

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



January 2016

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Death of a Legend

*If that ____-sucking mother-____
tries to bust my ____, I'll ____
tear him a new ____.* —Mark Smith

At the end of November, a check for a subscription renewal and sustaining fund contribution arrived in the Prairie Progressive mailbox from Mark Smith, former president of the Iowa Federation of labor. Smith died a week later at his home in Des Moines. He was 71.

Smith was many things: labor activist, former school board member, disability rights advocate, co-founder of the Iowa Policy Project, member of the American Federation of Teachers, provocateur, watchdog, bulldog, conscience, Chicago Cubs fan.

He perfected the popular image of a labor thug, cramming as many obscenities into his sentences as was linguistically possible. But his letters-to-the-editor were concise gems, skewering the venalities and hypocrisies of politicians and corporations without wasting a word.

Over the years, Mark picked the right fights: Ipsco, right-to-work, Equal Rights Amendment, scope of bargaining, fair share. In the mid-nineties, David Stanley's Iowans for Tax Relief was at its most powerful. Stanley engineered a measure on the statewide ballot for a constitutional amendment that would require

any tax increase proposed by the General Assembly to pass with a 60% majority. Smith rallied the troops against what looked like a landslide. He won. So did the people of Iowa.

Smith knew that smaller fights were necessary, too. With his passing, who will make sure that elected officials, candidates, and publications (including the Prairie Progressive) who profess to be pro-labor always use union printers?

Smith was no saint. He wasn't always right, and he could be a bully who brooked no dissent, but his legacy as a champion for working people is unassailable.

When the Obama administration rolled out healthcare.gov for the Affordable Care Act more than two years ago, the web site was widely mocked and panned as "botched," "boneheaded," and "a disaster." The Government Accountability Office concluded that the administration failed to provide "effective planning or oversight practices."

In comparison, the Branstad administration's attempt to move Iowa's Medicaid program into private hands makes the ACA rollout look like a masterpiece of flawless execution.

Contracts between the state's chosen managed care organizations and local care providers haven't been signed. Medicaid recipients have only received confusing information packets since Thanksgiving, with just a few weeks to pick a new MCO for services. Families, especially those with adult children who have received stable support for years, can't get answers from the MCOs, the state, or their legislators, who have been frozen out of the process by an increasingly intransigent and dictatorial Governor who dismisses their concerns as "fear of change."

560,000 Iowans and their families will be drastically affected by this massive privatization that Branstad announced less than a year ago, after never mentioning it during his re-election campaign. The Center for Medicare/Medicaid Services has to approve the state's plan. Everyone from the Iowa Hospital Association, Iowa's Democratic state senators, and Congressman Loebsack, to thousands of Medicaid recipients in Iowa, have written to CMS, urging them to stop this plan or at least slow it down to give families a chance to figure it out.

There is still time to add your voice by emailing andy.slavitt@cms.hhs.gov ✨

—Prairie Dog

The “S” Word: Science Fiction or Socialist Future?

In 1980 I joined the Socialist Party USA. It was where I found my political home. The party platform articulated so much of what I was feeling, yet could not put into words. I was not an historian; I was not a philosophy or political science person, not your typical academic socialist. I was a heartfelt activist who found a home in the concepts of democratic socialist feminism.

I see the larger long term vision of a socialist society: seeped in participatory democracy, decentralized control of the economy, racial and economic justice, gender and LGBTQ equity, worker rights and safety, single payer health care, environmental stewardship, abolishment of corporate personhood, and a host of other important fundamental changes to how we organize and live in our world. At the same time, I am a practical radical. I am willing to welcome and facilitate small incremental steps towards this larger vision.

As a candidate and elected person in local office, I was frequently red-baited. People would put me down based on my socialist affiliation and self-identity. I was not going to “hide” my card carrying socialist credentials or shy away from my political agenda. Yet, when I spoke to people who didn’t know my political affiliation about my vision for changes in public policy based on my socialist principles, they would react very positively.

In the 1980’s, the media would ask me the following question in one form or another, “What credibility do you have as a young, unmarried, card carrying socialist?” At first, I got aggravated and asked what my

marital status had to do with public policy. My response was defensive and it bothered me. Then I realized it was exactly my democratic socialist feminist principles that attracted people towards our campaign. I then began using this question as a springboard to talk about our city council agenda, to articulate our core values, and specific goals for the city. It felt so much better and was much more effective to use this “aikido” method of responding to red-baiting.

