I wasn't being objective. This device consisted of extensive quotes from the braceros themselves, rather than my commenting on this or that aspect of the program; letting them speak for themselves. So, I did that in this truncated report; it still turned out to be well over 300 pages long but my project supervisor couldn't object to my including this material because it wasn't me speaking, it was the braceros themselves.

Well, it was pretty good – still, he was very reluctant to let it be seen by anybody other than his immediate circle within the profession of public health administration. So, a few copies were

made and sent off with severe warnings that it was for administrative purposes only, not to be circulated, not to be quoted, etc. I forgot about the whole thing. Somehow or other, this publisher in New York City, it was a wholly owned subsidiary of the New York Times I found out; somehow he had gotten a hold of a copy, and wanted to include it in his series on the Chicano experience in the U.S. It didn't have much to do directly with Chicanos, but he wanted to include it as part of the series. And I said that was okay with me, if I could write a new preface to explain the whole history of my bracero study, and he agreed to that. So in the early 1980's, I think it was probably 1982, I was again a published author, although it was not exactly a New York Times bestseller.

Eugene: What was the title?

Henry: The Bracero Program in California.

Eugene: The publisher?

Henry: The Arno Press.

Now, I was in the market for country property. I don't know exactly how I got the idea, but I visualized buying a place that had enough elbow room that I could indulge all of my interests, including spreading out my archives that I had been building up throughout the years in all of my roles: at the AFLCIO job as director of research for AWOC, and then my several hats that I wore at different times at the State Public Health Department, including pesticide studies, including surveillance of the Medicaid program, and also including farm labor studies to some extent in the Public Health Department.

I visualized a place where I could spread things out almost literally on table tops and start organizing my collections that were in chaos, scattered widely to some extent in basements here and attics there. I was going to pull them all together and put them in sufficiently good shape that I might not only use them for my own writing; I dreamed of telling the true story of AWOC which nobody else had and nobody else ever did. But then I also wanted a place that had enough room for me to indulge my continuing interest in painting, which I had let fallow for a long time but which I would like to have gotten back to every once in a while.

So I was always on the lookout for someplace in the environs of Northern California. And in 1984 I just happened to be talking with a friend of mine from the real estate world who said he had a client who was looking for rural property and had found something in Sonoma County near a little town called Forestville, which I had never even heard of up until that point. And he said that it sounded awfully good, but this client of his had been turned off by the fact that the people who were occupying the place were freaks. Who claimed they had a religious community going, which was in fact a pot farm. And she didn't want to get involved. Well, my friend, the real estate agent, said in fact they were on their way out because they hadn't been paying for years and were about to be evicted by the Sheriff, and the owner of the place would be willing to sell it very reasonably, just to get it off his hands.

So, I said I would be interested in looking at it, and he drove me up there one weekend and it was a pretty interesting looking place. Even though it was steep and not very much of the 27 acres was usable, but there were lots of trees, and certain vistas from the tops of some of the places on the property. So I became very interested. And it was just a matter of waiting for the eviction process to take its course, and in order to satisfy the sale I needed to come up with all cash, which I was able to do. And in March of 1984 I became the owner of these 27 acres outside of Forestville. The place really wasn't in such bad shape; the religious cult hadn't trashed it.

So, at that point my significant other, Lois, had a son named Patrick who was at loose ends, and we worked out an arrangement whereby he could help develop the place in Forestville, including building a cabin for himself. There was one main house, and I guess at that time there was one other usable building on the highest point which was being sublet to a guy named David who was interested in computers and worked up there by himself. He wanted to continue staying in that cabin. So Patrick and I built a cabin for him down in the valley. When that had been finished, he began looking for employment elsewhere in the vicinity and found somebody in the town of Occidental, which was a few miles away. This fellow was doing some building of his own. Patrick considered himself to be a fairly competent carpenter's assistant. So, he started working for this guy. And all of this is a prelude, if you can bear with me, to quite a digression in my career arc, if you could call it that.

Patrick had a friend from Southern California who came up and shared the cabin with him and started working for this guy in Occidental. They lost their job with the builder in Occidental but were able to find employment as gardeners for an elderly couple. And now this gets into the meat of my story.

The elderly man named Joe Murphy was one of the last of the old Wobblies; a Wobbly being a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, an organization that had been a real power in the country in the early 1900's. I had learned about it from a course I took at Pomona College on social movements and the IWW had a real social movement back in the early part of the century. Joe Murphy was one of the last old Wobblies still standing, and Patrick and his friend Chester strongly suggested that I meet him, because they knew that I was interested in the labor movement. So I did, and was swept off my feet by the charm of Joe Murphy who was a good Irishman and he had the gift of Blarney. He apparently didn't have too many people who were that interested in the old days, when he would work in the wheat harvest, or the lumber industry or various things that he related. I gave him evidence of my own interests, I gave him copies of some of my writings; he was very impressed by them. So I began making video footage of him telling his stories. I guess I had in mind making a documentary eventually; I made a lot of tapes. I used to drive up from Berkeley to Forestville every week, and I would always stop off in Occidental along the way.

