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"Some Kind of Socialist:" Lee Hays, the Social Gospel, and the Path to the Cultural Front

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“Some Kind of Socialist:” Lee Hays, the Social Gospel,
and the Path to the Cultural Front

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Abstract

In 1939, with sixty-five dollars and twenty pages of Commonwealth Labor songs, Lee Hays, youngest son of a Methodist minister, hitchhiked thirteen hundred miles from Mena, Arkansas, to New York City where he found stardom in the Folk Revival movement, first, as a founder of the Almanac Singers then the Weavers. Hays' biographer Doris Willens and others, viewing Hays' unabashed socialism, ribald humor, penchant for beer, brandy, and cigarettes as induced by the childhood trauma of his father's death, argue Hays rejected his father's beliefs: replacing religion with radical politics. This thesis, in contrast, argues Hays' upbringing immersed in contradictions of Progressive Era Methodism in the Jim Crow South proved a seedbed for his work with Claude Williams, socialists, and radical social gospelers, which, in turn, undergirded his cultural front contributions to the Almanac Singers, People's Songs, and the Weavers. Rather than rejecting his religious upbringing, Hays transformed it: representing and depicting a southern religious left fighting for rights of labor, biracial coalitions of sharecroppers, and redistribution of land against Arkansas' planter-dominated economic system. His life and work illumine a southern route to the cultural front that passed through the portals of radical religion.

Yet, though Hays, by age twenty-seven, had labored in leftist film, drama, music, writing, education, and union organizing, Michael Denning largely absents Hays from the anti-fascist, pro-labor coalition of artists, writers, filmmakers, dramatists, and musicians — *The Cultural Front* — he argues emerged between 1929 and 1959 from a “material base in the CIO” and the collision of a non-communist-centric, American Popular Front social movement with “new

cultural apparatuses of state and industry.”¹ Hays’ collaborative compositional process and resulting Billboard-chart-topping blend of traditional, altered, and freely composed “folk” music are at odds with Denning’s arguments privileging individual cultural auteurs, left wing musical theater productions, jazz, and “cabaret blues” as the movement’s representative musics. Moreover, Hays’ southern religious roots defy Denning’s demographic model positing *radical moderns, anti-fascist emigres, and young plebeians* from “the immigrant and black working-class neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis” as “the heart of the cultural front.”²

Instead, Hays points to a nascent southern cultural front emerging from a radical religious pro-labor base extending through labor colleges and southern union organizing. Through his creative output and at once reluctant and enthusiastic embrace of commercial, national, and international acclaim, Hays merged the southern religious left’s messages of social and economic justice with folk and newly composed music in the Cold War Era to meet a new political moment: changing the means and content of political dissent and the trajectory of international popular culture.

Threading through decades from 1914-1981, Hays’ life ties the Progressive Era to the era of Reaganomics: knitting together Old Left and New. Post–World War I and Depression-era Arkansas, labor history, socialism, mainline and radical religious belief, vernacular and commercial music, and the artistic, political, and social milieu of Denning’s *Cultural Front* all intersect in Hays. His life shines a light on the origins of twentieth-century southern radicalism and its cultural contributors.

¹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 1998, with updated version, 2010), xviii-xix, 4-6.

² Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xv, xvi, 324.

Acknowledgements

When I was a child in the 1970s, each November my family traveled twisting two-lane roads from Fayetteville to Jackson County in East Arkansas to visit relatives. Though they owned their own farms by 1970, many had grown up tenant farming or as day laborers working from sunup to sundown on other people's land. The nearest sizeable town, nineteen miles east, was Newport, one of Lee Hays' childhood homes. Another, Forrest City, was sixty-four miles south. Without knowing it, I spent a lot of time on Lee Hays' terrain, and the sounds, colors, and contours of that world shaped my understanding of Hays' path. My relatives seldom talked about the Depression, but it permeated every part of their lives, and their life stories inform this thesis. For if my East Arkansas relatives seldom talked about the 1930s, my father, a tenant farmer's son who attended college on the G.I. Bill of Rights and became a professor of physics at the University of Arkansas, talked about them a great deal.

Those stories did not include Lee Hays, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, or the coalition of radical religionists who figure prominently in this thesis. For introduction to these I thank Dr. Michael Pierce, who directed this thesis, for suggesting Hays as a topic, and for his direction, encouragement, and patience as I wound myself along Lee Hays' path over a period of years. I likewise thank the members of my thesis committee, Drs. Richard Sonn, Jeannie Whayne, and Robert Cochran who helped shape this thesis not only through their valuable critique and comments but with their written works and instruction during my coursework.

The methodology for primary source research for this thesis rests almost entirely on the work of digital archivists. When I first began research on Hays, the Lee Hays Papers in the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections at the Smithsonian Institution were in the early stages of digitization. After conversations with archivists, that work was quickly completed, and I am

deeply grateful. As I am to digital archivists of the Howard Kester Papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the archivists of the Winifred D. Polk Archives for The Arkansas Conference United Methodist Church; and the many archivists at Highlander Research and Education Records at Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Jack Conroy Papers at The Newberry Library; Claude Williams Papers at Wayne State University in Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs; Archives and Special Collections of Oxford College Library in Oxford, Georgia; and especially those in the University of Arkansas Special Collections, who, in multiple emails and conversations, readily provided digitized documents included in this research. Without their assistance, this thesis would not have been possible.

Finally, this paper and would not have been possible without Quin Withey. For conversation, criticism, patience with endless discussion of minutia, innumerable collaborative living room performances of Almanac Singers' and Weavers' songs, and collaboration in much more, thank you.

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Introduction

The camera zooms in tight on a hand strumming guitar strings then pans back to reveal three men in matching suits and short haircuts and a woman wearing a strapless tulle-skirted evening gown on a sound stage that seems a cross between a small Victorian living room and a future sitcom set. “Irene Goodnight! Irene Goodnight! Goodnight Irene, Goodnight Irene, I’ll see you in my dreams,” they boom in close harmony.

The four have arranged themselves casually, if not comfortably, on furniture scattered about the stage. The guitarist stands with one leg propped on a chair, the woman and a banjo player lean against a dining room table, and centerstage, perched nonchalantly on what could be a large plant stand or short pulpit, is a very big man. He looks older than the others — in a sitcom, he would be the father, teacher, preacher, or perhaps, the comic next door neighbor. This blocking is a change. In the three other Weavers’ 1951 Snader telescription films, he looms mostly in the back, deftly avoiding a banjo neck accelerating up to an eighty-degree angle when he moves front to take a solo and again as it swings down when he steps back to resume the bass line. Gliding forward again, he stamps and claps with the others as the four sing *Tzena Tzena*, “a folksong from the new state of Israel,” in a performance the big man, spinning a school-house globe, describes as “a musical trip around the world” where “the first foreign country we’re going to visit is ‘The State of Arkansas.’” Arkansas is a “foreign country” this man, Lee Hays, knows well.³

“The State of Arkansas,” one of Hays’ signature songs, performed with the both Almanac Singers and the Weavers, is a dark, comic, musical commentary on the “mis’ry” he

³ THE WEAVERS TELESCRIPTIONS, Snader Telescriptions, Corp., 1951, 7 April 51, MP1423; Duke Goldstone, WEAVERS TELESCRIPTIONS, USA, 1951, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/jots.200020971/>.

witnessed in his home state before moving north permanently in 1940.⁴ Born in Little Rock, in 1914, to William Benjamin Hays, a Methodist minister, and Ellen Reinhardt Hays, one of the first women to work as a court reporter in Arkansas, Hays had, by the time he was twenty-five, suffered the death of his father and subsequent institutionalizations of his mother and sister, been shuttled, homeless, between his adult siblings, lost his chance to attend Hendrix-Henderson College to the 1929 stock market crash, and witnessed the worst of Arkansas' racism and oppression.⁵ But if much of Hays' early life was misery, there were also accomplishments. Before his move north, he graduated from Methodist-founded Emory Junior College; studied filmmaking with Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz of the radical Workers Film and Photo League in New York; wrote, filmed, directed, and produced *America's Disinherited*, a short film about the desperate conditions of southern sharecroppers; enrolled in College of the Ozarks where he planned to study for the ministry; and worked with "the red preacher," Claude Clossey Williams, in his ministry, union organizing, and New Era School. After Williams' ouster from the Presbyterian Church, Hays, with the National Committee for the Support of the Reverend Claude C. Williams, chaired by Willard Uphaus and including among its membership Howard Kester, prominent left-leaning Methodists James Dombrowski and Winifred Chappell, and Union

⁴ "The State of Arkansas" is a "traditional" ballad with lyrics credited to various writers. "State of Arkansas" lyrics from *Songs for Political Action*, Bear Family Records BCD 15720 JL, 1996, 88. William M. Clements describes the song as a "folk dystopia." William M. Clements, "The State of Arkansas," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas Music*, eds. Ali Welky and Mike Keckhaver (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2013), 194-195.

⁵ Doris Willens, *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee Hays* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988), 6, 13-17; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Lee Hays Papers, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution, (hereafter, Hays Papers); In addition to racism and violence Hays witnessed during his work with Claude Williams and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, Hays' correspondence and taped memoirs record childhood memories of seeing the pooled blood of nine African American men hanging from a viaduct in Forrest City, Arkansas, and the murder of an African American man by an unnamed member of Hays' family he credited as impetus for his desire to work with the STFU. Memoirs Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63; Lee Hays to Librarian, *Arkansas Gazette*, July 1979, series 1, box 2, folder 34, Hays Papers; Lee Hays to Howard Kester, April 21, 1936, series 1, folder 22, Howard Kester Papers #3834, Southern Historical Collection, the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, (hereafter, Kester Papers).

Theological Seminary's Reinhold Niebuhr, worked nationally to raise funds to support Williams and his family. In 1936, with Zilphia Horton at Highlander Folk School, Hays wrote, directed and toured *Gumbo*, a play about the plight of sharecroppers, and between 1937 and 1939, having been hired as Instructor of Dramatics by Claude Williams — by then Director of Commonwealth Labor College near Mena, Arkansas — Hays collected over one hundred songs from folk singer Emma Dusenbury, taught labor drama, and wrote, directed, and, with Commonwealth students toured another sharecropper play, *One Bread, One Body*. With the ministry out of reach, Lee Hays planned a life of teaching and union organizing.⁶ Likely no one was more surprised than he when eleven years later, he found himself a pop recording star with the folk quartet, the Weavers. *Tzena, Tzena* reached Billboard's number one slot first; *Irene* topped the charts for thirteen weeks.⁷

In the Snader telescription, three voices drop to a hum as Hays, showing the camera a photograph of an African American man wearing a striped suit and holding a guitar, tells a story.

We learned this song from a friend of ours, his name was Huddie Ledbetter, called himself Leadbelly, King of the twelve-string guitar. Some people thought he was the greatest folk singer that ever lived in America. We knew him best as a rememberer of

⁶ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 13-17, 37-38, 43-48, quotation, 29; Lee Hays to Claude and Joyce Williams, n.d., box 17, folder 21, Claude Williams Papers, 1934-1954, Wayne State University, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit (hereafter, Williams Papers); Lee Hays to Claude Williams, October 25, 1935, box 1, folder 19, Williams Papers; Vance Randolph and Frances Emberson, "The Collection of Folk Music in the Ozarks," *The Journal of American Folklore* 60 (April-June 1947): 122; Vance Randolph, "Ballad Hunters of North America," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 7 (Spring 1948): 7; Barbara Jaquish, "An Examination of the Mythic Frameworks Used by Two Forms of Media to Present the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union" (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 2007), 25; Mary McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions: The Labor Drama Experiment and Radical Activism in the Early Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 156-159, 196; William H. Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College 1922-1940* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 192; Lee Hays to Laurence Hosie and Willard Uphaus, April 2, 1937, series 4, box 5, folder 40, Hays Papers.

⁷ "The Billboard Music Popularity Charts, Part V: Juke Box Record Plays Week Ending September 29," *The Billboard Disk Jockey Supplement, Section 2*, October 7, 1950, p. 56; The Weavers *Billboard* hits continued. "On Top of Old Smokey" would, in 1951, become their second most popular single, and Hays' "Lonesome Traveler" on the flipside of the Weavers' recording of Guthrie's "So Long it's Been Good to Know You," reached number three. Jesse Jarnow, *Wasn't That a Time: The Weavers, the Blacklist, and the Battle for the Soul of America* (New York: DaCapo Press, 2018), 93-94, 102-103; see also, "Goodnight Irene by Gordon Jenkins and his Orchestra and the Weavers," "Goodnight Irene (song by Gordon Jenkins and His Orchestra and the Weavers) ••• Music VF, US & UK hits charts", accessed, May 12, 2019.

folk songs — and he taught us dozens of them — especially *Irene*. This was his theme song and he sang it for over thirty years before he died. Well he died before *Irene* got to be known by so many millions of Americans. Huddie had a hard and wonderful life. It's over now, but his songs are still very much alive.

Irene comes to life as the Weavers divide stanzas into solos. Hays takes the last verse, one Huddie Ledbetter “gave” him after hearing Hays’ husky southern bass rendition.⁸

Stop rambling, Stop your gamblin’ Stop staying out late at night. Go home to your wife and family. Stay there by your fireside bright.

“Irene Goodnight! Irene Goodnight! Goodnight Irene, Goodnight Irene, I’ll see you in my dreams!”

Years later, Hays said of these films, “If I’d known how foolish we looked, I swear on Pete’s chin whiskers I’d have given this up for something socially useful, like plucking chickens.”⁹ Throughout his life, Hays used humor to diffuse memories of dangerous times, and this was no exception. In 1951, under investigation by the FBI, outed in *Counterattack* as performers of “Communist song favorites” for “Red Front Groups,” and denied television performances for refusing to sign loyalty oaths, the Weavers, looking like college students off to the prom with Hays as chaperone, embodied McCarthy era fears of Communism’s cultural threat.¹⁰ During the Weavers’ first national tour in 1951, when Snader Telecriptions showcased the quartet’s hit single, *Tzena, Tzena* with *Goodnight Irene* on the flipside, Decca received a telegram requesting comment on “allegations . . . they had recorded for a communist front a party line ballad called ‘The Peekskill Story.’”¹¹ In 1952, Harvey Matasow’s testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) claiming he had seen members of the

⁸ In his “Posthumous memoirs” Hays recalled after a performance with the Weavers at a gathering of folksingers, Leadbelly, who was also performing, “liked the way I sang that [last] verse so much he gave it to me. After the show was over he said, ‘that’s your verse.’” *Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.*

⁹ Lee Hays quoted in *Ronnie Gilbert: A Radical Life in Song* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, first quote, 79-80, second quote, 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97. This telegram from Tom McCarthy at WKRC Radio Station, was far from the only complaint Decca and Gordon Jenkins, its president and Weavers supporter, received.

group at Communist Party activities completed the Weavers' blacklisting — a period of unemployment Hays' called a "sabbatical that became a Mondical and a Tuesdical."¹² In 1955, when Hays and Pete Seeger were called to testify before HUAC, the committee's questions circled around performances of two songs co-authored by Hays: "Wasn't that a Time," by Hays and Walter Lowenfels, and "If I had a Hammer" by Hays and Seeger. Counsel for the Committee, Frank S. Taverner, questioned whether not only Hays' songs but Hays' talent itself was a tool "used to advance the cause of the Communist Party" in the United States. "I don't know what you mean, sir, by the use of the word, 'used,'" Hays countered that day.¹³ Over twenty years later, in a letter to Seeger, Hays would write, "we all had Communist friends, and I certainly did, but I was never aware that any of them were giving me any orders. None of us were very good order-takers to begin with. If the Communists liked what we did it was their own good luck I suppose the most I can say is that I was a fellow traveler. It was a great trip, and still is."¹⁴ Hays' letter captures Michael Denning's notions of the American Popular Front as a non-Communist-centric movement of fellow travelers and a cultural front, Denning, echoing Hays' friend *New Masses* editor Michael Gold, argues created "a second American Renaissance" in art and culture.¹⁵

Yet Denning largely absents Hays and the Weavers from the anti-fascist, pro-labor coalition of artists, writers, filmmakers, dramatists, and musicians — *The Cultural Front* — he argues emerged between 1929 and 1959 from a "material base in the CIO" and the collision of a

¹² Ibid., 98; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 150.

¹³ Frank S. Taverner, counsel to HUAC, and Lee Hays. Quotes from: Lee Hays testimony before U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, 84th Congress, 1st session, *Investigation of Communist Activities in New York Area — Part VI (Entertainment)*, August 16, 1955 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1955), 2360.

¹⁴ Lee Hays to Pete Seeger, n.d., series 1, box 2, folder 31, Hays Papers.

¹⁵ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 1998, with updated version, 2010), xvi, 98, 203.

non-Communist-centric, American Popular Front social movement with “new cultural apparatuses of state and industry.”¹⁶ The quartet fits neither Denning’s artistic nor demographic parameters. The Weavers’ practice of group composition and resulting Billboard-chart-topping blend of traditional, altered, and freely composed “folk” music is at odds with Denning’s arguments privileging individual cultural auteurs, left-wing musical theater productions, jazz, and “cabaret blues” as representative musics of the cultural front and *opposing* New Left assessments of Popular Front culture as middle class, nostalgic, populist, “middlebrow,” and ultimately conservative. Viewpoints best summarized, Denning argues, by historian Warren Susman’s assessment of Earl Robinson’s *Ballad for Americans* as “a pseudo-folk ballad,” which like other Popular Front works presented “an absurd vision of the American past, a peculiar notion of American society in the present, a ludicrous attitude toward American culture in general.”¹⁷ And while Ronnie Gilbert, Fred Hellerman, and Pete Seeger approximate Denning’s demographic model of “the heart of the cultural front” — Gilbert and Hellerman as “*young plebeians*” emerging from “the second generation of the second wave of immigration,” forming “a new generation of . . . artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working-class neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis,” and Pete Seeger, son of Charles Seeger, as a second-generation *radical modern* whom Denning argues, with *antifascist émigrés such as* Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht *young plebeians* were allied — Lee Hays jars Denning’s

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xix, 6.

¹⁷ The term “folk music” remains problematic as an overarching categorization of genre. Here it will be used interchangeably with the term “vernacular music,” principally as Hays understood folk music to be “music of the people” — a broad-based group of genres including Childs Ballads, Carl Sandburg’s *American Songbag*, songs and music collected from unknown regional musicians and ordinary people, and hymnody — all of which could be transformed through the “folk process.” Hays and his generation also included blues, spirituals, prison, work, play songs, and other vernacular musics under the general umbrella of “folk.” Denning defines “cabaret blues” as a melding of jazz and political cabaret emerging from an “alliance between Jazz and the Popular Front” and dates the emergence of the genre to Billie Holiday’s performance of *Strange Fruit* at the New York club, Café Society in 1939. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 324; Warren Susman quoted in Denning, 116-117.

model. The youngest son of a Methodist minister raised in rural Arkansas far from the “modernist metropolis,” coming of age within a coalition of social gospel activists fighting for economic, social, and racial justice for Arkansas miners and sharecroppers, Hays cannot be contained within parameters arising from Denning’s acknowledged long-term focus on urban rather than agrarian-based labor.¹⁸

Hays is not the only southerner marginalized by Denning’s approach. Denning’s focus on the CIO-dominated urban North, Midwest, and West mutes southerners’ contributions to a leftist cultural renaissance and obscures the paths they traveled to radicalization: limiting the scope of the Popular Front cultural coalition he posits. Zilphia Johnson Horton, Erskine Caldwell, John Handcox, and Lillian Hellman receive barely a mention; the impact of radical religion on the South, none at all. Woody Guthrie, Denning treats not for his musical contribution to a cultural renaissance or political movement but as part of a narrative of migration to the urban centers of Denning’s interest. And though he correctly emphasizes contributions to the cultural front of African Americans and Blues artists of the Piedmont, by privileging jazz, and cabaret blues over “folk” and crediting promoters and song collectors for instigating cross-genre, biracial performance, Denning diminishes the transformative impact of folk music on the cultural front: suggesting false divisions among coalitions of artists and limiting artists’ agency in forming them.¹⁹ His contention, for example, that Woody Guthrie and Huddie Ledbetter performed in “uneasy collaboration” is at odds with Hays’ recollections of Ledbetter and Guthrie as two “very close friends” spending late nights at Leadbelly’s Harlem apartment swapping verses to blues

¹⁸ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xv. Denning acknowledges his lifelong interest in urban rather than rural/agrarian labor in the seminar, “The Accumulation of Labor: Rethinking Work and its Representations,” Institute for Comparative Modernities, Cornell University, Fall 2016 Lecture Series, Thursday, November 10, 2016, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://youtu.be/Q6aFvcdvYIE>.

¹⁹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 269-272, 359.

songs and “bang[ing] the hell” out an old piano — a gift from the Almanac Singers — until neighbors begged them to stop. Hays recalled Leadbelly as “fatherly” toward Guthrie and supportive of Hays himself who, “dead broke, during the war years,” remembered being fed at Martha Ledbetter’s table and handed five dollars by Leadbelly as he walked Hays to the nearest Harlem bus stop. In contrast to Denning’s notion of “uneasy collaboration,” Hays’s tribute to Huddie Ledbetter in the 1951 Snader films represented years of respect, friendship, and collaborative coalition.²⁰

Such collaborative coalition was not unusual for Lee Hays; his work within interracial alliances of socialists and radical religionists in the 1930s was the seedbed from which a career advocating for labor rights, social, racial, and economic justice, and the power of music to forward these goals emerged. Paradoxically, however, Hays’ lifelong insistence on artistic collaboration, co-authorship, broad-based coalitions, and communal living — reflecting both religious and political praxis and practical necessity — combined with his need for personal privacy and, an, at times, intense self-deprecation has made separating the strands of his life from what Hays called the “warp and woof” of the Weavers, challenging — as Hays’ oft-quoted political identification as “some kind of socialist” has blurred the lines of his political views.²¹

Hays remains elusive, contradictory, often appearing two dimensional or caricatured. Indeed, in performances and recordings, he frequently caricatured himself — at once concealing and revealing his own complexity, meshing fact, fiction, and humor in a way that simultaneously carried and obfuscated leftist messages in much the way Kenneth Burke in 1935 suggested the

²⁰ Lee Hays on Woody Guthrie, series 5, box 5, folder 49, Hays Papers. For more on the relationship between Guthrie and Ledbetter, see Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 216-218.

²¹ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 20; Robert S. Koppelman, *Sing Out Warning! Sing Out Love: The Writings of Lee Hays* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 27, 57.

“complete propagandist” could “interweave” messages sympathetic to the oppressed in a manner palatable to an evolving middle class.²² The difficulty of capturing Hays is evident in the work of Hays’ friend and chosen biographer, Doris Willens’ *Lonesome Traveler*. Published in 1988, seven years after Hays’ death, Willens’ psychological approach reflects her relationship to Hays in the last two decades of his life.

Willens shows Hays an irascible, “Bunyanesque,” “Mark Twain of the left” — a gifted, kind-hearted, difficult, hard-drinking hypochondriac who, scarred by the childhood trauma of his father’s death in a gruesome car accident, rejected “everything his father believed,” and searched endlessly for a home, “substitute fathers,” and families.²³ Though she summarizes Hays’ childhood, youth, and work with the radical Presbyterian minister, Claude Williams, Hays’ work with Williams figures principally as supporting evidence for Willens’ psychological portrait of Hays’ familial search — a theme that recurs as she traces Hays’ life with the Weavers. In her constant refrain, “Lee and Pete, Pete and Lee,” Willens at once unites and juxtaposes Hays and Seeger as inseparable, fraternal “sides of a coin.” While the importance of Seeger and the Weavers in Hays’ life is unquestioned, Willens’ approach also likely reflects the contents of a letter received by Hays’ longtime manager and friend Harold Leventhal in 1984, three years after Hays’ death, from publisher David R. Godine after having reviewed drafts of Willens’ work.

You don’t have to convince me Lee Hays was a wonderful and important man But this ms. is a problem I think most people think of the Weavers as a unit — at least the “old Weavers” of Hays, Gilbert, Seeger and Henderson [sic]. This is all tied up, in my furry adolescent mind, with the labor movement, with benign socialism, with women’s rights, with ecology. . . . her work tells me much more than I want to know about Hays. I mean, who cares where he grew up or how he related to his family . . . Hays isn’t, after

²² Denning argues Burke’s “complete propagandist” — a cultural worker Burke contended took “an interest in as many imaginative, aesthetic, and speculative fields” as possible, weaving through all, “sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy for our oppressive institutions” was the “working model for the intellectual of the ‘cultural front.’” Burke quoted in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 103.

²³ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, “Bunyanesque,” xxiii, “Mark Twain of the left,” dust jacket, “rejected everything his father believed,” 4.

all, FDR or even Seeger. What people would care about, I think, is a history of the Weavers (and by extension the Almanac Singers) I just don't think Hays, as much as I loved the man, has the weight or historical importance to sustain a full-scale commercial biography.”

In Leventhal's neat hand at the top of the letter is written, “Doris, let's discuss. Harold.”²⁴

Published four years later by W.W. Norton and Company, Willens' *Lonesome Traveler* reflects, if not Godine's brutal assessment of Hays, yet, the spirit of Godine's letter. There is an overarching sense of disappointment and reductionism in Willens' work: the sense of a life of unrealized potential. Of the book's 281 pages, 59 recount Hays' life before 1940, the year he co-founded the Almanac Singers in New York. Focusing principally on Hays' work with and relationship to the Weavers through the lens of her own and the group's conflicting emotions after Hays' double leg amputations and death due to diabetic cardiovascular disease in 1981, Willens shows Hays' a gifted, tragic, contrarian, flawed figure in comparison to Ronnie Gilbert's common sense, Fred Hellerman's ambition, and Seeger's incessant activity.²⁵ Though not to be faulted for her determination to publish on Hays' behalf, nor her extensive research in his papers, Willens' psychological, Weavers-dominated approach glosses the formative impact of Hays' upbringing in Progressive Era Methodism and youth working within a national network of radical religious activists on the development of his later political, artistic, and social beliefs. In point of fact, Hays' Methodist upbringing paved the way for his early work among radical social gospelers which, in turn, undergirded his contributions to the cultural front and shaped the Cold War-era work with the Weavers that influenced generations of musicians and changed the course of popular culture. Far from “rejecting everything his father believed,” in his writing, lyrics, musical composition, and “ministerial” performative persona, Hays represented and depicted a

²⁴ David Godine to Harold Leventhal, January 30, 1984, series 3, box 3, folder 53, Hays Papers. Godine was referring to Fred Hellerman.

²⁵ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 255.

southern religious left fighting for rights of southern labor, biracial coalitions of sharecroppers, and redistribution of land against the planter-dominated economic system represented in Congress by Mississippians Theodore Bilbo and John Rankin — both targets of Hays’ scathing musical commentary.²⁶ Rejection of his father’s beliefs remains a persistent trope in writing about Hays, however, as *Lonesome Traveler*, still the most comprehensive work on his life, has become the discursive foundation from which other work has sprung.

The study of Hays’ life during these years shows his religious and political principles, in fact, coincided. Methodist political support of prohibition was linked to Progressive Era reform and rooted in ideas of social service dating back to Wesley and pointing forward to the pro-labor Methodist Federation for Social Service (MFSS) for which Hays’ friend and mentor Winifred Chappell was secretary before becoming faculty chair at Commonwealth College a year before Hays was hired as Instructor.²⁷ In 1914, the year Hays was born, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South — the southern branch of Methodism in which Hays’ father served — adopted the Federal Council of Churches’ version of the 1908 MFSS Social Creed affirming labors’ rights to arbitration, the abolition of child labor, a six-day work week, and a living wage that was “the

²⁶ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 122, 228; Koppelman, *Sing Out Warning!*, 52. On representation and depiction, see Michael Denning, “The Accumulation of Labor: Rethinking Work and its Representations,” Institute for Comparative Modernities, Cornell University, Fall 2016 Lecture Series, Thursday, November 10, 2016, accessed, May 1, 2019, <https://youtu.be/Q6aFvcdvYIE>. For Hays’ songs about Senators John Rankin and Theodore Bilbo see Lee Hays and Walter Lowenfels, “The Rankin Tree,” *People’s Songs Bulletin*, February 1945, pp. 4-5; Lee Hays, “Talking Bilbo,” *Songs for Political Action*, Bear Family Records BCD 15720 JL, 1996.

²⁷ John Lee Eighmy, “Liberalism in the South during the Progressive Era,” *Church History* 38 (1969): 364, 359-372. In 1932 the MFSS declared “the present industrial order is unchristian, unethical, and anti-social.” See Jason E. Vickers, *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 110, and Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2012), 152; David Nelson Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx: Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 59-61; Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor’s Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: The University of Illinois Press, 2011), 87.

highest each industry could afford.”²⁸ In 1921, socialist leader and former Presbyterian minister Norman Thomas linked radicalism and religion, arguing the “religion of the future” would be “built on elements already implicit in the labor movement.” By 1934, when Hays at age twenty returned to Arkansas and began working with Claude Williams, thirty-four percent of Methodist ministers surveyed identified as socialist, language in correspondence between social gospelers was sometimes “salty,” and the occasional smoke, was, for some, a cherished Depression-era indulgence.²⁹ Hays did not reject his father’s religion; he transformed it. By “zipping” union lyrics into familiar hymn tunes and adopting a humorous, “ministerial” persona, Hays made accessible ideas advocating the rights of labor, social and economic justice, racial equality, and the possibility for radical personal and political transformation. For Hays, religious form became a vehicle for transmitting radical messages.