During some election cycles, there is an on-line questionnaire you can fill out about your core values. The site then matches you with the Presidential candidate that best suits your values. The Socialist Party USA candidate used to consistently be in the top 2 choices of those taking this survey from across the political spectrum. Between this polling data and my personal experience, I believe the world really is more socialist than it would care to think.

Now, I am an aging radical, continuing to look to incremental changes towards that larger democratic socialist feminist future. I no longer am a card carrying member of the Socialist Party, USA. Most of my political energy is spent owning a small business with no government public assistance and asking other small businesses to pull together to strengthen the local economy, to use our organizations for philanthropy and stewardship of our area.

When I first became a business owner downtown, people laughed that I now was a capitalist. Why do people think there would be no exchanges of goods or services in a socialist economy? There is still an economy! There

is such an elementary understanding about socialism. In my business, our philosophy is to listen carefully to the customers to be sure they leave with only what they are seeking. We don’t upsell and sometimes, when the less expensive option fits their needs, we downsell. It is not the best capitalist approach.

Maybe Bernie Sanders can help us all better understand how an economy and society based on social constructs that benefit the majority could be implemented. Sanders is finding such widespread political support amongst the political spectrum. As a small “s” socialist, he and I were amongst the few in the country in the 1990’s who could discuss socialist values and understand the municipal jargon at the same time. It was always a delight to connect with him in his Mayorship and as a member of Congress. He has a real chance to make larger incremental changes in our system.

At the turn of two centuries ago, the Socialist Party, USA’s platform had planks that included social security, child labor laws, and workers’ rights. I guess they got some things right back in 1910. It’s kind of like science fiction writing. Some of it sounds a bit far off, yet is highly predictive of the scientific, technological, and sociological future. Maybe the Socialist Party, USA’s platform or that of the Sanders campaign is not so much science fiction. Maybe it is our democratic socialist future. ✨

–Karen Kubby ran twice for the Iowa City city council before she won her first election in 1989. She served until early 2000. She now owns and operates a full service retail bead store in downtown Iowa City.

The Democratic Party Generation Gap

The Democratic Party is in bad shape, both in Iowa and in the nation. Nationally 70% of state legislative seats are in Republican hands, along with 60% of the governors. Only one member of Iowa's legislative delegation to Washington is a Democrat. The Democratic nominee for governor, Jack Hatch, lost 98 out of 99 counties in the last election, and the Democrat nominated to hold on to Tom Harkin's Senate seat, Bruce Braley, lost badly to the Republican extremist Joni Ernst.

Democrats are losing because of a failure of the Democratic Party leadership (i.e. our elected officials) to address the broad concerns of the American people on the economy and war, the two most important responsibilities of elected officials. Americans are facing a low-wage economic recovery, job insecurity, health care insecurity, and a housing crisis, which is related to the increasing load of student debt. To make things even worse, we are bogged down in unwinnable wars in the Islamic world.

The failure of Democratic elected officials to address these issues has opened a door for Republicans to win elections on the issues of abortion, gun control, immigration, gay rights, and terrorism. It has also opened up a large generation gap among Democrats.

The Iowa Secretary of State recently conducted a largely unreported mock caucus for Iowa high school students. Among Democrats, Bernie Sanders came in first statewide by a

large margin. Hillary Clinton came in last, and in Johnson County she was not even viable, i.e. she did not have enough caucus support to receive even one delegate to the state convention.

As the Prairie Progressive goes to press, Hillary Clinton has a narrow lead in the Iowa caucus polls, but it is based on large margins among Democrats over 50. Democrats between 18 and 35 demonstrate overwhelming support for Bernie Sanders, by two to one margins or more.

Young people are bearing the brunt of the Wal-Mart recovery, one in which older Democrats are insulated with decent jobs and decent health insurance, with Medicare and Social Security. Bernie Sanders addresses those issues that affect young wage earners and students with his proposals for a trillion dollar program to create thirteen million jobs, a national living wage, an entitlement to national health insurance for all Americans, and tuition free public college education. Hillary Clinton opposes all of those policies.

She also opposes any serious measure to deal with global warming and the environmental crisis that we face, one that older Democrats (like me) will not live long enough to confront. Given that she is funded by the very corporate polluters who are threatening our planet, her position is not surprising.

