

LIFE IN THE U.S.

HISTORY

Nagging questions at Farmer-Labor party tribute

A major topic at the tribute to former Farmer-Labor party Rep. John Bernard was a way out of the box that the Minnesota left is now in.

HIBBING, MINN.—Over 400 people gathered at Mesaba Park near Hibbing in Minnesota's Iron Range June 29 to honor John T. Bernard, Farmer-Labor representative from this district in the '30s.

Bernard, now 84, was elected in 1936 on the Farmer-Labor party ticket in the same sweep that re-elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt and saw Elmer Benson elected Minnesota's second Farmer-Labor governor.

Bernard distinguished himself in Congress in his second day in office by casting the only vote in either house against Roosevelt's Spanish Arms Embargo.

John Bernard was militant in his support of labor, as illustrated by the greeting sent by Bob Travis, the leader of the 1937 sit-down strike of General Motors autoworkers in Flint, Mich.

"I want to remind you of John Bernard, the spokesman for the embattled UAW Flint sitdown strikers, for he and Sen. Gore of Idaho were the only members of Congress to stand up for the autoworkers' right to use so unorthodox a means of wresting our first union contract from General Motors.

"Not only did Bernard stand up for us in Congress, but he sent us thousands of copies of his speech to be distributed around Flint. And he came to Flint, at his own expense, climbed through a window of Fisher Body Plant Number 1, and brought his personal message of cheer and

solidarity to the cold and worried men inside."

Carter/Mondale a failure.

Former Gov. Elmer Benson was present, offering tribute to Bernard in his first public speech in almost 30 years:

"I think the Carter/Mondale ticket deceived and lied to a confiding American people," Benson declared. "They led the American people to believe that they were populists. They led the American people to believe that they were going to cut military appropriations. They led the American people to believe that if Mr. Vance is named Secretary of State and Mr. Brzezinski is named chairman of the Foreign Relations Advisory Committee, this election will be a failure."

"Well, Vance is Secretary of State, and Brzezinski is chairman of foreign affairs. So then, according to the President's own manager, this election must have been a failure."

Also speaking was Gus Hall, General Secretary of the Communist party, USA. Hall is originally from this area and he and his parents helped establish Mesaba Park, where the tribute was held.

Early opposition to capitalism.

Minnesota's Farmer-Labor party was established in 1920 out of the remains of the Socialist party and Non-Partisan League. By 1923, the Farmer-Laborites had captured both state Senate seats and in 1930 Floyd Olson was elected Minnesota's first Farmer-Labor governor.

This same period saw the worst side of the Depression and the 1934 Minnesota FLP platform outlined the party's position that capitalism had failed and that immediate steps had to be taken by the people to abolish it in a peaceful and lawful manner.

The FLP called for "a new sane and just society" where "all the natural resources, machinery of production, transportation and communication shall be

owned by the government and operated democratically for the benefit of all the people and not for the benefit of the few."

In 1936 Floyd Olson died, and although the Farmer-Labor state ticket was swept into office that November, the party soon began its decline. Suffering from the lack of a leader of Olson's stature, various factions and personalities within the party began to fight amongst themselves, leading to a bloody, red-baiting gubernatorial primary contest in 1938 between Gov. Elmer Benson and Hjalmar Petersen.

Benson won the primary battle only to lose the election in November to Republican Harold Stassen. That defeat was indicative of the FLP's fortunes after 1936; with FDR riding tall in the saddle and with potential Farmer-Laborite presidential candidate Floyd Olson gone from the scene, the FLP lost its initial elan and was increasingly co-opted by the New Deal.

The process started in 1936 when the Democrats withdrew their candidates for state office in Minnesota in return for the support of the Farmer-Laborites in Roosevelt's bid for re-election, and culminated in 1944 with the merger of the Minnesota Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties.

A way out of present dilemma?

A major topic of discussion at the tribute was the way out of the political isolation in which the left in Minnesota has found itself since the merger of the two parties 33 years ago. Gus Hall stressed that "we were able to elect Elmer Benson and John T. Bernard because we had an independent political movement, a party independent of the old parties."

When asked about building Farmer-Labor type parties today in their light of their co-optation in the past, Hall simply said "I think that some form of politically independent new party is going to emerge. I think it's inevitable. Therefore, we look upon it in that light..."

