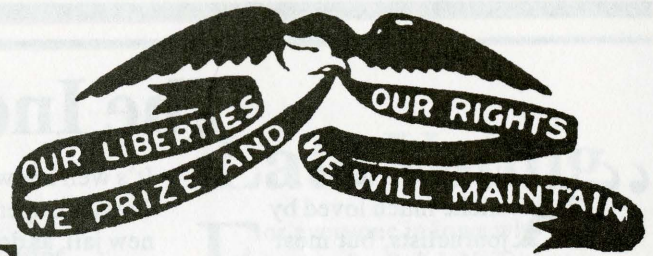


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



Fall 2000

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Séance on an Autumn Evening

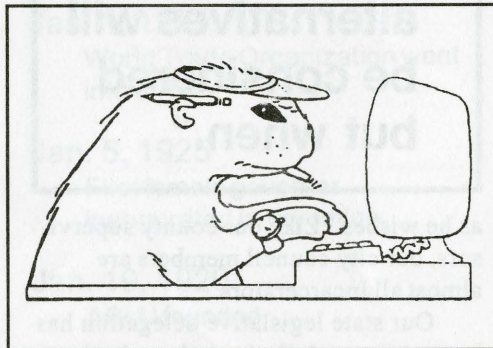
During our monthly meeting in front of the Black Angel at Oakland Cemetery, the Prairie Progressive editorial board received a surprise visit.

Many great Iowans have communed with us over the years, but none has been more imposing than the stern figure of Emma Harvat as she stepped from the shadows. The former mayor of Iowa City – and one of America's first female mayors – offered her views about current events in the town she once ruled.

As the moon shone through the trees, Harvat began with the city manager. "He keeps the streets free of horse manure, which was quite a problem during my tenure. But my city council would never have ceded so much power to a non-elected official. And we wouldn't have kept the same one for fourteen years. After that long, they go stale like an old biscuit, and tend to do more harm than good – like trying to undercut library expansion. Hell, I'd make the entire downtown a library if I could!"

The Mayor put a pinch of snuff inside her cheek. "We always had plenty of drunks on the streets in those days – and not just students. But this town doesn't need a Pentagon on the edge of town. Those county folks acted like city slickers on this one, but they greased it so well that it slipped right off the track. I'll give you a free month at my boarding house if it breaks 40%."

Adjusting her chapeau, Harvat expressed sympathy with library supporters who were upset when the Supervisors rammed the jail proposal onto the ballot. "But the closer one examines that behemoth, the more sensible and affordable the library looks. And the library folks finally



understand that they are in a campaign, not a classroom. If they work hard, they just might get their 60%."

The Mayor rolled her eyes when we asked her about the First Avenue referendum. "I did all I could do to help the city grow eighty years ago. But we must keep our perspective. Isn't Scott Boulevard enough? The dog-walkers will defeat the drivers and developers by a whisker."

The national scene? Harvat sighed. "I'm a Republican, but Gore can't lose. The authorities at the university say the numbers are still in his favor. He still has peace-and-prosperity on his side. And he's still taller than Bush. As for the sleaze factor, don't get me started! The

Clinton crowd can't hold a candle to the Reagan administration for indictments, abuse of the Constitution, and genuine scandals. Of course, Warren Harding had 'em all beat in my day."

"Young Mr. Nader has guts and gumption – and I'm quite fond of Susan Sarandon –

but it's troublesome that most of my Negro friends are indifferent to him. He may get 4% in Johnson County, but the nation will give him no more than 2%."

The Mayor glanced into the shadows. "Boys, May is waiting for me. Just remember this: keep your books straight, always pay your fines, and stay out of grandma's opium jar. And if you find a few more female writers, I might even subscribe." ✂

—Prairie Dog

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The Incarcerators

"All politics is local" is a cliché much loved by journalists, but most politics is a mixture of national and local. The heated fight in Johnson County over a bond issue to build a new 256-bed jail is a good example. An apparently straightforward local bond issue has set off vigorous public debate and even some mild (Iowa-style) name-calling among local political factions. Proponents of the jail argue that the increasing flow of prisoners is a natural force like the weather. It comes from nowhere; no one is causing it to happen; there is nothing we can do to stop it.