One way to make a decent living as a young working class person is to join the military. Hillary Clinton has an

astonishing record of bad judgement on issues of war and peace, and is now proposing to ramp up our war in Syria against Assad even at the risk of a military confrontation with Russia. "Boots on the ground" are inevitable as our bombing campaigns fail, whoever the Islamic opponent of the year may be. It is hard to imagine a worse thing for a President to do than to send young Americans to risk their lives in unwinnable wars that will not have the sustained support of the American people, yet that is precisely what she proposes.

Although Hillary Clinton leads in the primary polls, based on the support of elderly Democratic Party loyalists, she runs well behind Bernie Sanders in national match-ups with Republicans. There is a reason why Sanders is more electable in a general election than Clinton. He is addressing the issues that face working class Americans, and has the ability to reach out to nominal Democrats, independents, and even registered Republicans in a general election. If Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee, her support in the general election will be limited to the Democratic Party base, i.e. an electoral minority.

In the long run, the greatest threat we face as Americans is environmental degradation. In the short run, it is the electoral success of the Republican Party at the state and national level. We are fortunate in Iowa, with our Democratic caucuses, to have a chance to reverse both trends. Go to your caucus. There is a lot at stake on February 1st. ✨

—Jeff Cox



CALENDAR

Dec 25

Federal Holiday

Jan 15, 2001

Wikipedia went on-line

Jan 16, 1991

US and allies began bombing Iraq

Jan 16, 2006

Brokeback Mountain won Golden Globes award for Best Picture

Jan 17, 1961

Pres. Eisenhower warned of "military-industrial complex"

Feb 1

Iowa caucuses

Feb 24, 1991

Ground war began in Iraq

Mar 11, 2011

Nuclear power plant in Japan severely damaged by earthquake and tsunami

Mar 11, 2006

Michelle Bachelet became first female president of Chile

Mar 25, 1966

US Supreme Court outlawed Poll Tax in all elections

Mar 27, 1971

George Jackson killed at San Quentin Prison

From Our San Francisco Correspondent

A few weeks ago I attended a recorded interview at the Nourse Theater two blocks from City Hall in San Francisco. Gloria Steinem was being interviewed by Chinaka Hodge, an Oakland-based poet. Hodge's first question was about low voter turnout in San Francisco in the November 3 election. Steinem turned to the audience and responded with: "You get what you deserve." It was spot on. For a city with a progressive reputation, San Franciscans are surprisingly inactive and uninformed at the ballot box.

Our tech-hungry mayor Ed Lee was reelected. His three opponents were political unknowns with sloppy organizing technique. Their combined slogan was "Anybody but Ed Lee," which did little to shore up name recognition for the opponents. Even worse, all of Mayor Lee's housing initiatives moved forward. I believe San Franciscans were seduced by the words "affordable housing." And while all of Lee's measures promoted private development at a scale hugely beyond what current zoning law allows, he made sure to drop that key phrase into their descriptions. Never

mind that rent and displacement increase with every new development that breaks ground - affordable or not. Meanwhile, the two most important housing measures on the ballot bombed: a temporary moratorium on new market-rate construction in San Francisco's Mission District, and heightened regulation for Airbnb and other short-term rental platforms within the city.

The only positive outcomes from Election Day were the passing of a Legacy Business initiative, and the re-election of Aaron Peskin to represent District 3 on the Board of Supervisors. The business initiative will provide access to tax subsidies for long-standing small businesses in the city, similar to the subsidies Mayor Lee has been handing out to Twitter, Yelp, Dropbox, and the like for years. Aaron Peskin will represent Chinatown and North Beach, two neighborhoods that have managed to minimize redevelopment and gentrification compared to other parts of the city (cough cough, the Mission District). Peskin is extremely unpopular with the pro-development crowd, including Mayor Lee, but he's managed to protect his district and the

Continued on Page 6

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE is Iowa's oldest progressive newsletter. It is funded entirely by subscriptions from our readers. Editor for this issue: Jeff Cox. We appreciate your support.

\$12 1-year subscription

\$10 1-year gift subscription

\$_____ 2016 sustaining fund gift

Your Name

Gift Name

Your Address

Gift Address

City, State Zip

City, State Zip

Please return to: The Prairie Progressive, P.O. Box 1945, Iowa City, IA 52244

The Local Politics of Historic Preservation

How does a community justify the concept of historic preservation? That is, why should the local government be empowered to restrict a person's private use of his or her property? I would start with a surprising premise: the preservation of history is a basic human instinct. We are all preservationists.