"Of course, I'm for socialism and al-



Floyd Olson, first Farmer-Labor governor of Minnesota.

ways have been. I think the left, however, has to be broader than those who believe in socialism.

"The new people's party we would like to see develop would have to take positions that are against big business and monopoly, but [would] not necessarily [be] a party for socialism... The question of socialism is for parties that are for socialism, but I think we need a broader political force that will really challenge the two old parties of big business. It's an anti-monopoly concept."

New populist alliance?

Another strategy for the Minnesota left was present at the Bernard tribute in the form of literature from the "Alliance of Minnesota Populists." The Alliance was formed recently by a group of liberal democrats to "bring our proposals into the DFL party clubs and platform committees, particularly now with Gov. Perpich offering populist leadership." (Perpich is Minnesota's Humphrey-style Democratic governor.)

The preamble to the Alliance's "Agenda for Populism" says "we are confident that we can go beyond warmed-over New Dealism." Its first demand is "passage of the original Humphrey/Hawkins legislation to make the government the employer of the last resort." AMP leaflets refer to "the tradition of Minnesota populism, going back to the Farmer-Labor party and the Non-Partisan League," but they offer little analysis of the meaning of "populism" or its cooptation by the Democratic/Farmer-Labor party. And in a state where the Democrats claim both Floyd Olson and Hubert Humphrey, such an analysis is essential.

CITIZEN ACTION

Irate truckers win "Fuzzbusters"

A Virginia state trooper slides quietly into the parking lot of Jarrell's Truck Plaza outside Richmond. At Jarrell's huge semi-trucks are packed wall-to-wall waiting like silent drayhorses for their drivers to swallow a second cup of 100-mile coffee and a quick dinner of steak and green beans. The silent Smokey flips the trigger on his speedgun radar and immediately small red lights pop on in the cabs of a dozen trucks.

The trooper disregards the warm Christmas tree twinkle of the lights. He carefully jots down the license numbers on the tractor-trailers.

The red lights, you see, are connected to radar receivers, little black boxes called "Fuzzbusters" mounted to the dash. Fuzzbusters warn of police radar traps up to two miles away. In the third year of the "Double Nickel" speed limit and ionospheric fuel prices, Fuzzbusters have become the fastest selling over-the-road toy since CB radios. Three hundred thousand, \$30 million worth, were sold last year.

But in the Commonwealth of Virginia Fuzzbusters are against the law. The of-

Virginia was busting truckers using the little black boxes on their dashboards to tell them when a state trooper was approaching.

fending truckers will be pulled over when they leave Jarrell's and be handed a green-stamp fine of up to \$100. Their Fuzzbusters, each costing \$89.95, will be confiscated and destroyed by the local judge.

In the last year and a half, according to one Lexington, Va., attorney, over 4,000 truckers and motorists have been busted for carrying Fuzzbusters or the rival "Bearfinder."

Now, in what could be called the Great Fuzzbuster Showdown, the Independent Truckers Association and the manufacturer, Electrolert of Troy, Ohio, are fighting back with Smokey-the-Bear baiting vengeance.

"The name of the game in Virginia is revenue from traffic fines, not safer driving," Mike Parkhurst, the feisty editor of *Overdrive*, "The Voice of the American

Trucker," told me in Los Angeles. "Radio waves are under the purview of the FCC. No radio can be banned by a state, and the Fuzzbuster is just a radio."

"The law is unconstitutional," agrees Neil Saunders, spokesperson for Electrolert, a company that used to be on the other side of the speedtrap when it manufactured police radar guns. "The law puts an undue burden on out-of-state truckers, especially since Fuzzbusters are perfectly legal in surrounding states."

Last November an irate Parkhurst met with Fuzzbuster executives, and together they cooked up an imaginative protest. Electrolert agreed to manufacture 15,000 fake Fuzzbusters—cardboard decoy boxes designed to bamboozle state police cruising down the Interstates. Parkhurst, who helped to kick off the 1974 truckers' strike

over fuel prices by his fiery editorials in *Overdrive*, set up distribution points throughout Virginia.

With Parkhurst also "recommending" that truckers ring the state capitol and form mile-long convoys inching forward at 35 mph to tie up Virginia's freeways, the Fuzzbuster Showdown promised to be every bit as chaotic and effective as the 1974 trucker shutdown.

Then the state legislature threw in the oil rag. Several days before the big Jan. 31 protest was to begin, the Virginia assembly voted overwhelmingly to repeal the 1962 law banning radar-detecting equipment.

