



## **Jay Fox: Anarchist of Home**

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**By Mary M. Carr**

The utopian colony of Home was founded in 1896 on Von Geldern Cove, across the Tacoma Narrows on the Key Peninsula. Established by three families who were refugees from another failed utopian community, it became in time a successful anarchist colony whose most famed inhabitant was the sometimes elusive Jay Fox, anarchist and labor radical.

Jay Fox's Irish-Catholic parents had immigrated to America shortly before he was born in New Jersey on August 20, 1870. Soon thereafter the family moved to Chicago where his mother's immigrant brother Martin Murphy helped them settle, as Fox later wrote in his memoirs, "in the back of the stock-yards in the midst of a medley of other poor foreigners."

Although his parents hoped he would follow a pious path to the priesthood, he did not conform. He abandoned the faith of his forefathers and quit school at an early age. "Knowing how to read and make change was all the masses were required to know, all the bosses needed them to know, all that we could afford the time to acquire," said Fox of formal education. He later became an advocate of the Modern School Movement which stressed the importance of free thought and non-interference from church and state.

At age 14 Fox landed his first job. For 50 cents a day, he worked for the "sauer-kraut king" of Chicago whose fields of cabbage grew in the stockyards. Since Fox's father worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad, earning only \$1.40 a day, the contribution Fox made to the family's meager resources was welcome.

Duly impressed that work brought monetary reward, however small; Fox next took a job at the Malleable Iron Works, located near the McCormick Reaper Works (a forerunner of International Harvester). In 1886, 16-year-old Fox joined the Knights of Labor as a result of a discussion he had with Albert Parsons, a labor organizer eventually hanged for his activities. A strike for the eight-hour work day, called after several months' unrest and numerous protests at the McCormick Reaper Works, was set for May 1. Fox decided to participate in the strike.

On May 3, Fox was on the picket line in front of the Iron Works where relative quiet prevailed. He drifted over to the McCormick Reaper Works where, by contrast, he found an ominous siege underway. Rock-throwing strikers had dispersed the scabs and backed the police against the gates of the plant until police reinforcements arrived and drew their revolvers. The workers retreated, knowing that rocks were no match for bullets. Nonetheless, the police opened fire at the backs of the workers. Conflicting accounts state that Fox was wounded, with either a grazed shoulder or the loss of the end digit of one finger. There is no doubt, though, that the bullet which wounded Fox went on to strike and kill a fellow worker.

A shaken Jay Fox attended a meeting in Haymarket Square the next evening where he heard speeches discussing the injustice of police tactics used at the McCormick Reaper Works and protesting the senseless wounding and slaughter of workers. Someone threw a bomb into the crowd gathered there. Although it is still not known who was responsible, eight of the most vocal and persistent labor radicals were arrested, tried and convicted. Five received death sentences. Despite protests, four were hanged on November 11, 1887; the fifth committed suicide in his cell. Indeed, the events of May 3 and 4, 1886 and November 11, 1887, known collectively as the Haymarket Affair, did more to inflame the radical cause than any other single incident. Furthermore, the events of Haymarket, which still stand as classic examples of judicial impropriety, were pivotal for Jay Fox who first worked for the convicted men's release and later marched in their funeral parade. He went on to become an avowed anarchist and a powerful voice in behalf of the radical cause.

By 1893 Fox was working at the Illinois Central Railway in Chicago. He became a charter member of the American Railway Union (ARU) Local No.1, headed by Eugene V. Debs. As a delegate to the ARU's first convention, in June 1894, with the Pullman shop workers' strike then three weeks old, Fox voted to establish a relief fund for striking workers and endorsed a nationwide boycott of Pullman sleepers. Debs disobeyed an injunction during the strike and received a six-month jail sentence. The leaderless ARU faltered and was not revived.

