

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



Spring 2011

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Forgiven and Unforgiven in West Branch

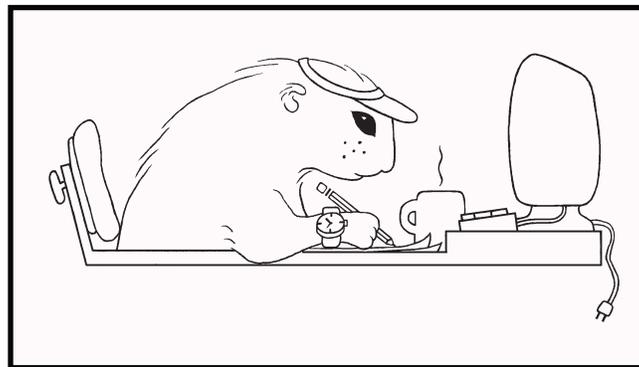
[In honor of Ronald Reagan's recently-celebrated 100th birthday, the Prairie Progressive reprints this tribute first published in our Fall 1992 issue.]

It was a lot more fun in 1969. But, then again, many things were a lot more fun '69,' even traveling to West Branch to see a former president of the United States. Ronald Reagan's August 8 visit to the Herbert Hoover Library took me back 23 years, when Lyndon Baines made a similar trip to the Heartland (although we didn't call it that in those days).

I had been one of those who cheered with triumph when LBJ announced in March of '68 that he would not run for reelection. Watching his address to the nation on tv, it seemed to many of us that our being jeered and pelted with eggs and rocks during countless demonstrations and marches had finally paid off. Johnson was acknowledging that our protests – and Eugene McCarthy's 42% in the New Hampshire primary – had, in effect, scared a sitting president out of politics.

The war in Vietnam continued, but by the spring of 1969, LBJ was out of the headlines and back at the ranch. There wasn't a lot of fanfare for his visit to West Branch. Although this would be a rare public appearance for LBJ, the Hoover hype-machine hadn't yet cranked up to its current output of daily press releases (New Acquisition for

Museum!... Washington Bureaucrat to Speak!... Hooverball Star Injured!). LBJ, it was said, was visiting West Branch simply to get some ideas for his own presidential library.



Some friends and I drove out in an old blue-green Rambler to see the man who had been our symbol of American brutality and governmental arrogance. A glimpse of the Devil – from a safe distance – would be good for the soul.

Leisurely approaching the outskirts of West Branch, we were unprepared for the sudden appearance of dozens of Highway Patrol cars – an unnerving reminder that even a deposed Devil has a lot of power.

The show of state force quieted our laughter, but we parked and walked the final quarter-mile with a kind of grim satisfaction. Yes, our humble efforts had contributed to the humbling of this notorious warmonger.

When he stepped out of the limo and

waved his Stetson at the crowd, Johnson looked exactly like what he was: a wealthy, tanned, relaxed ex-superstar who no longer had to listen to chants and catcalls wherever he went (Hey, hey, LBJ, who many kids did you kill today?).

We stood and gawked at this cheerful man who had perfected the art of stealing and buying elections. A man whose only ideology was the accumulation of power. A man whose pride, ego, and misguided stubbornness caused irrevocable damage to America.

This is what I was thinking as the Hill Country Texan glad-handed and back-slapped the eager

Iowans who pressed toward him. And yet, on that cloudy day in Cedar County, I felt the hate drain out of me. Here was LBJ himself, smiling and benign, gracing us with his charm, honoring us with his presence in our state. The sudden surge of benevolence and forgiveness surprised me as I, too, pressed toward him.

No such benevolence and forgiveness hit me as Ronald Reagan gave his homage to Hoover. His contribution to the ruination of America had been far more reckless and cruel than Johnson's. And here he was, gazing fondly at the flag-carrying boy and girl scouts who marched before us in their starched khaki uniforms.

*Forgiven and Unforgiven,
Continued on Page 6*

Faith, Freedom, and Reasonable Force

Born and raised a Catholic, I could always spot a convert to the Catholic faith. They could quote the Bible prodigiously (and quoted the Old Testament more frequently than the New Testament), carried a big St. James version with them, or thought that becoming a crusader for Jesus was more important than following in his footsteps.

