By BILL REICH

Bill Reich, Commonwealth teacher, and Truman Peebles and Herman Streignant, students, went as a delegation to the Gillespie convention. Bill describes their experiences in the following article:

The recent expedition to Gillespie, Ill., differed from previous Commonwealth field trips in several respects. The destination of this foray was a scene not of violence and destruction but of a constructive conference of workers which had as its aim the conception of a new organization in the labor movement. This was the first official delegation to travel in true proletarian style, i.e., via "Hoover Pullmans." This mode of transportation was necessitated by lack of funds—fourteen dollars carried three people 1500 miles—and also enabled a more intimate observation of the condition of the poor and outcast enroute.

The Gillespie Conference of Jan. 29, though ostensibly called for the purpose of forming a new federation in opposition to the American Federation of Labor, changed its tenor soon after the meeting opened. Leaders evidently realized that an attempt to organize a new federation at the present time is a little premature. In spite of a rather vague discontent on the part of the rank and file of the A. F. of L., especially in localities where the Progressive Miners' union is strong, no acute situation exists which would assure the success of a separatist movement at this time. Progressives within the A. F. of L. realize too, that their withdrawal would leave the rank and file who do not secede at the mercy of the conservatives. Consequently, the conference, instead of giving rise to a still-born new Federation, decided to continue as an educational and agitational agency, exerting its influence to mold existing labor organizations toward progressive policies.

No agreement could be reached regarding a name for the new organization but after

continued page
MEET THE FOREMAN OF THE WOOD CREW

By WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM

Clay Fulls, a product of Arkansas, that wonder state, where the mountains have been eroded into a stony sensuality restful to the human eye and spirit; where boulders have been pulverized and mixed with rotten leaves into a kind of soil that nourishes pines and peanuts; where bugs eat leaves and rub their hind legs together ecstatically; where birch eat bugs and whistle rapturously; where misty sunlight warms the musical bugs and birch; where children know that monkeys do not turn into men, since there is a state law against that's ever having happened.

Wearing home-spun trousers and a Hick's shirt, Clay attained manhood in his native Cleburne County, but although he is to this day respected in that county, he very early formed the habit of leaving every week and thus distinguished himself as a young spirited.

It was kicked out of church. For a time he was involved in a feud and carried a gun. Years later he was fired from the government service and was kept out of the teaching profession because he opposed the war. Twice he has been the Socialist candidate for governor of Arkansas.

He was for several years an invalid, plucking at the coves; and he walks with a slight limp as the result of a near-fatal accident. He is lean and tough as a hickory pole. The top of his head is bald. His ears and feet are enormous. He lifts a sharp Adam's apple.

Clay is foreman of the wood crew at Commonwealth. No student can split as much stove wood, nor handle heavier logs, nor predict so well where a tree "wants to fall." He can tell at a glance whether a pine stump is sap or pitch. He admits readily that where there are fifty-sodd varieties of oak in Arkansas he can identify only about a dozen. He knows the call of the "sap-suckah."

I

For years he has been chiding, with rare literary skill, his fellow citizens of the Wonder State and of the South. For instance, in an article "The Sacred Poetry of the South," published in The American Mercury, he says: "Those illusory Eastern critics who are scoundrels of the scarcity and contemptments of the quality of literary prose in the South have not seriously overlaid one prodigious output of the artists of that great section. I refer to the voluminous, consecrated writings of the fundamental prophet-heroes who rape and sour from the Potomac to the Gulf. . . . These holy Southern troubadours invoke only the sacred Musas; they sing the glad, immemorial songs of Jehovah and the Holy Ghost of Moses and the Lamb. No infantile jingles about sixpence and pence, neither unseemly songs about peeping at Susie; no Lydian lyrics of women and wine; no epics of any rough-hewn herdsmen, save soldiers of the cross in sheet, no me-woolly themes engage their genius. It is God and His attendant angels: the birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and final second coming of Christ; the miraculous efficacy of the blood of the Lamb; the implicit salvation through repentance and faith; and advertisements of 'realty in New Jerusalem—it is such things that form the bond of their 'eyes.' The slow, creaking, lugubrious hymn of other days falls, in many instances, like jazzed up to a lively foo-fot. The old-time reverential awe of God the Father is still discernible. He still retains something of the cha-acter of a long whiskered judge—but the Son, so popular now in Rota-ian and Kwanian circles, is treated in a spirit of easy compare, kindly inspired hands keep up with that the latter-day metempsychoses of the Christian gods. Christ, especially, is not only anthropomorphic in their compositions, but metamorphic as well."