During the 1896 presidential campaign between William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley, Fox took time out from his labor activities to travel by bicycle around the Eastern states, touring such cities as New York, Syracuse and Boston. Along the way he talked with people about class struggle, soliciting opinions and being none too shy about expressing his own. From Boston Fox arranged to work for his passage on a cattle ship to Liverpool. He stayed in England for about a year, working in and around Liverpool and Birmingham, and speaking to people about the "coming war on capitalism." He concluded, "Contact with people on that trip added strength to my belief that the competitive struggle of man against man for the chance to produce the necessities of life no longer exists, if it ever did. It seems that people today would prefer to cooperate with each other if the opportunity were available."

Fox returned to Chicago and re-entered the fray. By the late 1890s he was a rising star in the radical movement, beginning to establish himself as a speaker and an advocate for the laboring classes. On November 11, 1897, in a ceremony commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Chicago executions, Fox shared the stage with Emma Goldman among others. On Decoration Day (the forerunner of Memorial Day) in 1900, Fox addressed an anarchist picnic. On July 28, 1901, the Society for Anthropology heard his address entitled "Labor's Discontent and the Steel Worker's [sic] Strike." An extant handbill announces that Fox was to speak in Boston on November 16, 1902, concerning the "crimes of capitalism" at a meeting commemorating the hanging of the Haymarket martyrs. He also contributed to such newspapers as *The Demonstrator*, published in Home Colony, Washington, and *The Free Society* (formerly *The Firebrand*), an anarchist-communist journal then published in Chicago.

Fox's connections to the latter publication led to his first arrest. On September 6, 1901, President McKinley was shot at the Buffalo Exposition. The *Chicago Tribune* immediately announced that the U.S. Secret Service suspected a link with the Haymarket Gang. The Chicago police seized records from *The Free Society's* Chicago office and arrested publisher Abraham Isaak, his family, and members of *The Free Society* publishing group, including Fox. On September 14, McKinley died. Fox said, "For Mrs. McKinley I have the same sorrow which I have for my cellmate who heard of the death of his child yesterday and wept bitter tears." The members of the publishing group were finally released because the authorities had no case.

Fox lived for a while in New York City. Little is known about this period of his life except that he continued his writing and speaking career. Another extant handbill advertises that "J. Fox, of New York" was to deliver

four lectures addressing the central question, "Why are you poor in a rich country?" The handbill also describes him, somewhat prematurely, as editor of *The Labor Agitator*, a job which he did not actually assume until some years later. Newspaper clippings found in one of Fox's scrapbooks cite several New York addresses.

Returning to Chicago, Fox took Esther Abramowitz as his common-law wife. Born in Russia, she was a factory worker in her youth. Both of them became part of Chicago's anarchist salon, where radicals, including Emma Goldman, Clarence Darrow and others whose names are less familiar, met and exchanged ideas. An observer describing the people who frequented the salon said Fox was a man with "more fibre and calmness and strength than the rank and file of the anarchists." Abramowitz was described as melancholy and affectionate and gentle and sensual." The couple's anarchist ideals served as a basis for their relationship, which lasted for approximately a decade. Of Fox's first wife, nothing is known.

In 1904 Fox worked closely with Lucy Parsons, widow of the Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons, in an attempt to launch an anarchist, English-language newspaper. In the spring of that year Parsons, Fox and others discussed the possibility of starting a paper to replace *The Free Society* which had folded in the wake of the persecution of radicals following the McKinley assassination. Throughout the summer the group held socials and picnics to raise money for the cause.

However, by late summer a rift had developed between Fox and Parsons. A group headed by Fox felt that *The Demonstrator of Home Colony* should be adopted and backed. The other faction, headed by Parsons, felt strongly that such a paper should emanate from the radical and industrial center of Chicago rather than from the backwater colony of Home. Before the controversy was settled, Fox sent the money to Home. Parsons, undaunted, started a Chicago-based paper, *The Liberator*. It should be noted that Fox had good reason for his position. He had been invited to assume the editorship of *The Demonstrator*, planning to move to Home in the fall of 1905. He was delayed that fall and again in the spring.

