

[Reminiscences of a Rebel]

Beliefs & Customs - Folk Stuff

Tales

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK [4?] Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Wayne Walden

ADDRESS 51 Bank Street, New York City

DATE October 17, 1938

SUBJECT Reminiscences of a Rebel

1. Date and time of interview

2. Place of Interview

3. Name and address of informant

Told by one who is desirous of remaining anonymous

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Tales

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Wayne Walden

ADDRESS 51 Bank Street, New York City

DATE October 17, 1938

SUBJECT Reminiscences of a Rebel

It was in 1915, during the days when we were trying to organize the agricultural workers in the Dakotah harvest fields. Pat Kilcoin, a new convert to the aims, structure and methods of our union, had never before heard such words as we used. The very phrase "economic interpretation of history" was, to Pat, / a huge mouthful. 'The materialist conception', 'bourgeois', 'proletariat'-when you could use these kind of words you had attained erudition. But to really be one of us, a full-fledged card member of our fighting fraternity, a 'Fellow-Worker', equal in rank to the highest brow among us - that, indeed, was enough to swell Pat's pride, as well as his head. When, in listening to our discussions, you heard a guy use 'economics' you were, or should have been, convinced that the guy was educated and a deep thinker. To employ such terms yourself was to be eligible for the inner circle, if we would have had one; at least you would have been looked up to, by the likes of Pat.

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However, Pat, having become one of us, / listened even more eagerly to our words. He liked them, and strove to add a few to his own vocabulary.

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Leaving us one morning for a trip into town, Pat returned at evening in a joyful mood. He, too was an intellectual. He now knew a thing or three himself. "This, as he came plunging into our 'jungles; is what he excitedly proclaimed: 'Wot d'ye tink happened to me today! I goes in to dis hoozier burg here for some cigs, and was hoofin' it up on the main stem, see, and I gets to talkin' to a bloke, see, so I starts to tell him somethin'. Purty soon I find out he dont know a damn thing. Why, the bloody scissorbill, he didn't even know wot an economic is. I busted him one on the ear, and I'll bet he'll know from now on.'"

Those were great days, alright. We were all sure that the [worker's commonwealth?] was just around the corner. For a time the slaves came tumbling in as fast as our delegates could write 'em out tickets. The O.B.U. message was being spread like wildfire. Whereever you went, in the jungles or under railroad water-tank, harvest fields, woods camps, the mining-towns- in fact wherever two guys met, you'd hear us being either praised or damned. In the towns, at our street meetings, we'd break in as speakers fellows who never faced a crowd in their lives before. Some of them became in time fairly good spell-binders, but some of course, never amounted to a damn. And it was these birds who caused us the greatest embarrassment - these punk kind, I mean-for they were always ready to spout, and would rush in where a wiser guy wouldn't feel so cockeyed sure of himself. caps/

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I still shudder at the flop I saw a guy pull off out in Seattle, in either '16 or '15. That gink was worse, if anything, than Pat I was telling you about.

The large auditorium of the Labor Temple was crowded with people. They had come to hear a variety of outstanding speakers on a variety of what might be considered burning

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issues. A clergyman, in behalf of religion, preached a beautifully worded harangue; a leading local A. F . of L - ite orated melodiously upon the great A.F. of L; a socialist spoke most eloquently upon his particular philosophy-it was a verbal fireworks worth listening to, I'm telling you. Every speaker seemed inspired and, as I said, they put it over in grand style. But I waited. Naturally, I had an idea that the best was yet to come. I kept expecting a Wobbly speaker, who would have something real to say - one whose eloquence would be on a par at least with any of the others, but whose message would far transcend in importance anything they had said. So I waited for the appearance of one of our own speakers. Being the last would be fine, I thought; getting in his say - so at the windup of the whole series, I thought, would leave the crowd with something to think about. We had some damned good speakers too, there was Ellis, and Belmont, and J.P. Thompson, and others also. But where the devil where they! Anyhow, none of them showed up. Finally, out saunters a guy who the chairman said would represent the Wobs. I had seen the guy several times so when I saw him coming forth now, my heart sank. A./[.?]/=/

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Well, this is what he said, and, mind you, it was right after all the others had shot the works in the grand style I mentioned:

'Ladies and Gents, I-I aint much of a speaker, but there's one thing to it. Y'aint goin' to get nowhere unless y'git in the one big union. You gotta line up in the O.B.U. to git anywhere. Uh-you just gotta, thas all. You've been listenin' to the crap of a lot of other guys this afternoon and what 'd they tell you? Nawthin'. Well, Ladies and gents and fellow workers, I aint much of a speaker, but there's one thing to it; you just gotta organize for pork chops. Git in the right kind of a gang. Use yer bean-if y' got one. So, ladies and gents, as I was saying, I guess I aint much of a speaker and I'll now pull the chain.' # As T-bone Slim would say, I was mortified. Mortification set right in.