II

In his "Keepers of the Faith," several "sitting" of which were published in the Debow's, Clay lets the keepers of the faith speak for themselves. Thus:

"Elder Warlick: Yes, I recollect mighty well. When Simeon Smith died, 'Listen, Brother Warlick,' he whispered to me, 'can't you hear them singin' Over there? I can hear 'em just as plain. They air singin' "How Firm a Foundation."

"I listened an' store enough, Brother Brown, I could hear, faint an' far away, a great multitude of voices—sounded like millions—and I listened and I could hear the voice of my saintly father singin' 'lass an' in lessen ten minutes after Brother Smith died there appeared a ho' round his head. It looked sorter like moonshine an' it was plain as could be to ever' devout Christian in the room. A few days after, with opened the pillar he died on an' there was the brightest crown in it you ever seen... Its a crown of feathers—not a rale heavenly crown, Brother Danis, but it prefigurs the crown in glory the dyin' saint is about to receive. It was made and fashioned by Brother Danis. Then happened it that the pillar a Christian dies on has a crown in it. Really, I would be onesy about a Christian that died of an' you couldn't find no sign of a crown in their pillar. My mother found a crown in the pillar my father died on an' when she dug him up, he was buried that crown was restin' on her bosom."

"Brother Emnis: Well, well, I didn't know that before. But I remember when ol' man Washburn died—that ol' infidel that come down here from Boston. He died an' in an' a-rarin'. I didn't see him die, but they sent for me to come an' shave him. I didn't want to do it but I couldn't see much way out of it. Lord, how his old false teeth rattled when I started to work on 'em! An' all of a doggone sudden he'd get a laugh out of his nose. He'd be snappin' like I chopped the rock onto the floor. Yes, sir, he come as near as a digit one of my fingers off. I quit the job right then an' there and I feltin' finished it. I keep that ol' blood to me on dead Sundays but I never use it on a Christian."

Here indeed is an authentic picture of the folk of Arkansas. Some day "Keepers of the Faith" will be extended to a book-length, and to that folk students will turn for a true and wildly amusing account of what the Old Men were saying during the dark days of the twenties and thirties.

IV

Clay Fulls is an infidel son of the Wonder State, but a loyal son as well. Toward Elder Warlick and Brother Emnis, who have treated him so miserably, he feels a kindly contempt. He knows that nothing can be done for them; but for their children a great deal can be done. He hitch-hikes about the state on spiking tours, explaining patiently to Young Arkansas that it can, when it desires, help itself out of its present wretched condition.

For Young Arkansas, hungry y, cheated out of a chance for an education, suffering from a'c'oids and pellagra, Clay has the utmost enthusiasm. Mountain boys and girls, he believes, are going to do their share in building up a new civilization. In their log cabins, they are going to learn the truth, somehow, in spite of their elders; they are going to decide that they are not getting a square deal.

Already they are bathing once a week; and some of them at least have learned to smile at Elder Warlick and Brother Emnis.

When Clay is not touring the state he is splitting wood for the kitchen stove at Commonwealth, and teaching a course in farm problems to a class of boys and girls from various states, no better and no worse than his Wonder State.
SOCIETY NOTES

Few social gatherings at Commonwealth are songless. Amateur singing is encouraged at this labor school, perhaps more than it should be. At any moment the group may become savagely insistent upon hearing a song. "Let's have a song from Soandso! Commonwealth, Soandso! Aw, common!"