Fox attended the founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), held in Chicago in June 1905. He was initially sympathetic to the philosophy behind the IWW, but had reservations about its strategy. He was convinced that radical workers should try to effect changes from within existing unions. A poem in William Z. Foster's autobiographical work, *From Bryan to Stalin*, makes clear reference to the IWW factionalism over the issue of "dual unionism" which plagued the group from its beginnings:

"The proper way," said Jay the Fox

"To start the revolution

Is just to bore a hole or two

In existing institutions."

"Agreed," cried Mr. Foster,

"I have my gimlet ready,

My arm is long, my hand is strong,

My nerves are cool and steady."

Fox began reporting on IWW activities for Home Colony's *The Demonstrator*. The colony drew its name from the charter of the Mutual Home Association, a simple landholding organization with no other provisions for cooperative economic ventures. Taxes on the land were shared equally while the land itself remained in the hands of the association. Improvements on the land, such as houses, belonged to individuals. Gradually the association added to its land holdings. When platted in 1901, Home consisted of 217 acres.

The landholding agreement gave Home a communitarian flavor, but the fundamental principles of tolerance and individual liberty set forth by the founding families defined the Colony's nature as truly utopian. Stewart H. Holbrook, journalist and writer, visited Home often and wrote newspaper and journal articles about his visits. He said that Fox once described Home as a "Wild West Brook Farm, with overtones of Oneida Community and Nauvoo." As Holbrook observed, Home was a place where two-acre farmers were as conversant with Marx as with poultry.

Fox arrived in Home during its heyday, in the winter of 1908. He traveled alone, not having the resources to bring his family with him. Arriving on the West Coast, he visited Home briefly before returning to Seattle where he worked as a janitor tending the arts building at the Alaska-Yukon Exposition. He commented that this was perhaps the best job he had ever had because, once trained, he was never bothered by his boss and was able to look upon fine art and listen to the distant strains of the symphony playing in the next building. By the fair's end, Fox had earned the money needed to bring his wife and two of her children from a previous marriage to the West Coast. Once joined by his family, Fox secured two acres at Home and built his first house. Although he left Home for brief periods over the next 51 years, he always returned. As he later expressed in an unpublished poem, Home had captured his heart.

Radium LaVene, who grew up in Home, recalls that his mother Bessie Levin, invited Fox for dinner. Said LaVene, "Mother usually baked her own bread, but on this occasion she had bakery bread, and Jay questioned mother to learn if the bread was union made. Mother didn't remember for sure, so Jay explained the importance of insisting on seeing the union label before buying anything. It seemed that mother learned her lesson well, for sometime later when Jay was invited to dinner again, [on the table] mother placed a platter stacked high with bread and pasted to each slice was a union label."

Once established in Home, Fox and Abramowitz set up housekeeping and prepared for the publication of *The Agitator*, which replaced *The Demonstrator*. The residents, who had grown accustomed to having a newspaper published in their colony, were anxious for its appearance.

*The Agitator* made its first appearance on November 18, 1910, although in his editorial, Fox proclaimed that it appeared on November 11, the 25th [sic] anniversary of the execution of the Haymarket martyrs. (Actually, he was four days late for the 23d anniversary.) In its subtitle, *The Agitator* defined itself as an "Advocate of the Modern School, Industrial Unionism, and Individual Freedom." Fox declared that it would "stand for freedom first, last and all the time," and would promote the right of every person to express his opinions. He hoped to popularize knowledge so that common toilers, as well as the "rich and privileged class" could be "uplifted to philosophy and science." Appearing twice a month, the paper was generally well-written, although riddled with typos. Fox received encouragement from many people who hoped *The Agitator* would fill the need for a viable, English-language anarchist journal. Indeed, when entering his subscription, Jack London commented that the "free, open, fair spirit of the paper makes it one of the most valuable periodicals I read."

Although the newspaper reprinted articles by such notables as Clarence Darrow, it bore the distinct character of its editor. On the first page was a regular feature, "The Passing Show," which contained short articles and comments by Fox on a range of current topics. He also wrote many of the other articles in each

issue. While the paper was enthusiastically received, it was not financially well-backed and its fiscal struggles threatened its future.

