The Ina and Noel Harris Personal Papers Collection: No. 8
1940 - 1990
2.5 Cubic Feet

Introduction

Ina and Noel Harris, long time secretary and business agent respectively, of Local 2931, donated this three box collection of their personal papers relating to the lumber and labor history of Humboldt County. It is especially rich in material on the final plant closure and Louisiana-Pacific strike of the early 1980s. It was presented to the California Northcoast Labor/Community Archives project at Humboldt State University in 1990 and processed by Lesa Coleman, assisted by Gordon Webb, in June 1991.

Biographical Sketches

Noel Harris has deep roots in Humboldt County. His mother's father moved there in 1860. His father settled in Mendocino County circa 1900. Noel was born near Fort Bragg on December 6, 1918. Noel's father worked as a teamster in tie (railroad) camps, and as a commercial fisherman. He moved his family to Humboldt County around 1922. As a child, Noel attended the Fishermen's Union Christmas parties, held at the Eureka Labor Temple, with his father.

Humboldt County contained a sizeable Finnish population, many of whom belonged to the Fishermen's Union. The Red Finns, the main left-wing group in Eureka, were a source of education and influence for Harris.

In 1928, at 11 years of age, Noel campaigned for William Z. Foster, a radical Irish-American running for the U.S. presidency. A few years later in 1935, Noel (as a teenager) picketed at the foot of F Street in Eureka during the 1935 lumber workers strike.

From 1936 on, spanning half a century, Noel belonged to various trade unions in the whaling, fishing, railroad, lumber and plywood industries. He joined the IWA in 1937 while working for Pacific Lumber in Humboldt County. In 1939, he became a member of the Building Service Employees Union while working at the World's Fair in San Francisco. Coming back to Humboldt County, he worked one season at a whaling station in Fields Landing in 1940. Harris' first elected position in a union was Recording Secretary of the Fish Cannery Workers' Union.

Noel served in the U.S. Navy from 1942-1945, mainly in the Pacific Theater on the aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Cowpens. Soon after coming home from the war, he worked briefly at the Vaughn Planing Mill in Nevada where he married his second wife, Charis Wilson.

In 1948, Noel became Humboldt County Chairman for the Independent Progressive Party Presidential candidate, Henry Wallace. He was a delegate to its 1952 National Convention in Chicago.

Using the G.I. bill, he graduated from Humboldt State College in 1949 with a B.A. in social science, majoring in history.

In 1951, Noel became a member of Plywood Local 2931, a local he would participate in for the next thirty years. He began working in the tape and patch department of M & M Plywood, becoming shop steward and a delegate to the Redwood District Council in 1954. He also served on the Plant and Safety Committees. He gained considerable shop floor union experience at this time and filled in for the business agent at various times without pay.

Noel was nominated for the Local 2931 union presidency in 1960, but had to withdraw before the election, when the House Un-American Activities (HUAC) summoned him to appear as a witness in San Francisco. As a result of this appearance, Noel was temporarily eased out of union functions. It took four years for him to regain his pre-1960 status in the union.

In 1965, Business Agent Clarence Purnell had a heart attack. On the recommendation of a top officer of the Redwood District Council -- who argued that nothing was ever proved against Noel in San Francisco and that he was "one Hell of a good union man" -- Noel was appointed business agent/financial secretary and remained in that position until his retirement in 1981. From 1965-1980, Noel was elected business agent/financial secretary for Local 2931 seven times without ever campaigning. One of Noel's accomplishments was that he never lost an unemployment claim appeal of a laid-off, unemployed or terminated union member.

The term "Jimmy Higgins" came out of the Industrial Workers of the World and socialist movements of the turn of the century. It refers to rank-and-filers who do the day-to-day drudge work without aspiring for power, personal gain or even credit. In some instances, this was due to various federal laws and restrictions against radicals moving into elected union office. In other instances it was a philosophical choice to remain among rank-and-file workers, and on occasion an activist could be more effective working as a rank-and-filer. Noel feels that this grassroots mentality is the backbone of many movements. His own modus operandi for many years was to avoid seeking a leadership titles. Noel was very effective in working at the shop floor level.

Noel describes Ina, his wife, as a "combination of a 'Jimmy Higgins'. . . and . . . a natural leader." These traits are not only effective in the labor movement, but in the innumerable social, political and community activities Ina has been involved in for over 30 years. This is evidenced by the fact that although Ina tends to stay out of the limelight, she made a list of Humboldt County "movers and shakers" that appeared in the August 1990 North Coast Journal, a Humboldt County-based monthly magazine.

Ina Lipman was born in New York City on January 29, 1923. Her father, educated at Cornell University, owned a farm in New Jersey. She lived and worked on the farm from 1929 until 1943. She graduated from Trenton State Teachers College in 1943.

Although Ina's parents were conservative Democrats, her mother's father was part of a socialist colony in Roseburg, Oregon. Her mother, who had attended school with IWW leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, told Ina about socialism, a subject of fascination to Ina.

Ethnicity, discrimination and social concerns absorbed Ina, who also had a keen interest in history. The Lipman family was the only Jewish family among old-time farmers. The anti-semitism that she experienced at an early age had

a radicalizing effect. A Black family that lived adjacent to the family farm aroused her curiosity about Blacks and their role in American history.

At the end of World War II, Ina married a soldier and moved to Spokane, Washington. There she was influenced by the Native Americans' struggle for fishing rights. After ten years, she left her husband and moved to Seattle. There she worked as a file clerk at Boeing. When Ina reported a male supervisor who was harassing women workers, the successful outcome proved that one had to take direct action to make changes.

Ina married again. She and her husband moved to Eureka in late 1959. It was at this time that Ina met Noel. Both were members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Ina became a teacher, alternating between jobs in Kansas (where her husband resided) and Humboldt County. A teaching job at an all Black school in Missouri left a deep impression. Social and political change became a lifelong passion.

At this time, Ina's second marriage broke up and in 1967 she moved to Eureka. In December of that year, Noel and she were married.

In 1968, Ina became office secretary for Local 2931. From 1968-1981, she worked, mostly as a volunteer, getting paid when the local could afford it.

For over 20 years Ina has served various roles as a community activist including: The Human Rights Commission, NAACP (which includes putting out a monthly newsletter), Humboldt Peace Center, Redwood Coast Seniors, Community Multi-Culture Education Committee (CMEC), the Humboldt Campaign for Bradley for Governor, the Presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson (1984, 1988) and KHSU public radio station. In 1988, Ina won a National Federation of Community Broadcasters award and an award from American Women in Radio and Television for the programs "Through the Eyes of Women" and "Labor U.S.A."

At the time of this writing (June 1991) she is very active in trying to alleviate the homeless situation. She serves as a liaison between Sonoma and Humboldt County progressive organizations.

Scope and Content

The Ina and Noel Harris personal papers collection not only chronicles the history of lumber and labor in Humboldt County, but also reflects a wide range of interests and activities in history, human-social movements, politics, women's issues and the environment.

The bulk of the material dates from the late 1970s through mid-1980s, with a smattering of materials from the 1960s and the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Redwood Park and Redwood Employee Protection Program (REPP) Series dated from 1977-88; the Plant Closure and Displaced Workers Series dates from 1977-85 and the Louisiana-Pacific (L-P) Strike Series dates from 1983-85.

The oldest material is from the Noel Harris Series. One piece, dated April 8, 1940, documents a town meeting at Fields Landing regarding a proposal to build a whaling plant. The other document is a series of minutes from meetings of the Fish Cannery Workers' Union of the Pacific, Eureka and Fields Landing local which took place in 1940. Noel was the recording secretary.