

The People's Cowboy

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Essays

“Stay with the process or you will
never catch up.”

George Ade, “The Old-Time Pedagogue,”
Forty Modern Fables

The People's Cowboy

BY RALPH KEYES

In grade school my brother Gene and I boycotted Lionel model trains. We would play only with American Flyer. American Flyers were sleek, trim, and detailed, like actual trains in miniature. Unlike Lionels, they ran on two tracks. With their three tracks, clunky locomotives, and sketchy appearance, Lionel trains were beneath contempt. They were probably designed by fascists.

That's how our family looked at the world. We didn't just divide it into good or bad, beautiful or ugly, modern or primitive. Instead we saw progressive or reactionary elements. The Keyeses' world was cleaved into Us and Them. *Us* included Henry Wallace, the United Auto Workers, and *I. F. Stone's Weekly*. *Them* was *Time*, General Motors, and General MacArthur.

This attitude of my parents rubbed off on their four children. We split our own little world ideologically as best we could. Take cowboys. Gene Autry was obviously for the workers and against the bosses. He was my favorite, wasn't he? That made Autry the people's cowboy. Roy Rogers, on the other hand, was a stooge of the bosses. My brother had it on good authority that in one movie Rogers kicked the bad guys out of business then took over their operation. And who appointed him "King of the Cowboys" anyway?

Every family has a point of view. Ours was decidedly left-wing. Keyeses were for: equality, brotherhood, and peace. We were against: oppression, exploitation, and war. Bad names in our household included *McCarthy*, *Hoover*, and *Francisco Franco*. No matter how close the needle was to "Empty" on the gas gauge of our battered Oldsmobile, my father wouldn't stop at a Texaco station. Why not? Because Texaco had sold oil to Franco during the Spanish civil war, Dad would

explain as we drove past one of their gas stations.

Our dinner conversations dwelled on the innocence of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs. Sacco and Vanzetti, too. At bedtime we were told the tale of heroic progressive bodyguards who protected Paul Robeson from right-wing thugs as he tried to sing at Peekskill. During breakfast we reviewed Joseph McCarthy's latest lies. Each day's headlines added grist to our political meal as McCarthy's henchman Roy Cohn outraged our parents and J. Edgar Hoover disturbed our sleep. Years of such seminars taught us who the bad guys were: not just Hoover and McCarthy but Nixon, Taft, and Taft's fellow senators Bricker, Jenner, and Velde. (I'm still not sure what the problem was with Bricker, Jenner, and Velde, but their names remain sour in my mouth.) Our family's coffee table was littered with copies of *The Nation*, *National Guardian*, and *I. F. Stone's Weekly*; its bookshelves sagged beneath the weight of volumes such as *No More War!* by Linus Pauling and Carl Marzani's *We Can Be Friends*, which had a cover photo of American and Russian soldiers, shaking hands. Books we were given to read conveyed important messages. *Ferdinand the Bull* told us about a young bull who would rather smell flowers than fight toreadors. *Herman Ermine in Rabbit Town* was about a bigoted white ermine who learned tolerance after he turned brown with the warm weather. Leaning against our Victrola was an album of 78s in which progressive actor John Garfield read "Herman Ermine" aloud. Another album called "Little Songs on Big Subjects" assured us that:

You can get good milk from a brown-skin cow
The color of the skin doesn't matter no how
Oh, ho, ho, can't you see
The color of the skin doesn't matter to me.

Such input gave us special insights denied our playmates. Unlike them we knew that all races deserved equal treatment. They thought Alger Hiss was guilty. We knew he was innocent. Far from being a congenial war hero, Dwight Eisenhower was a tongue-tied nincompoop. His warmonger pal Douglas MacArthur had dragged us into the Korean War. "War?" MacArthur had said. "Let me in!" We knew. We got it from Mom and Dad, who got it from I. F. Stone. I think.

