

## 29. Staying in touch with the farm labor movement

**Henry:** In the 1980s, I was still having to put in a certain amount of time fixing up old houses and renting them out for a while, until I couldn't stand being a landlord anymore, and then I would turn around and sell them. But I never lost contact entirely with my various social issues, particularly the farm labor movement.

In 1982, I was invited to the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Farm Workers Association, which was started by Cesar Chavez in Delano in 1962. For some reason, the 20th anniversary celebration was held in San Jose. Well, I can think of a reason they might have done that. That's where Chavez spent a good many years -- in fact, that's where he was discovered by Father Donald McDonnell, who started him on the path to social activism. But I suspect that the main reason for holding the anniversary celebration there was that Chavez's mother was still alive -- she was probably approaching 100 years old -- and she was able to attend this meeting, whereas she probably wouldn't have been able to travel to Delano.

I met a number of my old friends there, including Chavez himself, Wendy Goepel (who had much to do with the organization I started, called Citizens for Farm Labor, back in 1963), and Father Thomas McCullough (I hadn't seen him for years). This was also the occasion upon which Chavez, hearing that I had been dropped from the Dept. of Public Health ... he knew that I had spent some time in the health dept. studying the effects of pesticides on farm workers ... when he heard that I was at liberty, he said "Why don't you come work for us?" He was very interested in the pesticide issue, because he was interested in boycotting agricultural products as part of his strategy of organizing the workers. However, I had to tell him that I had family commitments, and it would be impossible for me to move to Delano.

Another issue that got me involved once again took place in 1986, when the U.S. Congress was grappling with the problem of immigration, somewhat in the way that they still are. There was a big problem with illegal immigration then, as there still is. A senator named Alan Simpson from Wyoming and a congressman named Romano Mazzoli from Kentucky, after holding a lot of hearings, came up with an omnibus immigration reform bill popularly known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act. It was supposed to reform all the things that were wrong with the immigration system up to that point. It was going to cure the problem of employers hiring illegal immigrants by, for the first time, penalizing the employers -- that is, if they were caught. In regard to workers, there was a provision that if domestic workers could not be found in sufficient numbers to do certain types of jobs, then "guest worker" programs could be instituted. They didn't use that language -- they knew that the bracero program had been very unpopular in its time, so they avoided the use of that word. Somebody came up with this euphemism.

So, I was like an old warhorse smelling smoke, or whatever the cliché is. I began writing a critique of this aspect of the so-called immigration reform bill. As was my besetting sin, I was behind the curve and didn't finish my critique in time to do any good, because Congress passed the bill and it was signed into law by the President in 1986 -- Ronald Reagan.

There was a confluence of other interests of mine, one of which was my new friendship with Joe Murphy. Joe was not only a former wobbly, with lots and lots of anecdotes about the rough-and-tumble life he used to live, but I also learned that he was interested in some of the cultural aspects of life, including writers. Somehow or other, it had come to his attention that the remaining daughter of Jack London was still alive and well, and living in the town of Glen Ellen, which was where Jack London's ranch was located. She had never actually lived at the ranch; she was living in an apartment owned by the manager of a bookstore that specialized in the works of Jack London. Joe liked the idea of having gatherings of writers and would-be writers at his place in Occidental.

One day he arranged to have Becky London driven from Glen Ellen to Occidental, for the purpose of meeting me as another sometime-writer. We had a good time trying to bring out her memories of her father. Becky herself, unlike her sister Joan, my co-author on the book that I have mentioned before in these ramblings, was no writer. In fact, I think she took some pride in the distinction between herself and her sister. Joan was a political radical, and a heavy smoker and drinker. Becky was a conventional housewife, but she was a charming old lady and did have some memories of her father, which were very interesting to me.

