

A WITNESS TO HISTORY

The Life and Times of Ralph Chaplin

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On September 5, 1917, a few months after America's entry into World War I, Department of Justice agents made simultaneous raids on 48 Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) meeting halls across the country, seizing correspondence and literature that would become courtroom evidence. The original draft of the labor anthem, "Solidarity Forever," written by one Ralph Chaplin, was among the documents confiscated.

Later that month close to 200 Wobbly leaders, including Chaplin, a future manuscripts curator of the Washington State Historical Society, were arrested for conspiring to hinder the draft, encourage desertion, and intimidate others in connection with labor disputes. Of these, 101 of them, Chaplin among them, went on trial in April 1918. The trial lasted five months, the longest criminal trial in American history up to that time.

Three months prior to the raid, in June 1917, Congress passed and President Woodrow Wilson signed the Espionage Act. Part of an overall strategy to combat opposition to the draft, the act had a clause that provided penalties of up to 20 years in prison for "whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment services of the US...." Using the Espionage Act, the federal government imprisoned Chaplin and the others.

Born in Cloud County, Kansas, in 1887, Ralph Chaplin was raised in a working-class home on Chicago's South Side. His father was put out of work during the bloody 1894 Pullman Strike, and it appears the violence witnessed by young Chaplin started him on his road to radicalism. One of his earliest memories as a child was of a striker shot dead on the steps of his home as he clutched his lunch bucket. Chaplin described how the blood seeped onto the porch steps: "I never heaved a brickbat at anyone until the strike came along. Then I threw as the other urchins did, because the scabs and Pinkertons were there to take away our fathers' jobs...."

Ralph Chaplin did everything early in his life. He became a socialist as a teenager and married his lifelong companion, Edith, at age 18. Both were commercial artists and political activists. At age 22 Chaplin traveled to pre-revolutionary Mexico. He wrote of hearing dictator Porfirio Diaz's execution squads from his apartment windows and of witnessing the inhuman living conditions of the poor. His loyalties were with the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and others like him who "were seeking to establish freedom in human affairs not only in Mexico but throughout the world."

Chaplin soon returned to Chicago where he befriended Mexican exiles and began a pattern of life that involved constant travel to fulfill his political work. His little family, which now included son Von, provided the emotional and often the financial support this very passionate man needed. Through the years, Chaplin made money by working in commercial art studios with Edith, painting portraits, or in poorly paid positions with labor organizations. It was a hand-to-mouth existence but one he described joyfully in the last article he published: "At all times—on the soapbox, on the picket line, and even in prison—we were aware of being part of something more important than our own unimportant selves, a Cause worth living for, and if needs be, worth dying for...."

While living in West Virginia, Chaplin spoke at socialist meetings and wrote for a socialist paper, the *Labor Star*. At one meeting he shared the bill with Mother Jones. Chaplin urged the crowd to vote for the socialist candidate for president, Eugene Debs. Mother Jones asked for shoes for the children of the striking Kanawha miners in the middle of a two-year strike. Chaplin personally helped Mother Jones with her campaign.

The Kanawha strike greatly affected Chaplin. He not only reported on and wrote poems about it ("Paint Creek Miner," and "Mine Guard") but was part of the strike committee. He was once beaten unconscious as he traveled to deliver a speech for Mother Jones, who had been jailed. Chaplin witnessed an armored train opening fire on the striking miners' shacks where women and children also slept. These were commonplace attacks on workers in an America that had not yet recognized the power and rights of organized labor.

Chaplin repeatedly witnessed beatings, jailings, and the murder of working men and women as they fought for their rights. He was in awe of what the self-described "bums and hoboese" of the IWW could accomplish. In 1909 Wobblies protesting dishonest hiring halls and the prohibition against meeting and speech-making near the halls were arrested in large numbers in Spokane. The men and women chained themselves to lampposts and read the Declaration of Independence out loud as they were dragged off to jail. This free speech fight resulted in overflowing jails and finally an investigation of over a dozen dishonest employment agencies. The firms were found guilty of taking job seekers' money and then directing them to nonexistent work sites. At its peak, Spokane had 4,000 IWW members and a meeting hall that could hold 800. It also boasted a Wobbly newspaper, the *Industrial Worker*.

