

The Last of the Wobblies

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I

The gloom of late winter afternoon draped and permeated all Portland. Wind whipped the harbor wildly. It flapped awnings of the joints along Burnside Street. Rain streaked the windows and glistened like rhinestones as the lights began to come on, one by one, in Erickson's, in the Valhalla, in a hundred other places known the world over to men who work outdoors with their hands. Dusk was coming down on Burnside, the most celebrated Skidroad in Oregon, or on earth.

At the corner of Third stood a figure familiar to this spot on Saturdays for two decades and more, Arthur Boose, the Wobbly paper boy, in fact the last of the Wobbly paper boys, here or elsewhere, a bundle of the Industrial Worker under one arm, the other supporting the husky overcoated man with a stout cane... Get your copy of the Worker, he was saying, get your double-dose of industrial unionism hot off the griddle, learn the truth about the labor fakers, get into the One Big Union, be a man, five cents buys a complete education for any scissorbill, get your Worker now... High wind, low rain, sunshine, sleet, or snow, or even troublesome cops, they are all the same to Arthur Boose, the Old War Horse, and the Saturdays of twenty-odd years have found him on the Skidroad in Portland doing his level damndest to convert the dehornes, the scissorbills, the finks, the Mister Blocks, the Hoosiers, homeguards, hoboes and bums into Rebels; and the only Rebels who count with Boose are members of the Industrial Workers of the World—the Wobblies.

It is perhaps necessary, for those who came in late, to explain that the IWW, commonly called Wobblies, are likely the most distinctive and certainly the most American labor group the United States has ever known. Founded in 1905, militant, aggressive from the start, and as swiftly mobile as their membership which is (or was) composed of itinerant workers, the Wobblies raised more plain and particular hell in their twenty years of operations than any other union before or since. They organized the working stiffs of the woods, the mines, the harvest fields, the construction jobs, and occasionally the textile and the steel slaves. They staged strikes or riots in Lawrence, Massachusetts; in McKee's Rocks, Pennsylvania; in Calumet, Michigan; Virginia, Minnesota, Wheatland, California; Everett, Washington, and many another places. Wherever the Wobblies were, there too was battle.

The Wobblies were out for nothing short of Revolution, immediate, manifest, and complete, and to this end they bent their every energy. No voting for them, no peaceful revolution. They were lighting the fire for the Red Dawn which many of them devoutly believed would blaze up from behind the mountain at the very same moment the money palaces of Morgan and Rockefeller exploded and turned into rubble, the result of well placed charges of 90 per cent stumping powder. World War I conditions took heavy toll of the Wobs, though they rallied and flared again in 1919 and appeared to be going pretty strong until internecine warfare ripped them into two factions. By 1925 their ranks had dreadfully thinned. Nor did the depression revive them. Their aging leaders joined the Communists, the Socialist Labor Party, Technocracy, and their rank and file went into the CIO, or even into the AFL. But not Old War Horse Boose.

II

Mellowed today, yet truculent enough in matters pertaining both to Capital and "the right kind of Unionism," Arthur Boose lives a spartan life and keeps bachelor quarters in a corner

room of the Chester Rooms ("Reasonable Rates"), a venerable building along the Portland waterfront. He is a man of medium height, broad shouldered, with a fine head topped by a heavy growth of silver hair. Always clean-shaven, except for a neatly trimmed mustache, he might make you think of a banker—God save us—were it not for the man's eyes. In them smolders the light that comes not from bonds and mortgages, nor yet from Arcturus, but from some inner fire, kindled perhaps from the same coals that burned in the eyes of old Johann Most, the anarchist of demoniac intensity from whom the young Arthur Boose of long years ago learned that things were not as they should be, that peace on earth and good will to men were a delusion so long as The System prevailed.

Boose is always dressed in quiet good clothes of heavy blue serge, and wears a spanking old-fashioned watch chain across his vest. He has carried a cane since that time, early this century, when a big white pine log came whirling down a Wisconsin rollway and crushed his leg. He was born in 1878 in Milwaukee of German immigrant parents, and in his speech is yet a faint trace of accent in respect to "w" and "v".

Arthur Boose's mother died when he was six. Ten years later he quit school and home, to work in logging camps as a cantdog man, then as a teamster, in the pineries along the Chippewa and other streams. It was near Phillips where his leg was crushed, and while convalescing in Milwaukee he attended art school. Painting today is his only hobby. While recovering from his injury, too, young Boose attended lectures in the Milwaukee Freethinkers' Hall, a place of hellish reputation among the godly, and there one evening he listened spellbound while the aging Johann Most, wild eyed and wild whiskered, the very model for the cartoonists' Anarchist, told of the need for revolution by the working class; and Lucy Parsons, widow of the Haymarket Martyr, related the manner by which the rulers of creation kept the working class in their places.

"Those two lectures made a great impression on me," Boose recalls. "I talked with Mrs. Parsons afterward. She was a brilliant and altogether wonderful woman. I came away convinced that the world could be bettered, even though I myself wasn't quite ready to do anything about it."