Just as the first issues were coming off the press, Home was visited by William J. Burns and other operatives of the Burns Detective Agency. Disguised as surveyors and booksellers, they gathered information about some of Home's residents, including Fox and his family. Their visit was prompted by the bombing of the Los Angeles Times building which killed 20 people. John J. McNamara, a union official, and his brother James B. had been arrested and confessed to the crime at the time of their trial. However, two alleged accomplices were at large, one of whom was believed to be David Caplan. Burns' operatives recorded minute details of everyday Home life in suggestive, exaggerated language that added an air of mystery and intrigue. For all their observations, the most they gathered is that Fox returned from San Francisco without his wife, looking "very much worried, eyes bloodshot...as though he had been under a great strain." Without finding Caplan, they discontinued their two-week surveillance.

Although there is no conclusive evidence, it appears that Fox knew of Caplan's whereabouts. A later government report insisted that Caplan hid out at Home. Additionally, according to Bertha Thompson, known as "Box-Car Bertha," Caplan found refuge in Home Colony for a time. Years later, Fox hinted that Caplan also hid out on Bainbridge Island, but the exact truth may be lost to history.

As if the McNamara case were not enough, on July 11, 1911, Fox published his famed editorial, "The Nudes and the Prudes," in which he advocated boycotting those members of the Home community who were "prudish" and offended by those who chose to bathe naked in Puget Sound. Home's conservative faction had challenged the practice, and four residents of Home, three of them women, had been arrested. After the first of the trials, amid general unpleasantness and adverse publicity in the surrounding cities, Fox lent his voice to the disagreement, calling the two opposing factions the "nudes" and the "prudes." He clearly sided with the nudes, stating that "clothing was made to protect the body, not to hide it," and criticizing the local court. Fox wrote that Home had always been a community of free spirits, who came out into the woods to escape the polluted [sic] atmosphere of priest-ridden, conventional society. One of the liberties enjoyed by Homeites was the privilege to bathe in evening dress, or with merely the clothes nature gave them, just as they chose. No one went rubbernecking to see which suit a person wore, who sought the purifying waters of the bay. Surely it is nobody's business.

Fox was arrested seven weeks after the editorial's publication. The state law allegedly violated made it a misdemeanor "to encourage disrespect for law or for any court or court of justice," a statute enacted during the furor over anarchism following the McKinley assassination. Thus, both of Fox's arrests could be linked to the anti-anarchist sentiment resulting from McKinley's assassination.

The trial took place January 10, 1912. The issues of nude bathing, indecent exposure, free speech, free press, and anarchism were hopelessly entangled. On the second day, as the trial neared its conclusion, Fox addressed the jury, pleading for free speech and press. "It is only by agitation that the laws of the land are made better," the Tacoma Daily Ledger quoted. "It is only by agitation that reforms have been brought about in the world. Show me a country where there is the most tyranny and I'll show you the country where there is no free speech. This country was settled on that right the right of free expression."

The jury deliberated for 25 hours, nearly declaring itself "hung," before rendering a verdict guilty, but with a recommendation for leniency. On February 6, Fox was sentenced to two months in jail.

Supporters continued efforts to have the conviction overturned. The aid of the Free Speech League, forerunner of the American Civil Liberties Union, was enlisted. Dances and rallies to raise money for the "Jay Fox Free Speech Fight" were held from Boston to Portland, Oregon.

The case was appealed to the United States Supreme Court. There, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. read the decision which upheld the original judgment and reaffirmed a law which today would clearly be considered unconstitutional. In 1915, Fox finally surrendered to serve his sentence. Meanwhile, J. C. Brown, an official of the International Union of Timber Workers, brought the case before Ernest C. Lister, who was then the Governor of Washington State. Not entirely sympathetic at first, Governor Lister eventually signed a pardon for Fox on September 11, 1915, 12 days before his two-month sentence would have been served in full,

Amidst this backdrop, William Z. Foster had come to Home in 1912. Foster's conversion to the philosophies of the IWW had been short-lived. He had visited France where the radical movement was making inroads through the "syndicates" or unions. Syndicalism, "boring from within" the existing union structure, as Jay Fox had advocated, seemed a practical approach. Foster convinced Fox to let *The Agitator* become the official organ of Foster's newly formed Syndicalist League of North America. His timing coincided with the financial and legal difficulties of the paper and its editor.