The Catholics of my time rarely saw a Bible, and if so, it was not a King James version. Lucky for us, it was interpreted by priests and nuns. Those of us who were fortunate enough to attend Catholic school were taught what the Bible said, and the primary focus was what Jesus had taught through the gospels of the New Testament. We were taught about compassion, justice, and generosity.

I would be surprised if today's Catholic could name the seven corporal works of mercy, or the seven spiritual works of mercy. A corporal work of mercy is something like 'visiting the sick.' The parallel spiritual work of mercy would be 'praying for the sick.' Today's Catholic would be more inclined to instruct us on why abortion is wrong, or why two gay men shouldn't marry.

Connie Schultz, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, quoted her mother when she wrote that "being a Christian means fixing yourself and helping others, not the other way around." Connie's mother and I are of similar ilk.

There's a new Christianity afoot and I'm not familiar with it. In a way, Catholics seem to have joined forces with radical Christians who preach politics from the pulpit. One of those groups, the Iowa Faith & Freedom Coalition, describes itself as "a non-profit organization that seeks to make a difference in the public arena regarding the issues that matter most. We stand for integrity in government, high moral values, constitutional authority, and Christian principles. Our purpose is to educate and influence voters and politicians to keep their commitment to both liberty and law; that America may continue to be one nation under God."

Catholics have always been anti-choice, so it's no big deal that the Catholics and the IFFC share support for House File 153, which states: "The sovereign state of Iowa recognizes that life is valued and protected from the moment of conception, and each life, from that moment, is accorded the same rights and protections guaranteed to all persons by the Constitution of the United States, the Constitution of the State of Iowa, and the laws of this state." What's hard to swallow is the sentence that comes next: "The Iowa Supreme Court shall not have

"With or without religion, good people will do good and evil people will do evil. But for good people to do evil — that takes religion."

*— Steven Weinberg,
Nobel laureate*

appellate jurisdiction over the provisions of this section." Does that mean a lawsuit must go through the federal judicial process? Reflecting upon the IFFC's mission statement, where's the liberty in the first portion of the bill? And where's the commitment to law under the second segment? I'm disappointed in the church of my birth, that it would follow the lead of self-documented Tea Party activists.

Did you catch the part about the "sovereign state of Iowa" in the beginning of the legislative bill? A sovereign state is "a state which administers its own government, and is not dependent upon, or subject to, another power." Webster's Dictionary. Try to understand the comparison to "one nation under God" in the IFFC statement? Is there a conflicting

thought process here that I may be missing?

I'll give the Catholic Church some credit. It did not follow the modern-day Christian leadership into the darkness as the latter signed on in support of a bill (HF 7) that provides for reasonable force. "Reasonable force, including deadly force, may be used, and a person has no duty to retreat from any place at which the person has a right to be present, and has the right to stand the person's ground, and meet force with force, if the person believes reasonable force, including deadly force, is necessary under the circumstances to prevent death or serious injury to oneself or a third party, or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony." Now, you may ask yourself, why does a Christian group want to support a bill that Wyatt Earp would have found to be repugnant? Take a closer look at that phrase "prevent death [to] a third party."

If HF 153 is enacted (the bill mentioned above that provides that life begins at conception), then it follows that a gunslinger of today would have the right to use reasonable force to stop an abortion. Ouch! And HF 7 provides absolute immunity from prosecution.

Please don't excommunicate me yet. The Iowa Catholic Conference is still registered in support of several bills that actually provide mercy and aid to those less fortunate, such as prohibiting the use of restraints on pregnant inmates; promoting the state's version of the Dream Act; and supporting a study on a the social impact of a living wage. However, the IFFC has failed to register on the bills (at this time).

By the way, didn't the Warren Court already determine that life begins at forty? ✂

— Marty Ryan is not a practicing Catholic.

Celebrating 40 years of HELP in Eastern Iowa

I served as a paralegal at Legal Aid in the 1970's. It propelled me into a life of community organizing.