With America incarcerating more people than any other country in the world, the trend toward more jails and prisons will certainly come to an end sometime. Resources are not unlimited; taxpayer patience is growing thin; the sheer level of incarceration is undermining the rule of law. The real question is not whether alternatives will be considered but when. Or to put it another way: when will public officials come to their senses?

Jail proponents have mystified the process by which decisions are made. Despite what they say, we are building huge jails and prisons because public and elected officials have decided that incarceration is necessary. They have almost unanimously decided to ignore the growing body of critics represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Families Against Mandatory Minimums, the Drug Policy Foundation, the American Friends Service Committee, Criminal Justice Ministries, and the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church.

Jail proponents also argue implicitly that if even if the jail is defeated, many elected officials will continue to support incarceration, even if it results in overcrowding. I hope our City Manager and state legislators will not be so irresponsible, but on that point the Incarcerators have a stronger case.

It's well known that all five of our County Supervisors support building a new jail, as do all Democratic candidates for Supervisor. Turning to our city council, there is little hope for improvement. Iowa City has added 15 new permanent positions to the police force in the last few years, starving the fire department and library of staff and triggering the crisis of overcrowding that has led to the bond issue. City council members have given the City Manager a blank check to incarcerate as many publicly intoxicated students

"The real question is not whether alternatives will be considered but when."

as he wishes. Like our county supervisors, our city council members are almost all Incarcerators.

Our state legislative delegation has been voting solidly for jails and prisons all through the 1990s. Just over a year ago a majority of our Johnson County legislative delegation voted to require a two-day mandatory jail term for possession of a single marijuana seed. It is difficult to imagine legislation that would do more harm to Johnson County, but as the jail proponents argue, it is a trend. We can expect little relief, it appears, from our new Democratic governor who sponsored this piece of legislation. At the congressional level, our Democratic candidate for Congress was a member of the citizens committee that unanimously recommended a huge new jail for local possessors of marijuana seeds, and former populist Senator Tom Harkin is

famous for whipping up anti-drug hysteria (remember his "Drug Free in 93" slogan?)

Surely we will get some common sense policies from President Gore if he makes it to the White House? Not very likely. Gore was a strong proponent of the 1994 Crime Bill, which bailed out those states that were facing fiscal crises over prison construction, and funded (but only initially) the fifteen new police officers who are causing a crisis of overcrowding in Johnson County. Things are likely to get worse under President Gore or Bush. We can only hope that President Bush will give away so much federal tax money to the ultra-rich that he will not have enough left to fund "anti-crime" initiatives.

Supporters of the jail have been taunting anti-jail campaigners, saying that even if they win this battle they will lose the war. In the short term they are probably right; the war on the American people will go on until the money runs out, doing horrendous damage. Note that almost all of The Incarcerators listed above are Democrats. On this issue as on many others, people with common sense and sensible alternatives are almost entirely unrepresented in the present political situation, locally and nationally. Thanks to those of our ancestors who saw the value of direct democracy, we can by-pass our elected officials and vote directly against the jail bond issue. If we win, they will be forced to discuss alternatives sooner rather than later.

For those who care about this issue, however, it is equally important to vote for Ralph Nader for President. Completely unrepresented by the Democratic Party, progressive voters need some alternatives. If Nader gets 2% of the vote in Iowa, the fledgling Green Party will get regular ballot status, a small but worthwhile improvement that might help us win more than just the occasional battle. ✕

— Jeff Cox

Welcome Back, Jen Jen

*"No, Jen. Just one more game.
Pleeeeeease."*

Charity is thirty now, but she's still the baby in the family. "I mean, you've been in the poky for five years. . ." The plea is punctuated with a stomp of the foot, an eight-year-old lilt to the voice.