For the next few years Boose followed, as they say, the wheat harvests, and worked in logging camps. He drove team on construction jobs. And in 1909, in Minneapolis, he took out the Little Red Card that made him a Wobbly. Since that day he has never been in arrears with IWW dues, nor has he ever joined another union. If there is merit in consistency, then Wobbly Boose is a man of merit. Through good times and bad—very bad—through days and weeks and months and years in jails, workhouses, penitentiaries, through days of danger and of riot, under his real and his phony names, Old War Horse Boose has never wavered. The Wobblies are right, and their aging stalwart would rather be right than popular.

III

Wobbly Boose came first into national prominence in 1916. The First World War was under way and two years old. Wages in most industries had been going up, and the iron miners of the great Mesabi range in Minnesota wanted more pay. They started a half-hearted and wholly unorganized strike. Boose was in charge of the IWW hall at Duluth. Quickly seeing that their strike wasn't getting anywhere, a group of Finn miners sent a telegram to the Finnish newspaper in Duluth asking for an organizer, and Boose was asked if he would go. Turning over the Wobbly hall to another, Boose went to Aurora, a Mesabi mine town, and staged a couple of hot meetings.

Local police, naturally dominated by the mining companies, put Boose in jail on a charge of "inciting to riot."

The War Horse was now stabled, but there was kick in him yet. Talking through the bars of the tiny jail in Aurora, he urged the miners to spread news of the burgeoning strike to all parts of the range as rapidly as possible. Spread it like forest fire, he said. That night a young Finn, Ormi something-or-other, started the spreading. He had no horse, no train of cars, so out of Aurora that evening he walked until he was beyond the vision of mine police. Then he ran.

In the prime of young manhood, the Finn ran swiftly through the twilight, traveling like a shadow blown by a soft Mesabi wind. At Biwabik he roused the boys, then on to McKinley, and so on to Virginia, where he waked the secretary of the Finnish Brotherhood Lodge. Next morning few miners showed up for work anywhere along the eastern section of the range.

At the time of his arrest, Boose also managed to get word of events to IWW headquarters in Chicago, and now to the range came a whole pack of able organizers, among them Sam Scarlett, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Frank Little, later lynched at Butte, and Carlo Tresca, whose murder at Fifth Avenue and Fifteenth Street in 1943 still mystifies Manhattan police. At almost the same time that the organizers arrived, shooting started in the mine towns. Several miners were killed, and so were a couple of mine police.

Boose was moved from Aurora and confined in the jail at Virginia, then bailed out by a saloonkeeper. He promptly mounted the platform in the Finn hall and addressed a mass meeting of strikers. He said, among other things, that although the IWW did not believe in the use of violence, nevertheless workingmen must protect themselves; and now that the "mine Cossacks" had begun killing "innocent workers," it was perhaps time for the workers to arm themselves. He went on to speak of rats and parasites, and wound up by saying: "Parasites should be exterminated!"

"Fine, fine!" shouted Carlo Tresca, chairman of the meeting "For every miner killed," Boose went on, "a mine cop must die!"

This kind of talk was a great mistake, Boose says today. Eugene Debs had made the same kind of mistake in an earlier day, and so had Bill Haywood.

Well, the clubbing and shooting continued, and also the arrests of Wobbly organizers and sympathizers. The strike committee, figuring Boose was now a man marked for the cops, sent him to Duluth, just as newspapers came out with word of an indictment for murder against him and four other Wobblies. Boose, who seldom bothered to read capitalist newspapers, knew nothing of the indictment. A friendly attorney in Duluth told him about it and advised him to get out of there. Boose hid until traintime, while cops hunted him, then went to Minneapolis. It was still too warm. Wobbly Frank Little showed up with a copy of the newspaper in which Boose was quoted as saying that all of the mine cops ought to be killed. It also played up the murder indictment in a front-page box.

Now began a time of great danger for Boose. He knew he had nothing to do with the murder for which he had been indicted; it had occurred before he delivered his fiery speech in Virginia. But Little and Haywood warned him that would make no difference; he was a Wobbly organizer, hence he would be railroaded. They urged him to leave Minnesota. Boose went to Wisconsin to work a while in the woods, then to Chicago. Here he met Haywood, Gurley (The) Flynn, Joe Ettor and other Wob leaders, and they all told him he was "hot," to get going to far places and to stay until the Mesabi strike was done. Changing his name to Arthur Fritz, Boose grabbed a fast freight and landed in Oklahoma, where he went to work driving team on a railroad construction

job. Early in 1917 Haywood detailed him to go into the western oil fields to organize the working stiff. He did, then was called to Tulsa to take charge of the IWW hall. He now dropped "Fritz" and became Boose again.