At about this time -- we're talking about the late 1980s -- it came to my attention that an old friend of mine, Trevor Thomas, whom I had known way back when I was research director for AWOC ... at that time he was the legislative representative of the Friends' Committee on Legislation ... he was a lobbyist trying to get the California legislature to act on laws that would be of some help to agricultural workers, and in that connection I had got to know Trevor. Later on, he became station director of KPFA, and I got to know him even better during the troubled times there. It was always in trouble. By 1987, he had long since been relieved of his duties there, and was at liberty. In fact, I think he was on the verge of poverty. He probably had a small pension from Social Security, and that was about it. Somehow, I got the idea of combining my knowledge of Jack London's two daughters ... I had known Joan well, and I was in the process of getting to know Becky ... it occurred to me that there had never been a proper documentary (a television documentary of the sort that they run periodically on PBS) on the life and times of Jack London. He was a very colorful character, much more deserving of a documentary than some of the stuff they ran on PBS.

I knew that Trevor had some experience with television. He had been a commentator on KQED during a time when they used to have a hour-long news program every evening. It occurred to me that maybe he and I could join forces and do a proper documentary about Jack London, and it would give him a little extra to supplement his small Social Security benefit. I was going to bankroll the whole project. I somehow got the idea, and I don't know now how it occurred to me, that I would form a tax-exempt, non-profit corporation to which we would invite contributions from friends, relatives, and to some extent ourselves, and we would use the proceeds from that to support the production of cultural programs such as an opening documentary about Jack London. I found that it was entirely possible for amateurs to organize a non-profit corporation, by buying a book from the Nolo Press in Berkeley, which led you through

the process step-by-step.

So, that's exactly what we did. Trevor and I became co-directors of something called Antho Productions, Inc. The word "Antho" consisted of An- for Anderson and -tho for Thomas. We found incidentally that "antho" is actually a Greek word meaning "flower". I designed a piece of stationery that featured a line drawing of some roses. We began with my making a contribution to this non-profit, which was tax-deductible, and we would then pay Trevor \$1000/ month out of this fund. We hired a production crew (a professional video photographer) and went through interviews with a number of talking heads who knew something about the subject. We concentrated on Becky London, but also had extensive interviews with a man named Russ Kingman who had done a biography of London, and a teacher at Sonoma State named Clarice Stasz who had done another biography.

Unhappily, things began to go downhill when Trevor started to become increasingly forgetful. One day when I went down to meet him at his home on Rose Street, he had a long face and said that his car had been taken away. He said that he had not only lost his driver license, but to make sure that he didn't drive his car without a license they impounded the car as well. I never did get the whole story, but I gather that they saw him driving around without seeming to know where he was, and that is the problem -- he didn't. He had forgotten how to find whatever address he was looking for. I had never had any knowledge or experience with Alzheimer's -- I don't think I had ever even heard the word. Trevor had Alzheimer's, it was very swift-moving, and before long he was dead. Those tapes still exist. They're of much better quality than my videotapes of Joe Murphy, because they were made by professionals and didn't come cheap. So maybe somebody can use them someday in some way.

This was just one of many digressions from the main concern to which I always eventually came home, namely the farm labor movement.

In 1993, Chavez died quite suddenly; nobody really knows the cause. There was a memorial service in Delano, which I attended along with Eugene Nelson, the friend with whom I had tried to co-author a biography of Joe Murphy, which hadn't panned out. At this service, which attracted thousands and thousands of people, I renewed my old acquaintance with Father Donald McDonnell. I found out how to keep in touch with him, and soon afterward I invited him to the place I was living at the time (Buckeye Avenue, in Oakland) for the purpose of trying to get him talking about his experiences in San Jose, where he met Chavez and got him interested in the papal encyclicals, which said that the working man had not only the right but the obligation to form associations for their betterment, although these encyclicals didn't use the word "union"; they used the word "association".

Father McDonnell is the one who got Chavez from a job stacking lumber in a lumberyard in San Jose to being concerned with social issues. That is really what led to the events in Delano. Those events would never have happened without the presence of Father McDonnell in San Jose at just the right time. I wanted to get his story because it was not being told in the many

biographies of Chavez that were being written by that time (and are still being written). Most of them give passing allusion to McDonnell, but none of them give him the importance I think he deserves.

Anyway, Father McDonnell came to my house on Buckeye, and [*chuckle*] it was a most frustrating experience. He didn't want to talk about the days in San Jose -- he wanted to try to convert me to Catholicism [*laughter*]. He had become very conservative at his advanced age. I diplomatically tried to get him back on the track I was interested in, and he equally tried to get me on the track he was interested in, and it ended up in a draw with neither of us achieving what he wanted.