A defining moment for progressives of all ages was the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In the weeks leading up to their execution Gene spent every Sharing period at school going over the reasons they were innocent. I'd spent many an evening brooding over our volume of the Rosenbergs' letters, studying a picture of Julius and Ethel's

doomed faces as they were taken to jail, a fence grill separating their bodies. I mourned for their two little boys—the same age as Gene and me—who were about to become orphans.

The night before their parents' execution, Mom and Dad let us stay up late, huddled around the console radio in our living room, praying that president Harry Truman would grant the Rosenbergs clemency. On the day they were to be electrocuted, as other kids chortled that it was a good thing these Commies were about to get what they had coming, I struggled to convey my own feelings to third-grade classmates.

"They're innocent," I argued.

"Guilty," my classmates responded.

"Innocent."

"Guilty."

"They didn't get a fair trial."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Did."

None of us knew enough to carry the debate any further. What arguments like these did convey was how different our family was. How deviant. Possibly Communists. As if we cared. When a crewcut playmate told me he wouldn't take red checkers because they reminded him too much of "Commies," with a mixture of hubris, pride, and self-pity I said, "Give 'em here."

Along with our younger siblings, Steve and Nicky, Gene and I were *red diaper babies*: the offspring of radicals. Our parents were actually more pink than red: medium-rare leftists. They'd met during the Depression at Penn State's Social Problems Club. Dad, a staid Quaker pacifist, chaired the meeting. Mom, an exuberant Jewish socialist, caught his eye. Progressive politics was their matchmaker. Like so many of her peers, Mom went on to flirt with Communism. At a Party discussion one evening, the leader asked if fascists had a right to freedom of speech. My mother raised her hand. "Of course they do," she said. "Everyone does." That wasn't the correct answer. According to her discussion leader, this young woman was "confused." Because they were enemies of the people, fascists had relinquished their right to free speech. But as Mom later told us, "I was not confused. I believed then and I believe now that everyone has the right to speak his mind."

That episode ended Mom's brief fling with Communism. She re-

mained a radical for all seasons. To her, the left was one big happy family that embraced everyone from Harry Truman to Harry Bridges (head of the longshoremen's union). Although he wasn't a socialist like his wife, my pacifist father believed peace in the world could be achieved only through more enlightened political policies.

Mom and Dad were both active in the Progressive Party. A favorite "cute kid" story in our family had to do with my presence at the Progressive Party convention in Philadelphia in 1948, where Dad was a delegate. Only three at the time, I bounced on my mother's knee, hollering, "We want Wallace! We want Wallace!" along with Pete Seeger and Harry Bridges and all the other progressives who yearned to put one-time vice-president Henry Wallace in the White House. After a time I turned around and asked Mom, "Who's Wallace?"

Some months later I tugged at my father's pants leg and asked, "Is Wallace still president?"

Not exactly a knee-slapper, I'll admit. But in our family the political flavor of this story took it over the top and it was told to friends for years.

Very little happened in the Keyes household that didn't have a political subtext. Even our names were enlisted in the cause. Gene's name honored not only his grandfather Jean but the socialist Eugene Victor Debs. I was named for both my great-uncle Ralph and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Mom considered a former-day progressive.

Our mother believed passionately in something called *progressive education*. Whatever that was, we weren't getting one. Mom said so, often. Knowing this gave us license to deviate from the education we were getting, one that involved things like clean fingernail contests. Every day, each row of children in my second-grade class had to hold out their fingernails to be inspected for cleanliness by a student lackey. Our row never did very well, apparently due to one member: me. When I changed rows, my teacher said she hoped I didn't bring that row down too. I couldn't understand what the problem was. A few years later I discovered that everyone's fingernails weren't two-tone like mine: flesh colored below, black at the top. I had no idea that this blackness was due to dirt. That just wasn't the sort of thing our family was concerned about. Let the *I Like Ike* crowd and their well-scrubbed kids worry about dirt beneath their fingernails. We had bigger fish to fry.