On September 5, 1917, the so-called Palmer Raids took place all over the country. Radicals and persons suspected of independent thought were arrested and jailed all the way from Maine to California. Oddly enough, the raiders overlooked Arthur Boose, secretary of the IWW at Tulsa. But not for long. On the twenty-eighth, three large, rather grim men attended one of Boose's educational talks in the Wobbly hall, then arrested and took him to jail. "I was charged," he remembers, "not only with being a fugitive from the murder charge in Minnesota, but with almost every crime I had ever heard of, including lack of what is commonly called patriotism."

They took Boose to Chicago and there, throughout much of 1918, he and 165 other Wobblies and sympathizers were tried on five counts charging conspiracy to obstruct the war. The evidence, including tons of Wobbly papers, pamphlets and even correspondence, much of it illegally seized, would have filled three freight cars. The correspondence was particularly damning. "Haywood was always careless of his mail," says Boose, who adds that it was matter from Haywood's correspondence, all of which tactically should have been destroyed as soon as read, that was used as evidence to convict Boose and several of the other defendants.

Ninety-three of the Wobblies were found guilty in various degrees and were sentenced to from one to twenty years in prison. (Haywood, out on bail, skipped to Russia, where he died.) Boose drew five years, and was released on expiration of his time in June of 1922.

While in prison at Leavenworth, Boose read constantly in such works of philosophy and economics as he could lay hands on. They merely confirmed his beliefs that the Wobblies had the right idea, or at least the best idea that had so far been put forward, for a new and a better world; and when he came out of the Big House, he picked up where he had left off. The stiff must be educated and organized. Incidentally, of his jail and prison days, Boose recalls that the Christmas of 1917, spent in what he calls the Cook County Can in Chicago, was brightened considerably by receipt of gifts of a necktie, two pairs of socks, and a handkerchief, from Helen Keller. Each of the ninety-three prisoners received like presents from the famous blind woman.

IV

In the autumn of 1922, War Horse Boose, by then one of the most celebrated of Wobblies, started west on a "speaking tour which eventually took" him to Portland, Oregon. He soapboxed during the longshore and all of the lumber strikes of the 1920s and 1930s. Arrests on what appear to have been trumped-up charges were a regular thing. Once, in Walla Walla, Washington, Boose had barely hit town and had not yet had time to set up his flag and soapbox when a motorcycle cop arrived and took him to jail. "Quickest pinch I ever knew," he says today. There were many other pinches, too, one on the charge of "profanity" ("I said that the Bible shouters sell Jesus Christ over the counter like so much sugar"); another on a charge of "obstructing traffic," something Boose was always careful not to do. Incidentally, he has been arrested, on one charge or another, and always in connection with his work, in Aurora, Virginia, and Minneapolis, Minnesota; in Tulsa and Drumright, Oklahoma; in Great Falls, Montana, and in Portland and Walla Walla. Cops have slugged him. So have patriots. Judges have lectured and fined him. His meetings have been broken up with fire, with water, with stinkballs, eggs, brickbats, with shouting and rioting.

Yet Old War Horse Boose, a name applied by admiring Wobblies many years ago, is still packing the rigging, as they say of active IWW organizers, and he remains a cheerful and wholly unreconstructed Wobbly. "I'd prefer anarchism," he told me one day recently, "for that is the highest and finest form of civilization possible. But we aren't ready for it yet. We aren't even ready for the kind of world the IWW wants. It takes time." He considers Communists both comical and hopelessly entangled in dogma. He would as soon think of voting the Republican as the Communist ticket.

It irritates the War Horse to call him The Last Wobbly. He claims there are some 20,000 members of the IWW in this country and Canada. Maybe there are, but they are not in evidence in the Pacific Northwest, the real home of the Wobs; but Arthur Boose is. Everyone familiar with Portland's Skidroad district knows him as the only Wobbly paper boy left in the Northwest, and as nearly as I can learn, the only one on earth. He peddles his papers, as related, every Saturday, no matter the times nor the weather, and along with the Worker he sells a few copies of IWW pamphlets, and the latest edition (the twenty-eighth) of the justly famous Little Red Song Book, which contains a good picture of the late Katie Phar, songbird of the Wobblies, who rallied the boys with her sweet voice from 1910 to her death three years ago. The twenty-eighth edition of the song book, like all the others since it was composed, contains Joe Hill's Last Will, "written in his death cell on the eve of his judicial murder by the authorities of the State of Utah, Nov. 18, 1915.

Oldtime Wobs, passing through Portland, usually call on Boose, who is the official, stationary delegate of the IWW in that city. They often find him brewing a cup of coffee on the gas plate in his room, his table covered with brushes and water colors, at work on some forest scene, his favorite motif. For an oldtime Wobbly, Boose will put away his colors and brushes, and talk of the great days when the Wobbly brand of revolution ran like fire through the wheat, the mines, the woods of the West; when the West fairly reeked of Wobblies, and Wob organizers hung stiffly from bridges and trestles by their necks, or died on the bloody decks of the Verona in Everett harbor, or went down in the choking dust of Wheatland or Bisbee...Aye, my lads, those were great days, days when working stiffs had nothing to lose but their chains, unless on occasion their lives. Almost alone, the Old War Horse has survived them, unchanged.

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