Fox moved himself and the paper to Chicago. He wrote, "...Say Jo. What do you think?; I'm going back to Chicago. This berg [sic] is becoming too small for the A. [i.e., Anarchist movement]. It's outgrown the state. We want to take the center of the industrial stage. The syndicalists want me to go there and make the paper the central organ of the movement. And this movement is going to grow, Jo. I'll make em anarchists and they won't know it. It's sugar coat as it were."

The last issue of *The Agitator* was dated November 1, 1912; it reappeared as *The Syndicalist* in January 1913. The mailing address remained Home for a time, but the *Syndicalist Publishing Association of Chicago* appeared on the masthead as publisher. Early in the spring, while his case was under appeal, Fox was en route to Chicago with a copy of Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. The focus of the paper changed appreciably; Foster and syndicalism became the overriding issue. Instead of expanding to a weekly as planned, the paper lasted only a year, half as long as did *The Agitator of Home*. The September 15, 1913, issue did not mention suspension or cessation, but it was indeed the final issue.

Fox returned to the Northwest alone, for amidst the hassles of the "nudes and prudes" affair and the changes in the paper, he and Esther Abramowitz had separated (she married Foster in March 1918). It must have been an amiable parting. At least they remained good friends. Testimony to this fact can be seen in the closing of one of Foster's letters to Fox, which says, "Esther joins me in sending you love and best regards."

In Seattle, Fox joined with J. C. Brown in an attempt to expand the Shingle Weavers' Union into the Timberworkers, an industry-wide union. While Fox's case was being appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, he became vice-president of the newly expanded union and editor of *The Timberworker*. For the weekly publication he wrote "Letters to Jack Lumber," the main editorial. This publication and the Shingle Weavers' Union did not survive the First World War's negative impact on the Northwest timber industry.

In 1918, while in Chicago again, Fox was asked to join the National Nonpartisan League, headquartered in Saint Paul. This organization advocated such programs as the establishment of a rural credit bank and state-controlled grain elevators, and proposed to nominate its candidates for election from within the major Parties. The League managed to gain control of the Republican Party of North Dakota and directed the state's politics for a short period of time. However, his work with the League was short-lived since Fox quit when asked to transfer to Bismarck, where the League had affiliations with a daily newspaper. The mild winters and many good friends he had left behind in Washington beckoned.

Back in the West, Fox participated in the Seattle general strike of 1919. Then working in the Ames Shipyards, he championed the general strike "as the most practical and effective way to overthrow capitalism."

Fox was first, last and always a union man. He worked in various occupations during his lifetime, but he proudly notes that he never laid a hand to any work for which he did not possess a union card. Radium LaVene remembers him singing a song about a hod carrier:

I work 8 hours a day

and I'm sure I earn my pay.

When the clock strikes six,

I carry down my bricks

and I don't work another minute after.

Fox was not entirely happy living in Seattle. His room on Yesler Way was no match for Home. Furthermore, he was lonely. He had been living alone for seven years. As he said, "At forty-nine I began to think about getting married again, this provided that the right woman gave me the right answer. In Philadelphia lived a woman I greatly admired, and I set about getting the right answer from her." That woman was Cora Peterson, a native of Denmark. She said "yes" and came west. They were married in Seattle in June 1919.