Crusading against coloring books was one such fish. Mom thought coloring books were setting kids up to be corporate conformists.

Learning to stay within the lines, she believed, was preparing young crayon wielders to wear gray flannel suits and say, “Yes sir!” Tracing was almost as bad. Only by drawing our own pictures, Mom told us as she handed out pieces of newsprint and boxes of Crayolas, could we develop our creativity and learn to think for ourselves. I still can’t watch kids open a coloring book or pull out a piece of tracing paper without sensing that they’re IBMers in the making.

Perspectives like these didn’t impress our teachers at Frazier Street Elementary School. Mrs. Shallenberger did not look pleased when I tsk-tsked as she handed out pictures for her second graders to color. Her job would have been easier had she been able to conduct an air raid drill without being told this was preparing us for war. I’m sure all of our teachers would have preferred to discuss the Communist peril without having one of their students raise his hand and ask for their sources.

The way we looked at it, our teachers and classmates alike made the mistake of believing everything they read. And look at what they read: *The Centre Daily Times*. *Grit*. *Time*. We had far better sources: not just *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* and *The Nation* but the *Monthly Review*, *National Guardian*, and many another progressive publication that made us better informed than other people.

Alas, it’s a short step from feeling better informed than other people to simply feeling better. Snobbery is an occupational hazard of radicalism. Our political haughtiness didn’t make us popular on the playground. Not much about us did. Our pals’ families liked Ike. We were madly for Adlai. To them May Day meant maypoles. To us it meant workers on the march. We wanted the Rosenbergs freed. They wanted them fried. Who knew what it all meant? The only thing clear was that the Keyes kids were way out of step with those around them.

Exactly how we were out of step wasn’t always clear, however. Outside the realm of politics, our family’s attitudes grew hazy to us kids. We knew that the Keyeses had lots of *positions*, but didn’t always know what those positions were, or how to apply them to our own lives. This forced us to do so on our own. Boy Scouts were clearly fascists in the making, little better than Hitler Youth. That was obvious. But was there a progressive position on baseball? Gene and I weren’t sure. So we concocted one. With their name, their pinstripes, and their arrogance, the Yankees were the bankers’ team, no doubt. Joe

DiMaggio was little better than Joe McCarthy. With Jackie Robinson at second base, however, the Dodgers—'dem Bums—looked enlightened to us.

Baseball was okay for kids of our political leaning. We played in good conscience a sport that had a vague resemblance to chess. Books had been written about baseball. It sometimes got mentioned in *The Nation*. Football, on the other hand, was a brutal game played by illiterate goons. Gene and I did play football, but with guilt. Every tackle we made, each pass we caught felt like a betrayal of our family's values. Then there was basketball. There were no clear tipoffs about what our position should be on this sport. Should we disdain six-foot-ten George Mikan because of his bully-like size or admire him because his glasses made him look like a reader, possibly even of *I. F. Stone*?

Comic books were a gray area for red diaper babies like us. *MAD* seemed to be on our side with its irreverent razzing of American icons. *MAD*'s sister publications in the EC family—*Panic*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, *Frontline Combat*—impressed Gene and me with their vivid artwork and literate story lines. Probably EC was a progressive outpost. But when psychiatrist Frederick Wertheim began investigating the psychological harm done by comic books, EC's publisher, William Gaines, sent an advisory to members of the EC Fan Addicts clubs telling them to write their Congressman denouncing hearings on this subject as a Communist-inspired vendetta. What to do? Our club convened and resolved that no matter how much we loved EC comic books, there was a principle involved. We would have no truck with Gaines's red-baiting. Also, even though we liked horror comics, we'd heard that reading them had caused some kids to commit crimes. One boy who read a horror comic had even hung a playmate from a tree. Or so we'd heard. We wrote our Congressman urging him to carry on with the investigation. "Gentlemen," wrote one of our members, "Would you like your son hanging from a tree?"