It is the sixth night—our last night of vacation; somewhere close to midnight, and we, the sisters, Jennifer, Charity, and myself, are just getting used to being together again. We are on our condo's deck, as we have been the previous five nights, chain smoking and playing Pluck, "the only perfect three-handed card game," Charity calls it.

It is indeed an amazing game, conceived by someone with too much spare time on their hands. It comes from the same place where those long jokes come from—ones involving complex plots and characters with accents—ones that, after their punch line, you think, "Jesus, who comes up with these?"

I know now who comes up with them. I also know where baggy pants came from (one cannot, after all, hide a homemade knife, a "shank," from a guard under a tight-fitting pair of jeans).

Jennifer swears that the recent canvas and khaki craze is inspired by prison-issue "threads," and those intricate finger-nail designs—minuscule pictures of moons and flowers—were inspired by women who spent long hours on Sundays, waiting for visitors who never came. I know that wet M&M's can be used as eye shadow and blush. That a #2 pencil, rubbed and softened against a concrete floor, can double as eye-liner, and that in a pinch, Vaseline and dissolved instant coffee will rival any designer foundation.

"I'll be plucked," I say as fail to get my bid for the fourth time in a row.

"Mother plucker," Charity says when she looks at her cards.

Me: "Cock plucker."

Charity: "Pluck me running."

Me: "Plucking A."

"Well, pluck me dumb," Jennifer finally chimes in, softly, shyly. She looks over her hand to see how her line went over.

Charity and I laugh. "Good one, Jen Jen," Charity says, and Jennifer's face opens up into a familiar look. It is the same look she used to use when she'd come home with a good report

**"A #2 pencil,
rubbed and
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against a
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as eye-liner."**

card. I saw it in the prison visiting room once, too, when one of the other inmates came up to us and told us how lucky we were to have Jennifer as our sister. It is a look that breaks my heart.

The late July Florida sky is a thick black canopy. The air is a musky-smelling entity—a corpulent aunt, say—who plants hot dewy kisses on our necks and cheeks. I look longingly past the glass door, into the air-conditioning. But this is Jennifer's week. We've been planning this for her for years now, and after five years of having to step out for cigarettes, Jennifer no longer smokes indoors. Besides, her ten-year old son is somewhere inside, and she is determined, this time around, to be the kind

of mother—the kind of person—who does not expose her son to carcinogens.

Five years in prison has changed her. There's a resolve to her now. A certain set to her shoulders, a don't-mess-with-me tilt to her head, but still there's that familiar look. . .

She yawns. She is also the type of person who gets up at 5:30 for her exercise walk.

"No, Jen. Just one more game. Pleeeeeease."

Tomorrow we will board different planes, bound for different cities. Tomorrow, Jennifer, like so many other women recently released from prison, will get on with getting on. But for now, the gentle lapping of water out in the distance, the shuffling of the deck, the heavy Florida sky traps us securely in a place where none of us has to get on with anything.

"Amanda," Jennifer says in her best big sister voice. "You should think about going back to strawberry blond. Like the way it was when you were young."

I want to say, "Only strippers are strawberry blond." I nod my head and throw down a card instead.

"You can do it at home, you know. There's this soap with lye. You add it to hair relaxer. . ." She continues. I nod. "Jesus, Jennifer. Welcome to the world. There are places called salons."