Although Fox freely admitted that the old movements had lost some of their luster, he had not given up. The Russian Revolution and the advent of Communism in the Soviet Union had brought the winds of change to American radicals. Fox felt that the Communist Party, although not perfect, offered the latest, best hope of accomplishing the sweeping changes that the anarchist movement had not. He wrote an apologetic chapter in his memoirs, "Why I Joined the Communist Party," to affirm that he had not changed his overarching beliefs, but felt that in the 1920s they could be accommodated better within the Communist Party. Although some still believed anarchism could be put into practice, Fox had come to the rather unhappy conclusion that theory and practice were never to meet. His conversion to Communism alienated some of his one-time anarchist friends, which greatly upset him.

Although his actions were never again press-worthy or sensational, he did continue to write. He was a contributor to the Seattle Union Record and wrote at least one pamphlet, "Amalgamation," for the Trade Union Educational League. By 1935, Fox had become somewhat, if not totally, disillusioned with the Communist Party and returned to the anarchist movement. It is perhaps accurate to conclude that he had never fully left its ranks. Concerning the anarchist movement, Fox wrote, I could never desert a cause that is a vital part of my intellectual life.

Home was no longer the tranquil, communitarian community envisioned at its founding. The seeds of discontent, evident in the "nudes and prudes" incident, had had their origins in 1909 when Home was platted and a change made to the Association's articles of incorporation allowing for private ownership of land and individual deeds. This provision violated the Association's original purposes, depleted its holdings, ended the promise of available land for incoming members and led to factionalism between radical and conservative elements. The quarreling escalated to court battles. In early 1917 a split community elected two panels of officers, both claiming to be the legitimate leaders of the Mutual Home Association. Finally, in 1921, the Mutual Home Association was dissolved by court order, the judge having observed during the

proceedings that the Association had been "wholly impotent" to perform the charter purposes, and that such bitter hostility left no hope for reconciliation.

The Foxes entered a period of semi-retirement. They raised poultry and built a new house. Cora, an artist, sold hand-painted china to supplement their income. While his friend Foster had taken on the minions of Capital in industrial centers, Fox had decided he could make his statement from Home. Apparently, though, Foster grew weary of hearing about the "house that Jay built." He thought that Fox should attempt something more lasting and persuaded him to begin writing his memoirs.

At age 81, in 1951, Fox had the project well underway. When Holbrook visited Home in the 1940s, he dubbed Fox the "last of the veritable anarchists, genial and mellow..." adjectives that would not have been applied to him earlier. Aware of his own mortality, as is evident by some of his later writings which focus on death, Fox knew that he would be unable to finish his manuscript. In a letter dated November 17, 1960, he wrote that he was having trouble remembering things. "In light of the above, how could I go on with the book? You see it would be impossible, which it is, sorrowfully so."

Fox died four months later on March 8, 1961. His ashes were laid to rest in the rose garden on his property in Home Colony. Perhaps unknowingly, Fox wrote his own epitaph in the form of an unpublished poem, "When I Die." Although not a literary masterpiece, it conveys his self-image and points out his wry sense of humor.

It is common practice when a man dies, for his friends to dig up the memory of whatever little good he did in his life; then weep and wail over the corpse and bemoan the fates that deprived the world of so great a lover of mankind.

When I die let the time-honored process be reversed. Instead of tiring themselves with a search for the good that I may incidentally have done, let my friends pile up the crooked jobs I pulled off; and conjure up, so far as their imagination is capable of the task, a mental picture of all the rascality I intended to put over if death had not taken me off the job. Then let them fill their glasses to the brim and drink to the memory of one who, if worse than themselves, it was only because of greater opportunity.

Fox died as he had lived a humble laborer for the cause. He fought unstintingly for an eight-hour day, adequate compensation for all workers, a free press, free speech, women's rights, and individual freedom. He confronted issues that conventional society of his day chose to ignore and anticipated some issues that today's society has had to face.

EDITOR'S NOTE This article is based on Fox's unpublished memoirs, discovered by the author in the Rare Book Room of Crosby Library, Gonzaga University.

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For nearly 15 years, Mary M. Carr was a librarian at Crosby Library, Gonzaga University, in Spokane, home of the Fox Collection and Jay Fox's memoirs. She is now Director of Library Services at North Idaho College in Coeur d' Alene.

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