TV was another confounding subject. Even as our playmates' families got television sets, Mom and Dad refused to buy us one. Why let Texaco and United Fruit hawk their wares in our living room? If we wanted a TV so badly, they told us, we could buy it ourselves. So Gene and I got paper routes to earn the money, eventually purchasing a used television set with a ten-inch screen. Even then we were allowed to watch only a certain number of hours per week, and had to let our parents review the programs we proposed to watch. Ones with too much violence were *verboten*.

From early childhood we knew that opposition to violence was central to our family's credo. Having pacifists for parents can raise serious questions in the mind of a growing boy, however. Are you allowed to get in fights? Can you hit back if somebody hits you first? What if they're trying to kill you?

Even though they're not the same thing, pacifism and passive-ism are easy to confuse. In an early questioning of my parents' values I conflated the two, seeing my parents as unduly passive. Passivists. Patsies whom you could push around. I saw Gene that way, too. Many an afternoon my older brother would burst panting through the kitchen door because a couple of bullies had chased him home from school. (Gene later showed spine by going to prison for his anti-war activism, but that's another story.)

It seemed that belonging to my family made one easy pickings for little Pinkerton thugs. In my first clear break with our family's ideology, I resolved to never, ever, turn down an invitation to fight. And I didn't. I lost a lot of fights, but made this distinction clear between me and my family: I hit back.

In first grade I got beat up by a classmate. The next day I waylaid this kid after school, then whipped him with my Gene Autry vest until he ran home crying. I still feel ambivalent about that episode: proud I stood up for myself, but wishing I hadn't used a weapon to do so. I wish I'd just stuck to my fists. Mom and Dad, of course, would have preferred that I'd stuck to my words.

So many issues, so much confusion. Even our political positions weren't always clear to inquiring young minds. The Rosenbergs may have been railroaded and Alger Hiss framed. The Korean War was undoubtedly MacArthur's War. The DAR deserved a loud raspberry for keeping Marian Andersen out of their concert hall. But what was our position on Joseph Stalin's death? The day after Stalin died, I walked the four blocks to school puzzling over how I should feel about the Soviet leader's demise. As pacifists, we didn't want anyone dead, of course. Since Stalin was so despised by our classmates, perhaps we were for him and doubly sorry he'd died. Certainly we had no truck with red-baiting. But I'd heard that Stalin was a dictator, and our family was opposed to dictatorship. So maybe it was just as well that he'd passed away. I couldn't decide. It was a frustrating challenge to an eight-year-old sensibility better suited to studying box scores and reading *Little Lulu*.

Even though our parents' convictions weren't always easy for their children to grasp, what we did get—unmistakably—was that conventional standards didn't apply to us. Who cared what other people thought? When it came time for us to get bikes, Gene studied the issues and concluded that a girls' version made more sense than the boys'. They were easier to get on and off and posed less of a threat to our genitals. That made sense to me. We both got bicycles with no bar across the middle. My brother and I were the only boys in town to ride girls' bikes.

That town was State College, Pennsylvania, where our father taught economics at Penn State. Milton Eisenhower, Dwight's brother, was Penn State's president at the time. Eisenhower wasn't thrilled about a *Pittsburgh Press* article headlined "TWO PENN STATE PROFESSORS WANT RED CHINA RECOGNIZED / Commie Paper Claims They Are Among 183 who signed 'Open Letter' to Truman." One of the two named in this 1951 article was "Scott Keyes, assistant professor of economics." The article had appeared in the *Daily Worker*. When his employers could no longer ignore my father's political views and resistance to signing a loyalty oath, they fired him.

After fevered meetings in our home, supporters of my father took their protest to Penn State's campus. Eventually Dad was reinstated. Cutting him loose proved to be more trouble than keeping him on. Our household meetings on his behalf had done their job. They weren't the only type of meeting my parents hosted. Our house was a gathering place for Progressive Party members, Quaker peacemongers, and sundry radical activists. Their comings and goings did not go unnoticed by our neighbors. Mom wondered if some of them might be spying on us and reporting to the FBI.