But even now the governor had not yet agreed to sign. So Parkhurst and the truckers are still waiting at the overpass, ready to move against the 55 mph speed limit and what they consider to be restrictive load laws, as well as the Fuzzbuster restrictions.

But Electrolert, the manufacturer, is claiming victory. Does anybody want, they ask, now 15,000 fake Fuzzbusters?

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SPORTS

New left veteran defends his past as baseball fan

BASEBALL AND THE COLD WAR

By Howard Senzel

Harcourt Brace, Jovanovick, N.Y., 1977, \$10.00

Remember Frank Verdi? The third baseman for the Rochester Red Wings who was struck with a stray bullet during a game between Rochester and the Havana Sugar Kings in Havana on July 26, 1959, the first year of the Cuban Revolution? One year later, the International League (triple A) shifted its Havana franchise to Jersey City and professional baseball was gone from Cuba, another victim of the "crusade against Communism." This obscure incident is the starting point for Howard Senzel's remarkable new book.

Baseball and the Cold War, aptly subtitled "a soliloquy," revolves around Senzel's efforts to investigate this bizarre series of events, and, in the process, to piece together the disconnected strands of his own life.

When the "new left" fell apart in the early '70s, it left Senzel disoriented, "floating through American time and space with neither culture nor identity." To help get his bearings, Senzel decided to immerse himself in a project that linked the great passion of his childhood, baseball, with that of his adolescence and youth, radical politics. The Frank Verdi/Havana Sugar Kings affair seemed ideal for that purpose and so Senzel returned to Rochester, the city he grew up in, to examine the history of professional baseball in Cuba, before and after the Revolution.

What Senzel discovered, however, was hardly of earth-shattering significance. After going through the Rochester papers, interviewing sportscasters and officials of the club, he found there was no "behind the scenes" story or CIA plot—just a predictable tale of venality and sensitivity to political pressure on the part of the small-town businessmen who ran minor league baseball in those days.

The real story for Senzel was the feelings evoked in him as his research progressed—his inability to feel at home in the city of his birth, his emotional distance from old friends and relatives, the inability of his new left "reflexes" to provide

him with direction in a time when visions of limitless prosperity and utopian dreams of revolt had both lost their credibility. The two cultural settings that had been most meaningful to him—the working class neighborhood of his early childhood and the radical community he felt part of in the '60s had both seemingly disintegrated, leaving in their wake a standardized corporate culture devoid of "human characteristics."

Surveying Rochester in the mid-'70s, a city filled with McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, where Bob Dylan concerts were marketed like a new model car, Senzel writes: "One morning, long before it was true, we awoke to find that our culture had been replaced. Gone were all the restaurants shaped like chicken and ships... That special quality that the human mind and hand give to the things they care about is gone from the marketplace and survives only in gift shops and hobbies."

In the cultural vacuum Senzel found himself within, the most authentic feeling available was his love of baseball. In the course of his research Senzel gradually recaptures the emotions he experienced as a devoted Red Wing fan, and finds they are virtually the only part of his childhood that is readily translatable into his adult life.

The reason for this, Senzel concludes, is that baseball is one of the few aspects of American culture that has not been distorted beyond recognition by the corporate world, that can stir the imagination of observers in much the same way it did 15 or 50 years before.

"When I think of all the minute details of my everyday life," Senzel writes, "that have been organized against my satisfaction and in favor of corporate profits, I think that baseball has survived miraculously well... Baseball is big business... [but] the same baseball is a child's pleasure on a sunny afternoon, an internal world of knowledge and speculation, theoretical studies and practical theories, and a body of pure thought that is as likely to enchant a serious adult as it does a merry child."

This conclusion, needless to say, is sharply at variance with the common "rad-



Photo: J. Weinick/Montage: Free b

ical" view which Senzel once accepted that spectator sports are an "opiate" that divert people's attention from the problems they face and prevent them from rebelling against their oppressors. Sports are indeed a refuge, Senzel shows, but a refuge from a wide array of anxieties for which there are no simple solutions.

To deprive people of this outlet, he suggests, is to deny them one of their most genuine and spontaneous sources of pleasure and fulfillment.

In addition, Senzel takes on the myth of the "passive spectator" by showing us the remarkable variety of ways fans use sports as a springboard for fantasy and speculation, a reference for aesthetic and moral judgment, and a focal point of sociability and community spirit.