Now I am working with a committee to commemorate 40 years of HELP Legal Assistance in Scott County. HELP is a civil legal aid office in Davenport, Iowa, engaged in the ongoing struggle for justice on behalf of those who lack the economic resources to retain private counsel.

Its mission is grounded in the aspirational goal of equal justice under law: "Justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status" (former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell). HELP works to improve the lives of seniors and those living in poverty by providing quality legal services and education in civil legal matters involving basic necessities, fundamental rights, and safety. HELP annually assists nearly 2,000 clients.

The dream of a local legal aid serving the critical civil legal needs of the poor became reality only through the work of visionaries deeply committed to social action and to the true meaning of justice. In the late 1960's, Father Marvin Mottet's graduate school research had convinced him of the critical need for the poor to have meaningful access to this nation's civil justice system. He helped form a collaboration of the Diocese of Davenport, the Scott County Bar Association, and the University of Iowa College of Law, which culminated in the incorporation of the Help Through Education and Law Program in 1970. Early money came from the office of Economic Opportunity, which flowed directly from the work of those who led the early fight for civil rights in our country for African-Americans and for the poor. Early directors included Frank Rhomberg, Steve Schalk, and Michael Liebke. Many of the staff with whom I worked in the

70's are still at HELP, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to serving the poor and insuring equal access to our justice system.

In celebrating its 40th year of continuous operation, HELP hopes to expand its support and to engage the broader community in a discussion on the importance of equal access to justice. HELP's rich history of achieving social good through legal assistance to the poor provides a perfect background for this endeavor. We have a need, and indeed an obligation, to educate the community and the next generation about the continuing importance of this vital work to fight racism, poverty, and the disenfranchisement of the marginalized, and while protecting the civil rights of all.

The culmination of the celebration will be an "Equal Access to Justice Summit" to sensitize the broader community to equal justice issues and to

engender support for the provision of legal services to the poor. The Summit will take place on Friday, April 8, 2011 in the Rogalski Center on the St. Ambrose University campus in Davenport. Speakers and presenters will include Iowa Senator Joe Bolkcom on predatory lending, Father David Vasquez on immigration and the Postville raids, and US District Court Judge Robert Pratt on maintaining an independent judiciary.

Judge Pratt will also give a luncheon keynote on "Equal Access to Justice." We will finish the day with a wine and hors d'oeuvres reception with longtime legal aid advocate Congressman Bruce Braley.

Call 563-505-0183 or email jswanberg@iowalaw.org to pre-register. ✨

— *Cathy Bolkcom lives
in Le Claire, Iowa*



Pearl Buttons and Plug-Uglies

This year marks the centenary of an Iowa labor dispute known to history as the Labor War of Muscatine. It started as a lockout, continued as a strike, and settled into a grim contest of endurance that would last for fifteen months. It was seen by contemporaries as a strike of national significance and still has all of the hallmarks of one. The press from Chicago to New York reported news of Iowa's militant button workers alongside accounts of the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike, and the sinking of the Titanic.

During the Iowa Labor War, a policeman was killed, women and children were thrown in jail, the state militia was called to Muscatine twice, and the governor of Iowa negotiated a settlement that manufacturers immediately disregarded. Thugs (called "plug-uglies" by locals) were brought in from Chicago and the union filed suit against the Muscatine County Board of Supervisors and won. As the strike entered its second year, its leaders, including the national organizer of the American Federation of Labor, Emmet Flood, were indicted on charges of conspiracy.

Since the early 1900s, Muscatine button workers had tried with little success to organize a union to represent their interests. But going into the year 1911, with over 2,000 card-carrying members of the Button Workers Protective Union (BWPU), workers had every reason to feel optimistic. Their union was now one of the largest AFL-affiliated locals in Iowa and members hoped to improve working conditions and standardize wages throughout the industry without resorting to the strikes and conflicts prevalent in other parts of the country.

Then, towards the end of the workday on a cold Saturday in February 1911, employers posted signs in most of the factories announcing an indefinite shutdown. Over 2,000 men and women were suddenly out of work. Manufactur-

ers claimed the shutdown was the result of overproduction caused by a sluggish demand for buttons, a consequence of the recent Chicago garment workers strike. Button workers saw it as a deliberate attempt to break the union.