In the most strident example of speculation on Hays’ personal life, Jeff Sharlet’s essay, “The Embattled Lee Hays,” first published in the *Oxford American* (2007), posits Hays’ motivations for collaborative coalition based in closeted homosexuality. “They were all Lefties,” Sharlet writes of the Weavers, “but it was Lee’s longings — one part Red, one part Religion, one

²⁸ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, Gross Alexander ed. (Nashville, Dallas, and Richmond: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Smith and Lamar Agents, 1914), 373; Duke, *In the Trenches*, 61.

²⁹ Norman Thomas quoted in Dan McKanan, “The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900-1934,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (September 2010): 773. Of the 20,870 respondents to a questionnaire sent by Kirby Page in 1934 to 99,800 clergy from ten mainline denominations and 609 rabbis, fifty-one percent favored a “drastically reformed capitalism” with twenty-eight percent favoring “socialism or something like it.” At thirty-four percent, Methodist clergy were the largest group identifying as Socialist. Eighty-four percent of respondents granted permission for their views to be published. Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Chichester, Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 121. Hays recalled, as a boy, finding chewing tobacco, a corn cob pipe and smoking tobacco in his father’s luggage after Reverend Hays returned from one of his frequent trips as presiding elder. Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers. Perhaps more importantly to Hays, Claude Williams was a smoker. After Williams release from harrowing experiences at the Fort Smith jail in 1935, College of the Ozarks students who were among his chief followers greeted him with home brew to hear his story. Arguably in Hays’ milieu, by the time he was in his twenties smoking and drinking were not unusual or viewed as particularly rebellious. On Williams, see Cedric Belfrage, *The Faith to Free the People* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1944), 23, 175; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 156.

part angry empathy of a closeted gay man raised holy-roller in rural Arkansas — that provided the tilt that made “Goodnight, Irene” lilt so lovely out of jukeboxes across the country.” Sharlet overlays Willens’ work with sexual allusion. As a young man, Hays had a “movie star chin,” Harvey Matasow’s testimony before HUAC is a “fatal kiss,” and there is this:

Hunger and loneliness aged him. Beneath the deep bass voice and behind the Hillbilly routines, Lee was *afraid*, as permanent a condition as the sexual desires he referred to, obliquely in a pseudonymous review of now-forgotten novels by gay writers he deemed too “defensive” about their longings. “Have you ever been married?” Acquaintances who didn’t know better (which was most of them) would ask, and Lee would crack his broad thin lips in a grin, his little liquor-soaked teeth like a row of corn on the cob and tell about his first time, way back when, with a “golden-haired girl,” in a Confederate cemetery: no more questions, please.³⁰

Sharlet later issued, if not a retraction, a partial apology for the piece asserting he had misread clues “based on various textual sources,” and revealing a “source close to Lee Hays” had contacted him, calling the essay “a mischaracterization that would have made Lee very unhappy.” In the paragraph above, the “acquaintances” who asked Hays why he never married was, in fact, Angela, the twelve-year-old daughter of Walter Lowenfels who thought of Hays as her “other father,” and the cemetery story is one of the most poignant passages in Hays’ unfinished “Posthumous Memoirs” recorded not long before his death.³¹ Sharlet’s essay, the most extreme case of speculation on Hays’ personal life, has spawned further blog posts positing Sharlet’s unsourced interpretation of Hays’ sexual orientation as fact and was published in the *2008 Best Writing in Music* (Da Capo Press, 2008) where it survives both digitally and in hard

³⁰ Jeff Sharlet, “The People’s Singer: The Embattled Lee Hays,” *The Oxford American* 58 (Fall 2007) <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/185-the-embattled-lee-hays>; Jeff Sharlet, “The People’s Singer: The Embattled Lee Hays,” in *Best Music Writing, 2008*, eds. Nelson George and Daphne Carr (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), 169-181.

³¹ Jeff Sharlet, *Mutant Journalism*, Saturday, September 29, 2007, “Oxford American’s 9th Annual Music Issue (2007),” accessed September 9, 2017, <https://jeffsharlet.blogspot.com/search?q=Lee>. Sharlet’s essay contains no notes or other citations. The stories of Angela Lowenfel’s inquiry about Hays’ marriage and the cemetery reference Sharlet combines in a fictionalized account appear in Willens as two unrelated stories. Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 17, 105. Hays’ memory of a romantic meeting in a confederate cemetery near Emory Jr. College when he was fifteen may be found in, *Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63, Hays Papers*.

copy while Sharlet's apology lies buried in his personal online blog.³² Though Sharlet does not omit Hays' work with Claude Williams, he minimizes Hays' religious and political views, positing them as secondary to rather than motivating factors for Hays' later musical work. According to Sharlet, "Lee's god wasn't God, "it was 'The People' You could call Lee's religion communism, but he'd just as soon call it a song as far as he was concerned, collectivism meant four-part harmony."³³

The desire to minimize Hays' leftist political views is likewise evident in Robert Koppelman's "*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*" *The Writings of Lee Hays* (2003). Though Koppelman acknowledges Hays' life-long religious affinity, his work with Claude Williams, and the importance of "recogniz[ing] the worldview, the whole vision, the social democratic purpose that pervades his [Hays'] work," he stresses Hays "never received a penny from the Soviet government" and that — with Ledbetter, Seeger, Guthrie, and other folksingers of the day — Hays "perceived folk music largely in nativist terms and Jeffersonian and egalitarian to the core." Koppelman cites Denning's model of an American Popular Front defined by the "Age of the CIO" rather than by Soviet or CPUSA control to support his vision of Hays' work as a kind of benign socialist Americana.³⁴ But stressing a benignity in Hays' work diminishes the radical roots from which it came. Arkansas proved fertile ground for socialism in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In Hays' birth year, 1914, the state was rocked by strikes in coal mining

³² Tom Maxwell, "A History of American Protest Music: We Have Got Tools and We are Going to Succeed: Lead Belly, Lee Hays, and the hammer songs that powered the folk movement," *Longreads*, October 2017, accessed June 30, 2019, <https://longreads.com/2017/10/04/a-history-of-american-protest-music-we-have-got-tools-and-we-are-going-to-succeed/>; Eric A. Gordon, "Ronnie Gilbert's Radical Life in Song" in *People's World: Continuing the Daily Worker Founded 1924*, September 6, 2016, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/ronnie-gilberts-radical-life-in-song/>.

³³ Sharlet, "The People's Singer: The Embattled Lee Hays," *The Oxford American*, 58 (Fall 2007), <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/185-the-embattled-lee-hays>.

³⁴ Koppelman, *Sing Out Warning!*, 28, 13-15, 16-19; Richard A. Reuss, with JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 170 cited in Koppelman, 22.

regions of heavily socialist Sebastian County just twenty-five miles from Booneville where Hays' father died in 1927 — the year the Supreme Court decided against those same striking miners. In Marion County, where zinc mining predominated, Eugene V. Debs retained a solid 14.03 percent in the 1920 presidential election, down just 1.62 percent from the election of 1912.³⁵ By 1913, Arkansas socialists were linked by more than eight socialist periodicals published in locations that crisscrossed the state from Green Forest to Hot Springs and Jonesboro to Van Buren. Debs himself published in *The Appeal to Reason*, printed in nearby Girard, Kansas. When Hays returned to Arkansas in 1934 after living four years with his eldest brother in Cleveland, Ohio, he chose mentors who combined radical politics with revolutionary religion to fight for rights of labor and restructuring of land, wealth, and race relations in Arkansas and the South.³⁶ Without doubt, Lee Hays eventually, and with gusto, rejected restrictions and stringencies of prohibition. But finding an intertwined religious, social, and political milieu upon his return to Arkansas, he had no need to substitute politics for religion. His work within a united front of social gospel activists, socialists, educators, the bi-racial Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and as Director of Dramatics at Commonwealth College, concretized the political and

³⁵ While most sources, including Hays himself, give Hays' birth year as 1914, census records from 1920 list him as age five. "United States Census, 1920," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MDFP-QR8> : 14 December 2015), Wm. B. Hays, Madison, St. Francis, Arkansas, United States; citing sheet 10A, NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,820,080; Michael Pierce "Great Women All, Serving a Glorious Cause: Freda Hogan Ameringer's Reminiscences of Socialism in Arkansas," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 69 (Winter 2010): 295. For election results, see *US Election Atlas.org*, "1912 Election Results-Arkansas," <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?year=1912&fips=5&f=0&off=0&elect=0><https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?year=1912&fips=5&f=0&off=0&elect=0>. On zinc mining in Arkansas, see Jane Ellen Ross, "Zinc! By Thunder!: A History of the Rush Creek Mining District, Marion County, Arkansas, 1887-1920," (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2009).

³⁶ G. Gregory Kiser, "The Socialist Party in Arkansas, 1900-1912," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Summer 1981): 153; Joshua Youngblood, "Realistic Religion and Radical Prophets: the STFU, the Social Gospel, and the American Left in the 1930s" (M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 2004), 47; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 16, 26; Koppelman, *Sing Out Warning!*, xxiii.

social beliefs he brought to the cultural front, espoused in his work, and, through his lyrics, collaborative composition, and performance, transmitted to future arenas of unity and dissent.

In contrast to Koppelman, historian Charles Joyner's essay, "A Southern Radical and his Songs: Lee Hays, the Almanacs and the Weavers," argues Hays cannot be understood outside of his political context: noting, before he came north, Hays received a "baptism-by-total-immersion in radical politics."³⁷ Joyner points to Hays as an example of a "distinctive Southern wing of the Popular Front" posited by Robert R. Korstad, whose constituents, Korstad argues, believed in redistribution of wealth and power, expanding the southern electorate to undermine the alliances between southern and Republican congressmen responsible for inhibiting "social welfare measures and progressive labor laws," and who hoped, in "the political space opened up by the CIO and the New Deal," to construct a biracial movement to forward economic and political democracy."³⁸ Though Korstad's "southern wing" describes well the radical southern milieu from which Hays emerged, in his book about the mid-century North Carolina tobacco workers' struggle, Hays does not appear — though John Handcox, Claude Williams, Zilphia Johnson Horton, Pete Seeger — "a radical folklorist who helped spark the left-wing folk revival" — Woodie Guthrie, and Paul Robeson, all of whom visited or, in the case of Claude Williams, indirectly influenced the strikers, do.³⁹ Hays appears, obliquely perhaps, in Korstad's mention of the Almanac Singers whom he credits with helping spread protest music throughout the South. But like Joyner's essay about Hays and his friends, Korstad's Almanac reference points again to

³⁷ Charles Joyner, "A Southern Radical and his Songs: Lee Hays, the Almanacs, and the Weavers," in *Dixie Redux: Essays in Honor of Sheldon Hackney*, eds. Raymond Arsenault and Orville Vernon Burton (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2013), Google edition, 234-235, 231-232.

³⁸ Korstad quoted in Joyner, "A Southern Radical and His Songs," 244-245, 245-246; Robert R. Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 147-148.

³⁹ Korstad, *Tobacco Workers*, "147, 151-153 237-239, "a radical folklorist," 237-238.

historians' difficulty dealing with Hays on his own terms. As does Joyner, who even as he argues, against Denning, that the folk music of "Lee and his friends . . . more perhaps than any other artistic effort, carried forward the spirit of the cultural front," reveals the challenge Hays' insistence on collaborative authorship presents those untangling Hays' life and work from the "warp and woof" of others.⁴⁰

Why is Hays, who was during his lifetime one of the most internationally recognizable representatives of Korstad's Southern Front, so neglected in Popular and Cultural Front histories? Like his relationships with friends and coworkers, Lee Hays' story is neither easy nor comfortable — not the heroic tale of which a "commercial biography" David Godine referenced in his letter to Harold Leventhal was made. At once difficult, opinionated, dogmatic, and recalcitrant, Hays was likewise a kind and supportive mentor, creative, brilliant, and beloved. Among his colleagues and peers in folk music, ideas about "the Question" — whether folk music and musicians should be commercial — and Hays came to believe that they should, to help "beat the blacklist;" forward the cause of folk music; and to survive financially — were the source of verbal and print battles. Hays' ideas contrasted him with Seeger, who, though he had supported commercial endeavors for the Weavers and became the most financially successful of the four, left the group in 1957 when the other three members voted to record a cigarette commercial.⁴¹ On the topic of Seeger's growing aversion to commercialism, Hays recalled Seeger's wife Toshi Seeger telling him, "Pete doesn't want to lose his following." "God help me if I ever wanted a

⁴⁰ Joyner in *Dixie Redux*, 245-246; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

⁴¹ Mikkiko TACHI, "Commercialism, Counterculture, and the Folk Music Revival: A Study of Sing Out! Magazine, 1950-1967," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* No. 15 (2004): 193-197; Matthew R. Hengeveld, "Who are these folks and their music?: A History of Sing Out! Magazine" Pennsylvania Center for the Book, accessed July 4, 2019, <https://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/feature-articles/who-are-these-folks-and-their-music-history-sing>. When told by Decca Record producers the Weavers had to choose between being good or commercial, Hays replied that they could be both. Gilbert, *A Radical Life*, 73. On Seeger leaving the Weavers because of the cigarette commercial, see Gilbert, *A Radical Life*, 107, Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 180-181, and Memoirs, Excerpts, 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

following or needed one or had one,” Hays commented in the last reel of his taped memoirs to Doris Willens in 1977. “The idea of wanting a following is so alien to my way of thinking. But it seems to be natural to people like Pete and Woody, who also prided himself on his following I just want to trundle my little pushcart of strawberries up and down, whispering, ‘Strawberries for sale. Strawberries for sale,’ and hope that nobody hears. . . . anathema comes with the thought of memoirs.” Anathema because Hays could not bear to reveal things about others, especially about the “strange and powerful influence of Pete and Toshi,” that might be interpreted as derogatory; because, “it’s possible my role in history is to be a footnote;” and because, “I’ve not accomplished a great deal worth talking about, I have failed in almost everything I have tried, and . . . I’ve survived not so much by my own efforts as by the generosity and kindness of associates who have included me in, and made it possible for me to share in the good things that I’ve had.” With more humor, recording in his last home, a small house in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, his friends helped pay to insulate, he commented, “My joke to friends has been, when they ask what I’m doing, I say I’m sitting here trying to maintain a dignified silence.”⁴² His friend and manager, Harold Leventhal, wanted to keep Hays occupied, and to some extent, succeeded. Hays kept up a vigorous correspondence, remained an unrepentant socialist, gave interviews to young scholars about the early days and the folk revival, visited with family and friends who traveled to see him, kept the coterie of teenagers who idolized him in Croton entertained, plugged away dutifully at his “Posthumous memoirs,” and gardened — poring over seed catalogs became one of his greatest pleasures.⁴³ But the

⁴² Memoirs, Except 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 6, Hays Papers.

⁴³ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 204-205, 224-225; Lee Hays to Reuben Hays, January, 1975, series 1, box 2, folder 44, Hays Papers; Richard Reuss to Lee Hays, October 28, 1965, series 1, box 1, folder 75, Hays Papers; David Dunaway to Lee Hays, March 28, 1976, series 1, box 2, folder 34, Hays Papers; David King Dunaway and Molly Beer, *An Oral History of America’s Folk Music Revivals* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 201.

undiagnosed tuberculosis and diabetes responsible for his colleagues' assumptions of Hays' laziness and hypochondria had robbed him of his health. By 1977, Lee Hays was an invalid and knew it. In 1972, the year Pete Seeger visited North Vietnam, Hays lost a toe to diabetic gangrene. In 1975 and 1976, surgeons amputated his left leg and implanted a pacemaker. By 1978, both legs were gone. In 2009 when Pete Seeger sang Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" at Barack Obama's inauguration, Hays had been dead twenty-eight years.⁴⁴ Dying in 1981, just eight months after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, Hays did not have the long life, good health, or inclination to fashion his own legacy.

Not everyone agreed with Hays' assessment of his contributions. "I would like you to know, lest there's any doubt," wrote Ronnie Gilbert after the Weavers' final concert at Carnegie Hall, "that for me, your presence on that stage was the point of this concert, its true significance. You are a fucking hero, you old fart — and you'd better get used to it."⁴⁵ Harold Leventhal countered that Hays' self-denigration ignored "the whole sense of a human being, his personality, that made others *want* to include him."⁴⁶ The desire to include Hays did not arise from his complex personality alone. In 1978, academy-award-winning lyricist Sammy Cahn wrote Hays hoping to include him in a publication featuring "all the great lyricists" including Oscar Hammerstein and Ira Gershwin to benefit the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Declining, Hays replied, "To learn after all these years that I am not only a LYRIST but a GIANT and GREAT LYRIST is almost more than a humble songwriter can stand. To tell you the truth I didn't even know what a lyricist is until I looked it up and found that it means lyricist. You could have fooled

⁴⁴ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 76, 230-234; *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, DVD, directed by Jim Brown, (Genius Products, LLC, 2007).

⁴⁵ Ronnie Gilbert to Lee Hays, March 21, 1981, series 1, box 1, folder 23, Hays Papers; Gilbert was speaking of the Weavers' final Carnegie Hall performance on November 28, 1980, documented in *The Weavers: Wasn't That A Time!* directed by Jim Brown, screenplay by Lee Hays, New York, 1982.

⁴⁶ Leventhal quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 157.

me. . . . all in all, I don't qualify for a position among the august company you are assembling. But I thank you and the computer for thinking of me."⁴⁷ Hays had not lost his sense of humor or his reticence.

Though compelling, the historical significance of Lee Hays' life is not bounded by his well-documented, path-breaking work with the Weavers. Threading through decades from 1914-1981, Hays' life ties the Progressive Era to the era of Reaganomics: knitting together Old Left and New. Post-World War I and Depression-era Arkansas, labor history, socialism, mainline and radical religious belief, vernacular and commercial music, and the artistic, political, and social milieu of Denning's *Cultural Front* all intersect in Hays — both in his lived experience and in his intellectual, artistic, and performative output. His life shines a light on the origins of twentieth-century southern radicalism and its cultural contributors. Indeed, the early formative years of his life, those least addressed, reveal not only the formulation of talents and tenets Hays brought to the cultural front but much about radical activity in Arkansas and the South. In rural Depression-era Arkansas and the South, where the CIO struggled for power and federal monies for cultural projects had little reach, Hays and other left-leaning artists, musicians, writers, and educators emerged from a power base of church, religious, and service organizations led by a generation of social gospel activists working in coalition with unions and socialists at both local and national levels.⁴⁸ Hays represents a third generation of religious activism emanating from

⁴⁷ Sammy Cahn to Lee Hays, February 21, 1978, and Lee Hays to Sammy Cahn, n.d., stamped received March 1, 1978, series 1, box 1, folder 64, Hays Papers.

⁴⁸ Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015) shows the limited reach of federal monies for cultural projects in the South and provides analysis of the Federal Music Project, later the WPA Music Program, terminated in 1939, for which Charles Seeger worked from 1938 to 1939. Examples of organizations in and with which social gospel leaders were regionally and nationally allied include the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen; the American Civil Liberties Union, chaired by Harry Ward; the League for Industrial Democracy; Federal Council of Churches; National Religion and Labor Foundation; The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; The Committee on Economic and Racial Justice, chaired by Reinhold Niebuhr; The Committee for the Support of Claude Williams; Commonwealth College and Highlander Folk School; the Socialist Party; the YMCA and YWCA to name only a few.

three influential professors: Harry Ward and Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary in New York and Alva Taylor at Vanderbilt University. Though their views on how to achieve social justice in the South differed, each communicated powerful ideas his students — Claude Williams, Howard Kester, Myles Horton, and with them Lee Hays — strove to implement.⁴⁹

Family tragedy, alienation and abandonment, violence, parental death, and mental illness were likewise frequent components of radicalization. Hays is a pointed but far from singular example. Of the southerners receiving focus or mention in Denning's *Cultural Front*, many have backgrounds not dissimilar to Hays. Blues singer Josh White's father, a Methodist minister in South Carolina, was institutionalized for mental illness after a near-deadly beating at the hands of whites. Woody Guthrie and his brother raised themselves when their mother, suffering from undiagnosed Huntington's disease, was institutionalized after it was rumored she set Guthrie's father on fire. As a child, the novelist Erskine Caldwell, son of a Reformed Presbyterian minister, was beaten unconscious by those opposed to his father's social gospel beliefs and practices among sharecroppers and African Americans. Zilphia Johnson Horton worked with Claude Williams until 1935, when, estranged from her father for her pro-union stance, Williams and other social gospel leaders encouraged her work at Highlander Folk School, where she soon married Highlander founder and former student of Reinhold Niebuhr, Myles Horton.⁵⁰ Like Hays, many southern cultural workers moved north to escape the South's violence and bring their work to a wider audience but none emerged from Denning's "ethnic working classes of the

⁴⁹ Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1939* (University of Virginia Press, 1981), 29-30, 39-41; John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 77-78.

⁵⁰ Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2; Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004), 30-31; Wayne Mixon, *The People's Writer: Erskine Caldwell and the South*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 11-12; Chelsea Hodge, "'A Song Workers Everywhere Sing:' Zilphia Horton and the Creation of Labor's Musical Canon," (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 2014), 14-17; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 41.

metropolis.”⁵¹ Their stories point to the existence of a southern cultural front yet unexplored by scholars. Hays’ life is a window on their stories: revealing radicalizing influences on southerners of his generation, the pathways many traveled to become part of a “second American Renaissance,” and how their work affected political, social, and artistic change.

In the organizations he co-founded — the Almanac Singers, People’s Songs, and the Weavers — Hays was the chief representative of this influential but little-known constituency. The Arkansas folksongs and hymns zipped with pro-labor lyrics Hays carried north united socialism, labor, radical religion, and the push for southern social and economic change in a powerful, transmissive cultural medium. “Zipper songs” were living, evolving creations made as people, singing together in union meetings and labor schools, in the call and response of southern spirituals, shouted out new words of union: giving new power and meaning to well-known, beloved melodies.⁵² In Hays’ hands, and through the collaborative “folk process” he espoused, such songs became ever-evolving communicative tools for what Kenneth Burke termed “symbolic enrollment” and “revolutionary symbolism” as ordinary people became involved in the creative process of political enlistment. In urban, northern regions of the cultural front — through his creative output and his both reluctant and enthusiastic embrace of commercial, national, and international acclaim — messages of social and economic justice from the southern religious left merged with newly composed music in the Cold War Era to meet the needs of a new political moment: forever changing the means and content of political dissent and the trajectory international popular culture. “The future is really disclosed,” Kenneth Burke told the

⁵¹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xix, 6.

⁵² Hodge, “A Song Workers Everywhere Sing,” 30-33.

1935 Writers Conference, “*by finding out what people can sing about.*”⁵³ Today, in what is now Burke’s — and Hays’ — future, when protesters sing in unity and dissent, they still turn to the songs of Hays and his era — Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” the anthem of the Freedom Struggle, “We Shall Overcome,” and “If I Had a Hammer” by Hays and Seeger.⁵⁴ For Lee Hays, singing and writing songs for “the people” to sing was a political act aimed at determining the future. That people continue singing his songs to protest injustice today shows that his work may point to a better future, still.

⁵³ Kenneth Burke quoted in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 56. Zipper songs are those, to quote Hays, “so constructed that you have to zip in only a word or two to make an entirely new verse.” Thus, the meaning and function of songs could be changed, by creating verses with new words, from resignation to empowerment or from church invitational to call to join the union. The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union most often used familiar hymns Hays described as “rhythmic and full of bounce . . . derive[d] from the invitational hymns of the old camp meetings.” Many, such as “Roll the Union On” were written at New Era School with Claude Williams and John Handcox. For Hays’ quotations, see Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 56-57. On zipper songs, see also Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 75-76.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75-76. Claude Williams to Lee Hays, n.d., series 1, box 2, folder 20, Hays Papers. Based on the aforementioned letter, Gellman and Roll show Williams and Hays adapting the hymn, “I Will Overcome” for union organizing at the New Era School as early as 1936. Per Hodge and Korstad, “We Will Overcome” was taught to Zilphia Horton at Highlander Folk School in 1946 by workers who had struck against the American Tobacco Company at Charleston, S.C. Korstad names Anna Lee Bonneau and Evelyn Risher as those who taught Horton the hymn. Chelsea Hodge, “The Coal Operators Daughter: Zilphia Horton, Folk Music, and Labor Activism,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 76 (Winter 2017): 305; Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*, 239. “This Land is Your Land” was sung at the Women’s March on Washington, in 2017, “We Shall Overcome” and “The Hammer Song,” perhaps most famously at the March on Washington in 1963, and “We Shall Overcome” most recently at protests and vigils surrounding the murder of George Floyd, Jr. See Eric R. Danton, “Folkways Celebrates the Social Power of Music,” March 4, 2019, *PasteMagazine.com*, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2019/03/the-social-power-of-music.html>; Kevin Duggan, “George Floyd protesters gather for fifth day of marching in Brooklyn,” *amNewYork*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.amny.com/brooklyn/george-floyd-protesters-gather-for-fifth-day-of-marching-in-brooklyn/>; Jon Harris, “Somber Bethlehem vigil, energetic Allentown youth march, calls for change following killing of George Floyd,” *The Morning Call*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.mcall.com/news/local/mc-nws-naacp-george-floyd-vigil-lehigh-valley-protest-20200606-rkz5f5xfufehpjcahls22qbjx4-story.html>; Joe Heim, Hannah Natanson, and Susan Svriuga, “A Somber Feel at D. C. Protest on Day of George Floyd’s Funeral,” *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2020, accessed, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-somber-feel-at-dc-protest-on-day-of-george-floyds-funeral/2020/06/09/67656478-aa56-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html.

Chapter 1

“The State of Arkansas”

“Woody, Cisco, and the Almanacs . . .” wrote Millard Lampell to Hays in 1980, “it all seems another world. And yet, flashes of it are startlingly vivid. More alive than things that happened 8, 10 years ago.”⁵⁵ “The State of Arkansas” was one of Hays’ signature songs during the Almanac years, but the song’s comic, “dystopic vision” also suggests the influence of the contradictory messages of Hays’ Arkansas childhood on his path to the cultural front where, after meeting Millard Lampell, he co-founded the Almanac Singers. Hays and Lampell knew each other before they ever met in person. Both young writers — in the spring of 1940, Hays was twenty-seven and Lampell, twenty-one — had published in the *New Republic* and corresponded about their work. When they met in New York City the summer of 1940, they “hit it off” and decided to become roommates. Within weeks they met Pete Hawes, who brought around a friend from Harvard, another twenty-one-year-old performing as Peter Bowers, a name he used to protect his father who was working for the government as Deputy Director of the Federal Music Project — Charles Seeger. As the four began to sing together, Hays recalled, “some of the first Almanac songs were made up during that first week.” Within a few weeks more, “Woody Guthrie “pulled in from the West Coast with his whole family.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Millard Lampell to Lee Hays, n.d., series 1, box 1, folder 60, Hays Papers. Though Lampell’s letter to Hays is undated, the letter references filming “The Wall,” a television series filmed in Sosnowiec, Poland in 1980. See Arthur Unger, “‘The Wall’ finally comes to TV,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 12, 1982, accessed July 21, 2019, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1982/0212/021201.html>.