Soandso realizes that he is in a tough spot. No use to protest that he can't remember the words. Demand grows in volume until the party is in an uproar. Soandso is shoved this way and that, is badgered, belittled, belated, dared. He realizes that the only way to get attention off himself is to sing.

At the first sign of his weakening the group falls silent. "He's gonna sing. Keep still, everybody." He stares at the floor, clears his throat, blushes. There is a long silence during which his tormentors wait with bated breath. Then he looks at the ceiling, as if expecting strength to come from that direction. Rolling his eyes, he begins in a quavering voice. This will never do. He tries for more volume, hurling himself hurriedly, plunges recklessly into the melody, chokes, clears his throat, tries again.

But when it is all over he feels better. Maybe it wasn't so bad. The applause is heartening. Anyway he did what he could. In a spirit of revenge he cries out for a song from one of his former tormentors; he berates, belittles berates and dares. And so the process continues.

Most German students are good singers and remember many songs in their own tongue. We call upon them often, and although our German is not what it should be we try to laugh at the right place if the song is funny, and likewise look solemn if the song is very sad. We watch narrowly the Germans among the auditors for a cue as to when we should laugh and when we should look solemn, but we make mistakes at times—bad mistakes.

Of course there are talented singers in the Commonwealth group. The rest of us listen to them with awe. "I'd give anything if I could sing like that," we say. We feel that we could sing like that if only we had had the training. We have a sort of natural talent, but of course we never developed the talent.

At the opposite pole from the talented singer is the singer who cannot carry a tune, who cannot distinguish a high note from a low note. But the insidious thing about tunelness is that the tuneless one is never aware of his condition. He has been told that he cannot sing, but he has interpreted this as meaning that he cannot sing very well, just as he cannot sprint a hundred yards in ten seconds. He doesn't pretend to be a good singer nor a spritner, but he can't see any reason why he shouldn't either sing or run when he feels like it.

He cannot understand that his singing is not merely poor, but actually bad; that it is below zero; that it is much worse than no singing at all. Often such a tuneless one has great volume and remarkable revolutionary zeal. When the group attempts a stirring labor song he sticks out his chest, as indeed he has been told to do, and roars. Any attempt to silence him would be either ineffective, or cruel and unjust. We prize his zeal; we do not care to dampen his enthusiasm. We simply must let him sing.

But we have been given to understand that those of us who can almost but not quite carry a tune are really more objectionable than the utterly tuneless. In group singing we're not so bad. When we flat we are drowned out; when we get off key we find our way back, somehow, give us time. It is only when we sing as we walk across the campus that we do our real damage, or when we sing at our work.

Friends of ours who have an ear for music have tried in all kindness to make us understand their attitude toward our singing. It would seem that they can disregard the monotone singing of the tuneless ones, as they can disregard the noise of traffic, for instance. But when we flatters and off key singers begin warbling they are forced to participate.

They follow us in their mind's ear, correcting our flat notes, struggling silently to lift us to the proper pitch. Then, without giving any warning we change keys. Their very hair stands on end, they tell us. They feel an impulse to shriek; to attack and destroy us. Their nerves are shattered. They try to close their ears and cannot. Meanwhile, unaware of the havoc we have wrought upon delicate nervous systems, we sing a few flat notes and change keys again.

Our problem is a delicate one, especially at Commonwealth where irritations accumulate. We must either refrain from singing, and thus gain a reputation for being sullen and aloof, or we must tolerate those for whom we have the most kindly regards. There is one compensation, however. We are seldom called upon for a song.

Tuneless ones are sometimes called upon as a novelty, as a rare diversion, as a sort of burlesque of singers in general. But we, the nearly tuneless, are not quite bad enough as singers to be funny; and we are not good enough to be entertaining; we are merely painful.