Any parent intuitively understands this. Almost all of us have a box somewhere, full of material reminders of our child's life. Toys, report cards, early drawings, baby pictures, clips of hair, etc. That rite of parenting usually leads us back to our own childhoods. We find ourselves trying to hold on to objects related to our own early life. As we want to hold on to the reminders of our own children, we evolve into wanting to hold on to our parents and our own past.

Even though I suspect that this urge is more acute with parents, it is not limited to parents. All of us have an individual past that is our "history." And that history is the context we must understand in order to understand our present and our future.

This desire to preserve our past is not taught to us, not imposed on us as a lesson. It is intuitive and entirely natural. Sure, an individual's unhappy past might render them resistant to holding on to it, but that is the exception proving the rule: The past shaped us and it always has a grip on us.

Anybody remember a sled named Rosebud? Each of us has our own

Rosebud. But we cannot go back in time. Humans live and die in a material world that outlasts us. The only time travel allowed us is the possession of the material world from where we came. You will also discover that the past is not just about you. Your own "history" is seldom singular. You are part of a collective past as well.

Thus, we have a private history that is part of a bigger history. This is best understood when we consider our own national history. I'm a history teacher, and I always think my students never know enough history, but I do appreciate their basic understanding of themselves as Americans. They connect themselves with a story, a past that is represented by "things" as much as ideas.

How would we feel if the Washington Monument crumbled? The Empire State Building demolished? Jefferson's Monticello bulldozed? The Gettysburg battleground paved for a parking lot?

Pick any other example from our national past, any material object or place that we absorbed in the course of being educated in America, and which thus became part of our own history, our own identity. Their potential loss would provoke outrage and despair, and we would not have to explain why we were outraged or sad. It would not have to be explained or justified. Losing them, we lose part of ourselves.

So, our personal and national identities are significantly defined and confirmed by the things we chose to remember and preserve. Why is

this so difficult to understand at a community level?

Do we have an Iowa City identity? A small college town like Iowa City has one major impediment to achieving a collective local identity. Half the population was not born here and did not grow up here. Thirty thousand students here today will mostly be gone in four years. Another thirty thousand will come and go after them. True, they will take many memories of Iowa City with them, but they will not live here. They are never, and understandably so, going to be as emotionally invested in the preservation of the material Iowa City of their past.

How about the rest of us? I am typical of many people in Iowa City. I was born and raised elsewhere. I came to Iowa City for graduate school, and I stayed. Almost half my life has been lived here, over thirty years. It is part of my history, and, ironically, I am part of its history.

Preservation of a local past is a difficult process. The history being preserved was as much architectural as social.

To preserve history in Iowa City, the local government uses regulations and incentives for homeowners and developers. We all remember the controversy about the demolition of the Cottages on South Dubuque Street. Less well known was the preservation of the Tate House only a few blocks away. Both developers had the same rules and incentives in place, but only one chose to take advantage of them.

Continued on Page 6

*From Our San Francisco
Correspondent
continued from Page 4*

people who live there through smart application of Historic Preservation regulation. Critics call him a NIMBY, but his support among low-income and rent-controlled constituents is sky-high. I hope Peskin runs for Mayor in coming years. Yet if this last election cycle illustrated anything it's that the majority of San Franciscans don't vote, and those who do vote against their best interests. In this case, it seems unlikely that Peskin would gain traction at the city-wide level. Gloria Steinem is right. We can't coast on our liberal reputation any longer.

Though I have temporarily lost faith in my local electorate, I am re-energized by news out of Iowa. The current environment out here is one that would have ushered Secretary Clinton unchallenged into a party nomination. But that doesn't seem to be the case in the Hawkeye state. I eagerly await Iowans to show Californians how it's done on February 1st. ✨

—Flossie Cox graduated from City High in Iowa City. She is now an architectural historian for the firm of Page and Turnbull in San Francisco.

*The Local Politics of Historic
Preservation
continued from Page 5*

Thus, the eternal dilemma: how do we preserve the past while also respecting the property rights of today? More battles will be fought, some important properties will be lost to greed and a lack of imagination by developers and tunnel-visioned political leaders, but it is a fight worth having. ✨

—Larry Baker is a former member of the Iowa City City Council, and the author of *Athens, America*, novel about Iowa City politics. A longer version of this essay may be found in *Finials: A View of Downtown Iowa City*, edited by Mary Beth Slonneger, which would make a fine stocking-stuffer for the upcoming Federal Holiday--proceeds to the Friends of Historic Preservation.

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE
Box 1945
Iowa City, IA 52244