For about two years at least this went on. I had a little Dodge Ram pickup truck; I would load it with archive boxes in Berkeley and drive them up to the Ranch (I called it a Ranch, which rather stretches the term in its usual sense). I helped build several more out-buildings; we built

something we called the Red Barn, and I personally built something I called the "Library". Along about this time – we're now talking about the late 1980's – Patrick de-camped and the cabin down in the canyon that Chester was now living in was not adequate in several respects. There was no source of water down there for one thing. But it seems there was another point on the property at which a water line had been laid out with the expectation that a cabin would be built there. So, Chester had a friend from Southern California, who was in fact a skilled carpenter, and we brought him up to build a cabin for Chester himself, where he would have electricity and water and all the modern conveniences, including an out-house. That cabin has stood the test of time.

Now, I regret to say that I was never sufficiently well organized to carry out my grand plan of working on the archive boxes to make them usable for research purposes.

Another out-building was built by Patrick before he de-camped, on the highest part of the property, which is where there were two huge storage tanks for water, but alongside of those there was a bare space which was level and big enough to build what I called a Studio Gallery. It was divided into two halves, and one half would be devoted to my painting materials and the other would be devoted to hanging them where people could admire them. Well I'm afraid that I never realized much if any of that.

But then my attention was seized by the case of Joe Murphy who went into the hospital in 1989 I guess it was to have an angioplasty, a procedure that I happened to know something about because I myself had a heart problem and I understood that it was a relatively routine procedure that involved cleaning out some blockage in one of the coronary arteries, and the implantation of something called a stint. Well, I knew that Joe was going to have this done on a certain date and I started calling up to his home immediately after that to find out how it was going, and I didn't get an answer for several days. And I feared the worst, and in fact the worst had happened. The surgeon had bungled the procedure. Joe had been kept alive on whatever kind of heart/lung apparatus they had. His wife was Doris, who was by his side the whole time, and none of it did any good, and she finally had to agree to have the plug pulled.

I had become sufficiently friends with Joe that she wanted me to preside at his memorial service, which took place in May of 1989. At that service I met a man named Archie Green, and I understood from Doris that he was a labor historian and that he and I ought to get to know each other. So I did talk to Archie at that time and agreed we should get to know each other better. One thing led to another and we decided – I guess it was my idea originally – to start a non-profit foundation in honor of Joe Murphy and the IWW tradition. They had a little cabin, that is, Doris Murphy had a little cabin on her property now, which had been used for occasional overnight guests. But we decided that it would be converted to a library for Joe's memorabilia and for other books and relevant materials for anybody interested in the history of the IWW. And there was a lawyer who was sufficiently interested, to do the paperwork for creating this non-profit organization. And a long-time friend of mine named Eugene Nelson got interested because he was himself a member of the IWW, which still existed by the way, even though it didn't attract any attention anymore. But the whole idea of the IWW was to have

every worker in one big union rather than dozens and dozens of small unions, sometimes competing with each other.

Well, Gene Nelson and I – again I have to confess it was my idea – I suggested that we collaborate on a biography of Joe Murphy. I guess I was influenced by the fact that I had collaborated with Joan London on a biography about the history of the farm labor movement. So Gene and I began alternating chapters and got up to several hundred pages of material before the inevitable happened. We both had very definite ideas about tone and style and so forth and the point came at which Gene himself said that he couldn't go on with it. So that was the end of that project, although the materials still exist up in my attic. Gene went his own way and wrote his own version in the form of an autobiographical novel, that is, it was as though Joe himself was telling it; it was fictionalized.

Meanwhile, Archie Green and I had become ever more friendly, and I became very caught up in his field, which was what he called labor culture, which he was at pains to distinguish from labor history. History being limited to the cold hard facts, and names and dates and places; whereas Archie was interested in the glue which held the workers together by means of common slang and jokes and songs; and he was in fact the father of that sub-branch of labor studies.

So I helped him in whatever ways I could; by driving him around, because for some reason or another he had never learned to drive himself. I would take photographs, which later appeared in his books. I did research for him at the Bancroft Library. And I felt I was making a useful contribution.

Oh, it's 7 o'clock. If I have another couple of minutes, I will end in this way. In the course of my exposure to the IWW, I had become fascinated by the figure of Vincent Saint John, who had been the head of the whole thing during a crucial period in the period about 1908-1914 and yet he didn't appear in the histories of the organization. All of which made it sound as though the leader, the virtual Mister IWW, was a man named Big Bill Haywood. So I was fascinated by the fact that Saint John had been virtually forgotten. And I happened – well, Archie Green in his research on another subject – happened to find that Vincent Saint John had been buried in the Mountain View Cemetery of Oakland. Unmarked grave, but Archie was able to give me the number of the grave and I could find out from the office exactly where it was located.

And I did, and I was moved. I had an epiphany that what was needed was a gravestone to indicate that here was a leader of an important social movement at one time. So I broached this idea to Archie and he agreed that the two of us would raise the funds for such a headstone, and I designed it and we had it put in place, and notified people that we thought might be interested and had a little ceremony one sunny day in June, I believe it was. About 2001. And [David? Ed. question] reported it.

And it was a high point in my life. Because that is going to endure, that monument is going to endure, whatever else I have accomplished. That stone will still be there. So much for that

portion of my career; but it was very important to me, it was a peak experience, as Abraham Maslan would call it.

David: We should go there some time.