Being a rabid baseball fan as a child, Senzel feels, did not inhibit his political development; rather, it provided him with

an heroic image of human possibilities that was entirely consistent with his evolution as a radical activist. "Nearly every summer," he writes, "I saw human capability stretched to its limits by conflicting desire... It inspired me... to be a little more grand, a little more stylish, and as noble as I could possibly be."

Despite its good natured tone, the book ends on a pessimistic note. Senzel does not really see any way to stop the corporate world from absorbing and destroying everything he holds dear, and he makes no programmatic suggestions.

Senzel's strength is that he provides us with a powerful image of one way that people have been able to maintain contact with their past and find space in which their imagination can roam free and their sociability flourish. For that effort, he is profoundly to be thanked.

—Mark Naison

By Marvin E. Gettleman

Fencing and some of its technology surfaced briefly in the press last summer when a Soviet Olympic competitor in Montreal apparently rigged his electrical foil to show a "touch" when none was made. In fencing salles and clubs ardent fencers regretted that the sport had got some bad press, and there was much speculation about the punishment meted out to the offending athlete. But, at the same time, the incident did focus attention on a much neglected and growing sport.

There are three basic weapons in fencing. Foil, along with the heavier epee, are now judged electrically; scoring is accomplished by a valid touch of the point of one's weapon against the designated target area on the opponent (an area that differs with the different weapons). With the third competition weapon, the saber, valid touches can be made both by the side of the blade or the point and no feasible method for electronic scoring of saber bouts has yet been devised.

The advent of electrical scoring in the mid-'50s has helped democratize a minor sport. Until then, the judges and directors of fencing bouts had absolute discretion in assigning and determining valid touches. Old-time fencers remember a pervasive bias against Jews and other non-WASPS in those days.

Until the last few years women fenced

only foil, while the other two weapons were exclusively male domains. But now women in increasing numbers fence epee and saber, and this has forced the Amateur Fencers League of America to schedule women's meets in all three weapons.

A highly energetic sport that demands considerable stamina from participants, fencing places no great premium on strength, once a certain threshold of endurance is reached. It's primarily a sport of skill and economy in which minimal motion is often the most successful. A subtle parry—just enough to deflect the opponent's blade—leaves the defender in the most advantageous position to make a riposte, or counter-thrust.

Women who master classical fencing form, with its economical defense neatly balanced by energetic attack and counter-attack, can compete with men or with each other on every level in this virtually androgynous sport.

Fencing has a number of advantages that suggest why it should be a popular

sport. It can be a lifetime activity in which subtlety, precision and timing of older fencers can overcome the greater mobility of younger opponents.

It's a highly psychological sport as well, in which feints, timing shifts and surprise maneuvers are often decisive. Fencing develops reflexes to a high degree, and thus contributes to general well-being and alertness.

The initial outlay is modest: \$15 for a foil with one or two replacement blades; \$25 for a padded jacket, with metal breast-protectors for women; a wire mesh face mask and gauntlet round out a beginner's equipment for another \$20 or so. A novice can wear sweatpants and sneakers.

Fencing partners are not hard to find, at least in the urban centers; good coaches, however, are scarce. Clubs and salles, like the modest and unpretentious Santelli establishment in Greenwich Village where I fence, are inexpensive and accessible. In other places a notice on a conspicuous bulletin board should be enough to bring near-

by fencers out of the closets.

Why then, with all these advantages, has fencing failed thus far to attain a level of popularity anywhere near that of, say, tennis?

One reason for the seemingly built-in lack of popularity for fencing is that, while capable of attracting loyal and enthusiastic practitioners, fencing is not, and possibly cannot be, a spectator sport; the action is simply too fast and intricate for non-fencers to see, let alone savor and appreciate.

Fencing thus poses questions that have considerable cultural significance. Can a sport "take off" into popularity only when the active participants are supplemented by sedentary viewers? What is the function of at least a potentially appreciative audience to an athlete? Is there an exhibitionist element in sport? Just what is the relationship between spectator and athlete? Does this vary under different cultural and political systems? Is it possible to conceive of some technical device—instant slow-motion replay of televised fencing matches, for example—which would elevate fencing from a minor sport to a truly popular and widely followed pastime?

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Fencing foils foes picks up fans fast