⁵⁶ Almanac Singers, “State of Arkansas,” recorded July 7, 1941, track # 5 on *Sod Buster Ballads: Folk Songs of America, Sung by the Almanac Singers* (General Album-G21) featured Lee Hays, Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, and Woody Guthrie. William M. Clements, “‘The State of Arkansas’: A Folk Dystopia,” *Southern Folklore* 46 (1989): 3-14; Jim Capaldi, “Wasn’t That a Time!: A Conversation With Lee Hays,” *Sing Out: The Folk Song Magazine*, September/October, 1980, p. 4. Hays’ interview suggests he was with Walter Lowenfels at the League of American Writers Conference in New York City where he may have seen Aunt Molly Jackson and Sarah Ogden. Richard Reuss with Joanne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*, (Lanham MD and London: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 149; Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 21, 32, 127, 163, 170; *Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2*, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

Hays and Guthrie had met once before “at a big party, a fundraiser for Spain or something” in Philadelphia’s wealthy Main Line district. Lee had paused for the winter in early 1940 at the Philadelphia home of poet Walter Lowenfels and his wife, writer and translator Lillian Lowenfels: the last of the “friendly houses” along his hitchhiking route from Commonwealth College to New York City. As Commonwealth College collapsed around them the previous summer, the only way the Commoners could see to get their collection of labor songs to the workers was to send Hays north where he could “form a group and sing,” so they chipped in what they could and raised sixty-five dollars to fund a journey that covered over thirteen hundred miles. That night at the posh Philadelphia fundraiser, where Woody Guthrie and Will Geer performed together as they had in California migrant workers’ camps, Hays and Guthrie had little time to get acquainted; as Hays recalled, “All of a sudden Woody disappeared into the bushes with the most beautiful girl in sight, as he usually managed to do. So I didn’t get much chance to talk to him at that time.”⁵⁷ Three years later, however, they had plenty of time to talk. Guthrie’s letter to his second wife Marjorie, following “a free supper which I got after buying some brandy. (The brandy cost me twice as much as a super would have.)” shows Hays putting his “ministerial” counseling skills to use. Describing a post-prandial conversation and the advice Hays gave about problems arising from the couple’s long-distance relationship, Guthrie wrote, “Naturally the discussion quickly took the shape of our personal problems, and Lee gave me a very good talk. Lee says that if we let any kinds of doubts or suspicions eat their way into the foundation under us and let our love affair fall down, we are very foolish . . . It’s a pretty

⁵⁷ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 59, 62-63; all quotations, Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 4.

good thing to be able to talk your troubles to a friend you know has come through a lot more than you have.”⁵⁸

Hays said there were as many versions of the Almanacs’ founding as there were Almanacs — which could mean upwards of fifteen — but the core story, like the core group, remains constant: Hays and Lampell, Hawes and Seeger, and Guthrie.⁵⁹ Around these formed a continually evolving, collaborative, compositional, performative milieu which included at various times, Josh White, Bess Lomax Hawes, Burl Ives, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Agnes “Sis” Cunningham, and Gordon Friesen. Hays believed “no creating group” — not the early Composers Collective, New Theater League, the Commonwealth Players, Red Dust Players, nor People’s Songs — so matched its production to “its *theory* of production The Almanacs had a way of doing their work first, then if anyone wanted to construct a theory about it he was welcome to do so.”⁶⁰ Almanac methodology was also based on necessity. As “Almanac House” moved from the first apartment Hays and Lampell shared with Seeger, to a loft on Fourth Avenue and Twelfth Street, and finally, to a house on West Tenth Street, “free suppers” became the norm. Money was scarce, and hunger, real. Seeger took Hays to “saloons” and taught him how to shake pepper sauce into beer to keep hunger at bay. Fortunately for the Almanacs, in

⁵⁸ Woody Guthrie to Marjorie Guthrie, 1943, series 1, box 1, folder 27, Hays Papers. Both the Federal Council of Churches with which Claude Williams, Howard Kester, Winifred Chappell, Myles Horton, and others of Hays’ radical religious coalition were associated and the Methodist Church (the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and North reunited in 1939) published new practices with regard to companionate marriage, sex, and birth control: the FCC in 1927, and the Methodists by 1940. See Ashley Boggan, “A God-Sent Movement: Methodism, Contraception, and the Protection of the Methodist Family, 1870-1968,” *Methodist History* 53 (January 2015): 74-84.

⁵⁹ Lee Hays, “Concludes Almanac History,” *People’s Songs Bulletin*, December 1948, p. 9; Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 4; Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, 149. There are at least two naming stories for the Almanac Singers. Pete Seeger credits Hays, quoting Hays as saying, “Hold on. Back where I come from, a family had two books. The Bible, to help ‘em to the next world. The Almanac, to help ‘em through the present world. We’ve got an Almanac. Of course, most Congressmen can’t read it.” Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singer’s Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out, Publications, 1993), 19. Hays credits a letter from Woody Guthrie as inspiration. Lee Hays, “Almanacs Part Two,” *People’s Songs Special Edition, Songs for Wallace, 2nd Edition*, August 1948, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Lee Hays, “Almanacs Part Two,” 9; Dunaway and Beer, “*An Oral History*,” 49-56.

addition to the Commonwealth Labor Songs, zipped hymns of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union — “so constructed,” Hays wrote, “that you have to zip in only a word or two to make an entirely new verse” — folk songs of Emma Dusenbury, and his own “ministerial presence,” Hays brought an essential skill for communal living — cooking. “We got scraps of things;” Millard Lampell remembered in 1979, “Mother Bloor or someone like that would come over and bring us a basket of carrots or apples from her farm. Lee would cook big loaves of bread — you know, he’d been used to cooking for seventy or eighty at Commonwealth — anyhow, we’d have a pot of stew going. It’s amazing how little you could live on.” It didn’t take long for the Almanac stew pot to become famous. “In this first apartment with Lampell,” Hays remembered in 1977, “this little place, that is where we met Cisco [Houston] and Josh [White] and Burl [Ives] and that is where we had the famous soup pot going all the time, where everybody brought in a potato or a piece of meat. I don’t know how I was living in those days, but anyway, we had a famous stewpot, that a lot of people ate out of, perpetually cooking on the back of the stove.”⁶¹

Members dropped in and out, contributing what they could, both in tangibles and creativity. Song creation was not so different from stew creation, and both epitomized the “folk process:” a term codified by Charles Seeger, with roots in ideas of English folklorist Cecil Sharp, reflecting both continuity with the past and variation by individuals or groups. Like the stew pot on the back of the stove, which continually simmered and changed depending on who threw in which potato or carrot, Almanacs “threw in” verses, words, melodies, and chords; songs were written and rewritten in the living room, at rent parties, union halls, and hootenannies. On Sundays, when the Almanacs held open house, Leadbelly often sang *Goodnight Irene*, creating

⁶¹ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 71, quotation, 56-57; Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 4; Millard Lampell and Lee Hays quoted in Dunaway and Beer, *An Oral History*, 51-52.

new verses based on the names of those present. “In folk music,” Hays once wrote upon hearing a young singer claim an Almanac song as his own, “this is not known as thievery, but is called, instead, the folk process.”⁶²

Though the Almanacs dominated his early New York years, Hays had, for years, been part of a united front extending from the South through the Midwest, the Piedmont, and the Northeast of people working in religion, education, dramatics, music, and writing to forward the rights of labor against unbridled capitalism and “beat back what they saw as an alarming growth of fascism, both at home and abroad.”⁶³ When the Almanacs performed, in June of 1941, at the final League of American Writers Congress, Hays had been known to some of its membership for years.⁶⁴ In 1938, the editorial staff of *New Masses*, which included League members Theodore Draper, Granville Hicks, and Michael Gold, published in the “Readers Forum” Hays’ critique of leftist poets, “Wants Communist Poetry.”⁶⁵ Eleven days later, a January 22 flyer,

⁶² Dunaway and Beer, *An Oral History*, 13-14, 57; Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folksong, Some Conclusions* (London: Simkin and Co. Ltd., Novello and Co., Ltd., 1907), 16-31, *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/englishfolksongs00shar/page/16/mode/2up>. For a summary of Sharp’s principles of continuity, variation, and selection influential to Charles Seeger’s ideas of an evolutionary “folk process,” see Bertrand H. Bronson, “Cecil Sharp and Folksong: A Review Article,” *Western Folklore* 27 (July 1968): 204-205. Bronson provides in depth analysis in, Bertrand H. Bronson, “The Morphology of the Ballad-Tunes (Variation, Selection, and Continuity),” *Journal of American Folklore* 67 (January-March 1954): 1-13. On the controversy surrounding Sharp’s work see C. J. Bearman, “Cecil Sharp in Somerset: Some Reflections on the Work of David Harker,” *Folklore* 113 (April 2002): 11-34, and Dave Harker, “Dr. Bearman’s Meticulous Scholarship,” *Folk Music Journal* 11 (2017): 49-53; Gary Graff, “6 Questions with Pete Seeger,” *Billboard* March 1, 2008, p. 31. For a thorough discussion of Charles Seeger’s work in theory and collection of folk music, see Ann M. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger, A Life in American Music* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992); Hays quoted in Koppelman, 83.

⁶³ Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 2.

⁶⁴ Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, 134. Reuss describes the 1941 Writers Conference as a “folk song revival atmosphere — a hootenanny actually.” Performers in a session on music, poetry, and folk singing included the Almanacs, Josh White, Leadbelly, and Earl Robinson. FBI Files compiled on Hays indicate that he was present at the Writers Congress, citing a March 24, 1941, article in the *Daily Worker*, “America is in their Songs,” by Peter Bowers [Seeger] as evidence. United States Government Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York Division, Consolidation Memo, on Lee Hays, reference no. 100-86568-29, February 17, 1953, 9-10, FBI Records — 100-NY-86568.

⁶⁵ Lee Hays, “Wants Communist Poetry,” *New Masses*, January 11, 1938, p. 21. Jack Conroy, editor of the *Anvil*, renamed in 1938, *The New Anvil*, also appeared in the January 11, 1939 issue of *New Masses*.

headed “Commonwealth Comes to Chicago,” announced “Big Lee Hays pulled into town” to present a program of “Ballads that the farmers sing, and some sharecropper blues” . . . with music by Waldemar Hille, introduced by Jack Conroy, editor, *New Anvil* . . . Admission 35¢.”⁶⁶ Hays had met Conroy that same year after hitchhiking from Commonwealth in Mena, Arkansas, to Chicago to see a New Theater League production of Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle will Rock*. Two months later, in March 1939, Conroy published Hays’ “first short story,” and in May, Michael Gold of *New Masses* followed suit: publishing Hays’ column, “‘Let the Will . . .’” about the process of creating from hymns “good union songs.”⁶⁷ With hardly a break to make a thirteen-hundred-mile journey east on foot, May and August of 1940 saw the *New Republic* publish two of Hays’ short stories, “My Father with the Purple Hair” and “The 49th Chicken,” about the foibles of southern religion, featuring his father as comic protagonist. And in November 1940, *Poetry Magazine*, under the editorship of Writer’s League member George Dillon, published Hays’ poem, *Deadbuggy*: seeming with its first line, “Death is a rubbertired fact,” a meditation on Hays’ father’s death. With his written and intellectual work, performance, associations — and with his feet — Hays connected Popular and Cultural Fronts across state, region, country, race, religion, and genre. Making life better for ordinary people, Hays believed, required work on multiple fronts — a complete praxis he summed up in an interview during the Almanac’s cross-country tour in 1941. “Good Singing won’t do: good praying won’t do, good

⁶⁶ Flyer for *Commonwealth Comes to Chicago*, January 22, [1939] and Draft copy of script, *We Shall All Be Free* by Lee Hays and Waldemar Hill, box 13, folder 664, Jack Conroy Papers, the Newberry Library, Chicago (hereafter, Jack Conroy Papers).

⁶⁷ Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 3; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers; Lee Hays, “‘Let the Will . . .’: The Deep South is using its old hymns to aid farm-worker unionization. Here are a few examples.,” *New Masses*, August 1939, p. 15.

preaching won't do, but if you get all of them together, with a little organizing behind it you get a way of life and a way to do it."⁶⁸

For Hays, good organizing came later, but singing and preaching in his father's Methodist churches began early. Indeed, without Methodist support in the form of a substantial donation to his sixty-five-dollar travel fund from Commonwealth's faculty chair, Winifred Chappell, Hays might never have made his way to New York, Almanac House, and the cultural front. At the time Chappell made her donation in 1939, she had been a leader in leftist Methodism for over twenty years. Working with Harry Ward as secretary of the Methodist Federation for Social Service and co-editor of its publication, *Social Questions Bulletin*, from 1922 to 1947, Chappell was one of the drivers of the radicalized social gospel movement formative to Hays' later work.⁶⁹ As they worked together for and in support of Claude Williams in the 1930s, Chappell became a friend and mentor whose life provided a window on the development of the radical social gospel to which Hays and Williams were drawn.

Like Hays, Chappell was the child of a Methodist minister. Her father's enrollment, in 1895, in Garrett Seminary near Chicago brought the sixteen-year-old Chappell to Chicago's crucible of social and religious change where both the city and its churches reeled from the effects of the 1894 Pullman strike. Mainline Protestant denominations, which, had in large part, supported capital over labor, faced an exodus of working people they struggled to reclaim; Chicago's working men and women shifted the message of Protestantism leftward, forcing

⁶⁸ Lee Hays, "My Father with the Purple Hair," *The New Republic*, May 27, 1940, p. 726; Lee Hays, "The 49th Chicken," *The New Republic*, August 26, 1940, p. 274; Lee Hays, "Deadbuggy," *POETRY: A Magazine of Verse*, November 1940, p. 134; Lee Hays quoted in an interview by Lillian Lowenfels, "One Million Americans Have Heard 'Almanacs,'" *Daily Worker*, September 2, 1941, p. 7, series 3, box 3, folder 52, Hays Papers.

⁶⁹ Winifred Chappell to Lee Hays, November 8, 1950, series 1, box 1, folder 15, Hays Papers; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers; Capaldi, "Wasn't That A Time!," p. 4; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 87; Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *American Methodism: a Compact History*, 150-151; Duke, *In the Trenches*, 119.

churches toward greater social leveling, egalitarianism, and democracy. When upon his release from jail in 1895, Eugene Debs cried, “Where does the church stand with reference to labor?” a crowd ten-thousand-strong replied, “Against it! Against it!”⁷⁰ Chicago churches’ stance was not quite so monolithic as the crowd at Debs’ speech proclaimed it, however, and the “largest crop of rabble rousers” supporting labor in Chicago were Methodist.⁷¹ By 1901, Harry Ward, pastor of 47th Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago’s Packingtown, was joining his congregants in the packinghouse workers’ union. Six years later, Ward co-founded the pro-labor Methodist Federation for Social Service (MFSS), which, in 1907, produced the pro-labor “Social Creed” adopted by the Federal Council of Churches in 1908 and by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1914. The year Winifred Chappell, having graduated from Northwestern University, become a deaconess, and served as Assistant Principal for the progressive Chicago Training School for Deaconesses, was elected to the Executive Board of the MFSS — and Lee Hays was born in Little Rock, Arkansas.⁷² When she became faculty chair at Commonwealth College in

⁷⁰ Miriam Crist, “Winifred Chappell: Everybody on the Left Knew Her,” *Radical Religion* 5 (1980): 22; Heath Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 96-128; Debs quoted in Carter, 129.

⁷¹ Carter, *Union Made*, 120-123, quotation, 162.

⁷² The MFSS “Social Creed of the Churches” (1907) states the Methodist Church stands for, “equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life,” “conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions,” “protection of workers from dangerous machinery,” “abolition of child labor,” “regulation of labor conditions for women,” “suppression of the ‘sweating system’,” “gradual reduction of hours of labor to the lowest practical point with work for all,” a six day work week, “a living wage in every industry,” “the highest possible wage each industry can afford and the most equitable division of products of industry that can be devised,” and “recognition of the Golden Rule, and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social life.” Duke, *In the Trenches*, 60-61. The 1932 Federal Council of Churches version included support of “Social planning and control of credit and monetary systems and economic processes for the common good,” “a wider and fairer distribution of wealth,” social insurance, “justice, opportunity and equal rights for all; mutual good will and cooperation among racial economic and religious groups,” “repudiation of war,” and “the building of a cooperative world order.” Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA and Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 121; E. R. Hendrix wrote the mission of the FCC was “to manifest the essential oneness of the Christian Churches of America . . . and to promote the spirit of fellowship, service, and cooperation among them.” Of his election as first President of the FCC, E. R. Hendrix, quoting the moderator of the session, wrote that the “lines between North and South were wiped out in the election . . . [of] a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, a Southerner to the manor born.” E. R. Hendrix, “The Federal Council of Churches and its Mission,” *Christian Advocate* 70 (January 22, 1909): 6; Carter, *Union Made*, 163; Crist, “Winifred Chappell: Everybody on the Left Knew Her,” 22-23.

1937, Chappell, embodying Methodism's most radical elements, represented northern religious radicalism in the South as Hays would soon represent and depict southern religious radicalism in the cultural front.

Though far from being the bastion of left-leaning religious ideology that was the Methodist Federation for Social Service, Progressive era reformist thinking was in evidence in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in which Hays was raised and his father served; most visibly in the activities of women in "Home Missions" work. Indeed, Will Alexander, founder of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), in 1921, pronounced "the Woman's Missionary Council of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the most progressive and constructive religious group in the South."⁷³ If southern Methodist women lacked Winifred Chappell's radicalism — their stance, like that of the CIC "did not take issue with systemic economic injustice or legally imposed racial segregation" — like their northern counterparts, they conducted reformist work they believed helped poor women and children: supporting temperance and equal pay for working women, opposing divorce and child labor, working consistently and diligently for peace prior to America's entry in both World Wars, and supporting the League of Nations following World War I.⁷⁴

Women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South also conducted, what was for the time, pioneering racial work. As early as 1913, the Woman's Missionary Council openly condemned lynching, and in 1920, concerned by the explosion of racial tensions following World War I, the Council established a Commission on Race Relations "to study the whole question of race

⁷³ Will W. Alexander quoted in John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press), 144; Alexander was, himself, a Methodist minister.

⁷⁴ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, vii-viii; McDowell, *Social Gospel in the South*, 72-83.

relations” and “the needs of negro women and children.”⁷⁵ By the end of 1922, one hundred local auxiliaries of the Council on Race Relations were active; by 1923, the number had increased to four hundred. The early 1920s likewise saw southern Methodist women condemning the Ku Klux Klan as they voiced strong opposition to lynching. In chilling terms, the 1923-1924 *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council* recorded Methodist women “recogniz[ed] with gratitude that the number of lynchings were less by half last year than the preceding year we record again,” the report continued, “our sense of shame that this barbarity has continued . . . and urge Christian women to continue to work and pray that the Southland and the nation may be entirely free of the crime of mob murder.”⁷⁶ Their phrase, “mob murder,” well describes the horrific racial violence of 1919 Arkansas reflected in contrasting approaches of two regional Arkansas Methodist Conferences, the newspaper of the denomination, and childhood memories that continued to haunt Lee Hays sixty years later. Indeed, Hays’ five-year-old memories of racial violence and suspicions of involvement by both his church and family are the earliest evidence of his awareness of contradictions and inequities that later drove him to fight for racial justice.

Transcripts of Hays’ tape-recorded memoirs recount a searing image.

And the story about the nine negroes hanging from the viaduct, I don’t remember how I know that there were nine because I don’t see how I would have had time to count them. Maybe somebody later said there were nine bodies hanging. There was time, however, to see the blood on the gravel. The railroad ties were filled in with gravel which we used to call white chat, and from these bodies which evidently had been shot more than once, the blood was dripping down, and blood stains on the white gravel along the railraod [sic] tracks underneath the bodies.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ McDowell, *Social Gospel in the South*, 87-88, 94-95.

⁷⁶ McDowell, *Social Gospel in the South*, 87-93; *Fourteenth Annual report of the Women’s Missionary Council of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South 1923-1924* (Nashville, Dallas, Richmond, and San Francisco: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1924), 181-182, *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/fourteenthannual1924meth/page/182/mode/2up>.

⁷⁷ Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3 folder 63, Hays Papers.

In 1979, from his home at 4 Memory Lane in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, Hays composed a letter addressed to “Librarian” *Arkansas Gazette*. “I am seeking information about a mass lynching which occurred in Forrest City, Arkansas, sometime around the year 1919.” Hays’ father was a minister in Forrest City in that year. “This was in connection with a ‘race riot’ beginning in Phillips County, Arkansas The lynching at Forrest City may have involved as many as 9 black men, and occurred on a railroad viaduct Is there any record of how many blacks may have died in East Arkansas during that entire incident?”⁷⁸ Although there is no record of a response to Hays’ inquiry in his archives, Hays’ thought may have been that violence followed the train lines. Forrest City was a major stop on the Missouri-Pacific Iron Mountain Line, consolidated into the Rock Island Line in 1919 when railroads were nationalized as part of the war effort — and the Iron Mountain line ran to Elaine.⁷⁹

Other childhood memories troubled him. In the same month, he wrote to the editor of the *Arkansas Methodist* in Little Rock “to ask your help in verifying or disproving certain memories of mine concerning the relationship between the Methodist Church and the Ku Klux Klan in the middle-1920s.” Hays vividly recalled, at about age eight, traveling to Little Rock with his mother and father — then a presiding Methodist elder and former editor of the paper — and being taken downstairs through a tunnel to the basement where the paper was printed. “They swore me to secrecy,” he wrote, before recounting having seen “new pine shelves containing piles of KKK

⁷⁸ Lee Hays to Librarian, *Arkansas Gazette*, July 1979, series 1, box 2, folder 34, Hays Papers.

⁷⁹ If violence followed the train line, Elaine, thirty miles south of Helena was linked to Helena by the Iron Mountain railway which linked to Mopac at Helena and thence, a straight shot to Forrest City. Library of Congress, Rand McNally and Company. “*The Rand McNally Indexed County and Township Pocket Map and Shippers Guide of Arkansas Showing All Railroad, Cities, Towns, Villages, Post Offices, Lakes, Rivers, etc.*” Chicago, 1898. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98688447/>; See also, Bill Pollard, “Forrest City Union Station,” *Arkansas Railroad History*, 2013-2014, <http://www.arkansasrailroadhistory.com/Forrest-City/Forrest-City.html>; Railroad connections between Helena and Elaine are documented in “Gerard B. Lambert Co. v. St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railway Company et. al., Report of the Commission,” *United States Government Interstate Commerce Reports*, Volume 49, February 1918-May 1918, (Washington, D. C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1919), 158.

uniforms, and in the room were two or more black women making the uniforms on sewing machines. — I was shown uniforms decorated with differing colors of bias tape, blue, red, and so on, indicating rank. Whether at that time or another, I met the editor, A. C. Millar, upstairs. He was a kindly old gentleman with whiskers.” The respondent referred him to Dr. Walter Vernon who had recently completed a history of Arkansas Methodism. Responding promptly, Dr. Vernon remembered A. C. Millar as a strong opponent of the Klan but confirmed, “You are right that some Methodists went along with the Klan and others opposed it.” Astonished at Vernon’s prompt response, Hays composed a more cheerful reply. “Now about Dr. Millar. It seems to me that if he was that outspoken against the Klan, my memory of a Klan-making factory in the Arkansas Methodist building must be false. Yet I do have the memory, and it is possible that I was taken to such a place on the same day we visited Dr. Millar The memory of going through a secret tunnel into a basement is so vivid that it must have some basis in fact, beyond my active boy’s imagination.”⁸⁰

In attempting to solve these mysteries, Hays was well aware that memory can deceive. Yet, his memories, coinciding with the establishment of Klan no. 1 in Little Rock, reveal his early perception of endemic racial violence in post–World War I Arkansas. Though the lynching of nine men at a railroad viaduct in Forrest City seems to have gone unreported, in 1919, a mob of twenty-five to thirty people in Forrest City, where Hays’ father then served as presiding elder, hung Sam MacIntire to death beside the railroad for the crime of “being able to implicate others in a murder.”⁸¹ Hays’ childhood awareness of contradictions within Arkansas Methodism about

⁸⁰ Lee Hays to Walter Vernon, n.d., series 1, box 2, folder 34, Hays Papers. Hays’ reference to himself as a “double amputee” dates the letter after 1978.

⁸¹Todd E. Lewis, “Mob Justice in the ‘American Congo:’ ‘Judge Lynch’ in Arkansas During the Decade after World War I,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Summer 1993): 164; Charles C. Alexander, “White Robed Reformers: The Ku Klux Klan Comes to Arkansas, 1921-1922,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1963): 7-9; Brooks R. Blevins, “The Strike and the Still: Anti-Radical Violence and the Ku Klux Klan in the Ozarks,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Winter 1993): 407-408.

race is borne out by contrasting responses of the *Arkansas Methodist* newspaper and Arkansas Methodist Conference Journals following the horrific violence in Phillips County in 1919.

Held in December 1919 in Hot Springs, two months after mass killings of African Americans in Phillips County, the proceedings of the forty-second annual session of the Little Rock Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church — a conference established for African American Methodists in 1878 — seemed to begin as usual.⁸² That the conference’s white presiding Bishop, William A. Quayle, closed the morning session of the first day by requesting “the conference stand and sing the African American spiritual “You’ve Got Shoes, I’ve Got Shoes” gave little indication of the drama that would ensue the following day when Bishop Quayle directed the Conference Secretary to read aloud the following “Memorial from the Board of Managers of the Freeman’s [sic] Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to the Congress of the United States.”

TO THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES—
A MEMORIAL

The board of Managers of the Freedman’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church hereby earnestly memorializes the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States to pass a federal law for the suppression of lynching, we being thoroughly convinced that this brutality cannot be hindered by state legislation and as thoroughly convinced that it can be stopped by federal legislation and the holding of each locality

⁸² As separate entities within Arkansas Methodism, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) followed different strategies with regard to African American Methodists following the Civil War. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South established African American churches and conferences, and in 1867-1870, white and African American church leaders created a new and separate denomination — then called the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (C.M.E. now, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church). White and African American conferences remained in contact and MECS leadership, including Moses U. Payne, founder of Paine College, made significant financial contributions toward educational initiatives. The MEC similarly set African American Methodists apart in separate churches and districts, but these remained under the jurisdiction of white MEC church hierarchy. Additionally, the MEC was linked to the Methodist Freedmen’s Aid Society organized in 1866 and responsible for founding Philander Smith College in Little Rock. When established in 1879, the Little Rock Conference of the MEC was racially mixed and remained so until 1900, when boundaries set by the MEC General Conference moved the “work of white people” out of the Little Rock Conference. Woodie Daniel (W. D.) Lester, *The History of the Negro and Methodism in Arkansas and Oklahoma: The Little Rock — Southwest Conference, 1838-1972* (Little Rock, AR: University Press, 1979), 44-72; Walter Vernon, *Methodism in Arkansas, 1816-1976* (Nashville: The Joint Committee for the History of Arkansas Methodism, 1976), 102-117 Winifred D. Polk Archives for The Arkansas Conference United Methodist Church, <https://www.arkansasumcarchives.com/home.html> (hereafter, Polk Archives).

in which lynching occurs to a community responsibility for the doings of its anonymous citizens. We further believe that today is the day of days for such legislation, inasmuch as the Negro has made a record for bravery and efficiency and patriotism on the battlefield and at home, so as to make their conduct a righteous demand that the rights belonging to an American citizen shall be accorded them in full measure. This memorial was unanimously adopted by the Board of Managers of the Freedmen's Aid Society at its Annual Meeting, January 14, 1919.

Following the reading the secretary recorded, "Bishop Quayle spoke concerning the same in a forceful manner." When the vote was called, "the whole house stood up and it was unanimously carried."⁸³

The story was different at the North Arkansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, home to both Forrest City and Elaine. Held in Jonesboro, November 19-23, 1919, the *Journal of the North Arkansas Conference* contains no mention either of lynching or the events in Phillips county. Perhaps because A. C. Millar — former president of Hendrix College and owner and editor of the denominational newspaper — had, in the October 9, November 6, and November 13 editions, reported on Elaine in extensive detail. As Walter Vernon told Hays in 1979, A. C. Millar was indeed opposed to the Klan and to lynching. His editorials and reports on the Elaine Massacre, however, reveal contradictions within southern Methodism: showing white Arkansas Methodists' view of themselves as positive forces in southern race relations coexisted

⁸³ *Official Journal of the Forty-second Annual Session of the Little Rock Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, December 17-21, 1919, pp. 15-16, 24-25, Polk Archives. Following the Memorial to Congress, was printed an explanation of the work of the Freedmen's Aid Society stating, organized in 1866, "Its purpose is the Christian education of the Negro. It has a theological seminary at Atlanta, Georgia, for the training of colored ministers; a medical college at Nashville, Tennessee where 500 young men and a few women are being trained as physicians, pharmacists, dentists, and nurses; and in addition, it has eighteen other institutions for the training of teachers, industrial and other Christian leaders for service among the Negro people." The *Journal* numbered physicians, teachers, ministers, and industrial leaders emerging from these institutions at over 200,000 at a cost of "tens of millions of dollars" and gave current statistics as "twenty schools, 334 teachers, and 5,702 students" with an annual budget of "half a million dollars." Members of the Freedmen's Aid Society Board of Managers in 1919 included bishops William A. Quayle who presided over the 1919 Little Rock Conference and Francis J. McConnell, who, with Harry Ward and Winifred Chappell, led the MFSS for over thirty years and in 1936 served as an Honorary President of the National Religion and Labor Foundation during the period of Hays' work with the organization. See Lee Hays to Howard Kester, February 1, 1936, series 1, folder 20, Kester Papers; "Our History," *MFSA*, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.mfsaweb.org/ourhistory>.

with a world view rooted in the Jim Crow South and what Charles King has called a “global consensus . . . about the natural hierarchy of the world and the importance of racial purity” based in a belief in the innate superiority of those of Northern European descent.⁸⁴ “We would remind our Negro friends,” Millar wrote one week after the events in Elaine, “that . . . We as Methodists want them to have education . . . protection of life and property. We believe that they are entitled to kind and fair treatment in every relation in life. We are helping to build their churches and schools, and are anxious to do vastly more.” And yet, Millar continued, “There is no more patent fact in human nature than the differences of races, and these differences are not merely superficial.”⁸⁵

Millar’s November 13, 1919, edition is more revealing, still. “DISGRACEFUL! HORRIBLE!” Millar’s first headline read. “Our State has been disgraced and humiliated by the burning in the public square at Magnolia of a negro who had murdered the sheriff and had been captured. There is absolutely no excuse for this as by regular action of the court justice could have been speedily and surely secured.”⁸⁶ Millar did not continue coverage of the lynching, however, but in the editorials that followed, turned again to Elaine. He rejoiced that “no members of the Colored Methodist or Methodist Episcopal Churches” were among those convicted in Phillips County and advised “the principle of ‘noblesse oblige’ should “constrain us to be patient with this child race as we are with individual children.” Arguing the violence of Elaine was “NOT RIOTING, BUT INSURRECTION,” he blamed Robert L. Hill, organizer of

⁸⁴ *Journal of the North Arkansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Sixth Session*, November 19-23, 1919, Polk Archives; Charles King, “How a Few ‘Renegade’ Thinkers Helped Usher in a New Era of Anthropology,” interview with Dave Davies, *Fresh Air*, on KUAF Radio, August 20, 2019; Charles King, *Gods of the Upper Air* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 4-10.