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place implicit faith in the individuals with whom they formerly trusted their destinies. The tin gods have fallen and the workers are beginning to take things into their own hands; they are beginning to realize that they and they alone can work out their salvation. A militant, revolutionary atmosphere pervaded the entire conference. Another conference will be held in Gillespie on April 2.

As mentioned before, the trip to and from Gillespie was made by freight trains. Boarding a freight in Mena is a comparatively simple affair: the train pulls in around midnight and while the engine is replenishing its supply of coal and water one seeks an empty box car and crawls in. This box car usually travels all the way to Kansas City and once we were going to Kansas City we got off at Neosho and boarded the Frisco. Between Neosho and St. Louis is the Monett railroad yards wherein lurks the famous yard detective. We encountered one, a man from Monett Red who, it is said, takes a sadist delight in unmercifully thawing any unfortunate vagrant found within his domain. Consequently, as the train pulls into Monett, hoboes who know the ropes jump off and walk a mile or so through the town to the other side of the yards where the train can be mounted as it pulls out. At Springfield another notorious pummelling "bull" prowls the yards but we did not encounter him.

Our first mishap occurred after leaving Springfield: an unsympathetic brakeman put us off the train in a small jock car town at which none of the fast trains stopped. We were forced to hitch-hike thirty miles to Lebanon where all trains take on coal and water. We arrived in Lebanon on Saturday afternoon and the town was swarming with farmers. With wheat at twenty cents a bushel they have little money to spend but come to town on Saturday from force of habit. Utterances of despair and discontent were voiced all about us but so far this feeling of unrest has resulted in no overt action in this region. On the main street a Pente­costal preacher raved and ranted of the glories of heaven and obstructed the traffic while exhorting sinners to "get right with God." I wonder what would happen if a Socialist or Com­munist soap-boxer disturbed the peace and obstructed in this manner.

In Lebanon we met an interesting member of the tribe of 20,000 home­less boys. This one, a handsome lad of eighteen, had a knack of getting almost anything he needed by simply asking for it. While waiting for the train he obtained socks, overalls, tobacco and food enough for a Sunday School picnic from the good housewives of Lebanon. About six o'clock we boarded the "highball" for St. Louis and rode the rest of the way in the iceless-compartment of a refrigerator car, a "reerier" as it is called on the road. The rest of the trip to Gillespie was without incident.

After the conference we decided to take the Illinois Central from St. Louis to Memphis. We went to the yards and inquired about the trains. An old darkly told us, "They's glad to see you all get on these trains here; means less hoboer in the soup-line." It seems however, that on this particular day the railroad buses were not working hand in hand with the charity officials. As the first train pulled out a small army of wanderers started to mount it. The ball ordered us off and when we paid no attention to his command he started shooting. Such unexpected tactics frightened most of us and we complied to the delight of the railroad, of the yards to await the next train. Soon it gave the "highball!" (starting whistle) but alas! perched atop one of the cars was the bull with flashlights and horn who had decided to get on, bull or no bull. Again the shots rang out; the boys who boarded the front end of the train were put off but our party being near the end was not molested. At the first stop we found an empty box car, fell asleep, and awoke next morning in Memphis. From Memphis to Mena we travelled leisurely on the proverbial slow train through Arkansas. The trainmen we, without exception, friendly; the rivers and mountains appeared beautiful, framed by a box car door; and our companions, Southern knights of the road, were companionable and jovial.

Every train upon which we travelled was literally loaded with wandering men and boys—yes, and even girls, who with hair cut short and garbed in overalls are difficult to distinguish from adolescent boys. Most of these transients seem to be aimlessly wandering to pastures which are appa­ently more green. Many held responsible positions before the depression, not a few are high school graduates, while some have even attended college. Very few have a definite radical philosophy but nearly all listen to and agree with radical talk. The Southerners, poor white, with whom we came in contact exhibited violent racial prejudice, in some cases blaming all their ills, economic, religious and physical, upon the Negro.

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