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Then there was cross-eyed Cunningham, about the ugliest ding you ever laid eyes upon. He was a hell of a nice little fellow but, gosh, / what a homely mug he carried around with him. Not only was he cross-eyed, but he had a snozzle on him that ought to have got him a job in the circus. He wasn't any bigger than a pint of whiskey. He'd have had to stand on a soap-box to kick a duck from behind. But he was a witty little cuss though. Some of the bunch was kidding him one day about his looks. They was rubbing it in kind of hard. The average guy would have gotten sore about some of the things they said to him. But he didn't get sore. 'Say', he says to them, 'when I was in the navy, I was the best lookin' kid anyone ever saw. Why, two Admirals once fought a duel over me.'

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In Chicago, Sam Scarlett was delivering a streetmeeting lecture. That was just before our getting into the war, in 1916, Sam was a ccackerjack crackerjack speaker, and his Scotch wit was generally ready for whatever happened. At that time some rather nasty cracks were fashionable concerning us. A favorite one was taking the initials of our organization and twisting them out of all semblance to what it really was...Industrial Workers of the World, usually shortened to just I.W.W., became frequently, by those against us, / as 'I wont work', or 'I want whiskey', or some such foolish taunt. Well, as Sam was talking, a big shiny limousine pulls up on the outskirts of his meeting, and soon as the elegantly attired lady within had satisfied herself as to the nature of his speech, she shriekes forth 'I wont work'. Sam turns around and says, 'You dont need to boast about it madam. It was obvious without your shouting it. We are all aware as to how you make your living. But I'm talking to working men, men, contrary to you, who will work, and do work, and would also prefer to see the likes of even you, / do a little work once in a while.'

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About as funny a darned fared as I ever saw was one pulled off in Minneapolis, at a smoker, right after we came in from the harvesting of 1915. The farce was mainly / ritten by [Charlie Ashleigh?], who was the literary light among us, but several others of us had a hand in it. About a dozen of us were the actors, including Ashleigh, who took the part of an eccentric Count. Previous to being attracted and starting to hobnob with us Wobblies, Count de Kakyak had been roaming the world in search of some Copenhagen snuff mines. In a high stovepipe hat, a swallow-tailed coat and a monocle, Ashleigh, who could affect the English accent to perfection, was about the last word in the role of a Count.

The scene opened with a bunch of us laying around a fire, scratching ourselves. It is early in the morning. For a fire, we had run an extension down to the stage floor, with a couple of electric lights covered with stuff to make it look real. On the other side of the fire were some harvest stiffs who were scissorbills. Pretty soon they gets up and starts to make some coffee for themselves. We other stiffs, representing the Wobblies, let 'em get everything set, and then took over the Java for ourselves. The scissors didn't like that, but they liked still less being told that we were conducting a general strike and that no one could go to work until we won it. "But I only got eleven dollars, and I need some laundry done," one of the scissorbills spoke up. Imagine the kind of a guy who would be rarin' to go to work with eleven dollars in his possession! Why, that was more than most of us had as our whole stake at the end of the harvest!

The general strike was supposed to be the last spasm to bring the Dawn of a New Day for the workers of the world. So we couldn't let the scissorbills go out to work and help defeat us. "Well, this is a free country, ain't it?" another one of the scissors says as he 7 starts to go. "It will be," says one of the Wobblies, "when we get you 14-carte, ivory-domed scissorbills to line up and help make it free." Well, these particular slaves saw the error of their trying to get away, so they took out cards which were issued to them by Teddy Frazier. Ted, in the play, was "Line-em-up-Shorty", and was disguised as a preacher. We

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accomplished the disguise by putting a white collar on him the wrong way, and a black, flat-topped hat.

Well, as the strike goes on and we stick it out, we finally exhaust the patience of every farmer in the whole district, so that they gave up fighting us and were ready to listen to reason. All except one fool farmer who, reading the capitalist press, thought he, with the aid of the law, could whip us into submission. The "Law" was Fred Hardy, a little runt about five feet two inches tall, while the part of Lydia Pinchem, his daughter, was played by Scotty MacPherson, who stood six feet four and looked even taller in the female getup we had him rigged out in. Scotty was a scream as Lydia Pinchem, and the contrast between her and her old man, the sheriff, was about as ludicrous as they come. Hardy was made up as sheriff, with a long drooping moustache with other disfigurements and a ten-gallon hat on his head that came down over his ears. I'm telling this from a memory of it that, no doubt, leaves out quite a few of the real points of the farce. There were some really funny parts to it that was great stuff.