⁸⁵ A. C. Millar, “Race Relations,” *Arkansas Methodist*, October 9, 1919, pp. 1, 3, Polk Archives.

⁸⁶ Though not by name, Millar was referring to the lynching of Jordan Jameson on November 11, 1919. See Guy Lancaster, “Jordan Jameson (Lynching of),” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, Central Arkansas Library System, last updated February 19, 2020, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/jordan-jameson-13490/>

the Progressive Farmers' and Household Union of America, for organizing an "insurrection" Millar believed was aimed at taking possession of white-owned property that could have resulted in the mass slaughter of white citizenry. Though acknowledging that white men of Phillips County were not blameless and "might be justly criticized," Millar opined, "they are entitled to great credit for handling a very ugly situation in an admirable manner . . . those who were believed to be innocent were fully protected even when hundreds saw red and believed their lives and their families and property were in imminent danger of destruction."⁸⁷ That Millar's editorial was reprinted near-verbatim in the *Arkansas Gazette* the following day shows he not only accepted the "official version" but participated in codifying it.⁸⁸

Though Hays could not escape the knowledge of brutal racial violence endemic to his Arkansas childhood, as the youngest son of a white presiding elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, until his father's death in 1927, he led a comparatively sheltered life. In Methodist parsonages, surrounded by books in his father's library, his mother, one of the first women court reporters in Arkansas, taught him to type before he could write his name. By the time he was eight years old, Lee Hays was driving the family's Model T Ford, enjoying ten-cent serials at the movies, and the frequent indignities of visiting dignitaries. "To hear good singing," he wrote later, sometimes required "running away from home" to the houses of African American children — "pals of mine" — where his parents would find him singing Baptist hymns

⁸⁷ A. C. Millar, "DISGRACEFUL! HORRIBLE," and "Our Brother in Black," *Arkansas Methodist*, November 13, 1919, 1-3, Polk Archives.

⁸⁸ "Minister Discusses Elaine Uprising: The Rev. A. C. Millar Tells Facts as He Found Them in Phillips County," *Arkansas Gazette*, November 14, 1919, p. 6; Jeannie M. Whyne, "Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places: Race and Class in the Elaine Race Riots," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Autumn 1999): 287-288; Grif Stockley, *Blood in their Eyes, the Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 182-184.

— “good thumping songs you can get your teeth into” and “mournful songs too . . . stamping and clapping as loud as anybody.”⁸⁹

In the Hays home, both bishops and prostitutes sat at table, though probably not together, and Hays’ childhood memories of homelife are spiked with the family trait — an “amused way of looking at things.”⁹⁰ Indeed it appears Lee Hays, who became known for dry, comedic “talking routines” with the Weavers, may have been the dour one of the family. Before he became a presiding elder — and a preacher who could “have them laughing one minute and shedding tears the next” — Reverend Hays was a college student who put a cow up the Hendrix College Belfry. Lee’s brothers Reuben and Bill, who played practical jokes on their father at the risk of whippings, replaced their father’s white handkerchief with a red sock to surprise the congregation when the minister mopped his brow and wired up the family toilet to an old Ford battery to give Reverend Hays a jolt in his more personal moments.⁹¹

As Lee Hays would in performance, Reverend Hays clothed ideas in humor. Minnie Frank, Hays’ older sister, by nine years, remembered their father “would discuss Malthus, Mendel, and Kant with the more eminent of our Methodist Bishops and then say, ‘Excuse me, I have to go milk the cow.’”⁹² Lee Hays had his own memories of the family trait. Visiting bishops and other dignitaries were frequent sources of hilarity. Perhaps revealing the mixed messages of southern Methodism, Hays recalled, “One Bishop came to visit and we had an old crank Victrola . . . I think when I was eight or nine I put on . . . what must have been called a race record in those days. And one of the verses were [sic] It takes a long tall brown skinned girl to make a

⁸⁹ Lee Hays, “Christmas 1947 — Some Random Thoughts,” *People’s Songs Bulletin*, December 1947, p. 11.

⁹⁰ Reuben Hays quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 7; William Hays to Harold Leventhal, December 31, 1964, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers.

⁹¹ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 5, 8-9; quotation, Reuben Hays to Lee Hays, February 25, 1968, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers.

⁹² Minnie Frank Hays Moseley quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 7.

preacher lay his Bible down I seem to remember my father charging out and changing the record to . . . the Hungarian Rhapsody.” Driving his father with a visiting bishop to the train station in the “T-model,” Hays remembered charging “down the little, narrow main street, through wagons and cars and mules and people with only minutes to spare, and I think we missed the train, whereupon the Bishop said, ‘That’s alright, I have to go back and change my underwear anyway.’” “The T-Model,” Hays recalled, “was so much a part of culture and life. One of the eternal verities for reliability and durability, it was right up there with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”⁹³

Malthus, Mendel, and Kant were not the only philosophers William B. Hays quoted. Arkansas Methodism, during the era of “muscular Christianity,” embraced the outdoors and “the pioneer spirit” — with church camps on Petit Jean Mountain and Mount Sequoia. Hays remembered hiking the hills with his father who, after quoting William James on the subject of the second wind, left his son sitting on a boulder to find *his* and hiked on up the mountain.⁹⁴ From his father, Hays acquired his size and ministerial presence, a love of books, food, rural life, his storytelling abilities, an “amused way of looking at things”— and his ill health. For while Reverend Hays was by all accounts very vigorous as a younger man, in his mid-fifties, he would have died of diabetes, had not injectable insulin become available in 1922, eight years after his youngest son’s birth.⁹⁵

The year 1914 brought change to the Hays family, southern Methodism, Arkansas, and the world that laid the groundwork for the social-religious outlook necessary for Lee Hays’ later work. As Europe went to war, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South adopted the Federal

⁹³ All quotations, Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63, Hays Papers.

⁹⁴ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

⁹⁵ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 4, 14.

Council of Churches' pro-labor Social Creed based on that of the left-leaning Methodist Federation for Social Service, and William Benjamin Hays, with his wife and three older children — Lee was born in March— moved from the Saint Louis Methodist Conference to Little Rock, where Reverend Hays assumed editorship of the “Official Organ of the Five Conferences of Arkansas and Oklahoma” — then called the *Western Methodist*.⁹⁶ Though owned by A. C. Millar, the paper under W. B. Hays' editorship, five years before Elaine, was different in topics and tone from later years: reflecting social gospel and reformist impulses, the hardship wrought by the war years, and, at times, “an amused way of looking at things.” Articles on prohibition and temperance appeared weekly with frequent reports from the anti-saloon league. “Rum is on the run,” announced the *Methodist* in an article on the banning of alcohol in the European military, and the paper rejoiced in the October 8, 1914, issue that “ninety-five percent of Arkansas is now legally dry.” The controversial work of women in home missions' social work was highlighted; the paper reported not only the appointment of deaconesses but endorsed laity rights for women, which increased women's power within the denomination.⁹⁷ When the Tennessee Supreme Court removed Vanderbilt University from Methodist oversight (W. B. Hays was a graduate of both Hendrix College and Vanderbilt University), the *Western Methodist* reinforced southern Methodists' commitment to higher education: reprinting, from the eleventh convention of the Religious Education Association, a new Methodist paradigm focused on social gospel issues stating that “Without any abandonment of the educational ideals of our fathers, we must now exalt the newer ideals of social justice, social service, and social responsibility . . . all

⁹⁶ Gross Alexander, ed., *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914* (Nashville, Dallas, and Richmond: Publishing House of the M.E. Church South, Smith & Lamar Agents, 1914), 373-374.

⁹⁷ George Thornburgh, “Report of the Little Rock Committee on Temperance,” *Western Methodist*, December 3, 1914, pp. 2-3; “Church Deaconesses,” *Western Methodist*, March 5, 1914, p. 11; Endorsement of women's laity rights is found in an editorial response to a letter from Mrs. E. J. Edwards. *Western Methodist*, February 19, 1914, p. 8, Polk Archives.

students should regard education not as a title to exemption or privilege but as an obligation to service.”⁹⁸

With the coming of war in Europe, the *Methodist* took a darker turn, reflecting the dire effects of European war on Arkansas. From Marked Tree Reverend Hays reported: “the financial situation has caused many of the mills and factories in eastern Arkansas to be shut down.”⁹⁹

Unable to sell cotton in Europe, Arkansas cotton prices plummeted. Within three months, from August to November, prices dropped from 10.6 to 6.6 cents per pound. The cumulative drop from 1913 to 1914 was even steeper; the average price for cotton in Arkansas fell from 12.08 cents to 7.03 cents that year.¹⁰⁰ Faced with economic hardship, the southern rural church, like its counterpart in the industrialized north, lost members. Rural churches, however, were losing not only members but the pastors they could not afford to pay. The situation was so dire one writer suggested the denomination purchase farms for its rural ministers, as pastors and even college tuition were paid through “buy a bale” programs.¹⁰¹ Southern Methodism in 1914 was not without contradictions. In October, a plea from J. D. Hammond, President of Paine College — a Methodist-founded college for African Americans tasked with training teachers and preachers to “Bring the two races together into better Christian relations and thus fit them for co-operation in working out a common destiny” — encouraged readers to “Buy a Bale and Help Paine College”

⁹⁸ “Religious Education and Social Progress,” *Western Methodist*, September 10, 1914, p. 1; “The Church has Lost Vanderbilt University,” *Western Methodist*, April 2, 1914, p. 1, Polk Archives; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 5.

⁹⁹ William B. Hays, “In the Field,” *Western Methodist*, October 15, 1914, pp. 2-3, Polk Archives.

¹⁰⁰ “Retrenchment is in Order,” *Western Methodist*, October 22, 1914, p. 1, Polk Archives; Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, “Cotton Prices in the World Wars,” *Economic Quarterly* (March 1944): 2, accessed September 15, 2019, https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/960/item/37944/toc/396851?start_page=2;

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Bulletin 131, *Cotton Production and Distribution: Season of 1914 -1915*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1915): 19, accessed September 15, 2019, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1910/bulletins/agriculture/131-cotton-production-and-distribution-season-of-1914-15.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ John Womack, “A Suggestion,” *Western Methodist*, October 8, 1914, p. 4; Alva E. Goode, “Our rural problem,” *Western Methodist*, August 20, 1914, pp. 5-6; J. P. Womack, “The Rural Church Problem — A Suggestion,” *Western Methodist*, September 10, 1914, pp. 4-5; W.P. Whaley, “An Appeal,” *Western Methodist*, October 8, 1914, p. 9, Polk Archives.

alongside an announcement of the Arkansas State Convention of the United Confederate Veterans in Little Rock.¹⁰² On the question of the European conflict, editorials show an almost visceral opposition to war. Denouncing “The Disgrace of War” the paper warned, “Let come what will we can never escape the fact that the national honor is maintained at the cost of disgrace.” It was a position that linked southern and northern Methodists at war’s outset, and one reflected in Hays’ early work with the Almanac Singers twenty-seven years later.¹⁰³

Not surprisingly, the *Western Methodist* itself suffered the effects of war. With paper shortages and increased difficulty collecting subscriptions, issues became smaller, positions were cut, owner A. C. Millar took over sole editorship, and W. B. Hays, now fully transferred from the Saint Louis to the Arkansas Methodist Conference, moved his family to Newport to resume the much-needed work he loved among people of rural churches.¹⁰⁴ Between 1915 and 1927, the Hays family lived in Newport, Forrest City, Paragould, Conway — where Lee’s older brothers Reuben and Bill and sister Minnie Frank graduated from Hendrix College — and Booneville.¹⁰⁵ The older Hays children were Arkansas Methodist success stories, and Reverend Hays rose to some prominence in Arkansas Methodism, especially with regard to needs of rural churches, about which he presented a “radio chautauqua” — “From Soil to Soul” — on station KTTH in

¹⁰² J. D. Hammond, “Buy a Bale and Help Paine College,” *Western Methodist*, October 14, 1914, p. 11; J. Kellogg, Adjutant General, “Confederate Veterans Meet,” *Western Methodist*, October 14, 1914, p. 11, Polk Archives.

¹⁰³ Pacifism reflected perhaps most notably in *Songs for John Doe*, The Almanac Singers, Almanac Records, producer Erin Barnay, 1941. Though Hays took only one writing credit with Pete Seeger for “Washington Breakdown,” he sang on four of the six songs; “Ballad of October 16,” “Billy Boy,” “Liza Jane,” and “Plow Under.” “The Disgrace of War,” *Western Methodist*, September 8, 1914, p. 1, Polk Archives; Duke, *In the Trenches*, 90-95.

¹⁰⁴ “Notes and Personals” *Western Methodist*, October 1, 1914, p. 2; “Appointments,” *Western Methodist*, November 26, 1914, p. 3; “Dr. A. C. Millar returns,” *Western Methodist*, December 3, 1914, p. 1, Polk Archives; Reverend Hays’ obituary in the *Arkansas Methodist* stated that he “gave unusual attention to the problems of the rural church.” “Rev. W. B. Hays,” *Arkansas Methodist*, May 26, 1927, p. 3, Polk Archives. Multiple obituaries of W. B. Hays are located in series 1, box 1 folder 35, Hays Papers.

¹⁰⁵ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 9; *Journal of the North Arkansas Conference Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Sixth Session*, November 19-23, 1919, pp. 4, 29, Polk Archives.

1926.¹⁰⁶ With the exception of Newport, Reverend Hays served during this time as presiding elder: traveling for two weeks at a stretch to supervise between twenty and forty pastors. Never a good driver — Lee remembered holding the door open ready to jump for his life, riding with his father on mountainous roads — Reverend Hays and the Model T, that “eternal verity for reliability and dependability,” in May 1927 skidded on a gravel road and flipped over. The obituary in the *Arkansas Methodist* reported Reverend Hays was killed instantly.¹⁰⁷ “More on that damned car,” Hays recorded into the reel to reel a lifetime later, describing in extensive detail, not the accident, but his relationship to the machine that killed his father.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ “Reverend Hays in Radio Speech,” archival clipping, series 1, box 1, folder 37, Hays Papers.

¹⁰⁷ “Rev. W. B. Hays,” *Arkansas Methodist*, May 26, 1927, p. 3, Polk Archives and series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers.

¹⁰⁸ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

Chapter 2

“Some Kind of Socialist”

With his father's death began a period of movement and intermittent homelessness that would mark Lee Hays' life and work. Lee, his mother, and sister had limited means of support. Ellen Reinhardt Hays suffered a complete mental breakdown from which she never fully recovered; Minnie Frank, suffering from both mental and physical issues, also collapsed. Lee's older brothers Reuben and Bill, having both graduated from both Hendrix College and Columbia University, managed the chaos from Boston and New York where Reuben was rising in banking and Bill, with the management of B.F. Goodrich. Lee and his mother moved first to lodgings, but as her illness grew worse, Reuben placed her in institutional care in Little Rock and moved Minnie Frank to New York.¹⁰⁹ In June, less than a month after his father's death, Lee was sent to Camp Markham in Fayetteville. Writing to Reuben, he complained bitterly of loneliness, and with thirteen-year-old piety, of Dr. Pratt, who “believes in evolution just as Darwin did. If Darwin said anything of cours [sic] it was so (According to this old fop.) When I told him everything he said disputed the Bible, to get around it he told me the Bible had gone through so many editions and had been translated so many times it was not true. He said there is no God. He

¹⁰⁹Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 14-16, 23; The 1928 *Journal of the North Arkansas Conference* shows the widow of W. B. Hays received \$146 from the conference Boards. An accidental death insurance policy through *The Arkansas Methodist* paid a solid one-time payment of \$1,250 to Charles I. Evans, who had charge of Ellen Reinhardt Hays' affairs, and for a time, the older brothers received a \$300 annual payment from the Inter-Southern Life Insurance Company. With the onset of the Depression, however, the Inter-Southern was placed in receivership. Letters between Reuben and William Hays in 1927 suggest finances were strained. *Journal of the North Arkansas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Fourteenth Session*, November 21-25, 1928, p. 55, Polk Archives; “The Value of Our Insurance Plan,” *The Arkansas Methodist*, August 11, 1927, p. 3, Polk Archives; Reuben Hays to William Hays, July 19, 1927 and William Hays to Reuben Hays, October, 25, 1927, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers; “Historical Sketch,” Inter-Southern Insurance Life Insurance Company Ledger, 1931-1932, p. 3, Collection SC0109, Archives and Manuscripts Collections, Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg VA, <http://www.leesburgva.gov/Home/ShowDocument?id=14535>.

made me so mad I had all I could do to keep from knocking him off his chair Keep writing to me, I tell you it gets lonesome up here without any mail.”¹¹⁰

To add to the confusion in Booneville, a new pastor and his family moved into the parsonage before the Hays’ belongings were moved out. Reuben arrived to a chaos of confusion about what belonged to the Hays family, what to the church, what to the new minister’s family, and what bills needed paying. “To my utter disgust,” Reuben wrote Bill, “the new crowd had moved in bag and baggage. Bed-clothing, piano, and everything else were being used and it was almost impossible to distinguish which was our personal property and which belonged to father’s successor. . . . it took three days to get everything packed up, during which time I was annoyed by everything from squalling babies and inquisitive boys to an old hound dog that they had imported.” The Hays family owned property in St. Francis County and had part ownership of land near Paragould, but the latter was enmeshed in legal and financial entanglements and with seeming relief, the brothers dispensed of it.¹¹¹

In July of 1927, Reuben reported to Bill that Lee was, “except for a broken arm” about the same, and the brothers began planning their younger brother’s future. Lee, their mother, and, temporarily, Minnie Frank would live with Bill, now with B. F. Goodrich in Atlanta, where, after finishing the year at Bass High School, Lee would attend “a good boy’s school” — the Methodist-affiliated Emory Junior College in nearby Oxford. “I realize that so far as Lee is concerned this is more expense than we can justifiably carry;” Reuben wrote Bill, “yet it may be for the best.”¹¹² If Reuben displayed less of the “family trait,” Bill made up for the lack. By

¹¹⁰ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 16; Lee Hays to Reuben Hays, n.d., series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers. At the bottom of Hays’ letter to his brother Reuben, in Hays’ hand is written (probably to Doris Willens) “Smite the Infidels! At thirteen wouldn’t you know it? I am in the oxygen chamber —my foot is — 4 hours a day . . . Hope to see a miracle soon! Love Lee.”

¹¹¹ Reuben Hays to Bill Hays, October 7, 1927, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers; correspondence and documents pertaining to the land in Saint Francis County and Paragould, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers.

¹¹² Reuben Hays to William Hays, July 19, 1927, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers.

October, he reported that their mother seemed better, Lee was “about to bankrupt me from a food angle,” but that “[we] manage to get along without an armistice. He has been getting along fine in school and as there is nothing to do here but read, I find time to help him with his studies. It would never have done to have separated him from Mother this year as the events of the summer have dazed him considerably. He is playing tennis now and seems to be getting back more of his old pep and meanness. Hoping you are the same.”¹¹³ The return of “pep and meanness” seems confirmed by Hays’ 1928 memory of paying a local barnstormer to ride in his bi-plane and fly over Bill’s Atlanta House. The plane flew so low his mother and sister in the front yard could see Lee waving from the front seat without goggles or a helmet. “It took only half a block to turn the airplane around and come back around about six times,” Hays remembered, “and I’m waving down the street and my mother’s hopping up and down . . . my sister told me later that she was yelling, you come down from here this instant.’ But I didn’t.”¹¹⁴ In the fall of 1928, Lee Hays began his schooling at Emory.

In his “posthumous memoirs,” Hays told Myles Horton, in the early 1980s, he was “reaching back” to “golden places” in his life.¹¹⁵ Emory was the first. For Hays, the Emory years were a coming of age period with shimmering memories of an old Confederate cemetery where Sherman’s hairpins — railroad ties heated red hot by Union soldiers and wrapped around the

¹¹³ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 16; William Hays to Reuben Hays, October 25, 1927, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers; Ellen Reinhardt Hays was in and out of institutions for the remainder of her life. Hays last remembered seeing her “behind bars,” in a hospital that was “like bedlam” in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹¹⁴ Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63, Hays Papers.

¹¹⁵ Lee Hays to Myles Horton, n.d., series 4, box 5, folder 40, Hays Papers. Hays’ reference to the Weavers’ November 28, 1980, reunion concert and documentary “Wasn’t that a Time,” dates the letter between November 1980, and Hays’ death on August 26, 1981. Emory catalogs show Lee Hays entered Emory in 1928 and graduated in 1930. At Emory, where literary societies were important to both academic and social life, in 1930, Hays served as secretary/treasurer for one of the oldest and most prestigious — the Few Literary Society founded in 1839. *The Dial, 1930* (Oxford, GA: Published by the Students of Emory Junior College, 1930), 51; Kerry Bowden, Archives and Special Collections, Oxford College Library, Oxford, Georgia, correspondence with the author, October 9, 2019; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 17; archival clipping, series 1, box 1 folder 37, Hays Papers.

bases of trees — hung suspended fourteen feet above ground, and where, on a fallen Confederate tombstone surrounded by tall, dried, and golden grasses, he “lost his cherry” to a blonde-haired local girl who later threw him out of bed in her father’s house for reading Walt Whitman’s “I Dream the Body Electric,” which, despite the circumstances, she despised as “nasty.” Hays quoted Whitman for the rest of his life, believing creativity came from “loafing and inviting the soul.”¹¹⁶

“Inviting the soul” at an Emory revival meeting was more problematic, however, and Hays’ years at Emory show he was developing a sense of the dramatic, as well as other sensibilities. Sitting in the back row at an Emory revival, unable to feel the spirit like others who were weeping and praying — feeling left out and “maybe to test them out” — Lee began to “hoot and holler:” knocking over rows of seats, and, finally, heaving the marble top off a pulpit which fell to the floor and broke. “Whereupon,” he recalled, “one of the teachers came up to me and said, Lee behave yourself, in a normal tone of voice, which somehow convinced me that the fervor wasn’t all that real.” What might seem like youthful misbehavior can also be read as Hays’ depiction, albeit mischievously, of high drama employed by revivalists of the period.¹¹⁷ By the late 1920s when he attended Emory, Billy Sunday’s crowd-pleasing evangelistic showmanship and athleticism had been covered in major newspapers for over twenty years.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63, Hays Papers; “I loafe and invite the soul” is a phrase from Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Much has been made by writers of Hays’ use of this phrase as a sign of laziness; none have made the connection to his reading of Whitman. See “Song of Myself,” 1892 version, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>.

¹¹⁷ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹¹⁸ “Noted Ex-Baseball Player A Famous Evangelist,” *The Washington Times* (Washington, D. C.), July 6, 1902, p. 6, *Topics Chronicling America-Billy Sunday: Athlete and Evangelist*, Library of Congress Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room, Serial and Government Publications Division, accessed, October 1, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/sunday.html>. Sunday was far from the only dramatic revivalist. Burke Culpepper, a highly respected evangelist of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, who in 1916 while preaching a revival in Helena, Arkansas criticized “the unfair treatment of labor, especially colored farm labor,” was described as the “Billy Sunday of the South,” and had in his repertoire of sermons one during which, donning a surgeon’s

Revivalists' soul-saving measures frequently provided a church-approved source of entertainment Hays, as a Methodist minister's son, knew well. Within four years after leaving Emory, he would become the "chief helper" and staunch supporter of another dramatic preacher, Claude Williams, who cited Billy Sunday as one of his chief influences.¹¹⁹ Hays' childhood and youth were filled with a rich variety of pastoral personas, including dignified bishops and his father's "amused way of looking at things," dramatic evangelists who kept thousands spellbound at tent meetings through hot summer nights, and the impassioned proponents of radical religion with whom he worked in his twenties.¹²⁰ Reinterpreting and blending them in his intellectual and creative output, Hays constructed, in himself, a powerful tool for communicating ideas of unity, social justice, and radical equality that proved effective from the 1940's past the era of McCarthyism.

Not all Hays' memories of Emory were "golden." He believed he was thrown out for "stealing something he didn't steal" — a bottle of mosquito lotion he was tricked into taking from one of the school's top athletes and refilling with water. Not knowing exactly what had happened or why he was called to the headmaster's office and asked to leave, he packed his "big old cardboard suitcase" and — more puzzled than hurt — walked into Oxford to take the bus to

gown, mask, and rubber gloves, with medical equipment borrowed from local hospitals, including "real ether," he pantomimed a surgical operation to examine the contents of a patient's heart: removing items such as whisky, dice, and a pistol. James Culpepper, *Burke Culpepper, Prince of Evangelists*, (Louisville, KY: The Herald Press, 1952), 26. The appellation, "the Billy Sunday of the South" appears in *The Daily Press of Paragould* quoted in James Culpepper, *Prince of Evangelists*, 47, 53-55. Culpepper's comments on the unfair treatment of labor appeared in the *Helena World*, July 21, 1916, cited in Susan E. C. Huntsman, "Race Relations in Phillips County, 1895-1920," (Unpublished honor's thesis University of Arkansas Fayetteville, 1996), 16, cited in Jeannie M. Whayne, "Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places: Race and Class in the Elaine Riots," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Autumn 1999): 308.

¹¹⁹ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 27.

¹²⁰ In August of 1923, Burke Culpepper reportedly preached to between two and three thousand people each night and from six hundred to one thousand during the day after stores closed at 9 a. m. during a three-week-long revival — a "county-wide campaign" — held in Hugo, Oklahoma. W. U. Witt, "Revival at Hugo Oklahoma," *The Christian Advocate* 84 (November 14, 1923): (19) 1171.

Atlanta. After that, Hays said simply, “I was a hobo on the road for some time.”¹²¹ Whatever the confusion, Emory’s records show Lee Hays graduated in June 1930, and a Conway newspaper records he was in town planning to attend Hendrix-Henderson College in the fall, as had his older siblings.¹²² Hays never attended. After the stock market crash of 1929, the college, and indeed, the university system of the Arkansas Methodist Episcopal Church, South was in financial crisis. Amid much controversy, Hendrix in Conway and Henderson-Brown in Arkadelphia had merged the previous year, causing A. C. Millar to protest the towns had been “set at one another’s throats in a death grapple.” By 1932, Hendrix was over \$26,000 in the red.¹²³ “There’s a line in my father’s obit,” Hays recorded in his taped memoirs more than forty years later, “‘Devoted to his family, he had given his three older children the best educational advantages and they are all making places for themselves in the world.’ I was the young one, 13 when my father died, and while the others were making places for themselves in the world, I was scrounging around looking for a bite to eat.”¹²⁴ From Cleveland, Hays’ brother Reuben, thirty-one, married, and an analyst for the Cleveland-based investment fund, Continental Shares, sent letters to Lee general delivery along his “expected route” about a job at the Cleveland Public Library; with no home or family left in Arkansas, at sixteen, Lee Hays shifted his hitchhiking route toward Ohio. By September, he was living on the third floor of his brother’s home, working in the Cleveland Public Library, and learning how to become “some kind of socialist.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹²² Kerry Bowden, Archives and Special Collections, correspondence with the author, October 9, 2019; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 17; archival clipping, series 1, box 1, folder 37, Hays Papers.

¹²³ James E. Lester, Jr., *Hendrix College: A Centennial History* (Conway, AR: Hendrix College Centennial Committee, Hendrix College, 1984), 117-128; A. C. Millar quoted in Lester, 119.