The turbulence and misery he witnessed led Chaplin to support the IWW's philosophy of militant economic action. In his memoirs he wrote: "We joined without reservation in opposing all who denied to any, even the lowliest, their rights and dignity as human beings.... That was what the unrestrained exploitation and injustice of the early decades of the twentieth century did to us." In 1913 the young socialist officially joined the IWW. He soon became the editor of *Solidarity*, the IWW's official publication in the East.

Chaplin's relationship to hard rock miner and labor radical "Big" Bill Haywood was important to him. Haywood, a very large man, as his nickname implied, had a booming voice and a magnetic personality. Radical Elizabeth Gurley Flynn spoke of Haywood's ability to communicate with crowds often composed of mostly non-English-speaking migrants:

We had to explain to them why we wanted them to be in the IWW, one big union, and not in the AFL. [Haywood] would say (showing his hand with fingers spread), the American Federation of

Labor, the AFL is like that, each one separated, but the IWW is like that (he would make a fist), and they would all say, three cheers for the IWW and he had made his point...."

Haywood, estranged from his wife, enjoyed family life at Chaplin's home. The men talked politics as well as poetry. A letter in the WSHS archives from Haywood to Chaplin, dated October 25, 1916, acknowledged Chaplin's poems: "I read them all aloud, some of them over again.... I trust I can say something that will convey to others what you and your work means to me and to our kind. I'll try...."

In 1917 Ralph Chaplin was one of 100 Wobblies rounded up in Chicago during the wartime hysteria that rocked the country. Wobbly headquarters and private homes were ransacked, members arrested, and some shot dead in the street. Chaplin eventually served a total of four years in prison and was released after accepting the conditions of clemency set out by the government. Some IWW men condemned Chaplin for giving in to the government, and this proved to be a painful experience for him. Big Bill Haywood's exile and subsequent death in the Soviet Union also shocked Chaplin.

What happened to Ralph Chaplin? His political activism continued after his release from prison, but he became disillusioned with the path labor was taking. Nor was he particularly fond of New Deal liberalism. As the government appeared to take on a caretaker role, Chaplin also saw the specter of communism overshadowing the country.

In 1941 he wrote, "In our young foolishness some of us thought the Bolshevik revolution marked the birth of a free society. Instead, it started a monstrous reversion to the world's oldest form of tyranny. Free government, free labor and free enterprise in the American sense—they meant little to us until we saw them being consigned to destruction...."

Chaplin continued to serve his community and fight for workers rights, but he also joined the Sons of the American Revolution, began attending church, and often found himself shunned by former friends who saw him as a "red baiter." Yet, his views were complicated:

The communists have one thing in common with the old IWW—to both of them the labor movement was a Cause. To the less imaginative bosses of the AFL it was merely a business. Gompers gave the American labor movement a body. It took Haywood and Debs to give it a social conscience.

A low point in Chaplin's crusade against communist infiltration of labor occurred one day when he found himself drowned out by crowds expressing their dissatisfaction with his ideas by singing loud choruses of "Solidarity Forever." They had no idea he had written it.

Chaplin spent his final years in Tacoma, working variously as editor of the Pierce County Central Labor Council's *Labor Advocate* and striving to open lines of communication between labor and business. Papers in the Washington State Historical Society's Chaplin Collection indicate he served as a correspondent with the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II. A letter dated February 19, 1945, from Everett V. Stonequist (of OWI) asks: "1) Is there much or little discussion of, or concern about, the need for guarding information that might be of value to the enemy? 2) What kinds of information do people think would be of value to the enemy...?"

Chaplin worked as a curator for the Washington State Historical Society from 1949 until his death in 1961. When he died, the Society advised its membership of "his tireless spirit, his gentle manner, and his creative grasp of the basic elements in the history of man's long upward struggle."

Maria Pascualy is curator of exhibits at the Washington State History Museum. She curated the exhibit, A Witness to History: The Life of Ralph Chaplin, which runs through September 30, 2001, in the Gonyea Gallery at the Washington State History Museum.