They were. In 1951 the Federal Bureau of Investigation received an anonymous tip from someone who thought they should investigate the political activities of Scott and Charlotte Keyes. This informant was apparently a neighbor of ours. He was particularly concerned about my family's "meetings and the quotations from such meetings, even by their children. . . ."

Our neighborhood dime dropper was only one of several who warned the FBI about my parents' political activities, and those of Dad in particular (something I discovered after submitting a Freedom of Information request for any files the FBI might have gathered about my father). Mom and Dad had reason to be concerned. We were a family under surveillance.

Any red diaper baby who grew up in the McCarthy era knows how exhilarating life under siege can be. A sense of intrigue was part of our daily diet. My family's conversations were filled with abbreviations—HUAC, FBI, CIA, ACLU—that sounded like code words to us. Terms such as “loyalty oath” and “informer” had overtones of espionage. It felt like we were on an undercover mission behind enemy lines, privy to privileged information denied our playmates.

Life as an undercover agent can be awfully lonely, however. So can the life of red diaper babies in general. Feeling radically estranged from the world around them cuts two ways in a child's upbringing. On the one hand, young outliers can grow up to be creative, independent-minded adults. On the other hand, being imprinted as a child to stay out of step makes it hard for them to feel at home anywhere except among those also craning their ears to hear different drumming. My own parents' sense of community was stronger among far-flung fellow radicals than it was among nearby faces that they recognized. Our family's bias was against the local, which we associated with the parochial. We identified more strongly with the United Nations than with the United States, and felt a stronger connection to the world's oppressed than to residents of State College.

I think one reason progressives are so obsessed with the notion of *community* is that it's not their strong suit. Citizens of the world who believe fervently in the brotherhood of man tend to belong nowhere in particular. Fitting in can be hard for those raised this way, even when they want to join the crowd. When my brother Steve was having trouble getting in step with a 12-step group, he lamented, “We were raised to be outsiders.”

I've had similar problems becoming part of a group, even ones I'd like to join. In my late sixties, however, that problem has faded. Hostilities have ceased among my agemates, I've come to realize; a truce has been signed. I'm free to pick my fights.

Seven decades after I defiantly rode a girl's bike around State College I joined a group of peers pedaling stationary bikes in cardiac rehab. Sixty years earlier they probably would have been taunting me on the playground, I figured, but that was all in the past. Now my fellow survivors of cardiac episodes greeted me warmly and I welcomed their warmth. This called for making adjustments. The existing members of our group had decided that we should all wear the same color on the right day: blue on Monday, red on Wednesday, white on Friday. What the hell. I no longer saw fitting in this way as a betrayal of my parents'

values. I got myself red, white, and blue workout shirts.

That may sound like throwing in my family's towel. Like most red diaper babies, however, I retain a leftish outlier's outlook, if not *us against them*. This perspective surfaces every time I send money to the Brady campaign, knock on doors for progressive Democrats, and sign petitions against environmental degradation.

My red diaper wife and I have led unconventional lives but not ones as highly charged politically as those in which we grew up. We've tried to raise our two sons with a sense of social responsibility but without the heavy political overlay. We've also planted our family flag in a rural Ohio town whose artiness is tempered by the cornfields and conservatives on its borders.

As it turns out, some of those conservatives may not be so conservative after all. At rehab, one crusty retired farmer from Tennessee with a fondness for country music refuses to wear the right colors. He had enough of dressing like everyone else in the service, this man explains. In 2008 he sent Washington a message by voting for Ralph Nader. On an adjacent treadmill, another rehabber, one who spends his time going to dirt track auto races since retiring from a career selling auto parts, told me about growing up in rural Ohio, then attending a Christian college in Indiana. Between the wars in Korea and Vietnam he'd done his service, the retiree said. Which branch of the service? I asked. He gave me a quizzical look, then explained, "No; alternative service. I was a conscientious objector."