¹²⁴ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹²⁵ Hays quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 18-19; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

“The Beginning of Socialist Thought”

The four years in Cleveland marked a period of political awakening in Hays’ life. In Cleveland’s urban industrial setting, mind-opening books in the Cleveland Public Library, “little mags,” socialism that was accessible and prevalent, and a firsthand view of mass suffering inflicted by the Great Depression created a new awareness of the possibility of dissent as a means for change. Working as a page in the vast spaces of Cleveland’s new five-story library, Hays quickly discovered books marked with a black stamp as “unfit for children” were the most interesting.¹²⁶ Among these, books by Upton Sinclair, were “like doors opening.” After the “fixed society” of the South, Sinclair’s books taught the sixteen-year-old pastor’s son that irreverence was not only possible but could be an instrument of change. “Just the idea that you COULD be irreverent about these people and institutions, education, banks, etc.,” Hays said of Sinclair’s works, “and he raised hell with Carnegie, Mellon, Rockefeller, Big Oil People . . . [that] was the beginning of socialist thought.”¹²⁷ Seeing lines at soup kitchens, runs on banks, and encroaching tent cities, Hays came to believe, with many Americans, that the country was on the verge of a fascist revolution.¹²⁸ As he passed socialists speaking on city street corners and attended socialist meetings, “something sank in,” Hays recalled in 1976, “— and I’ve more or less considered myself a socialist ever since.”¹²⁹

He could hardly have escaped the social and economic turmoil in the streets of Cleveland between 1930 and 1934. Four months after his arrival, a special federal census reported, of the

¹²⁶ The main building of the Cleveland Public Library where Hays worked as a page from 1930-1934 was a five-million-dollar plant completed in 1925. Michael Ruffing, “Cleveland Public Library,” *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, Case Western University, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://case.edu/ech/articles/c/cleveland-public-library>; Richard Raponi, “Cleveland Public Library,” *Cleveland Historical*, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/788>.

¹²⁷ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box, 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹²⁸ Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 3.

¹²⁹ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

city's 900,049 residents, nearly 100,000 were out of work while another 25,000 had been laid off or were working only part-time — and the numbers kept rising. By 1933, 219,000 workers in Cuyahoga County were unemployed.¹³⁰ On May Day of that year, led by the Communist-founded Unemployment Council Committee, thousands of Cleveland's unemployed marched on City Hall less than a mile from the Public Library where Hays, poring over Upton Sinclair, worked as a page for fifteen to twenty-five cents an hour. He had moved out of his brother Reuben's house to the Cleveland YMCA by the time Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* reported in 1933 and 1934 that 3,300 garment workers struck; in the spring of 1934, workers struck at over fifteen different entities. Housing evictions sparked violence between police and protesting crowds. In a July 1933 confrontation with six-thousand protesters, police deployed teargas, clubs, and firehoses; fourteen people were hurt and seven arrested. In a different way, the Depression penetrated the library itself. There, artists funded by the New Deal Public Works of Art Project and Civil Works Administration — headed, in the Midwest Region by Cleveland Museum of Art Director, William M. Milliken in consultation with Linda Eastman — painted enormous murals in the library's vast new spaces.¹³¹ "I think it was what I saw of inequality during the depression that began to bear down on my conscience and my consciousness," Hays reflected in his taped memoirs. "The whole country in the grip of a terrible sickness . . . somewhere there was an awful lot of money, and the people who had it didn't have it because they'd worked for it, and everywhere there were a lot of people who needed money who didn't have it who were willing to

¹³⁰ Marian Morton, "It Was the Worst of Times, It Was the Worst of Times: Cleveland and the Great Depression," *Teaching Cleveland Digital*, teachingcleveland.org, August 5, 2016, <http://teachingcleveland.org/category/1930s/the-depression-in-cleveland/>.

¹³¹ Morton, "It Was the Worst of Times;" "Cleveland Main Library: Coltman Mural — Cleveland Ohio," *The Living New Deal*, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/cleveland-main-library-coltman-mural-cleveland-oh/>.

work for it and had no chance to. Somewhere along in there I became some kind of socialist. Just what kind of socialist I've never to this day figured out."¹³²

By the time Hays left Ohio in 1934, he had firsthand experience of Cleveland residents' tenuous existence. In 1932, after organizing the Cleveland Loan agency for the Hoover Administration's Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Reuben Hays, having been appointed Assistant Director for the RFC itself, left Cleveland for Washington D. C. Lee, meanwhile, moved into the Cleveland YMCA where he and a roommate, Joe Sedlak, struggled to pay rent with library salaries of twenty-five cents an hour. With only the change in their pockets when Franklin Roosevelt declared a bank holiday in 1933, Hays and Sedlak did not eat for two days. When Reuben returned to Cleveland in 1934 as an officer of the Federal Reserve Bank, Lee stayed at the Y. Not an illogical move for a young man with burgeoning leftist sensibilities whose brother had just become an officer of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland — and it was not his first stay at a YMCA. At eleven years old, his father sent him alone by train from Arkansas to New York, where his brother Bill was working at the YMCA in New York City.¹³³

However, Hays' and Sedlak's recollections of the period and a letter Reuben Hays wrote to Lee on Christmas Eve 1964 suggest the brothers were engaged in a generational clash for control that was both personal and political. Sedlak recalled Lee's acerbic, thundering attacks on politicians and a government that could allow "decent men to survive only by selling apples on the streets."¹³⁴ Hays' memoirs from the late 1970s record in typical, dry fashion, "For some reason I already didn't have much sense of race prejudice in those days . . . I had a girlfriend in Cleveland who was black. . . . That wasn't usual in those days even in Cleveland. Today it would

¹³² Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹³³ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 21-24; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers. Willens describes a trip when Hays was nine years old; Hays' memoirs indicate he was eleven.

¹³⁴ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 22.

be required.”¹³⁵ Reuben Hays’ Christmas Eve letter, written thirteen years after Lee reconnected with his family in 1951, reveals both the tensions of the Cleveland years and the humor of brothers reconciled. “Dear Lee,” he wrote from Cincinnati, “It has been over 30 years since I believed I knew what was best for the world and you. You, having an equal amount of stubbornness and independence (some things seem to run in the Hays family) said “To Hell with him! I’ll live my life as I damn well please —” And you have.”¹³⁶ Though they corresponded regularly from 1951 until Lee’s death thirty years later, Lee and Reuben Hays never saw each other again after the day Lee, with no word of explanation, left Cleveland and hitchhiked back to Arkansas that spring of 1934.¹³⁷

Hays did not say why he went back to Arkansas, but based on the mentors he chose once there, it seems likely he decided that at age twenty, it was time to stand with those working to improve conditions for the poor, disenfranchised, and exploited in his home state. Desperate conditions in Arkansas and elsewhere in the South were in the news nationally and within Hays’ newly acquired socialist circles. Norman Thomas, alerted to the dire situation of Arkansas sharecroppers by socialist organizer Martha Johnson in 1933, traveled to Arkansas to see for himself, wrote letters to Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, and, in 1934, published *The Plight of the Sharecroppers* through the League for International Democracy.¹³⁸ Southern racial injustice was front page news Hays would have had readily available in the Cleveland Public Library, and radical religionists were on the front lines of the fight. As *The New York Times* carried near-daily reports on the Scottsboro Case, Winifred Chappell representing the Methodist

¹³⁵ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

¹³⁶ Reuben Hays to Lee Hays, December 24, 1951, series 1, box 1, folder 35, Hays Papers.

¹³⁷ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 24, 26.

¹³⁸ M.S. Venkataramani, “Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (September 1960): 229-232; Norman Thomas, *The Plight of the Sharecropper*, second edition, (League for Industrial Democracy, 1934), *Internet Archive*, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/ThePlightOfTheShare-cropper/page/n1>.

Federation for Social Service, traveled with the Scottsboro-Herndon Delegation to investigate conditions of the Scottsboro defendants in Alabama and Angelo Herndon in Georgia.¹³⁹ Just a few months earlier, William Randolph Hearst's *Chicago Tribune* attacked Chappell, Harry Ward, and the MFSS as examples of the "Pacifism, radicalism, and communism . . . spreading "like a disease" in America's schools, colleges, churches, and social organizations."¹⁴⁰ Chappell and other radical religionists Hays would soon come to know were on the leading edge of a changing social gospel movement radicalized by the Depression and global fascist threat. When he returned to Arkansas in 1934 and began working with Claude Williams, Lee Hays became a younger member of a far-flung network of radical religionists extending from New York to Tennessee and Arkansas. Those who would be most influential in his life were students or associates of three professors of social ethics: Harry Ward and Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary and Alva Taylor at Vanderbilt University, instructor and mentor to Claude Williams.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ The Scottsboro-Herndon delegation was sponsored by the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, the American Civil Liberties Union (of which Harry Ward was National Chairperson), the International Labor Defense, and the Herndon Defense Committee. See *A Southern Welcome: A Report by John Howard Lawson, Report of Scottsboro-Herndon Delegation* (New York: The National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, November 1934) in Michigan State University, Special Collections, The American Radicalism Collection, Gerald M. Kline Digital and Multimedia Center, <https://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/southernwelcome.pdf>. Examples of Scottsboro coverage include, "Scottsboro Trials Delayed by Motion: Defense Asks Quashing on Ground No Negroes Were on the Jury Finding Indictments," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1933, p. 11; F. Raymond Daniell, Special to *The New York Times*, "Negroes Transfer Waits in Alabama: Eight Remain in Kilby Prison Death Cells Pending Decision to Move to Birmingham. BOTH SIDES MARKING TIME Defense Lawyers Want to Consult Clients in Privacy Prior to Trial Next Week," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1933, p. 17; "Jury Out Overnight With Scottsboro Case; Judge Warns of Bigotry and Racial Issue," *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 9, 1933, p. 1; "Mass Meeting Urges Trial Delay," *The New York Times*, April 17, 1933, p. 4; Hamilton Basso, "Five Days in Decatur," *The New Republic*, December 20, 1933, p. 161-164.

¹⁴⁰ "Legion's Chief Assails Church 'Pacifism' Drive: Reds Invade Colleges Says Hayes Here," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, July 1, 1934, p. 12. Attacks on Chappell, Harry Ward, and the MFSS continued in the *Chicago Tribune*. See Rembert Gilman Smith D. D., "Driving Churches on the Rocks," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, October 20, 1935, 16.

¹⁴¹ Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 43-45; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 28-30; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 29-30, 39-41; Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 1-5, 126. Winifred Chappell, who became Hays' friend and mentor, as Secretary of the Methodist Federation for Social Service, was not a student, but a close associate of Harry Ward's. Myles Horton and James Dombrowski, both of whom Hays would come to know at

When Hays walked into the library of the Presbyterian manse in Paris, Arkansas in July of 1934, Williams was in the midst of pitched battle for his pastorate. The library where Hays would enjoy spending time over the coming weeks revealed much about why he found Claude and Joyce Williams compelling, and why many of their congregants were abandoning them. Around the room, the Williamses created a makeshift mural of magazine cutouts depicting the “progress of man” from empty-handedness to industrial slave; portraits of Lenin and Eugene Debs hung alongside the image of Jesus on the wall, and Williams’ Bible, often resting on the arm of his chair, was just steps away from shelves displaying works of Marx, Thorstein Veblen, Norman Thomas, Edward Carpenter, H. G. Wells, and Upton Sinclair.¹⁴² In this parsonage library among symbols of his new-found socialism, it is no wonder Lee Hays felt at home.

Hays found more than symbols in the library. Filled with activity, people, and controversy, the manse was a gathering place for the town’s young people and students from the Presbyterian College of the Ozarks twenty-five miles away in Clarkesville where Hays, in August, enrolled to study for the ministry. Among the young people Hays met was Zilphia Johnson — a brilliant musician four years his senior disowned by her father for her radicalism — who became Hays’ friend, mentor, and artistic collaborator.¹⁴³ Ward Rodgers, a young Methodist preacher and socialist from Oklahoma and Texas Williams met, with Howard Kester, in classes with Alva Taylor at Vanderbilt, had quit his Arkansas pastorate, moved into the manse and was

Highlander Folk School were students of both Harry Ward and Reinhold Niebuhr. Gary Dorrien posits Horton more sympathetic to Niebuhr, and Dombrowski more attuned to Ward. Williams claimed Harry Ward, who believed “the Religion of Christ and the Philosophy of Marx Not Antagonistic,” as influential. Ward quotation from Doug Rossinow, “The Radicalization of the Social Gospel: Harry F. Ward and the Search for a New Social Order, 1888-1936,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 15 (Winter 2005): 68. Ward Rodgers and Don West likewise met Williams in Alva Taylor’s classes at Vanderbilt; Williams attended classes and seminars, but did not receive a degree from the institution. See also Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day*, 78.

¹⁴² Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 70, 145.

¹⁴³ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 26, 27-29; Hodge, “The Coal Operator’s Daughter,” 295; Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 3.

helping Williams plan a “Religion and Revolution” conference. A month later, the conference was attended by students from Commonwealth Labor College, local labor leaders, Myles Horton from Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and Willard Uphaus of the Connecticut-based National Religion and Labor Foundation (NRLF).¹⁴⁴ Miners who had joined the Presbyterian church after Williams’ membership drive among them, stopped by to talk with the “Preacher,” and African American sharecroppers sat down to dinner at the family table. Gathered in the manse library with Joyce and Claude Williams, Hays, Johnson, and the other young people discussed everything from the Bible to philosophy and labor organizing, racism, and sexual equality late into the night. It was, perhaps, not surprising that Hays’ grades at College of the Ozarks that fall semester were less than stellar; he devoured books at the manse and was enthralled by what he saw Williams trying to accomplish. “What Claude has tried to do,” he later wrote, “is to take the Bible seriously. . . . Claude has said, ‘Look here, do you really believe the Bible? Then for Heaven’s sake let’s do what the Bible tells us to do.’ For of course, we’d have no Jim Crow, no hate; we’d have democracy in our plantations and factories and homes and schools and churches; we’d have as Claude says, the Kingdom of God on earth. Who wouldn’t want that?”¹⁴⁵

The work in Paris was fast drawing to a close when Lee Hays entered Claude Williams’ world of charisma and chaos the summer of 1934. Two months before Hays arrived, 14 of the 112 tithing members of Williams’ Paris congregation signed a petition charging Williams with dereliction of duties, communism, heresy, and requesting the Fort Smith presbytery revoke his

¹⁴⁴ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 70; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 52-56; See also, Nan Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 161.

¹⁴⁵ Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 68; Hays quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 26; Lee Hays, “The Singing Preacher,” *Peoples Songs Bulletin* 3, Second Anniversary Edition, February/March 1948, pp. 11, 13.

pastorate. Williams' dynamic brand of Billy-Sunday-inspired preaching, captivating to congregants in 1930, no longer made up for the continual flouting of social norms Hays and the young people found so appealing. Miners stopped in to shoot pool in the games room Williams installed in the church's abandoned wing, where, in addition to games, a nudist magazine was found.¹⁴⁶ He not only dined with African American sharecroppers, but was known to swear, smoke, and have a beer or two with the local miners, and, by liquidating his life insurance policy, had poured the foundation on a "Proletarian Labor Temple" designed to combine church and labor school. Further construction he planned to fund by assessing check off dues from the local United Mine Workers was thwarted by UMW district leader, David Fowler. In spring of 1933, half Williams' paycheck — that paid by the elders of his own congregation — vanished. The remainder, paid by the Arkansas Presbyterian Board of Missions, remained for the moment.¹⁴⁷ Williams' membership drive among local miners, which swung the balance of church power away from the original members, was the last straw. Though he, Joyce, and their three daughters stayed in Paris until the end of January, the presbytery revoked the pastorate in June, and notice was served for eviction of the Williams family from the manse.¹⁴⁸

Williams was not without allies in the fight, and among these, Hays found friends and mentors on whose work he hoped to model his own. From Nashville and Mount Eagle, fellow Presbyterians Howard Kester, Williams' longtime friend from Alva Taylor's classes at Vanderbilt, and Myles Horton of Highlander Folk School wrote on Williams' behalf, as did Willard Uphaus, who soon arrived to investigate for the National Religion and Labor

¹⁴⁶ Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 35-37, 67-68, 110-112. Per Belfrage, Williams saw nudism as a "sincere revolt against the hypocrisy found in most churches" and remarked that nobody protested the "enforced nudism" of thousands of poor children. See *Faith to Free the People*, 111-112.

¹⁴⁷ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 41-4. Half of Williams' \$1,800 salary in Paris was paid by his congregation and half by the Arkansas Board of Missions, headed by M. L. Gillespie. Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 63, 123; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 31.

¹⁴⁸ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 52-54, 59; Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 123-125, 133.

Foundation. The International Labor Defense Fund (ILD) likewise pledged support.¹⁴⁹ From Union Theological Seminary in New York, Reinhold Niebuhr published an article supporting Williams in the *Christian Century*. Winifred Chappell, who had visited Paris on behalf of the MFSS, remained a staunch supporter, and Williams had support from the Presbyterian Church (USA) which, in 1932, had approved at its General Assembly in Denver sixteen ideals and objectives — including the rights of labor to collective bargaining, “erection of a cooperative world order,” and “mutual goodwill and racial, economic, and religious cooperation.”¹⁵⁰ This new Presbyterian dictum Williams believed would sustain him was part of a more radical social gospel movement among mainline churches trying to reach a desperate and drifting membership. Though the MFSS, led by Harry Ward and Winifred Chappell was at the forefront of the movement, other mainline denominations saw the need for social service organizations. Presbyterians founded a Fellowship for Social Action, Congregationalists, a Council for Social Action, and Episcopalians, a Church League for Industrial Democracy. Williams and his allies were thus part the expanding network of radical religionists in alliance with socialists and communists extending from New York to Nashville and the South.¹⁵¹ It was a network Hays entered, embraced, and in which he planned to make his future. It was not, however, a network that could save Williams’ pastorate in Paris from the judgement rendered by the district presbytery in Fort Smith.

Hays was still enrolled at College of the Ozarks during the ensuing months of Williams’ “manic desperation.” Having now lost all church income, Williams became increasingly focused on the need for “revolutionary action.”¹⁵² During a frenetic six-month period of near-constant

¹⁴⁹ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 54-55.

¹⁵⁰ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 107-108.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122, 107-108.

¹⁵² Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 36; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 58, 57.

travel to enlist support of friends and allies, Williams cemented alliances that would soon impact Hays' life. He became more deeply involved with Arkansas socialists and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union; friends from Commonwealth College found Williams positions as president of the American Federation of Teachers local and as organizer for the new Workingman's Union of the World for relief workers and the unemployed. In November, Williams organized a bi-racial conference in Paris to "face together the problem of creating a just society." The three hundred people in attendance heard addresses by Sherwood Gates and Willard Uphaus of the NRLF and Brooks Hays, the New Deal Administration's recently appointed labor compliance officer for Arkansas for the National Recovery Administration.¹⁵³ Less than a month later, Williams was in Chattanooga for a December 4 Conference of Younger Churchmen, organized by Howard Kester, with Myles Horton and James Dombrowski of Highlander Folk School. Meeting both Williams' personal needs and new focus on revolution, the conference crafted a Statement of Principles calling for "a genuinely co-operative social economy democratically planned . . . eliminat[ing] private ownership of the means of production and distribution wherever such ownership interferes with social good," sent a letter to the Presbyterian church of Paris requesting Williams' reinstatement, and elected him to its executive committee. Three days before Christmas, having sold his car, Williams hitchhiked to a labor conference in Fort Smith where he wrote "revolutionary" resolutions demanding the Federal Government take over relief allocations in Arkansas or face protests by the Workingman's Union over poor wages and conditions.¹⁵⁴ These resolutions would soon spur conditions in Fort Smith that would lead to Williams' arrest.

¹⁵³ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 57; "Politics and Principles: Documenting the Care of Congressman Brooks Hays," University Libraries Digital Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, <https://digitalcollections.uark.edu/digital/collection/BrooksHays>.

¹⁵⁴ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 74; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 58.

As his family spent a cold Christmas Eve supported by donations from those who had little themselves, Williams wrote an upbeat letter to Kester about the Fort Smith meeting. The letter's principal focus, however, was the future of Zilphia Johnson. Correspondence between Williams and Kester regarding her shows an interest in assisting the next generation of radical workers and promoting "art as a weapon," three years before Hays, as Instructor of Dramatics at Commonwealth College, announced creating "drama as a weapon for union organization" as a mission of the college's dramatics program.¹⁵⁵ "You recall Zilphia Mae Johnson," Williams wrote, "the young college graduate of my Young People's Group? . . . I tell you Buck, we must find a place to use her in the movement -especially, since she is a Southerner, in the interracial phase. And too, could she be of service on the tour Streater [sic] You and myself are planning - music, dramatics, reading?"¹⁵⁶ Williams' and Kester's letters about and to Johnson over the course of the next month contributed to her move to Highlander Folk School, and thus, to the enrollment of Lee Hays — another "Southerner in the interracial phase" — at Highlander in the Spring of 1935.

Despite his upbeat tone, Williams' Christmas Eve letter to Kester shows that conjoined with his new revolutionary focus was a penchant to dismiss even his staunchest allies he felt were not in strict agreement with him or failed to support him in the way he desired. After the November 9 Paris conference, Williams confided to Kester that he planned to disassociate himself from the Religion and Labor Foundation — judging Willard Uphaus' views to be

¹⁵⁵ Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 143; Lee Hays, "Workers Dramatics," *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, September 1, 1937, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ Claude Williams to Howard Kester, December 24, 1934, series 1, folder 13, Kester Papers. Williams is probably referring to African American Socialist George Streater who had attended and spoken at the Chattanooga Conference of Younger Churchmen, on December 4, 1934. See Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 58; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 74; Hays, "Workers Dramatics," p. 2.

“compromising,” representing a “liberal, go slow” approach. To Kester on November 16, he commented:

I feel that he [Uphaus] betrayed the conference, my efforts, and everyone who co-operated with us in his speech Monday. Moreover he wants a \$4,000 NRA official, a bourgeois lawyer, a twice-defeated candidate for governor on the Democratic ticket to be secretary in the Southwest -never do for me to serve in that capacity: I’m too direct: I might offend the elite [sic].¹⁵⁷

Williams continued receiving personal donations from Uphaus, however, and by Christmas Eve, his opinion of Uphaus was shifting.¹⁵⁸ Kester, who had supported Williams’ original decision — signing himself, “your buddy in all things”— likewise supported him in this. Replying on January 3, 1935, Kester wrote, “He [Uphaus] does have the greatest admiration for you. . . . it would be a good thing for you to pull along with them now. Willard means well.”¹⁵⁹ Willard Uphaus did more than mean well. On January 30 he wrote to Harry Hopkins asserting Williams had received discriminatory treatment when denied federal funding to teach workers education in Paris. By February, he had begun forming the National Committee for the Support of Claude Williams, which included among its members Kester, Winifred Chappell, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Within a few months, Lee Hays and Willard Uphaus were working together on the Committee to ensure the survival of Williams, his family, and his work.¹⁶⁰

Hays’ work on Williams’ behalf at times makes him seem a father figure to his frenetic mentor rather than the reverse. After another semester at College of the Ozarks, during which time his grades improved, Hays dropped out to help Williams more fully in his work. His

¹⁵⁷ Claude Williams to Howard Kester, November 16, 1934, series 1, folder 12, Kester Papers.

¹⁵⁸ Williams to Kester, November 16, 1934; Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 140-143.

¹⁵⁹ Howard Kester to Claude Williams, November 18, 1934, series 1, folder 12, Kester Papers; Howard Kester to Claude Williams, January 3, 1935, series 1 folder 14, Kester Papers.

¹⁶⁰ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 58; Willard Uphaus to Harry L. Hopkins, January 20, 1935, series 1, folder 14, Kester Papers. Committee members also included Cameron P. Hall, Harold E. Fey, George Edwards, and Walter Warner. Willard Uphaus fundraising letter, May 7, 1935, series 1, folder 16, Kester Papers.

decision may have been impacted by the crisis of Williams' arrest in Fort Smith less than a month after the family's eviction from the Paris manse at the end of January 1935.

The Williamses and Hays decided the building in Fort Smith, rented with thirty dollars advanced from Willard Uphaus, would house the New Era School of Prophetic Religion—offering “classes in trade union history, organization and tactics, in the Christianity of Christ, and in political and economic subjects.” Though still reeling from the events in Paris, they were hopeful. Zilphia Johnson visited on her way to Highlander Folk School, and Hays, with students from College of the Ozarks, worked to get the project off the ground: soliciting support from, among others, both Earl Browder and Norman Thomas. Despite their efforts, the Fort Smith project was over before it began.¹⁶¹ Braced to new militancy by the Fort Smith Workingmen's Union of the World conference in December where Williams had authored “revolutionary” resolutions, Fort Smith WPA workers, joined by four thousand people from surrounding Sebastian County — numbers greater than ten percent of Fort Smith's population — were striking over a pending decrease in wages when the Williamses arrived. After strike leaders Horace Bryan and Lucien Koch were arrested, Williams assumed leadership.¹⁶²

Singing hymns and waving banners, the delegation from College of the Ozarks with Commonwealth College joined in multi-racial “hunger marches” through the streets of Fort Smith. During a prayer meeting on the morning of February 18 before a march was to take place,

¹⁶¹ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 61-62; quotation, 61; Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 153-154; School transcripts, series 2, box 2, folder 61, Hays Papers; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 26.

¹⁶² Williams quoted in Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 58. Per the 1930 census, the population of Fort Smith was 31,429, Benjamin Boulden, “Fort Smith (Sebastian County),” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, Central Arkansas Library System, last updated May 13, 2020, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/fort-smith-988/>; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 70-72; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 62-63. Gellman and Roll argue the proposed wage decrease due to state FERA administrator's contention southern workers did not require as much as northern workers, and that too much charity would make them lazy. Dunbar contends the pay decrease was to keep relief workers' pay in line with that of local miners. The reduction was to be from thirty to twenty cents per hour.

police arrested Williams, telling him, as he remembered in his memoir of the event, “The respectable citizens of Fort Smith are going to mob you, and by God they ought to!”¹⁶³ Searching for a telephone among the town’s citizenry to call for help that night, Hays was told, “No friend of that damn communist can use my phone.” With other students, he stood guard over Joyce and the three children all night amid rumors that seven hundred vigilantes had gathered in the streets.¹⁶⁴ After eighteen days imprisonment, during which Williams feared for his life and the lives of his family, Hays and around thirty students met him with “home brew” at the rooms of a College of the Ozarks professor, sixty miles from Fort Smith. There, Williams recounted the horrors of the Fort Smith jail. “You ought not to fool with a man like that,” a local minister responded when Hays confided in him about Williams’ experiences. “He’s a hypocrite. He preaches birth control and he’s got eight children and five of them have n****r blood.”¹⁶⁵ Less than a year after his return to Arkansas, Hays experienced the danger faced by southern radicals trying to effect change. It would not be the last time.

Hays’ biographer Doris Willens contends that after the trauma of Fort Smith, Hays, “being neither foolish nor especially brave,” reconsidered the life of a radical southern preacher, “dropped out of college and . . . hit the road.” While Hays did leave College of the Ozarks at the end of the spring term in May and appears to have traveled to Highlander to study in the labor dramatics program — supervised by Elizabeth (Zilla) Hawes and Rupert Hampton and attended by his friend Zilphia Johnson Horton who had married Myles Horton in March — he did not

¹⁶³ Gelman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 63; Claude Williams, “Prison Memoir,” *Fellowship 2* (January 1936): 3-4, quotation, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 161-163.

¹⁶⁵ Williams, “Prison Memoir,” 3. To Howard Kester from jail Williams wrote, “If I should ‘go’ and it is likely I know — Sentiments are high — I ask , since I have given all for humanity, that the church, the liberals, the workers and those of even a more radical hue care for my “little girlies” (God how I love them) and not let them suffer . . . I am writing this to you and through you to the World! I hope I succeed in getting it out We need outside help desperately! The situation is extremely serious.” Claude Williams to Howard Kester, February 25, 1935, series 1, folder 14, Kester Papers; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 33; Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 176.

leave Williams or the radical religious coalition. That he was soon back in Little Rock working with Claude and Joyce Williams lecturing on “workers dramatics and creative writing” at the New Era School for Prophetic Religion shows that if Hays reconsidered the ministry, he remained determined to make a radical contribution.¹⁶⁶ “Of course I came up in the days of art as a weapon it was the doctrine that dominated most of the thinking in the 30s — federal theater, painting, all of the arts,” he would later recall. Just two years after Fort Smith, Hays announced “drama as a weapon for union organization” to be the mission of the Commonwealth College Labor Dramatics program.¹⁶⁷

When he traveled back to Little Rock from Highlander, Hays, at twenty-one, became — by his own description — Williams’ “chief helper for quite a while.” At New Era School, with Williams and New Era students he zipped familiar hymns with new lyrics to create “good union songs.” One of these, “I Will Overcome” became, in Hays’ and Williams’ hands, a song about workers’ empowerment through unions. Twenty-five years later, “We Shall Overcome” was the transcendent anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. As he traveled with Williams on STFU organizing trips among sharecroppers in a union with “very strong religious overtones,” Hays often led singing or might briefly take the pulpit.¹⁶⁸ He also handled Williams’ correspondence,

¹⁶⁶ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 33; Mary McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions: The Labor Drama Experiment and Radical Activism in the Early Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 147, 151; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 65. Elizabeth (Zilla) Hawes is not to be confused with Elizabeth Hawes whom Michael Denning treats at length in *The Cultural Front*. For a brief biography of Elizabeth (Zilla) Hawes see, Jake Altman, *Socialism before Sanders: The 1930s Movement from Romance to Revisionism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 152-155.