The shutdown led to demonstrations and picketing; manufacturers escalated by calling in members of Chicago's "Hinky Dink" gang to guard the plants and beat demonstrators. By the evening of April 13 a near riotous situation prevailed and Iowa governor Beryl Carroll reluctantly called in the militia whose first order of business was to escort the Chicago thugs out of town. After that they had very little to do. Workers returned to the factories under an agreement negotiated by Carroll. The BWPU called a second strike in August in response to persistent retaliation against union members. In May 1912, Samuel Gompers officially called off the strike, having tried in vain to get Muscatine button manufacturers to sit down at the table and negotiate with him.

Women played a little-recognized but key role in this strike. They constituted roughly one-third of the 2,700 workers employed in Muscatine's pearl button industry. They held elected offices in the BWPU, marched in parades, ran the strike kitchen, and fanned out across the country to speak at countless union meetings raising thousands of dollars for the locked out button workers of Muscatine.

Although the Iowa button workers lost their bid for union recognition, the Labor War of Muscatine was part of an ongoing struggle for workplace rights, women's rights, and human dignity. It is wholly appropriate on its 100th anniversary that we take a moment to look back and remember the heroic actions of these early Iowa industrial unionists who fought for the rights that many of us take for granted today. ✨

— Janet Weaver lives in Iowa City

Thank you!

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subscribers
who have
generously
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10,000 yen
in 2011,
keeping the
*Prairie
Progressive*
solvent for
yet another
year.**



March 16, 1921

War Resisters International founded

May 4, 1931

Striking miners fought armed thugs in Harlan County, KY

May 1941

Premiere of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

April 11, 1951

Pres. Truman red Gen. MacArthur

April 17, 1961

Bay of Pigs invasion

April 20, 1971

US Supreme Court upheld busing

March 30, 1981

Pres. Reagan shot

March 3, 1991

Beating of Rodney King videotaped

March 28, 2001

Pres. Bush rejected Kyoto Treaty

Join the Iowa Healthcare Not Warfare Campaign!

The Iowa Presidential caucuses are only a year away, and you can help make a difference. The Healthcare Not Warfare Campaign is organizing to elect uncommitted delegates at the 2012 Iowa Presidential Caucuses who support Healthcare for All and Peace in Afghanistan, but are not yet committed to any presidential nominee. Uncommitted delegates are committed to:

1. The passage of National Health Insurance for all Americans (Medicare for All) during the next President's term in office.
2. The withdrawal of all American forces from Afghanistan within the first year of the next President's term in office.

This is a **money-free campaign**, organized by word of mouth, phone, and internet. If you are interested, send an e-mail to: jeffcox@inavia.net

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Forgiven and Unforgiven,
Continued from Page 1

It was a wonderful only-in-America sight: the hero of Free Enterprise matched with the puffed-up economic developers of West Branch. The little town has marketed its former president as shamelessly as Dyersville has packaged and sold its Field of Dreams. Who better than Reagan – the premiere huckster and pitchman for the American Dream – to help sell the re-invented image of a failed president? Who better than Reagan – a man who will shill for anyone, from General Electric to the Japanese government, if the price is right – to give a home speech written for him by the captains of the Hoover industry? The Music Man had come to River City.

Reagan presided over the U.S. as it became a debtor nation. He abetted the victimization of thousands of Nicaraguans and Salvadorans. He allowed

hundreds of thousands of Americans to become homeless. While the percentage of children living in poverty rose to one in five, Reagan was consulting an astrologist. Yet there he stood – the Teflon President – unscarred by the havoc he had wreaked, never having experienced the vilification that LBJ suffered for his sins. He was no more conscious of the pain caused by his administration than he was of the sweat-drenched, near-fainting children who held their flags in the sun until a Hoover official whisked them into the air-conditioned library.

This day in West Branch, the hate did not drain out of me. LBJ paid a price for his hubris and intransigence. Reagan never has. He is truly unforgiven. ✂

— *Prairie Dog*

**“Pick battles
big enough to
matter, small
enough to win.”**

— *Jonathan Kozol*

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Inside!

**“Women played a
little-recognized
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