Jennifer looks at Charity. "Oh, yeah" she says, momentarily confused. Yes, I think, welcome back, Jen Jen. She gets her bearings about her, and deals us another hand. ✕

*—Amanda Coyne lives in Iowa City.
Her sister Jennifer served five years
without parole for conspiring to
deliver a controlled substance.*

Acres of Opportunity

It was a really bad summer for Hollywood. *The Nation's* Stuart Klawans called it "one of the shabbiest movie summers in memory." Without a *Star Wars* draw, attendance dropped 15 percent, according to one estimate. This had a devastating ripple effect on the industry: many theater stocks have plunged 50 percent, the large theater chains Carmike Cinemas and General Cinema have declared bankruptcy, and *Box Office Magazine* predicts that 10,000 of the 37,000 movie screens in the country will close within the next three years. Iowa's Fridley Theatres is closing old movie houses in four Iowa towns. River Hills, which had the largest screen in Des Moines, is gone. Closer to home, eight screens bit the dust in Cedar Rapids. Old downtown movie houses can't compete with megaplex cinemas, which—reflecting economic concentration patterns in America—account for about 78 percent of the total screens.

To that add Washington's recent all-out assault on Hollywood. Ignoring the fact that more social harm is done in the halls of Congress than on any studio lot, the Democrats' point man Joseph Lieberman joins forces with the artless Republicans (bearing their traditional preference for stock quotations over the written word) to turn up the election-season heat on the movie industry. If its chosen party loses in November, Hollywood is in for an even worse fall than summer.

But there is still an old movie house in downtown Tipton, Iowa that hasn't been megaplexed, and its annual Hardacre Film Festival just keeps getting better and better. And growing. The first year (1997) saw only 13 entries; this year the Hardacre Festival Jury had to review 51 submitted films.

One overarching theme came out of this year's festival, and one striking development. The theme was full of irony: this first-of-the-millennium Hardacre Festival showcased a number of productions whose aim was to

preserve end-of-an-era subject matter on film.

Beginning with the 9-minute *Moss Family Dairy*, several of the entries focussed on the relentless passing of time. This film is dedicated to the memory of Eldon Moss, head of the local Moss Dairy, where you could get unpasteurized and unhomogenized "real milk," and where the "cows, milk

"More social harm is done in the halls of Congress than on any studio lot."

and customer were all treated with dignity." The dairy closed its doors in June.

Winner of Best Documentary, the wonderful *Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians*, documents Curtis' attempt to preserve in his photographs a people and culture that was being rapidly and systematically wiped out by the white man.

Buena Vista Social Club was also a documentary project meant to preserve a forgotten piece of a country's culture, to rescue from obscurity some great old Cuban musicians (one is 90) for one last taste of well-deserved glory. *Buena Vista* was not part of the competition, but what a way to end a festival!

The festival also had its lighter moments, most notably the 9-minute *The Tell-Tale Vibrator*, which, according to the program, has delighted film festival audiences from New York to

Krakow, Poland. This nightmare about a daughter's vibrator coming to life while she serves her parents dinner is a short, racy variation on the meet-the-parents theme.

The striking new feature of this year's festival was the overwhelming number of women in creative roles. Of those credited as directors, producers and writers (some in multiple roles), the women outnumbered men 9 to 5.

Two of them, Carter Anne McGowan and Kelly Bryan, co-writers and producer of *Jingle Hell* (a family gathering at Christmas), appeared on stage at the Hardacre to answer questions from the audience. Their Honorable Mention feature film, an "ensemble script" with 26 drafts, was financed by "friends, family, Master Card and Visa." It was shot in 14 days on the east end of Long Island with a crew of 7 on most of those days. The director's assistant was an unemployed fisherman. The actors were a mix from Broadway and local community theater. Many on the project lived in the same house they were shooting. Since they had no money for catering, they "begged neighbors to cook something." The catering credit is the longest. These two women put years of sweat into a 14-day shoot.

The high numbers of women behind this year's entries is reflected in the quote from Francis Ford Coppola at the back of the festival program, where he expresses the hope that with the advent of 8mm video recorders "suddenly one day, some little ... girl in Ohio is gonna be the next Mozart, and make a beautiful film with her father's little camcorder."