Every once in a while, somebody would learn that I was still alive, still interested in farm labor, and still in possession of most of my faculties, and they would want to pick my brain about AWOC or some other subject of which I had some knowledge. I remember one author who had a manuscript that he called "The politics of insurgency". He looked upon the farm labor movement as an example of insurgency, I guess. He had a chapter in which he wrote about AWOC, some of the efforts at organization that had taken place before AWOC, and those that had followed, including the Chavez union. He wanted me to go over this chapter and give him my opinion. I guess he wanted me to tell him that it was worth publishing [*chuckle*]. But I couldn't, because I didn't think it was worth publishing. It was full of factual errors as well as wrong interpretations of the facts, which if anything was even more unacceptable to me. So I didn't reply, and I guess that eventually he figured that was my opinion.

On other occasions, I was very willing to help people. Sometimes, people wanted to interview me. Sometimes the interviews turned up later in articles or books. I was happy enough to take part in the movement in ways such as that, even though in spite of my best efforts to get the facts right, they often got warped somewhere along the line [*chuckle*].

When Joan London died in Jan 1971, our book had just been published. I often thought that the thing that kept her going during her last days (she was dying of lung cancer) ... the will to live is apparently a powerful one, and I really think that she kept going as long as she did in the hope that she could actually hold that book in her hand before she died, and that is exactly what happened. This story got into the hands of Herb Caen, the famous and popular gossip columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He dressed it up with as much pathos as he could, and he managed to get the title of the book wrong [*chuckle*]. It's called "So shall ye reap", but it came out "So we shall reap" [*general laughter*], and then I knew all I needed to know about Herb Caen. Almost everything in his column was ...

**David:** I completely agree with that, by the way. He was a buffoon.

**Henry:** Somewhere along the line, a woman named Sara Ramirez, who was in a PhD program in sociology at Stanford University (which was of more than normal interest to me because I had at one time been on the same track) was proposing to write her dissertation on the subject of farm workers and pesticides. So, this looked to be a match made in heaven. She gave me a

prospectus and wanted my comment on that. I couldn't make any sense out of it. I didn't see how she could possibly succeed in writing anything that made sense. But she went on and got a PhD, all right, without me. She might have gotten some help from somebody else who knew the subject. Or maybe they gave her a pass because of affirmative action.

I never did get anybody coming to me and asking for my opinion about the administration of these huge new medical care benefits under Medicare and Medicaid, which I had devoted a couple of years to studying and trying to arrive at some ways in which the fraud that was going on, or simply inefficiencies -- it wasn't always deliberate dishonesty. I did publish in the *Journal of the American Public Health Association* an article that had some of our ideas for identifying the providers of services who were abusing the system. But nobody ever did approach me about this. I used to keep a box of clippings from the newspapers that would say that such-and-such medical group (or individual in some cases) had been found bleeding the system of millions of dollars after an investigation of several years. It didn't seem to me that it would take several years, if they knew what they were looking for. I eventually gave it up because the box got to overflowing with clippings. It's still going on.

On a happier note, from time to time somebody would be referred to me by a mutual acquaintance. In some cases, I guess they would find my name in the phone book, where it's always been over the years. They would come to me wanting to talk about some aspect of the farm labor movement. In the year 2000, a fellow by the name of Gilbert Gonzalez came here and told me that he had become very interested in the bracero program, even though it had gone out of existence in 1964. He was a teacher in Chicano Studies at UC Irvine. A remarkable number of the students in his classes mentioned that their fathers or grandfathers had originally come to the U.S. as braceros. He had heard that I had done some work on the bracero program back in the 1950s.

We talked at length, and he became really interested in my work. One thing led to another, and I put together a proposal that we make up a panel that would address in some way the subject of so-called "guest worker" programs. They were once again being discussed seriously as part of the "immigration reform bill" that had passed in 1986. I learned that the North American Labor History Conference (NALHC) was about to have its annual meeting in Detroit, and the theme of that year's conference was somehow relevant to the subject of "guest workers", bracero history, or whatever.