¹⁶⁷ Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers; Lee Hays quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 52; Hays, “Workers Dramatics,” p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Capaldi, “Wasn’t That a Time!,” p. 3; Lee Hays, “Let the Will,” p. 15; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 75-76; Claude Williams to Lee Hays, n.d., series 1, box 2, folder 20, Hays Papers; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 40.

traveled East with him, and, staying behind, worked with Willard Uphaus to find ways Williams and his family could survive.¹⁶⁹

As “chief helper,” Hays’ possessed physical characteristics and skills that were valuable to Williams. Though he had no desire for physical conflict, his substantial size and youth created an imposing presence; his garrulous sense of humor — at once dry and bombastic — was already in play; he wrote quickly and well and could wrangle a manual typewriter with few errors; had a stentorian speaking and singing voice and thorough knowledge of southern hymnody; had been driving since he was eight years old, and had — unlike Williams, Kester, H. L. Mitchell, Ward Rodgers, and many others of the southern radical coalition — an Arkansas pedigree. Considering Williams’ volatility and Hays’ youth, there were bound to be gaffs. One in particular shows the responsibility Williams assigned Hays for maintaining his personal and professional relationships, and how, in the face of Williams’ increasing need for publicly expressed loyalty after Fort Smith, even his closest relationships showed signs of strain.

In August 1935, from Little Rock at Williams’ direction, Hays wrote Howard Kester a brief, formal letter confirming permission to use Kester’s name on New Era and Williams Support Committee materials. “He understands, however,” Hays wrote of Williams, “that you have recently become highly critical of his positions and attitudes. If this attitude extends to the point of wanting your name removed from subsequent bulletins, Claude will be glad to comply with a request to that effect. If your attitude is still one of co-operation, Claude hopes that you will find it convenient to visit him here soon and discuss his plans with him.”¹⁷⁰ Kester was taken

¹⁶⁹ H. L. Mitchell, informing Howard Kester Williams proposed moving the offices of the STFU to Little Rock wrote, “Claud [sic] had the brilliant idea of renting a big house and all of us moving in together . . . an idea I promptly vetoed . . . and added that he get a place for his school and office and rent the smallest house he could find and take Mrs. Williams and the children out of the revolutionary atmosphere.” H. L. Mitchell to Howard Kester, July 10, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers. Mitchell later informed Kester Williams had rented a twenty-room house for fifty dollars a month. Mitchell to Kester, July 15, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers.

¹⁷⁰ Lee Hays to Howard Kester, August 7, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers.

aback. During the summer, Uphaus' newly formed National Committee for the Support of Claude Williams, whose membership included Kester, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Winifred Chappell, had raised \$160.00 — by some estimates, the equivalent of over \$3,000 dollars today — to supplement the fifty-dollar disability pension paid him by the Presbyterian Church each month.¹⁷¹ Two days later Kester replied not to Hays, but to Williams. His response reveals early fissures in his relationship with Williams and questions of transparency and political ideology over which the fissures would widen.

I have been intending to write to you for weeks, particularly since receiving the announcement about the establishment of your school in Little Rock. The summer has been an unusually heavy one, and I have neglected to write my trusted friends. This morning, however, I received a letter from Lee Hays which has goaded me into action. Mr. Hays suggests that I have “recently become highly critical” of your positions and attitudes. I have not the faintest notion why you have any grounds to believe such rot as that. . . . if I have said or written or done anything that has caused you to hold this opinion of me I want you to write me.

This letter . . . has caused me more real pain than any letter I have received in a long time I thought my friendship for you was unquestioned. I had thought friends could be critical of one another and still be friends. I had also thought that criticism was a part of a healthy revolutionary movement and that healthy revolutionaries welcomed honest criticism.

I haven't served your committee as I have wanted to as I recently wrote Uphaus I don't want any thanks for what I do for you for whatever you say about me I will always admire and love you.¹⁷²

Williams did not respond; again, it was Hays who wrote. Apologizing and attempting a lighter tone, he explained he was responsible for Williams' correspondence. “He does not dictate the letters to me, but gives me the addresses and the messages he wants sent to them.” Try as Hays might for a more jovial tone, Williams' accusation remained:

He had understood that you were highly critical — that should be in quotes — and asked

¹⁷¹ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 65; Monetary equivalency calculated from 1935 to 2020 on Calculator.net, <https://www.calculator.net/inflation-calculator.html?cstartingamount=160.00&cinyear=1935&coutyear=2020&calctype=1&x=57&y=14>.

¹⁷² Howard Kester to Claude Williams, August 9, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers.

me to write you about it, as he wanted to be sure before he enlisted further co-operation from you. I remarked at the time of writing that it was a difficult letter for me to write and I made several starts before I gave it up with the rather curt note I finally did send . . . I am sure that my letter was unworthy, and that Claude should have written it himself. However, I have been close to his work and he has relied upon my writing letters for him — you probably know of his complexes on the subject of letter writing. It has been hard to do but I have tried to make a good job of it.¹⁷³

There is no record in Kester's extensive archives of a response to Hays' apology — either to Williams or Hays himself — though Kester's name continued to appear on Williams' support committee letterhead, and subsequent letters indicate a renewal of cordiality. This initial fraying continued to trouble Hays as he strove to make plans for a life within the radical southern coalition.

By October, Hays was in the East with Willard Uphaus, deeply involved in fundraising and organizational efforts to ensure Williams' survival. The situation was desperate not only for Williams. From New Haven on letterhead of the National Committee for the Support of the Reverend Claude C. Williams, Hays wrote of an enclosed check, "You will note that it is dated November 1. There is not a penny up here except a few dollars of Willard's which he is saving for food . . . Willard asks that you not take a chance on cashing the check before the first in the hope that there will be funds here to cover it by the first, for there probably won't be. I hope this will straighten things out for you. At any rate, it is the best that can be done."

The letter shows Hays working to stabilize not only Williams' finances but the most minute details of his travel and family life. Williams' impetuous planning for a fundraising trip raised concerns about funding, scheduling speaking engagements, whether Williams had his "clergy book" so that he could travel more cheaply by train, the Williams family, who was to shoulder the increasing work of the committee — even Williams' whereabouts. "We realized

¹⁷³ Lee Hays to Howard Kester, August 12, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers.

with a shock today that you were thinking of your trip for this month instead of next,” Hays wrote:

Can you leave the family in Tennessee or are the kids in school? The whole hitch is that I’m trying to get enough regular contributions to carry you and I don’t see how you can come until we get something of the sort . . . I myself am in debt — but that’s not worrying me as much as getting your salary fixed up Of course I understand your feeling about my taking over the work of the committee, I haven’t done so hot, have I? But it’s a case of necessity. Willard can’t do it, I can’t do it, you can’t do it, who’s to do it? Well, Willard and I have so far split the labor but as my last letter pointed out, he just can’t pledge more than the \$25. Of course it will soon have to be turned over to you to be done from Arkansas Is there any possibility that you can finally support yourself there without national appeal? I suppose not, unless you build up a pretty good church.

In a letter that contained two typos, Hays concluded, “Please excuse my many errors. I am suffering from eyestrain and headache tonight — too much worry, I guess.” And more jovially, “How about giving us your address? Your letters are so cryptic that we aren’t sure half the time where you are.¹⁷⁴

Hays knew where Williams was in February of 1936. He had just seen him in New York when he wrote to Howard Kester on NRLF letterhead where Claude Williams’ name — now listed as Regional Secretary for Arkansas alongside Kester for Tennessee — figured among such powers of the religious and secular left as Methodist Bishop Francis J. McConnell, Sidney Hillman, Sherwood Eddy, A. J. Muste, Reinhold Niebuhr, Charles C. Webber, Stephen S. Wise, and A. Philip Randolph. It is clear that Hays, who was involved in publishing the bulletin of the of the NRLF, *Economic Justice*, felt a part of the organization, and that as such, his confidence had received a significant boost. “We are all quite angry about your recent troubles, and especially because we are so helpless,” he wrote referring to Kester’s near-lynching following evictions from the Dibble Plantation near Earle, Arkansas in January of 1936. “Several of us in

¹⁷⁴ Lee Hays to Claude Williams, October 25, 1935, box 1, folder 19, Williams Papers.

protesting to Henry Wallace have received evasive answers we have called his bluff as well as we could so far removed from the scene of battle, recommending, chiefly, the publication of the Mary Connor Myers report.” He condemned and parodied Henry Wallace’s article in the *Christian Century*, writing, “Note particularly, that ministers should not take action in social crises, but should go around bathing the laity in their pure idealism;” he informed Kester, whom he had yet to meet, “I have read your pamphlet [*Revolt of the Sharecroppers*] and consider it well done, although a little heavy on the case-study side;” before concluding in language reminiscent of his ministry studies, “Claude is having a wonderful trip. He is growing in stature as a public speaker and everyone is showing him great sympathy He is giving a good word for the STFU, and I understand is asked many times for information about it. In my own speaking, I find a fairly good level of information about the Union — all I have to do is to supply the class struggle bases.” In Hays’ style, he concluded, “Forgive this terrible letter.” Uncharacteristically, Hays also betrayed concern to Kester about the future of Williams’ work. “I do feel rather futile about the whole struggle,” he confessed, “especially in Claude’s work, which is foredoomed to failure, but I try to help as I can.”¹⁷⁵

Though never disloyal to Williams, Hays’ letters from 1936-1937, particularly to Kester to whom he confided, “I have been waiting for a long time to meet you — since I bungled one of Claude’s messages to you, in fact,” show his desire to make both his own way and his own contribution to the conjoined work of religion and labor. Living in the East afforded opportunities to pursue studies and connections toward that end. In New York, Hays studied methodologies for creating art as a weapon with radical documentarians Paul Strand and Leo

¹⁷⁵ Lee Hays to Howard Kester, February 1, 1936, series 1, folder 20, Kester Papers; Lee Hays to Howard Kester, February 4, 1936, series 1, folder 20, Kester Papers; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 112-115; Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 88-92.

Hurwitz of the New Theater League. For the rest of his life, he incorporated the “spinal” theory in writing plays, songs, and short stories.¹⁷⁶ Living at the Neighborhood House — student housing affiliated with Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square in Greenwich Village — he met Pastor Laurence Hosie who served with Willard Uphaus on the Executive Committee of the NRLF and another group of young people who wanted to “put religion into practice” to change the world — the Social Action Fellowship. At his first meeting in the choir room above the Judson Street Church Sanctuary, Hays taught the young people about the struggles of southern sharecroppers and the song:

Weary, weary are we
Just as weary as weary can be
We don't get nothing for our labor
So weary, weary are we.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Lee Hays to Howard Kester, February 4, 1936; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 43.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-44; “Weary, weary are we . . .” Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 41.

America's Disinherited

From his work with Strand and Hurwitz and encouragement from Judson Street Fellowship and the NRLF came inspiration for *America's Disinherited* — a 16 mm documentary film about the plight of southern sharecroppers Hays hoped would reach into the hearts and pockets of northern donors for the STFU.¹⁷⁸

After discussions with Uphaus, Hosie, and “others in religion-labor work,” Hays wrote Kester in April of 1936 of plans to create a commercially viable “social document” to bring much needed funds to the union. His plans were ambitious: a full-length, stand-alone sound picture with music and narration. Putting his fundraising skills work, Hays had already received a pledge from Jerome Davis of the NRLF for \$250.00 of a projected \$1000.00 budget “and possibly more if we raise the rest through other groups.” With Alan Hacker, a young film-maker he met through Judson House, Hays planned to come south to film in Arkansas where he thought it possible he might still have connections among “respectable people there who have not heard of my departure from conservatism.” Hacker would contribute equipment, experience, some funding, and enthusiasm. As for his own motivation, Hays, who told Kester his letter to him was

¹⁷⁸ *America's Disinherited* was not the first film about sharecroppers; producing a film of the sharecroppers' struggle had been on the minds of the radical religious coalition for at least two years. In March 1934, Eugene W. Sutherland, a Unitarian minister from Kentucky, wrote Kester he and H. Lee Jones, a fellow Unitarian minister from Dayton, Ohio (who had taught psychology at Commonwealth) proposed to “make an excursion into Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama” with a movie camera and typewriter to film sharecropper conditions. In July of 1935, they filmed assisted by STFU membership. By July 22, J. R. Butler told Howard Kester Sutherland had “obtained a wealth of pictures while on the work here with Jones . . . Jones left here this morning for Dayton to begin the editing of his “Epic of Starvation.” The film had some initial success. When Claude Williams tried in December of 1935 to obtain one of the two copies for use at New Era School, Sutherland responded that Jones had over fifty advance bookings and a copy could not be spared. The film's trajectory did not so continue. With apologies, Sutherland reported to Kester in August 1936 after traveling 8,000 miles touring the film, the fifteen dollars raised he had hoped to send to the STFU had been spent on car repairs resulting from the trip. First quote, Eugene Sutherland to Howard Kester, March 26, 1934, series 1 folder 16, Kester papers; second quote, J. R. Butler to Howard Kester July 22, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers; third quote, H. L. Mitchell to Howard Kester, July 10, 1935, series 1, folder 17, Kester Papers; Eugene Sutherland to Claude Williams, December 28, 1935, box 1, folder 21, Williams Papers; Lee Jones to Gene Sutherland, n.d., included with letter from Sutherland to Williams, box 1, folder 21, Williams Papers; Eugene Sutherland to Howard Kester, August 18, 1936, series 1, folder 24, Kester Papers; Sutherland was also largely responsible for drafting the Statement of Principles at the Conference of Younger Churchmen in Chattanooga held December 4, 1934. See Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 74.

the first mention of the film to the union itself, wrote, “I have tried to help the Union in various ways But I have not been able to do all that I should do to pay the debts which long generations of slave owners and exploiters in my family have incurred. This has been a very real problem to me since the day when I saw a close relative murder a Negro for a trivial reason.” By combining newly acquired methodologies in drama and “religion-labor work,” Hays hoped to create a tool for union education, recruitment, and funding that could effect change in his home state. While in New York, Hays also acquired new mentors and supporters. Informing Kester he hoped for both his and the union’s stamp of approval, he provided as reference, not Williams, but Laurence Hosie and Willard Uphaus.¹⁷⁹

Williams’ name did appear, however, along with Uphaus, Hosie, Hays, Hacker, the NRLF, Social Action Fellowship, and — representing the STFU and Hays’ success in religion-labor coalition building — Kester, E. B. McKinney, H. L. Mitchell, and Walter Moskop, on the letterhead of the Sharecropper Film Committee organized for fundraising and oversight of the project. The fundraising letter Hays wrote for the committee spoke not only to the hardship but to the agency of southern sharecroppers. “These poverty stricken agricultural workers,” he wrote, “are attempting to change the conditions which have oppressed their class for generations. They are the ‘basic human element in the production of cotton’ and they are thus effecting change in the whole system of cotton production. If they succeed, all people will profit. They require our help.”¹⁸⁰

In a car loaded with tent, typewriter, and film equipment, Hays and Hacker set out in the summer of 1936, stopping along the way with Hays’ sister Minnie Frank where Hacker “took

¹⁷⁹ Lee Hays to Howard Kester, April 21, 1936, series 1, folder 22, Kester Papers.

¹⁸⁰ To All Friends of the Sharecroppers of the South from The Sharecropper Film Committee, 1936, series 3, box 3, folder 69, Hays Papers.

wonderful pictures of the brand new baby,” and the two young men turned the house upside down experimenting with lighting and camera angles.¹⁸¹ Much of their filming took place not in Arkansas, as Hays had expected, but at Delta Cooperative Farm near Hillhouse, Mississippi — the brainchild of Sherwood Eddy and Reinhold Niebuhr established under the auspices of the STFU and Socialist Party of America for the recently evicted sharecroppers of the Arkansas Delta.¹⁸² Hays wrote the shooting script, and later the synopsis of the movie, which traces the sharecropping system from slavery in 1858 to a triumphant STFU strike after the murder of “two union men. But they have figured without the solidarity of these workers, who meet to denounce the murders,” the synopsis reads:

They would murder us to force us to work for a miserable 35 cents a hundred pounds!'
35 cents a hundred pounds? Then strike! Strike!
The call goes out. Soon the fields are empty. . .
Now the planters evict union members. But the union holds firm.
Planters rage against this affront. They bribe and denounce and try to lure pickers back to work by offering slight increases. But the wealth rots on the stalk.
Now the planters loose their terror. Guns blaze and houses burn. Men disappear. A planter boasts, ‘I’ll build a bridge across the St. Francis River with the bodies of Union men!’
And so the Union marches. Planters may gnash their teeth and chew their fingernails off to the elbows, but nothing they can devise will stop the strike. They must yield. Okay, \$1 a hundred.
Exultantly, rejoicing as a strong runner, the Union sings its great message: Just like a tree standing by the waters, we shall not be moved!¹⁸³

Perhaps no other piece of his early writing so succinctly demonstrates Hays’ intersection of southern religious radicalism with the emerging cultural front than this passage. Reflecting his Arkansas Methodist childhood, near-religious fervor for the STFU, and newly acquired

¹⁸¹ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 129.

¹⁸² Ibid., 42-44, 52, 129; Capaldi, “Wasn’t that A Time!,” p. 3; Fred C. Smith, “Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms,” *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*, last modified April 13, 2018, <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/delta-and-providence-cooperative-farms/>. The names used for the cooperative vary from source to source. As example, Dunbar gives the name of the cooperative as Rochdale. Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 118.

¹⁸³ The synopsis of the film was is dated January 30, 1937, at which time it bore the title, *Eight Million Americans*, series 3, box 3, folder 69, Hays Papers.

understanding of labor drama, in the scansion of southern preaching the synopsis combines biblical quotations, union events, the great zipper hymn of the STFU “We Shall Not be Moved,” and the cry, “Strike! Strike!” reprising the audience’s spontaneous chant at the January 6, 1935, performance of Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*.¹⁸⁴

That Hays’ and Hacker’s enterprise was dangerous came as no surprise; Hays had anticipated trouble. “We are counting the chances of getting run out,” he wrote to Kester, and “We are making plans accordingly.” He was not wrong. Hays was beaten by riders from “one of the big plantation owners” who raided their camp in Mississippi, stole Hays’ shooting script, notebooks, continuity logs, and other materials. They ran out of film and had trouble ordering more from New York from local merchants who did not, or refused to understand what they wanted, and they were concerned about the desperate needs of sharecropper families — especially the children. Letters to the Sharecropper Film Committee discussed sending two boys to New York for schooling. Food for Hays and Hacker was likewise in short supply. “We are living on canned foods and the occasional cabbage,” a letter from Hillhouse in September informed the Committee. “No fresh vegetables and no milk in this land of cotton.”¹⁸⁵

Hays and Hacker were not alone in filming at Hillhouse the summer of 1936; Dorothea Lange shot many of her best-known photographs at Hillhouse that summer. As Hays summarized four decades later, “the great American photographers . . . went out and photographed the face of

¹⁸⁴ “Rejoicing as a strong runner” appears to be a paraphrase of Psalm 19:5. On the fourteen-hundred-member audience chanting “Strike! Strike!” following the January 6, 1935, performance of *Waiting for Lefty*, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xiv-xv. Hays would have been aware of this event since the performance was staged as a benefit for *New Theater*, and Hays, in his letter to Kester of April 21, 1936, stated the critic for *New Theater* might travel on the filming expedition to help publicize the film. On “We Shall Not Be Moved,” see Michael Honey, *Sharecropper’s Troubadour: John L. Handcox, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, and the African American Song Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 56, 64, 142; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 84-86; H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in this Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union*, paperback ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 87-89, 142-143.

¹⁸⁵ Hays and Hacker to Contributors and Friends of the SFC, September 17, 1936, series 3, box 3, folder 69, Hays Papers.

America during the '30s, when for the first time America got a good look at itself."¹⁸⁶ Forwarded by the confluence of technological innovation with commercial and New Deal funding from the Resettlement Administration, Lange, Hays, and Hacker were part of a Depression-era "documentary impulse" to represent "the people" Michael Denning posits as characteristic of 1930s American culture.¹⁸⁷ The photographer Ben Shahn captured images of Arkansas sharecroppers the previous year; Pare Lorenz' film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, premiered as Hays and Hacker traveled South, and before *America's Disinherited* was completed, the *March of Time* series began filming in Memphis, *Land of Cotton*, a half hour newsreel featuring scenes of the STFU with Claude Williams, as himself, reenacting his beating at the hands of planters just the week before.¹⁸⁸

By October Hays and Hacker were in Colt, Arkansas where, having received word that the raw footage had been viewed with approval by Willard Van Dyke, they made plans to go to Memphis and "thence to Dyess to view the effects of paternalistic concern for sharecroppers; and then home."¹⁸⁹ Letters to the committee over the course of production show Hays' concern for

¹⁸⁶ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 42; Memoirs Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers; "Death Versus Dignity: An excerpt from Patsy Watkins' It's All Done Gone: Arkansas Photographs from the Farm Security Collection, 1935-1943," *Arkansas Life*, November 27, 2018, <https://arkansaslife.com/death-versus-dignity/>; Library of Congress, collection, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/> (accessed February, 2020).

¹⁸⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 118-120, 259.

¹⁸⁸ Ben Shahn, "Cotton Pickers: Pulaski County October, 1935," Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, LOC, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/docchap1.html>; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 81, 261; Robert J. Snyder, "The Plow that Broke the Plains," Library of Congress, 2015, LOC https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/plow_broke.pdf; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 128-130; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 68-69, 82-83; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 112-113. The first sixteen-millimeter film kit suitable for amateur filmmakers like Hays and Hacker was available through RCA in 1935. See Alan Kattelle, "Once, There Was Film: Looking Back at Amateur Motion Picture Technologies," in "Rethinking the Amateur: Acts of Media Production in the Digital Age," ed. Broderick Fox, *Spectator* 24 (Spring 2004): 62, <https://cinema.usc.edu/archivedassets/098/15847.pdf>. Scenes from the *March of Time* reenactment of Claude Williams' beating featuring Williams and Willie Sue Blagden may be viewed at <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/video/willie-sue-blagden-reverend-williams-in-arkansas-news-footage/509281531?adppopup=true>.

¹⁸⁹ Lee Hays and Alan Hacker to Contributors and friends of the Sharecropper Film Committee, October 20, 1936, series 3, box 3, folder 69, Hays Papers. After a career in still photography and film, Willard Van Dyke went on to

sharecroppers' children may have provided impetus for teaching plans of his own. After reporting the less-than-satisfactory outcome that children would be attending a county school that winter to which they would have to walk seven miles, Hays continued, "Plans are being made to attack this problem on a wholesale basis, probably through the establishment of a strong, socially conscious hill school." Concluding, "It will be good to see you all being educated by your film."¹⁹⁰

In the spring of 1937, Hays' impulses were more educational than documentarian. His plans to establish a "strong, socially conscious hill school" were put on hold, however, to hitchhike to Highlander to work on a project planned during his visit the year before — *Gumbo*, a southern labor drama about the plight of sharecroppers written and produced with Zilphia Horton and the Highlander labor dramatics students in a collaborative methodology Hays would carry to Commonwealth College and throughout the rest of his life.¹⁹¹ From Highlander, Hays wrote to the Williamses for help.

Dear Claude or Joyce or both:

I started over to Arkansas to live in Cross County, but I've been delayed here for a month or so to help Zilphia put on the new sharecropper play I'm writing on it, helping direct it, etc. Now, because of our poor state, we are wondering if we can use your gorgeous red curtains, those things you got for the Paris church I remember seeing them in that old trunk and while I do not know their size, Zilphia says they would do well It is for the sake of the r-r-revolution, comrades, that we ask Claude, I don't know where the hell you are, but if you do get this, kindly let me know when I'll see you. Things to talk about, pal.¹⁹²

become Head of Films at the Museum of Modern Art from 1965 until his death in 1979. See, Douglas C. McGill, "Willard Van Dyke, Ex-head of Films at Modern Museum," *New York Times*, January 24, 1986, p. 17, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/24/obituaries/willard-van-dyke-ex-head-of-films-at-modern-museum.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Hays and Hacker to the Contributors and Friends of the Sharecropper Film Committee, October 20, 1936, series 3, box 3, folder 69, Hays Papers; Rockwell Kent to Lee Hays, October 10, 1936, series 3, box 3, folder 69, Hays Papers.

¹⁹¹ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 46-47; Poster for *Gumbo*, series 1, folder 27, Kester Papers.

¹⁹² Lee Hays to Claude and Joyce Williams, n.d., box 17, folder 21, Williams Papers.

On neither the poster for *Gumbo*, where he is listed in the roles of both Mr. Bagley (the villain planter) and Brother White (a white union sharecropper), or on the script of the play does Hays take a writing credit. However, the play's final funeral scene — both a reprise and extension of the synopsis for *America's Disinherited* — reflects what would become Hays' trademark blending of southern religious radicalism with elements of left-wing theater in dramatic-musical form.¹⁹³ The funeral scene is the dramatic climax of a plot surrounding the murder of African American STFU organizer Frank Newell by white planters; in it, Hays, as Bagley, delivered a line reminiscent of but more menacing than the film synopsis. "There's goin' to be an end to this union stuff around here — or I'll build me a dam across the Arkansas River with the bones of you union n*****s!"¹⁹⁴ Coming after the revelation that Newell has been apprehended and killed, leaving a wife and child, the funeral scene — on a stark set with mourners, a pulpit, and a coffin — interweaves Hays' synopsis ideas of "rotting wealth" with Old and New Testament Biblical references, the call and response of African American churches, spirituals and songs, "the Social Gospel of a "kingdom of God on Earth," and a call to union action: ending, as had *America's Disinherited* with the STFU zipper hymn, "We Shall not be Moved."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Poster for *Gumbo*, series 1, folder 27, Kester Papers; *Gumbo*, Highlander Folk School, folder 1, box 57, Highlander Research and Education Records, 1917-2005, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, Madison (hereafter, HREC Records); Mary McAvoy in *Rehearsing Revolutions* states Hays acted in the role of Riding Boss, Big Boy Stokes. While the poster for *Gumbo* in Howard Kester's files lists Herschel Williams in that role, it is possible Hays could have played Stokes in another performance.

¹⁹⁴ *Gumbo*, 4.

¹⁹⁵ *Gumbo*, 6; The passage combines verses James 5:4, "Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty," Matthew 6:19-21, and James 5:1. Spirituals and songs include, "Oh Freedom," "No More Mourning," and "Mean Things Happening in this Land;" words for the latter two are credited on the play's cover to John Hancock.

As Brother White, Hays pronounced the union call in the play's final soliloquy: reprising sharecropper identity as "the disinherited," assigning to them true ownership of the planter's land, and through the power of union organization, the future.

However in this world did ol' man Bagley git the idea he could beat down a power like that! Where did he git the ground he walks on? We give it to him, didn't we? We worked it and give it to him. But the union books tell us: To the Disinherited Belongs the Future! Hit don't belong to Bagley and them, their day is gone! . . . Oh, the union stands like a mighty tree by the rivers of waters, and we shall not be moved! They can run us down and beat us and kill us, but we shall not be moved! This dead man here is our brother, and he's gone, but his spirit is still marching with us, and we shall not be moved—¹⁹⁶

Gumbo toured to unions in Tennessee and to ILGWU and auto workers unions as far distant as Atlanta. With its messages of religious radicalism and unionism, spirituals zipped with new words, and original music — the "title song" *Gumbo* was composed for the play itself — *Gumbo* represents the work of a nascent uniquely southern cultural front. Hays and Horton, at the forefront, used "art as a weapon" to educate and inspire southern workers to the potential power union organizing could provide.¹⁹⁷

As work on the play drew to a close, Hays began formalizing plans for the "strong, socially-conscious hill school" he had discussed with Sharecropper Film Committee the previous October. From Highlander on April 2, he disclosed to Willard Uphaus and Laurence Hosie plans to establish a school in East Arkansas on Crowley's Ridge for a biracial group of sixteen STFU families. The idea of service had become both real and compelling, he confided, and, with the help of Highlander friends, he had realized a practical way to serve. To begin, Hays hoped to "buy land and build a place to live, for myself and for one or two other families," develop resources to farm sub-marginal land, study the people's educational needs and develop a

¹⁹⁶ *Gumbo*, 7-8; *The Disinherited* is the title of a 1933 proletarian novel about coal miners by Jack Conroy whom Hays would come to know within the year, and who, within two years, would publish Hays' writing.

¹⁹⁷ McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 159; *Gumbo*, cover.

program of workers' education to "aid the Union struggle for socialized agriculture" and improved living conditions, and "To develop my own mental and physical resources, now sadly lacking." He confessed he feared becoming "one of the cranks who infest the movement, without purpose," and believed his plan provided "the fairest chance to regain my strength while at the same time laying the basis for my life work I am beginning to live in this way and believe that, considering the depression, it is the best way to live. I hope the project will educate me more thoroughly than ten years of university study."¹⁹⁸

Hays also wrote Kester, addressing him now as "Buck" — the nickname used by Kester's friends and associates. Writing from Sonora, Kentucky on April 30, where he was working on a farm and "trying to get well,"

The time has come when I can tell you about my plans to work near my home in East Arkansas. I didn't want to take your time in consideration of these plans until I was pretty sure of my ground. The folks in Cross County with whom I lived and worked on the farm last summer asked me repeatedly to start a 'school' for them and their kids. They don't know what they mean by 'school' but they do have a conviction of inadequacy to face their problems. Several of them have asked me to teach them to read and write so that they might organize for the Union. All of them need education in subsistence living, health, recreation, and the like.