If you were that little girl from Ohio (or Iowa or Idaho) and are looking for a forum for your film, here is the web site: www.hardacrefilmfestival.com The entry fee is only \$25. The rules and all other information are on the site. Do it. Hollywood needs help. ✂

—Jae Retz



Interstate Commerce Commission

Dec. 1, 1955

Rosa Parks arrested after
refusing to take a back seat
in a public bus

Dec. 2

Tribute to Minnette Doderer,
Ramada Westfield Inn,
Coralville, 319-338-6000

Dec. 5, 1955

AFL and CIO reunited

Dec. 8, 1980

John Lennon assassinated in
New York City

Dec. 25

Federal holiday

Jan. 1, 1995

World Trade Organization went
into effect

Jan. 5, 1925

First female governor
inaugurated in Wyoming

Jan. 19, 1920

ACLU founded

Late Voting

For everyone in Iowa who wants to vote for Ralph Nader but is even slightly queasy about the possible presidency of George W., I suggest you do what I did on Election Day 1996 – wait until 8:30 PM to vote.

Because of Iowa's late poll closing time (9:00 PM), over forty states finish voting before we do. So, at 8:30 PM you can turn on the TV, and if the networks are certain that either Gore or Bush will win, you can vote for Nader – as I did in 1996 – at 8:30 PM, after it was obvious that Clinton had been re-elected.

If, however, the election is still uncertain, I urge you to think about Roe v. Wade, the Alaska Arctic Refuge, the National Labor Relations Board, school vouchers, and inclusion of sexual orientation and disability in hate crimes legislation – and vote for Al Gore. ✂

—Gary Sanders lives in Iowa City
and rural Michigan.

Nov. 2

Gay Issues in K-12 Schools: An
Evening with Kevin Jennings,
Executive Director of GLSEN,
Gay/Lesbian/Straight Education
Network 7:30, Iowa Historical
Building, Des Moines

Nov. 4

Iowa Latino Conference and Day
of the Dead Festival, Iowa
Memorial Union and Old Brick,
Iowa City, 319-335-4965

Nov. 7

Last Day to Vote

Nov. 16

Civil Disobedience and Direct
Action Training, Iowa City
Public Library, Iowa City,
319-643-5548

Nov. 25, 1955

Racial segregation on interstate
trains and buses banned by

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Library Yes!

On the November 7 ballot, Iowa City voters will decide the future of the Iowa City Public Library. Will the proposed \$18.4 million bond issue pass, so that the library may expand and provide the kinds and level of service that Iowa City library patrons require? Or will the bond issue fail, condemning the library to remain cramped in its current space where services must be curtailed and many collections cannot grow?

Iowa City loves its library! As our population has grown, and our requests for library services multiplied, the library board and staff have responded as well as anyone could expect. But even a community like Iowa City can't take a positive vote on this issue for granted. A bond issue needs 60% of those voting to pass and that's a lot of

votes in a presidential election. Several ballot issues compete this year for the voters' approval and dollars, and it's essential that voters make this issue a priority!

Unquestionably, the library has now reached the limits of its current facility and even very basic library services will be curtailed unless more space becomes available. For example, one important component of the summer children's reading program, Hear Me Read, had to be canceled last summer because the small amount of space customarily used to permit beginning readers to read one-on-one to adults had to be converted to shelf space. Further, several collections, including the children's collection, cannot grow in the current space. For each new item added to the children's

collection, an item must be discarded. We don't want our library to be constrained in that way.

The Library Board has worked on this issue since 1993. It has taken so long to get this issue on the ballot, uncoupled from a regressive sales tax, that the situation in the library has become a crisis. The ballot proposal is a good plan which includes enough room for the most heavily used areas of the library to more than double in size, as well as the potential for further expansion if that proves necessary in future decades.

Please support this proposal and talk to your friends and neighbors about the urgent necessity of passing this bond issue. On November 7, please turn your ballot over and vote "yes" on the proposed library expansion. ✨

—Lois Cox is a former soccer mom.

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

Box 1945

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Capitalism needs and must have the prison to protect itself from the criminals it has created.

— Eugene Debs, 1907