Anyhow, while we stood around in the jungles, expecting to be raided by the dreaded sheriff, someone conceived the brilliant idea that it might help matters if one of us could woo and win over the daughter, the fair Lydia herself. That job falls to the count. He, above all, was best qualified by birth, manner and experience. So pretty soon, when we hear from off-stage, but supposedly from out among the surrounding trees, the shrill and silly voice of Lydia Pinchem, singing on her way to our jungles, we beats it, leaving the stage to 8 Count de Kakyak to carry out the love scene.

Lydia comes in and, seeing the dount, begins to cavort around befitting a young and innocent American girl suddenly smitten by the charms of a nobelman. We depended upon the Count. His success in this lovemaking was of tremendous importance to us, despite that we had, by our economic might, brought paralysis upon the whole [agrarian?] industry. Well, into the jungles stumbles the large and ungainly sheriff's daughter, almost wrecking our cooking utensels, and knocking over Ashleigh in her wild charge.

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Ashleigh, the Count, partly rising, remains on one knee and, adjusting his monocle, gazes up at the towering Lydia. "Ah," he says, "What is this before me? Surely 'tis no living maiden that I see, but some wood-nymph! Or, perchance, some disordered vision of my white-lime dreams! Ah, do but speak and assure me that I have at last found what I have sought throughout a long and checkered career." Giggling, and with a finger in her mouth, Lydia Pinchem answers, "Oh, this strange feelin' in my bosom! It feels like cascarets. Can I be in love, or is it sauerkraut I et?" She says, "Are you a live Count?" as she picks him up and hugs him to her rag-stuffed breast.

After a little the sheriff comes on the scene. He confronts the pair of lovers and demands of Lydia information as to her boy friend. "Oh, father, forgive me!" she says, "but I've et me last meal under your crool roof, and me and me Count is fleein' fur away. I'm even quittin' me job of pearl glaumin' in Starvum's greasy hash joint, and, me dear father, you can go plumb to hell, for I'm going to join the Wobblies," she says.

"Well, daughter," says the sheriff, "I'm right glad to get rid of you. Never was a greater appetite than yours, you great gawk, but lay off the Wobblies," he says, "and go back to your job." "No, no," put in the Count, seizing one of Scotty's big paws (I mean Lydia's),

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"Never shall these little fingerettes again be sullied in sordid dishwater."

By this time the rest of us actors had, one or two at a time, come back on the stage and again became part of the breath-taking beauty of the scene. When about all of us were back, in rushes one fool farmer. Puffing, he pointed at us and hollers, "That's them, sheriff; arrest them. Don't let 'em Get away! Quick!" he says, "put 'em in the hoosgow." But just as he is pleading, a terrifically loud explosion is heard off-stage. The hayseed, looking skyward, moans, "There goes my new autymobile." Another explosion is heard. This time he shrieks, "Tarnation, by the looks of them pieces, there goes my new threshing machine!"

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Just then, Line-em-up Shorty comes on and reports that every scissorbill in the entire territory had taken out cards and, no longer scissorbills, were now Wobblies in good standing. This news was too much for John Farmer. He casts one agonized look at the undisguised organizer who, he thought, was a friend as well as a preacher, and falls dead. The sheriff, realizing that the class struggle was over, and himself no longer in power, rund like hell to get away from everything. We start singing, "We're coming hone, John Farmer" — the curtain drops, and we come out to find the place swarming with sure-enough cops and ourselves under arrest. We weren't long in the can, though, for we didn't happen to be the particular wobblies they were after. It was a funny darned farce.

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We all liked Joe Hill. His execution was a blow to us all. His songs — in our little red songbook — of sarcasm and rebel defiance expressed the sentiment of most of us. We were proud of him and recognized him as a great Wobbler. But even those of us who truly revered him were a bit skeptical of some of the assertions about him. For 10 instance, out in the Pot Latch country, not long after Hill had been killed, Joe Ratti was acting as literature seller at one of our meetings. Holding up a little songbook, he said, "Fellow workers — we wants to sell you dese songs, for dese songs and de music you sings 'em to was written by fellow-worker Joe Hill, an' dat guy was de greatest pote and/ de greatest musician in de whole worl'."