Having no capital, he would not attempt a comprehensive project, Hays said, but felt capable of doing "these few things:" buying a "little land to build a home for the project. To begin to grow vegetables. To direct social recreation. And to give a few hours to these men who want to learn to read and write for their union's sake — I should not presume to take part in Union affairs, or even to give Union teaching until the project had proven worthy. But I should hope that ultimately my place might become a Union center." The Highlanders pledged help with books and materials, and Hays had "the support of a good many people who will see me

¹⁹⁸ All quotations, Lee Hays to Laurence Hosie and Willard Uphaus, April 2, 1937, series 4, box 5, folder 40, Hays Papers.

through, but more important, I have the support of the folks on Crowley's Ridge. Perhaps the plantation workers are the backbone of the union, but the hill farmers have a little security left, and afford the only basis for workers' education. At any rate, I am closer to them than to the others.¹⁹⁹

After months in the East working with the National Committee for the Support of Claude Williams, the NRLF, and "trying to help the union in various ways," including producing a film and co-writing and producing the first sharecropper play, Hays, having passed his twenty-third birthday the month before at Highlander, wanted to return to Arkansas and establish an outpost for workers' education beginning on the most basic level — growing vegetables and teaching people to read and write. Cross County on Crowley's Ridge was a logical location for Hays' school for a number of reasons. As Hays had seen, there was real need. Farmers hit hard by the flood of 1927 and the drought of 1931 now struggled to survive the Depression. Having witnessed the scarcity of fresh food while filming the summer before, growing vegetables on sub-marginal land was, for Hays, a project aimed not only at improving living conditions but chances for survival. That he felt "closer" to the hill country farmers was likely not only because he had spent time with them filming but because he was known to them as the son of a Methodist minister remembered for dedication to education and working among rural churches. As presiding elder for the Forrest City District in the North Arkansas Methodist Conference, William B. Hays would have frequently traveled to area towns along the ridge, including not only Forrest City, but Colt just ten miles distant (and fourteen miles from Cross County) where Hays had written the Sharecropper Film Committee the previous October. With his family, Hays

¹⁹⁹ Lee Hays to Howard Kester, series 1, folder 15, Kester Papers. The letter is dated April 30, 1935, but this appears to be a misdating by Hays, who refers to the sharecropper film more than once, closing by asking for Kester's critique of it. Discussion of the hill school first appears in the October 1936 letter to the Sharecropper Film Committee of which Kester was a member.

had lived in towns within twenty-nine to sixty miles from Cross County — Forrest City, Paragould, and Newport. As further incentive, Memphis, where the STFU headquarters had moved in 1935, was just fifty miles away across the Mississippi River. From “his home in East Arkansas,” then, Hays’ plans to establish a school of basic education which would be of service to those around him and a potential outpost of workers for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union were both reasonable and pragmatic.²⁰⁰

How much Hays knew of the turmoil within the union surrounding Claude Williams during this time is not clear. He never alluded to it in letters to Kester, and there are few existing letters between Hays and Williams from this time. While Hays was writing the synopsis for *America’s Disinherited* in January of 1937, Williams “fell apart with rage” at the third annual convention of the STFU in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Pressures — national, local, and from within — were fracturing the southern radical coalition along the fault line of communist affiliation. With increasing national coverage of the STFU, sharecropper evictions, and issues of farm tenancy, Franklin Roosevelt, facing an upcoming election, “ordered Henry Wallace to name a President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy.”²⁰¹ Roosevelt’s decision, in turn, refocused attention on issues of communism within the union. The alliance between the STFU and Commonwealth College splintered as the college faced accusations from the pulpit, press, and state legislature — in the form of the Horton sedition bill — of practicing communism, racial equality, and free love.²⁰² The STFU was under pressure from not only local sources but from Socialist Party

²⁰⁰ In his letter to Hosie and Uphaus, Hays provided the location of the land: “On the map you will see Highway 1 between Wynne and Forrest City,” [the land was] “off the road East of Colt, a few miles out of Wynne.” Hays to Laurence Hosie and Willard Uphaus, April 2, 1937, series 4, box 4, folder 40, Hays Papers; Nancy Hendricks, “New Deal,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, Central Arkansas Library System, last updated, September 9, 2020, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/new-deal-4852/>.

²⁰¹ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 79; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 130-135, quotation, 130.

²⁰² Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 130-135; Attacks came from the pulpit and in pamphlet from Mena Baptist pastor L. D. Summers. In January 1937, Herman Horton, a state representative from Jonesboro the same age as Hays (twenty-

officials in New York and Chicago who wanted the union free from CP influence. Questions of communism likewise arose from powerful leaders in the religious left. When asked by Reinhold Niebuhr to explain the differences between the STFU and the Alabama-based Sharecroppers' Union (SCU), Howard Kester, who had founded the Tennessee Socialist Party local in 1932, responded the STFU was larger, multi-racial, and "non-political" while the SCU was "communistic."²⁰³

At the Muskogee convention where the STFU hoped to cement an alliance with the CIO through UMWA representative David Fowler, mounting pressures exploded. After ill-advised interviews by the Commonwealth delegation were used by local press to support swirling accusations against them, Williams, campaigning for directorship of Commonwealth, sided with the college delegation; Fowler, Williams' combatant since the Paris days, walked out claiming love of "God and Country" prevented his association with such radicals. Kester, Mitchell, and Gardner Jackson, fearing Fowler's negative influence on a CIO alliance, signed an agreement Mitchell later described as an "asinine [sic] collection of words with very little meaning" to disassociate the STFU from political parties and labor schools — specifically Highlander Folk School and Commonwealth College.²⁰⁴ Williams took this as a personal affront: not only because of his enmity with Fowler, but because he had been covertly selected as Director of Commonwealth; recently elected national Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers; and because he took the agreement as sign Mitchell, Kester, and Jackson were forcing him out of the union per Fowler's directions. Hoping to maintain his status through popular vote,

three) announced he would introduce a sedition bill aimed directly at the school and by implication at its ally the STFU. Cobb, *Rural Education*, 173.

²⁰³ Robert F. Martin, "A Prophet's Pilgrimage: The Religious Radicalism of Howard Anderson Kester, 1921-1941," *The Journal of Southern History* 48 (November 1982): 519.

²⁰⁴ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 152-153, quotation, 152; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 76-79; H. L. Mitchell to the National Executive Council of the Socialist Party of America, February 2, 1937, series 1, folder 27, Kester Papers.

Williams accused Mitchell and Jackson from the floor of the convention of fascist appeasement by supporting “racketeering, red-baiting, and dictatorial Dave Fowler,” ran for the union’s executive council, lost, and left, still angered by the convention, for another speaking trip to the east coast.²⁰⁵

It is not surprising that support for Williams for the Directorship of Commonwealth was far from whole-hearted within extended radical coalition. Though they claimed admiration for Williams, neither Roger Baldwin, tasked with granting monies to Commonwealth from The American Fund for Public Service (AFPS), Norman Thomas, H. L. Mitchell, nor Howard Kester supported Williams’ hiring: fearing his damaged relationship with the UMWA and Arkansas Federation of Labor would impede his ability to administer Commonwealth and that his flamboyant volatility might not only fracture any possible alliance between the STFU and CIO, but incite further red-baiting. Reinhold Niebuhr, who just three years before had written in support of Williams in the *Christian Century*, now wrote Kester, “Is that school going to the dogs completely. He certainly lacks the balance to run a school.”²⁰⁶

Doubts extended not just to Williams but to the viability of Commonwealth itself. Based on recommendations from Kester and Mitchell the year before, Baldwin informed Charlotte Moskowitz a complete reorganization of the College, entailing “a responsible board composed chiefly of southern backers, better selection of faculty and student body . . . and less emphasis on politics,” was required, that the appointment of Williams was “very unfortunate,” and that “it should be clear that that school has been too radical for the movement it professes to serve.” Even Kester questioned Williams’ involvement in the union without direct control. For six

²⁰⁵ Claude Williams quoted in Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 79; Cobb, *Rural Education*, 181.

²⁰⁶ Cobb, *Radical Education*, 181-182; Reinhold Niebuhr quoted in Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 165; Reinhold Niebuhr to Howard Kester, August 1937, series 1, folder 36, Kester Papers.

months, as his hiring appeared to be postponed pending reorganization, Williams worked behind the scenes to secure Commonwealth's directorship by discrediting supporters of the Muskogee Fowler document — particularly H. L. Mitchell. Mitchell and Kester were not serving on the STFU Executive Council in June 1937 when, as the *March of Time* reenactment of Williams' beating hit the nations' theaters and his notoriety reached an all-time high, Williams requested and received approval from the STFU for his plan to reorganize Commonwealth — and with it, union sanction for his “candidacy for directorship.” Upon discovering Williams' *fait accompli*, Howard Kester proffered an olive branch: nominating Williams to the union's Executive Council. Six months after Muskogee, the August 15, 1937, edition of the *Commonwealth College Fortnightly* announced Williams as Director of Commonwealth College. By September, Hays was working with a “socially-conscious” school in Arkansas though not in the way he had envisioned. The September 1, 1937, *Fortnightly* announced Lee Hays, the college's new Instructor of Workers Dramatics.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 82-83; Cobb, *Radical Education*, 181-182; “responsible board,” “very unfortunate,” Baldwin quoted in Cobb, *Radical Education*, 181; Roger Baldwin to Charlotte Moskowitz, February 3, 1937, series 1, folder 27, Kester Papers; “professes to serve,” Roger Baldwin to Charlotte Moskowitz, February 18, 1937, series 1, folder 27, Kester Papers; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 51; “Arkansan Will Lead Labor Dramatics,” *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, September 1, 1937, p. 2.

Chapter 3

We Are Not Alone

Michael Denning posits theater as the “model for collective activity” among radical artists of the cultural front. Hays’ Workers Dramatics program — focused on collective creation to meet the needs of students, the local community, and southern workers — created a new model for southern labor drama: ushering in a “cultural renaissance” at Commonwealth so successful the New Theater League hoped to make the college a center for labor drama in the South.²⁰⁸ When Hays took the job in September 1937, however, he was absorbed with developing curricula for a flagging program. “Emphasis will be placed upon the drama as a weapon for union organization,” Hays wrote in the *Commonwealth Fortnightly*, to “meet a need long felt in workers education in the South.” Students of Workers Dramatics would study plays with “social content” pertinent to labor; those produced by workers groups, labor schools, and unions; the influence of the film and theater industries in shaping public opinion; as well as “labor songs, mass chants and other theatricals.” “Most important,” Hays concluded, students would write and produce the plays themselves, learning “to use dramatics in attacking their own social, economic and organizational problems.”²⁰⁹

The immediate demands at Commonwealth gave Hays little time to ponder pedagogy. He was responsible for producing a popular weekly program of performances each Saturday, performed both on campus and off, for Commoners and the neighboring community. In October, he put out a call in the *Fortnightly* for donations of plays to the Commonwealth Library. By

²⁰⁸ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 366; McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 193-195; “Arkansan Will Lead Labor Dramatics,” *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, September 1, 1937, p. 2; Hays, “Workers Dramatics,” p. 2; Lee Hays, “Dramatics at Commonwealth Must Serve Needs and Aspirations of Labor Audiences,” *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, January 15, 1938, p. 2; Cobb, *Radical Education*, 192.

²⁰⁹ Hays, “Workers Dramatics,” p. 2.

January 1, 1938, he had received over two hundred, including the complete collection of plays published by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) sent by the union's educational director, Mark Starr. Two months after his arrival, the Commonwealth dramatics program mounted its first production — a skit adapted from Florence Lasser's ILGWU pamphlet, "Who's getting excited?" The second, *97¢*, written and produced by Hays and the dramatics students, was performed for the Commonwealth Association meeting on December 4 and 5 less than a month later. These initial performances set the pace of Hays' productions: numbering well over fourteen during his two years at the college.²¹⁰

Hays was not the only instructor whose classes were announced in the September 1 edition of the *Fortnightly*; the paper confirmed Winifred Chappell would be teaching courses in Labor and the International Scene.²¹¹ Chappell, who worked with Williams and Hays at New Era School in Little Rock, taught classes at Commonwealth in 1934, and enthusiastically supported Williams' hiring when questioned by Roger Baldwin, had left her position with the Methodist Federation for Social Service in June 1936 after coming under fire from conservative Methodist laymen attacking the Federation. Williams hired her as Commonwealth's faculty chair, in which role she ran the college during his frequent absences. Their partnership grafted a radical religious character onto Commonwealth and cemented a friendship between Hays and Chappell that lasted until her death in 1951.²¹²

²¹⁰ McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 190, 185, 196-197; "Dramatics Teacher Asks Copies of Play Scripts," *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, October 15, 1937, p. 2; "Dramatics Class offers Skit by Florence Lasser," *Commonwealth Fortnightly*, November 15, 1937, p. 2. The December 1, 1937 *Fortnightly* informs the play, *97¢*, was based on a pamphlet written by Thomas L. Stokes for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, *Carpetbaggers of Industry*. "Dramatics Students to Produce Original Play for Commonwealth Association Meeting," *The Commonwealth Fortnightly*, December 1, 1937, p. 4; "Plays Contributed in Response to Appeal," *The Commonwealth Fortnightly*, January 1, 1938, p. 3.

²¹¹ "Tentative Classes for Fall Term Announced," *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, September 1, 1937, p. 1.

²¹² Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 86-87; Cobb, *Radical Education*, 189; Miriam Crist indicts the Methodist laymen as both "reactionary" and "red-baiting." Miriam Crist, "Winifred Chappell: Everybody on the

Despite the turmoil of the college's reorganization and ongoing attacks, Hays remembered Commonwealth as one of his "golden places;" his two-year residence at the college marked the longest period he had lived in any single place since leaving Ohio three years before. Besides the excitement of developing a new dramatics program, Commonwealth's rustic campus in the Ouachita Mountains had much to offer Hays, for whom "the whole idea of a group of people living together and working in a joint effort" was an ideal way of life.²¹³ He was often the center of campus life. Waldemar Hille, dean of music at Elmhurst College who spent time at Commonwealth, remembered Hays "was able to lead and make everything hum." Donald Kobler, who had been with Hays and Williams at New Era School and moved to Commonwealth as Secretary, recalled "boisterous occasions" when, while working in the common room at "some mindless job like getting out a mailing," Hays led group singing. Improvising in ways that were "often amusing," and "sometimes inspired," Kobler recalled, "the Commons would ring with the excitement of a revival meeting as Lee led us, his 'audience,' through variations of a folk song or hymn" later performed by the Almanac Singers and the Weavers.²¹⁴ Everyone worked at Commonwealth. The farm allowed Commoners near-self-sufficiency and plenty of the vegetables Hays craved. This was fortunate since, in addition to teaching dramatics, Hays did much of the cooking — a job requiring rising at 5:00 A.M. to prepare meals to feed the fifty or more students and faculty in a dining hall adorned with a forty-four-foot-long mural painted by muralist, Joe Jones, the summer of 1935. However "golden," Commonwealth's rustic setting posed practical challenges to Hays' developing dramatics program. Labor audiences were in

Left Knew Her," 26-27. Chappell's influence was felt at Commonwealth prior to Williams' formal appointment. See "Tennessee, Arkansas Students Addressed by Com. College Teachers," *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, June 1, 1937, p. 1. Among her other contributions, the October 14, 1937 *Fortnightly* reported the MFSS donated one-hundred-eighty-three volumes to the Commonwealth library.

²¹³ Hays quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 59; Lee Hays to Myles Horton, n.d., series 4, box 5, folder 40, Hays Papers; Capaldi, "Wasn't That A Time!," p. 5.

²¹⁴ Waldemar Hille and Donald Kobler quoted in Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 53-54.

short supply, as was theatrical equipment. Students and instructor alike were distracted by the multiplicity of duties required to run the Commonwealth plant, and rural performances meant sometimes staging plays in locales where “hogs had taken over the building and released a brigade of fleas.”²¹⁵

Though years later Hays professed to know little about labor drama, correspondence from the Commonwealth years presents a different view. Following the production of *Gumbo*, Hays wrote Zilphia Horton a lengthy critique of the play’s productions, tour schedule, and overall efficiency: revealing not only Hays’ practical understanding of stagecraft and seriousness of purpose but the wit, humor, and friendship in his relationship with Horton — and by extension, Myles Horton and Ralph Tefferteller who performed in and toured with *Gumbo*. The letter likewise reveals something of the previous experience and theoretical grounding Hays brought to Commonwealth. “I once produced JOURNEY’S END,” he confided to Horton. “Starting with burnt tin we built half a set but finished with black drapes. The effect was startling, and a bit confusing. There is a unity in play production which should control every task.” Finally, Hays addressed what he felt was *Gumbo*’s greatest flaw:

The most important thing about the play which requires discussion is its use of blackface . . . do you consider it legitimate? I do not. From your position at Highlander, with its race policy as it is, you may consider it necessary to use black face as you perchance go into race problems as they relate to Southern labor. From my position, I would plan to use Negroes for negro parts, thereby further illustrating the reality of the problems of labor and race.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Cobb, *Radical Education*, 111, 121-125, 128-132; Hays quoted in McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 199; Lee Hays, “From 97¢ to Hushpuppy: Report of the Dramatics Director to the Second Annual Meeting of the Commonwealth College Association February 25-26, 1939,” St. John Collection, Commonwealth College Collection, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, p. 2; Max Brantley, “UA-Little Rock unveils restored Joe Jones mural,” *Arkansas Times*, August 22, 2018, <https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2018/08/22/ua-little-rock-unveils-restored-joe-jones-mural>; Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63, Hays Papers.

²¹⁶ Lee Hays to Zilphia Horton, folder 2, box 58, HREC Records.

Hays’ correspondence with members of the New Theater League shows his ongoing concern about appropriate racial representation in southern workers’ dramatics. See Jaquish, “An Examination of the Mythic Frameworks,” 26. The complete script of *One Bread One Body* may be found in full in Jaquish, Appendix C, 141-162.

Hays' "position," however, was, at the time of writing, a purely theoretical one; it would be five months before he was hired as Dramatics Instructor at Commonwealth — an institution with its own strict racial policies. Within the year, however, Hays had put many of his recommendations to Horton into practice. As the popularity of the Workers Dramatics program caused its extension to all students on campus, in January, Hays delegated: dividing students and faculty into groups to organize and write three plays simultaneously. Less than a year after Highlander's productions of *Gumbo*, Commonwealth presented its own sharecropper play, *One Bread, One Body* — a sequel to *Gumbo* written by Hays in collaboration with Dan Burnet, Commonwealth staff, and the dramatics students — at the February 26, 1938, STFU convention in Little Rock. Though different in tone from *Gumbo*, the play shows Hays' continued commitment to religion-labor work as a means to reach southern workers. *One Body* incorporates humor in a way *Gumbo* lacked, often against the still menacing character of Planter Bagley, reprised by Hays. The principal difference between the two plays, however, is message. *Gumbo* ends with a funeral call to union; in *One Body*, the power of union triumphs as members demand and receive a contract from Bagley for the season. Incorporating STFU hymns and songs soon to appear in Hays' first edition of the *Commonwealth Labor Songs*, at its STFU convention premier, union members appeared on stage as extras: suggesting African Americans and whites performed together. The point appears confirmed by the February 26 program listing O. H. Whitfield — initials used by Owen Whitfield, organizer of the Bootheel named second vice president of the union at the convention — appearing in the role of "Bill Stepps, a sharecropper." A year after the tumultuous Muskogee conference, having just returned from another speaking tour in the East, Claude Williams took the boards as "the STFU organizer."

Whether or not Hays was indeed able to cast African American performers, at the February 26 performance, there was no blackface.²¹⁷

Hays' two years at Commonwealth were a period of vital creativity in areas not directly related to the Workers Dramatics program; his work collecting folk songs was among that which most influenced his later work in the cultural front. In addition to his teaching duties and work in the kitchen, office, and writing for and often editing the *Fortnightly* — Hays sought out Emma Dusenbury, the beloved blind folk singer of the region, who promptly told him she was his distant cousin.²¹⁸ Hays frequently brought Mrs. Dusenbury to sing at Commonwealth's Saturday night gatherings, once stood guard with a shotgun on her porch all night when her daughter felt menaced by ruffians, and, with Waldemar Hille, collected some one hundred of the five hundred folk songs she kept in her memory: later teaching one of the best-known, "The Candidate's a Dodger," to the Almanac Singers in New York.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ "Two Classes Added as New Term Opens," *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, January 15, 1938, p. 1; "Sharecropper Play to be Given Campus Production," *Commonwealth College Fortnightly*, March 15, 1938, p. 1; Barbara Jaquish, "An Examination," 95-96. The cast list, including Lee Hays, Claude Williams, and O. H. Whitfield, is found in Jaquish, p. 142, as is the New Testament verse, 1 Corinthians 10:17, from which the play's title is drawn; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 90; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 167-168; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 183n49.

²¹⁸ Memoirs, Excerpts 1 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 63, Hays Papers; Lee Hays, untitled column in *People's Songs Bulletin*, April 1947, p. 11.

²¹⁹ Vance Randolph, "Ballad Hunters of North America," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 7 (Spring 1948): 7. Randolph states Hays "wrote down more than one hundred" Dusenbury Songs for the Commonwealth College library that were lost when the school closed, and that Waldemar Hille's recorded interviews with her from these years were also lost. Lee Hays, untitled column in *People's Songs Bulletin*, April 1947, p. 11; Lee Hays on Woody Guthrie, series 5, box 5, folder 49, Hays Papers; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 53-54; Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds: A Celebration of Popular Music in Arkansas* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 36-37. Though others collected Dusenbury's songs, including John Lomax, Vance Randolph, and Sidney Robertson Cowell for the Resettlement Administration under Charles Seeger, the Almanac Singers learned "The Candidate's a Dodger" directly from Hays who had learned it personally from Dusenbury in 1938 while at Commonwealth College. See, Stephen Winick, "The Candidate's a Dodger: An Electoral Folksong Tradition from Oral Tradition to Aaron Copland," *FolkLife Today, American Folklife Center and Veterans History Project*, (September 29, 2016) Library of Congress, <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2016/09/the-candidates-a-dodger-an-electoral-folksong-from-oral-tradition-to-aaron-copland/>; Lee Hays on Woody Guthrie, series 5, box 5, folder 49, Hays Papers; Koppelman, *Sing Out Warning*, 161.

As 1938 became 1939, Hays and Hille collaborated on another project showing both Hays' growing connections with the cultural front in the North and his desire to further the work of Commonwealth and the STFU in those circles. Hitchhiking to Chicago, Hays and Hille performed on January 22, at the Chicago Repertory Group theater, a program for striking newspapermen to benefit Workers Education Libraries they titled, *We Shall All Be Free*.²²⁰ Alongside a caricature of "Big Lee Hays," the flyer for the event announced, "Commonwealth College Comes to Chicago. Arkansas Dramatist Collector Southern Songs to Give Program." Introduced by Jack Conroy, author of the novel *The Disinherited* and editor of *The Anvil*, Hays' performance script describes a radical hope for the future in a remarkable combination of religion, humor, and "labor-Chautauqua" style lecture recital that would become a Hays trademark.²²¹

"An amazing thing is happening in the South," it begins. "We are moving from the old boss-slave economy into a new South — a South of struggle against tyranny, of militant union action. For we have heard the good news of unionism, that if we stand like a tree by the living waters, we shall all be free." With more humor, it continues, "Two great southern industries: Cotton and hymnbooks. We have always sung hymns," and "The Commonwealth College collection of southern labor songs contains hymns and spirituals and their parodies, folk songs

²²⁰ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 56; Draft copy of script for *We Shall All Be Free* by Lee Hays and Waldemar Hill, box 13, folder 664, Jack Conroy Papers.

²²¹ Flyer, *Commonwealth Comes to Chicago*, January 22, [1939], box 13, folder 664, Jack Conroy Papers. Chautauqua variety entertainment and lecture series was a form of entertainment and education with which Hays would have been familiar. Founded by Methodists in Chautauqua, New York, Chautauqua was especially popular in the 1920s. Between 1920 and 1924, over ten thousand communities sponsored a program each year; in 1924, the "Jubilee Anniversary" of Chautauqua, an estimated forty million Americans attended Chautauqua circuit performances. See John E. Tapia, *Circuit Chautauqua: From Rural Education to Popular Entertainment in Early Twentieth Century America* (North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1997), 7. McAvoy provides a thorough discussion Labor Chautauqua, (acts alternating with songs) originating at Brookwood Labor College and written and performed at Highlander Folk School on pp.151-152, 156-158, as does Colette A. Hyman *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996), 212-215, who informs Brookwood employed puppet troupes in its performances, as did Hays in his second year at Commonwealth.

and their parodies, original folk songs of social content.” Hays’ script could well have been describing his work with the Almanac Singers and the Weavers over the next three decades. Interspersed with spoken word and examples of parody songs — he had not yet begun using the term “zipper song” — Hays ended the program with the song he taught the Social Action Fellowship at Judson Street Church two years before. His “parody” demonstrates how new words in familiar settings transform a song’s meaning from powerlessness to empowerment: creating a vehicle for both union organizing and a sustaining “culture of unity.”²²²

Hungry, hungry are we —
We don’t get nothing for our labor, so
Hungry hungry are we.

Angry, angry are we —
We don’t get nothing for our labor, so
Angry, angry are we.

No matter that they used to sing:

Wearry, weary am I —

For they have a new song:

Landless, landless are we —
Homeless, homeless,
Raggedy, raggedy,
Hungry —

Union members are we,
Just as union as union can be,
We’re gonna get something for our labor,
For union members are we!²²³

²²² Draft copy of script for *We Shall All Be Free* by Lee Hays and Waldemar Hill, box 13, folder 664, Jack Conroy Papers; Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66, 1-2; Lizbeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 333; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, citing Lizbeth Cohen, 20; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 57.

²²³ Flyer, *Commonwealth Comes to Chicago*, January 22, [1939] and Draft copy of script for *We Shall All Be Free* by Lee Hays and Waldemar Hill, box 13, folder 664, Jack Conroy Papers.

Jack Conroy further cemented the alliance with the southern coalition by taking Hays out for drinks with *New Anvil* co-editor Nelson Algren to their “favorite saloons,” where, as part of their W.P.A. Writers Project assignments, Hays recalled, Conroy and Algren recorded graffiti from “washroom walls.” The following March, Hays’ first published prose appeared in the inaugural edition of *The New Anvil*. That Hays chose as his first publication “Two Dreams of John Riley,” his account of an African American STFU organizer’s prophetic visions for political, social, and economic justice, shows Hays’ ongoing determination to educate the northern cultural front to the struggles of sharecroppers and the southern radical coalition.²²⁴

“Two Dreams” was not Hays’ first publication in the “little mags.” The previous January, *New Masses* editor Mike Gold published Hays’ trenchant “Wants Communist Poetry” in the letters to the editor section. Critiquing *New Masses* featured poets, Hays declared, “Their poetry does not sing to me, Awake! Or shout, Arise! or thumb its nose at my masters, or help me aim my kicks at my masters’ britches It is too much to ask that *some* communist poetry be written for workers and worker-audiences that some communist poetry speak to me and other rank-and-file workers of a Soviet America — and of our own bloody struggle for democracy!”²²⁵ Hays’ critique may have had results, for in August, his prose piece “Let the Will . . .” appeared on the page following the poem “Red Clay Blues.” Co-authored by Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, the poem’s lines “I want to see the landlords runnin’ cause I/Wonder where they gonna go!” dovetail like a single song into Hays’ opening “In Cotton Plant, Ark., I

²²⁴ Lee Hays, “Two Dreams of John Riley as recounted to Lee Hays,” *New Anvil*, March 1939, p. 12. The *New Anvil* replaced *The Anvil* which ceased publication in 1935. The first edition, in which Hays was published, stated, “*The New Anvil* is launched at a time in which the issues of three years ago have been immeasurably intensified.” Among these issues were the increasing power of world-wide fascism and reaction, the resistance of trade unionism, and the actions of the Dies Committee; the editors encouraged support of Federal Arts, Writers, and Theater Projects, and pledged “as much as writers may, [to] assist in shaping the course of events toward a democratic victory over the dark forces of oppression and aggression.” *New Anvil*, March 1939, pp. 3-4; Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 3; Algren may be best remembered for his 1955, novel, *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

²²⁵ Lee Hays, “Wants Communist Poetry,” *New Masses*, January 11, 1938, p. 21.

heard a Negro congregation singing an old hymn, ‘Let the will of the Lord be done.’” Hays describes in print, as he had in the Chicago performance, the process of creating from hymns and spirituals, “good union song(s).” As the song phrase “the will of the Lord” is changed, first, to “the will of the union,” then “the will of the People,” and finally, the single word “Organize!,” the hymn’s meaning shifts from resignation to empowerment through organized labor and democratic dissent. In creating new hymns of dissent, Hays was following in a long line of Dissenters, among them, the Wesleys, for whom hymns provided not only a means of devotion but a means of “collective identity.”²²⁶

Hays was still educating the cultural front about STFU struggles and the power of collective singing in 1947. In a February-March *People’s Songs* column, he described the terror of driving through a dark Arkansas night. Riding in a car known to local planters, with an African American man, a white woman, a young boy, and a union organizer “hated . . . so much that riding bosses had caught him and flogged him with the belly band of a mule harness,” Hays was afraid. He could sense the man and woman in the back seat beside him “tightening up every time we passed a car or went through a town.” To strengthen their resolve on that night, they sang, not the “good union songs,” but hymns with “harmonies swelling and breaking . . . bass voice giving way to sweet soprano, the organizer’s raspy baritone coming in with a verse or a chorus one hymn after another, and all the voices searching, working for harmonies unheard and unknown, perfect blends of tones and feelings and fears.” It came to him that night that the words did not matter; it was the “drawing together of inner strengths, and what mattered was that

²²⁶ Lee Hays, “Let the Will . . . :,” p. 15; On Methodism and dissent, see, Jay R. Case, “Methodists and Holiness in North America,” and D. Densil Morgan, “Spirituality, Worship, and Congregational Life,” in *Oxford History of Dissenting Protestant Traditions* eds. Timothy Larsen and Michael Ledger-Lomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 211-213, 519-520.

each offered his voice to the others, and his own strength.”²²⁷ It is a prescient column: one that reveals Hays’ beliefs not just about the power of music, but about the workings of humans’ interwoven relationships and his conviction that an “ideal way of living” meant gathering strength from cooperative collaboration — merging the creative, political, and religious, into a singular life work.