Gil and I divided up the subject. I don't remember exactly what he talked about. I wrote a talk called "Braceros speak" that consisted largely of quotes from field interviews with braceros that had been conducted during the course of my studies. I appeared at the conference in Oct 2001, and it went over very well. Apparently nobody else had ever actually studied the braceros while the program was still in existence. All of Gil's information came second- or third-hand. People were very impressed that I had braceros talking about themselves in their own words (translated, of course). After the panel broke up, I was surrounded by people who wanted to know more about my project, what had happened to my project, etc. That was a "peak

experience" for me -- if I may use that phrase, which I think I have once before -- it's something I learned from the writings of Abraham Maslow.

I kept in touch with a couple of the people that I met on that occasion. One of them had a contact at the Bancroft library in Berkeley. She wrote to this fellow and suggested that he get in touch with me, to get an oral history from me. In due course he tried to do so, but [*chuckle*] I just wasn't prepared. In fact [*chuckle*], I still am not -- not fully. I kept putting him off, until eventually he retired. I guess my habit of procrastination got me into a vacuum that can no longer be filled. Another one I kept in touch with once in a while, and she's still interested in the subject of foreign contract labor programs.

I was so pleased by this experience that I began submitting proposals for meetings of other labor history organizations. There was a Southwest Labor Studies Organization (SLSO) that met annually. There was a Bay Area Labor History Workshop (BALHW) that met every month. It was headed by a fellow who lives in Oakland, named Don Watson. Every so often I would submit a proposal to one of these organizations. I would talk about not only the bracero program, but also the history of AWOC. These organizations were small compared to NALHC, but they were gratifying.

One of the annual meetings of the SLSO was held in Los Angeles. To my great surprise, during a plenary session that ended the conference, I was called to the front by the chairman, and he presented me with a certificate: a Lifetime Achievement Award for my contributions to labor history. A complete surprise, and I have to put that down as another "peak experience".

I'll just refer to one more interview I had. They weren't always a great success.

**David:** What about the movie that Gilbert Gonzalez made?

**Henry:** Well, I'll have to come to that next time.

I was interviewed by a woman who went to the trouble of hiring a professional crew. She was preparing a documentary on contributions to the Delano movement by Filipinos, who were involved in the beginning but later drifted away. As far as the general public knows, it was all Chicanos, but in fact Filipinos played an important role in the beginning of the movement. She brought her production crew here one morning, and I was to talk about my friendship with Larry Itliong, the head of the Filipino community in Delano. I hadn't had a wink of sleep that previous night, and I had a sore throat that made it ... Well, I sounded just about the way I do right now [*chuckle*], and it was a fiasco! I never have seen the resulting documentary. I don't know whether any of my taping survives in it, and I hope it doesn't. If it does, it doesn't show me making any sense. That was one of my failures.

**Eugene:** What year was that?

**Henry:** Probably 2007 or -08, something like that.

So, I don't want to make this sound as though it were one triumph after another, because it wasn't.

But my relationship with Gil Gonzalez did build up as the years went by, and I will talk more about that later.

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*Note from transcriber (Steve):* The names I typed here for three labor history organizations mentioned toward the end of this episode (North American Labor History Conference; Southwest Labor Studies Organization; Bay Area Labor History Workshop) all differ from what Henry says in the recording (National Labor History Association; Southwest Labor History Association; Bay Area Labor History Association). However, based on some Google searching, I'm pretty sure the names I used are the correct ones.

Relevant web sites:

Simpson-Mazzoli Act (Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986):

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration\\_Reform\\_and\\_Control\\_Act\\_of\\_1986](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_Reform_and_Control_Act_of_1986)

Father Donald McDonnell and his influence on the young Cesar Chavez:

[www.ufw.org/\\_board.php?mode=view&b\\_code=news\\_press&b\\_no=11813](http://www.ufw.org/_board.php?mode=view&b_code=news_press&b_no=11813)

North American Labor History Conference: <http://clas.wayne.edu/nalhc/>

Bay Area Labor History Workshop: <https://sites.google.com/site/4balhw/Homepage/balhw-history>