Hays’ flurry of performance and nationally published writings in 1939, documenting the work of Commonwealth and the STFU, may reflect a realization that his “golden period” at the college was coming to an end. Claude Williams’ problems with the union only intensified after becoming Commonwealth’s Director. In the aftermath of Muskogee, as anti-communist feeling increased both within the union and — with the formation of the Dies Committee — the nation at large, H. L. Mitchell accused Williams of Communist Party membership. Responding, Norman Thomas suggested Mitchell bring formal charges of holding dual party membership against Williams to the Arkansas Socialist Party, and “make sure that some of our colored friends” knew Williams was now director of a whites-only institution.²²⁸ Williams’ suspected CP membership incited not just local disruption. His fund-raising stop in Cleveland, a week before Kester’s for National Sharecroppers Week, was interpreted by Harriet Young, director of NSW, as calculated communist sabotage. The STFU alliance with the CIO through the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) was likewise souring over perceptions of a communist takeover designed to eliminate the STFU. Kester, suspicious and angry after being “kicked out” of a meeting of the UCAPAWA executive board meeting in April

²²⁷ Lee Hays, untitled column in *People’s Songs Bulletin, First Anniversary Issue*, February-March, 1947, p. 15. Claude Williams who was beaten in 1936 with a mule harness, was, no doubt, the union organizer Hays describes in his column. On the beating, see Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 68-69, and Cobb, *Radical Education*, 111-113.

²²⁸ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 165-169; Norman Thomas quoted in Dunbar, 165-166.

of 1938, declared the STFU “must fight back or be ‘smashed like a potato bug,’” while H. L. Mitchell privately asked Gardner Jackson if John L. Lewis might not want to use the conflict between the unions as an excuse to purge communists from the CIO.²²⁹

Thus, the stage was set when J. R. Butler, STFU President and Williams’ frequent defender, found the morning of August 21, 1938, a detailed proposal addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party seeming to propose a takeover of the union for the CP in exchange for a \$500.00 grant to Commonwealth College. The document was in the pocket of a coat Williams, who had stopped at Butler’s home to rest on his way to Missouri, had accidentally left behind.²³⁰ Stunned, Butler reacted: first, calling a press conference where he accused Williams of being “red,” then writing Williams requesting his immediate resignation from the union’s National Executive Council — and that “Lee Hayes” and others “remove themselves immediately from the field of the STFU and that they desist from making or showing any pictures that may in any way purport to represent the activities of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union or the Southern Labor Movement.”²³¹

Williams convinced Butler to withdraw the request, explaining the document as a misguided, unauthorized student project, but when the question of his continuing on the Executive Council and in the union, itself, were put to a vote at his trial before the Executive Council in September, Williams was expelled by unanimous vote. Hoping for reprieve, he

²²⁹ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 168-169; Kester quoted in Dunbar, 169; Robert F. Martin argues Kester, who in 1934 considered himself a “revolutionary socialist,” became increasingly disillusioned by political activism, and, following a nervous collapse and extended period of rest and reflection in 1937 (possibly beginning with his reordination as a Congregational Minister in 1936) reoriented his ideas of southern activism toward religious rather than political action. This change coincided with a “violent opposition to Communists, real or imagined during the late thirties.” See Martin, “A Prophet’s Pilgrimage,” 525, 528-529.

²³⁰ Gellman and Roll contend Williams was on his way to the Missouri bootheel to assist Owen Whitfield in speaking engagements to publicize the plight of evicted sharecroppers. See *Gospel of the Working Class*, 93.

²³¹ J. R. Butler to Claude Williams, August 22, 1938, series 2, folder 265, Kester papers; Cobb, *Radical Education*, 120-121, 192-197; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 170-171.

appealed to the full union at the annual convention in Cotton Plant in December 1938 and was expelled by a vote of fifty-eight to seven.²³² As Commonwealth, now without funding from the AFPS or organized labor, canceled its winter session to regroup, Hays and Hille hitchhiked to Chicago to perform the *We Shall All Be Free*. In the middle of the program, Hays said, “This song illustrates an important characteristic of hymnology: the role of the leader . . . I have heard Claude Williams — Commonwealth’s director — improvise a whole song with three hundred sharecroppers, singing out verses like these: Join the union. It is able. It will help you. Get a contract. Boss won’t like it. Make him like it.”²³³

On February 26, after returning from Chicago, Lee Hays delivered at the second annual meeting of the Commonwealth College Association a report on the prolific work of the dramatics program from 1937 to 1939 — a period so successful, one scholar now argues Hays’ experimental approach placed Commonwealth not only at the vanguard of “southern labor drama,” but “perhaps even theatre practice as a whole.”²³⁴ In less than two years, Hays and the Commoners created well over fourteen productions. Plays on topics of northern takeover of southern industry, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, planter abuses of tenant farmers and sharecroppers, the poll tax, farm relief, and May Day were performed for “farmer’s union locals in East Arkansas and Calhoun County, for “local people,” and, Hays noted, four were published and “produced elsewhere.”²³⁵ The report also noted the performance of numerous skits and

²³² Cobb, *Radical Education*, 198-200.

²³³ Ibid., 200; Draft copy of script for *We Shall All Be Free* by Lee Hays and Waldemar Hill, box 13, folder 664, Jack Conroy Papers.

²³⁴ McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 196.

²³⁵ Lee Hays, “From 97¢ to Hushpuppy,” 2; McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 196-197. Commoners performed for the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union, the Indiana Farmers’ Union, and the Dallas Civic Federation; plays were published by the National Religion and Labor Foundation and the *Midwest Daily Record*. McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions*, 199. The *Midwest Daily Record* (1938-1939) was a radical newspaper published by the Communist Party. See, Christopher H. Sterling, *The Encyclopedia of Journalism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 79; *Midwest Daily Record*, (Chicago, IL) 1938-1939, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn86086388/>.

innovative development of marionette theater, both of which were components of the “Oklahoma show,” *Hushpuppy*—a four-part production the labor dramatics classes toured to striking Tulsa oil workers in December 1938 before Hays and Hille traveled to Chicago. All in all, Hays reported, “We took our plays to 3000 people, 2000 saw them produced by other groups. All our published plays have been sold out. The market for workers’ plays — easy to produce, well planned to meet the money limitations of workers’ groups and with specific appeals — is wide open.”²³⁶

With pride, he reported one play particularly effective:

WE ARE NOT ALONE: About the Blytheville Boys, falsely accused of rape. Published, used by the NAACP as a reading. Sent to a large number of Arkansans, urging them to free the boys by protesting. Apparently they did, for Governor Bailey’s secretary wrote me asking me to ‘tell my friends’ to stop writing the governor; and indicating that popular protest was having its effect.²³⁷

When Hays presented his report in February 1939, he did not yet know the outcome of the case that began in 1935 and continued to haunt him during his blacklist period fifteen years later. In many ways, *We Are Not Alone* was Hays’ final act before closing the curtain on Commonwealth. In the last months of its existence, the college became involved in the struggle to stop the execution of Jim X. Carruthers and Bubbles Clayton — two young African American men accused of raping a white woman in Blytheville. An April article in the *Blytheville Courier* announced Governor Carl E. Bailey had received a letter signed by Winifred L. Chappell, stating, “The students and staff of Commonwealth College through our joint action committee, urge you to use your influence in behalf of complete justice for the two Blytheville negroes, Jim

²³⁶ Lee Hays, “From 97¢ to Hushpuppy,” 3. *Hushpuppy*, comprised of two full plays, one marionette piece — complete with a fire-breathing dragon, as the “spirit of capitalism,” that breathed real fire — and numerous “Toby Skits and songs,” represented a significant production in dangerous territory. The shows were presented in a rented hall with set and stage equipment brought from Commonwealth; the home of the organizer in which Hays and the students stayed was raided and the organizer arrested by police the day after the Commoners left Tulsa. Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 54.

²³⁷ Lee Hays, “From 97¢ to Hushpuppy,” 3.

Carruthers and Bubbles Clayton. We do not want another Scottsboro Case; we do not want any negro left without the protection due him.” Having investigated conditions in Scottsboro with the Scottsboro-Herndon Delegation in 1934, Chappell was likely aware the case of Carruthers and Clayton had already been named “The Second Scottsboro,” by the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, the *Atlanta Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, and other African American newspapers across the country.²³⁸

We Are Not Alone, published on May 4, 1938, depicts Clayton and Carruthers in poignant conversation with their lawyer, Luther, about possibilities of their pending execution or release.²³⁹ Closing with a call to action, the last page urges readers to “USE THIS PLAY!” in local union meetings, in traces councils, and in churches; to mail letters of protest to Governor Carl Bailey; and, “Most important,” to send donations to Mr. Luther Moore, the President of the local NAACP — concluding, “Time is short. “Help the Negro people to secure justice for themselves by freeing the innocent Blytheville Boys.”²⁴⁰ The *Arkansas Gazette* reported hundreds of letters from across the country flooded acting governor Bob Bailey’s office demanding a stay of execution based on unfair trial practices and new evidence. On the night of the execution, however, in a special report from Russellville, the *Gazette* assured its readers, “Bob Bailey went to bed tonight with a clear conscience.” After years of staunchly maintaining his innocence, the *Gazette* reported, James Carruthers, seated in the electric chair at Tucker

²³⁸ “Commonwealth College Pleads for Negro Pair,” *Blytheville (AR) Courier News*, April 20, 1938, p. 1; Stephen A. Smith, “Arkansas ‘Scottsboro’ Case,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, Central Arkansas Library System, last updated January 24, 2012, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansas-scottsboro-case-6452/>. The Scottsboro-Herndon delegation traveled first to Georgia to investigate the treatment of Angelo Herndon then to Alabama to investigate the prison conditions under which the Scottsboro defendants were held. See *A Southern Welcome*, 3.

²³⁹ Jules Koslow and the Students of Labor Drama, *We are Not Alone*, (Mena, AR: Commonwealth College, 1938), William Gilbert Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. *We Are Not Alone* was, in Commonwealth’s collaborative fashion, credited to Jules Koslow and the Students of Labor Drama; nowhere does Hays’ name appear.

²⁴⁰ Jules Koslow and the Students of Labor Drama, *We are Not Alone*, title page, 3-4.

Prison Farm, had confessed. “I don’t mind admitting that confession was a relief to me,” the acting governor told the *Gazette* the day after the execution. “There was a tremendous amount of pressure on me and I did very little sleeping last night, pondering the case, but I couldn’t see my way clear to take any action.” Carruthers’ confession, the governor believed, was the “best answer” to those demanding a stay. Bubbles Clayton maintained his innocence to the end.²⁴¹

In 1953, while blacklisted and supporting himself primarily by writing, Hays mailed Robert Hille of *Ellery Queen Magazine* a letter, background information, and draft short story, asking for his opinion. In his cover letter, Hays confided, “I was very close to the case at the time I know I have not done justice to the case itself, which is a long tale of manufactured rape charge, heartbreaking legal battles, and final defeat when the youngsters were executed.” His explanatory notes continued:

In the late 1930s two Negro boys, Bubbles Clayton and Jim X. Carruthers were executed in the electric chair near Tucker Farm, near Little Rock. They had appealed their case and fought for their lives for about three years after their conviction. That they kept going so long was due to the efforts of their lawyers and also to the efforts of several white ministers who had become convinced of their innocence I got into this case in a very slight way when one of the ministers asked me to write a one-act play about the case, which I did. It was mimeographed and sent to churches in East Arkansas where it was either performed or read from the pulpit. I promptly received several insane letters from irate citizens and at least one threat, but also a number of warm letters thanking me for writing the play.²⁴²

On June 29, 1939, the night before the execution, Hays rode a bus “halfway across the state to Little Rock.” Reading accounts in the *Gazette* the next day, he was undone. “I stood reading it on Main Street crying,” he wrote, “for I was so shocked at the cruel story they printed. The reporter had obtained a list of foods the boys had ordered for their last supper and it was a

²⁴¹ “Carruthers Confesses as He Dies,” *Arkansas Gazette*, July 1, 1938, p. 7; “Carruthers Confesses as He Dies,” *Arkansas Gazette*, July 4, 1938, p. 13; Stephen A. Smith, “Arkansas ‘Scottsboro’ Case,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, Central Arkansas Library System, updated January 24, 2012, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansas-scottsboro-case-6452/>.

²⁴² Lee Hays to Bob Mills, November 5, 1953 with undated explanatory notes, series 3, box 4, folder 1, Hays Papers.

big joke — they had ordered things they could not have seen, ever, but only heard about; and they had to die to get all the good things.” Hays tried for years to write about the case and could not find a way to craft words to convey the tragedy or, perhaps, his epiphany about it. The story, he realized, could not be about himself, “a white southerner,” and his reactions, but “was the tale of two hungry boys, sacrificed to ignorance and bigotry.” Of the story he titled *A Banquet and a Half* he wrote, describing their “last supper is only a tiny part of their agony.”²⁴³

Ellery Queen Magazine published *Banquet and a Half* and included it, and Hays, alongside Ray Bradbury and Margery Allingham in the magazine’s honor roll of short stories for 1953. The story, based on the “last supper” of two young African American men falsely accused, draws a thread from Hays’ childhood haunted by lynching to his personal experiences of hunger hitchhiking the country, the want he found among sharecroppers while filming at Delta Farms, his hopes to alleviate suffering through religion-labor work with the STFU and radical religious coalition, to the Commonwealth years, and finally, the urban cultural front in New York. Throughout all, the suffering of disinherited, disempowered, and disenfranchised dominated his thinking, as did the idea that people organized and working collectively had a better chance at a better life, and that cultural work, both creative and performative, could bring people to a unified vision, inspiring a unity of action, that might just make a better life possible.

Banquet links Hays’ religious, political, intellectual, and artistic praxis across time and distance from the southern radical coalition to northern cultural front — from the “Old Left” to the Cold War Era of Civil Rights; it is but one such link, however. The best known are the twenty pages of Commonwealth Labor Songs Hays carried in his pocket, with those of Emma Dusenbury he carried in his mind, hitchhiking from Mena to Philadelphia and New York the

²⁴³ Hays to Mills.

summer after Clayton and Carruthers were executed. Through Hays' work with the Almanac Singers and the Weavers, these southern union hymns and folk songs were grafted onto the cultural front during Denning's "age of the CIO."²⁴⁴ In some cases, the Hays-Dusenbury-Almanac connection is inseparable. Hays wrote "Union Train" — one of his best-known vocal performances recorded on the Almanacs' *Talking Union* — based on "The Old Ship of Zion" Dusenbury sang.²⁴⁵ Two Dusenbury songs he taught the Almanacs, "The Dodger Song" and "The State of Arkansas," moved with him into the Weavers Cold War period. Hays' Commonwealth compilation contained other union and folk standards performed by the Almanacs, the Weavers, and later performers of the folk revival — "Roll the Union On," "We Shall Not Be Moved," "Casey Jones," "Solidarity Forever," "The Riddle Song," "Crowdad Song," and "No More Mourning." The original vision with Seeger was to create a "singing labor movement."²⁴⁶ Seven years later, during the Wallace campaign, Hays' "Sermon for Songwriters" dreamt of "a great people's song, of our marching song which will come again, but hasn't yet, of the great song which is still unsung." It would be a "battle hymn" sung in days of defeat and "on the day we celebrate our victory."²⁴⁷

In New York's urban cultural front, Hays embodied the southern religious left: encompassing in his background, work, and life experience the southern ministerial class; Methodist hymnody and spirituals expressing unity and dissent; southern socialism; labor colleges; and the STFU. To these, he added his talent, desire for community, creativity, skills, acquired knowledge, a pressing need to be of service, and a belief that art could be the vehicle

²⁴⁴ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 68.

²⁴⁵ Capaldi, "Wasn't That A Time!," p. 3; The Almanac Singers, *Talking Union*, Keynote, 1941.

²⁴⁶ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 62, 69; *Commonwealth Labor Songs: A Collection of Old and New Songs for the Use of Labor Unions* (Mena, AR, 1938). Two editions of the *Commonwealth Labor Songs* were published; the first during the college's 1938 spring quarter was followed by a second edition in the fall. Song adaptations are credited variously John Handcox, Claude Williams, Lee Hays, and Mark Starr of the ILGWU.

²⁴⁷ Lee Hays, "A Sermon to Songwriters," *People's Songs Bulletin*, *The Wallace Campaign*, April 1948, p. 11.

for rendering it. In the years prior to 1940, tracing a path of study, work, and publication between North and South, Hays contributed to both the development of a nascent cultural front in the South and to the urban cultural front in the North. In folk circles obsessed with “authenticity,” Hays’ Arkansas pedigree and southern labor work granted verisimilitude. In New York’s urban cultural front, Hays *was* the southern left. Thus, he not only brought north southern leftist culture, practices, and techniques; he was the perfect transmitter to convey them.

He was already in the East when the auctioneer’s gavel fell, and Commonwealth College’s three-hundred-twenty acres sold to the highest bidder. The school’s prized library of over five thousand volumes — to which Hays’ efforts had added some two hundred labor plays and over one hundred songs by Emma Dusenbury — was purchased by L. D. Summers, the Baptist pastor whose attacks from pulpit and pamphlet had precipitated the college’s downfall. The forty-four-foot mural, “Struggle for the South,” Joe Jones painted on the walls of Commonwealth’s dining room, survived. Painted on the Masonite walls of the Commonwealth dining hall, it made suitable building materials for a closet in Mena. In a brief but serious attempt to recreate the college as a New Theater School, the New Theater League began operations on the property deeded to them by Commonwealth on September 25. The experiment was over by October 12, when the League was charged with operating the school without a license.²⁴⁸ By the summer of 1940, when Lee Hays and Millard Lampell met Pete Seeger, Commonwealth College was gone. Hays’ correspondence from the ensuing years shows, however, that his connection to the people and ideas of the southern radical religious coalition remained.

²⁴⁸ Cobb, *Radical Education*, 207-208; Leslie Newell Peacock, “A Mural to Move Little Rock Forward: Restored Joe Jones Painting Centerpiece of new UA Little Rock Downtown,” *Arkansas Times*, December 27, 2018, <https://arktimes.com/news/cover-stories/2018/12/27/a-mural-to-move-little-rock-forward>.

“After the experience at Commonwealth,” Hays said of the reason for his journey north, “it seemed to Claude and me some of the others that the only way in which to spread our music was for me to go to New York and form a group and sing.”²⁴⁹ That Chappell, Williams, and the Commoners sent Hays — with sixty-five dollars and twenty pages of Commonwealth Labor Songs — hitchhiking thirteen hundred miles toward New York speaks to their view of both his resourcefulness and the strength of the radical web along which he traveled. After two years at Commonwealth, it likewise may have seemed Hays’ chances of success, and possibly of survival, were better outside Arkansas. Written in November 1950, eight months before her death, Winifred Chappell’s letter to Hays reveals much about her early confidence in his abilities, the ongoing connections within the radical coalition, Hays’ life in the cultural front, and his view of the political purpose the Weavers’ commercial success might serve.

Lee, it was because I believed in your talent that I gave you a little lift to get from C. C. to NYC. I remember remarking to you that the time would come when I would be retiring without enough to retire on; and that by then you would be realizing your creative gifts. Now that time has come and I am warm with satisfaction that you wanted to send me this check. I do not need it for necessities of the body, but I do for cultural food, so I am buying me a phonograph . . . mainly so that I can have some Robeson . . . some of Earl’s [Robinson] some Almanac pieces and some of your new things.²⁵⁰

Hays, whose work with the Weavers allowed him a degree of disposable income for the first time, had mailed Chappell a check for thirty dollars. From the Chicago Deaconess Home where she then lived, Chappell responded cheerfully to Hays’ other inquiries; her trip to see him in New York last year had been a highlight; yes, she was still in touch with Harry Ward; was delighted Lee was in close contact with Mike Gold; and yes, “sarcoma is a kind of cancer, but one that responds marvelously well to radiation — especially when, as in my case — it is in the lymph system.” One response reveals much about Hays’ conflicted views of the Weavers’

²⁴⁹ Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 4; Memoirs, Excerpts 2 of 2, series 3, box 3, folder 64, Hays Papers.

²⁵⁰ Winifred Chappell to Lee Hays, November 8, 1950, series 1, box 1, folder 15, Hays Papers.

commercial success and the purpose he hoped it would serve. “I am so gratified that you are in what you are in and that you are succeeding,” Chappell assured. “I think most of us *should* have stayed in the bourgeoisie field so that we could keep our purpose clear and bright. You are. We have isolated ourselves too much, and as you imply, have had to be supported in some fashion by the movement.”²⁵¹ In 1950, at the height of the Weavers’ success, Hays’ praxis was little changed. He lived cooperatively, worked collaboratively for “the movement” within a broader coalition, and still experienced its concomitant dangers. Though not on stage with Paul Robeson, he had “run the gauntlet”— with Guthrie, Seeger, Ronnie Gilbert, and Fred Hellerman — at Peekskill the year before.²⁵²

Ten years before Chappell’s letter, in April 1940, she and Hays became charter members of Claude Williams’ new venture in Memphis, the People’s Institute of Applied Religion: pledging to “assist its director in formulating the plans and policies of the organization; and to cooperate in its program.”²⁵³ Williams, who had suffered periodic bouts of tuberculosis since the 1920s, resigned from Commonwealth in August 1939 on the verge of nervous and physical collapse. Joyce Williams had likewise been diagnosed with the disease and spent much of the winter of 1939-1940 in the Arkansas Tuberculosis hospital. Hays never knew when he contracted tuberculosis, but in 1941, his selective service medical examination acknowledged probable vestiges of the disease in one lung.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Capaldi, “Wasn’t That A Time!,” p. 6; Lee Hays, “Simon McKeever at Peekskill,” *Sunday Worker*, September 13, 1949 reprinted in Koppelman, *Sing Out Warning*, 96-99; Lee Hays to Mother [Bloor], n.d., (copy of original) received by United States Government Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 12, 1949, file no. 100-86568-1A2 also included in United States Government Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York Division, Consolidation Memo, on Lee Hays, reference number 100-86568-29, February 17, 1953, FBI Records—100-NY-86568.

²⁵³ The People’s Institute of Applied Religion Charter Membership form, box 1, folder 16, Claude Williams Papers; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 108.

²⁵⁴ Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 76; United States Government Federal Bureau of Investigation, Lee Hays Selective Service Record Review, completed, October 20, 1952, file number, 100-86568-29, FBI Records—100-NY-86568.

Throughout his life, Hays remained loyal to Williams: defending him and supporting him financially with small contributions when he was at last able to do so. In 1962, when interviewed about charges of communism against Williams and their effect on Commonwealth, Hays responded that Williams had briefly joined the Party under the name Galey, but “let his membership lapse” when, as Director of Commonwealth, he had pledged to keep the college nonpartisan. “Everyone who knew Williams,” he continued, “recognized that, for him, program was everything and party was nothing; therefore, any concern with a man’s party affiliation was contemptible ‘red-baiting,’ the cheapest and most emotionalized form of attacking labor unity.”²⁵⁵ In 1979, Hays mailed a small contribution in response to a printed newsletter sent by Williams and his supporters about increasing expenses; Williams concluded the newsletter, “please let me hear from you again soon when possible. There’s still a lot to be done in this continuing struggle of ours for economic security, lasting peace, and world brotherhood.” Under this, in a handwritten note to Hays, he added, “Thanks for the ‘ten spot’ but the communication in words was the treasured message.”²⁵⁶

Hays’ tribute, written from Croton-on-Hudson and read, with many others, at Williams’ memorial service on August 4, 1979, reveals an influence on Hays more personal than political. “If I know Claude,” Hays wrote, “he died laughing Claude took me in during the depression. He and Joyce put me to work, taught me and kept me laughing during some of the hardest times the country has ever known Of course I tell people about the man who opened

²⁵⁵ Hays quoted in Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 173n28.

²⁵⁶ To colleagues and friends of Claude Williams from Scott Douglas, Director, Paul Robeson Social Club, Stephen F. Vause, American Federation of Teachers, and Judy Hand, Southern Organizing Committee, with second page note by Williams, May 1, 1979, series 1, box 2, folder 20, Hays Papers.

doors for me that led into the whole wide world of thought, ideas and love for humanity

Aren't you glad he was here? I am."²⁵⁷

However “anathema” were thoughts of memoirs in 1977 when Hays told Doris Willens he was giving up the project, his letter to Myles Horton, written after the documentary “Wasn't That a Time” and the Weavers Reunion Concert of November 1980, showed the prospect seemed brighter. “In my ‘posthumous memoirs,’” Hays wrote Horton,

I am reaching back to a lot of golden places like Highlander, Commonwealth, the Seeger Compound and others. The point will be that the most golden place of all is right here in Croton — like that famous old lecture Acres of Diamonds. Each of my golden places was a place I grew and learned, and I'm still doing that. I figure if I have about 80 more years on top of my present 67 I may get Just enough education to start living. My ignorance is astounding.²⁵⁸

Writing to Horton about Highlander's upcoming fiftieth anniversary, Hays was flooded with memories. “I remember Zilphia poaching eggs in milk and I have done the same ever since. And I shall never forget her dancing on the lawn in her billowing peasant skirt. Blouse too, of course.” He spoke of her influence and that of Claude Williams on his life and work. Through her, he had discovered the work of the New Theater League and the process of “using art as a weapon;” her uses of music, drama, and dance “opened up windows on a whole new world.” And she had introduced him to Claude, whose vision — not in politics, which Hays confessed he never fully understood — but in “his ability to reach for the talent in people,” remained with him still.

From reminiscing with his old ally, Hays swooped back to the present. Pete had come and worked with him editing the documentary the night before and “munched steadily until his departure around midnight.” The freezer was full of good things from last summer's garden, and

²⁵⁷ *Memorial Service: Claude Williams, 8-4-79*, series 1, box 2, folder 20, Hays Papers.

²⁵⁸ Lee Hays to Myles Horton, n.d., series 4, box 5 folder 40, Hays Papers.

Hays was planning the sowing for the spring. “Times like these,” he concluded, “I wish I were rich. I wish you could have heard the whooping and hollering at Carnegie. Even Pete says he has never experienced anything like it. I’ll have to settle for riches like that.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Ibid.; *Acre of Diamonds* is a lengthy speech by Russell H. Conwell positing the true riches in life come from doing good in one’s own community. Between 1870 and 1925, Conwell reportedly delivered the speech more than six thousand times to over thirteen million people on the Chautauqua circuit and by radio: a feat by which he earned eight million dollars toward the founding of Temple University in Philadelphia. See A. Cheree Carlson, “Narrative as the Philosopher’s Stone: How Russell H. Conwell changed Lead into Diamonds,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53 (Fall 1989): 342-355; *Acre of Diamonds by Russell H. Conwell, founder of Temple University; His Life and Achievement by Robert Shackleton* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/368/368-h/368-h.htm>.

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The Weavers: Wasn't That A Time, 1982; Directed by Jim Brown, Screenplay by Lee Hays, produced by Harold Leventhal, George C. Stoney, and Ginger Brown