

# [Marxism] (fwd) David Herreshoff dead

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Sat Oct 2 05:20:18 MDT 2010

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Some members of the marxmail list will be interested to know that David Herreshoff died about 10 days ago at the age of 88. He was a founding member of the SWP who was expelled in 1953 and became a secondary leader of the tendency grouped around the American Socialist Magazine. He wrote two books: "American Disciples of Marx" dealing with the early socialist movement in this country and "Labor into Art". He participated in the New Left and was prominent in the antiwar movement in Detroit. In later years he was active in the environmental movement in British Columbia, Canada.

The following are an approximation of my remarks from the memorial service which was held last Monday in Kaslo, British Columbia. (By the way, was I correct to say that Ralph Nader wrote something for the American Socialist - I believe I read that on marxmail)?:

Most of you in attendance here met David in the latter half of his life, after he and Jessie moved to Fletcher Falls. So I will concentrate my remarks on an earlier incarnation of the David that you all know and love.

I first met David in Akron, Ohio, on November 7, 1949, two weeks before he turned 28. To be honest, I remember nothing of that meeting, since that was the day on which I was born. He was my father.

At the time, he was a stalwart member of the Socialist Workers Party, a revolutionary socialist organization. He was going to school on the GI bill and working full time as an industrial worker in a rubber factory.

He had a reputation for lacking common sense, a reputation which, he worked to enhance for the rest of his life. One of his favorite stories from that time was of overhearing one of his coworkers exclaim: "Herreshoff - he wouldn't know how to pour piss out of a boot if the directions were printed on the heal." On one occasion he lost control of a wooden shaft which he was using to shape a truck tire. It went flying from one end of the factory to the other. His coworkers were afraid that he would get somebody killed.

David's technological ineptness did not come with a pedigree. He came from a line of engineers involved in boat building (America's cup champions) and mining. In fact, the Herreshoff name encroached on this part of British Columbia long before David set foot here. The first international air pollution case was tried in the early 1900's. It involved polluted air from Trail sashaying down the Columbia River valley and wiping out fruit trees in Washington State. One of the culprits in that case was a Herreshoff copper broaster situated in Trail.

Back to Akron:

Many of David's coworkers were Serbian and Croatian immigrants who carried their enmities with them from the old country. David was amazed that Tito had been able to unify these and other nationalities to carry out his revolution. He was also inspired by Tito's break from Stalin while carrying on a socialist project of his own. In 1950, David and his wife Doris made plans to go to Yugoslavia to participate in the revolution. These were scuttled by the refusal of David's sister Jeanne to take care of me and my brother Robert while my parents were gone.

David finished his undergraduate degree in three years, in spite of being a full time rubber worker and a young father. He received a prestigious fellowship which gave him the choice of pursuing his PhD at either Harvard or the University of Minnesota (among other places). Naturally he chose the University of Minnesota, because Minneapolis was where the Trotskyists had led a successful general strike in 1934 - one of three general strikes (the others being in Toledo and San Francisco) which created the conditions for the explosive growth of the United States labor movement.

We moved to Minneapolis in 1951 into the University Village, where several hundred students with families were domiciled in Army Surplus corrugated metal barracks which had been intended for use in the South Pacific. In the winter, the floor would be covered with frost and in the summer, the barracks turned into an oven.

David made up for his rapid matriculation through the undergraduate curriculum by taking eight years to earn his PhD. What took him so long was his political activism and his engagement with his family.

Although David left the SWP, he was still a left wing student political activist in the midst of the McCarthy era. In fact, his disaffiliation from the SWP and participation with a less sectarian group whose magazine the "American Socialist" included, I believe, contributions from a young Ralph Nader, undoubtedly enhanced the effectiveness of his campus activism.

He was an object of scorn to some of the residents of the University Village, scorn which was transmitted to me through the medium of their children who sliced my bare foot with a piece of broken glass when I was

two and a half years old.

David also spent a lot of time with his children in an era when that was considered woman's work. Bedside reading was a nightly occurrence which I enjoyed with my dad well into my teens. I remember many evenings when we gathered around the piano with David playing. We sang songs from the Fireside Book of Folksongs. Neighbor's used to know when I was coming home because they would hear me loudly humming the Bartok Mikrococosmos that my dad was playing on the piano. By the time we left Minneapolis, we had the longest tenure in the University Village, a status which was not highly prized.

After getting his PhD in American Studies in 1959 with a dissertation which later became his book "Americanizers of Marx", David was on the job market. Given the atmosphere of rabid anti-communism in the United States at that time, there were few job offers. Robert and I were enthusiastic about going to Fairbanks, Alaska. I shiver to think what would have happened to us had we ended up there. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed, and David ended up accepting a position in the English department at Wayne State University in Detroit. There, David kept a low profile for four years until he earned tenure. Then he emerged from the closet, becoming the faculty advisor for virtually every radical group on campus, ranging from Students for a Democratic Society, the Young Socialist Alliance, the WEB duBois Club, committees to end the War in Vietnam, UHURU (a black liberation organization) and many more. Although many of these groups had trouble getting along with each other, they all got along well with David. He took a thoroughly ecumenical attitude toward them - an aspect of David that many of you are familiar with through his simultaneous membership in more than one competing religious sect.

Interestingly, when I was growing up, David was a very passionate atheist and had an attitude toward religion which all three of his sons continue to hold. He took great pleasure in teaching the bible as literature. He believed that the bible was the work of human beings and not the word of God. He enjoyed engaging in his classroom with fundamentalist students who thought that the truth had been revealed to them in some magical way.

One of my regrets is that I never took a class from him. I did however get to see him in his element when I got him an invitation to speak in a class at UCLA. He came into the classroom without preparation, asked what poem the students were reading, and then did an extremely sophisticated line by line analysis of the poem, making reference to a wide range of literature that may have influenced the poets choice of metaphor.

David was elected to the board of the American Civil Liberties Union in Detroit and played a very prominent role in the antiwar movement both in Detroit and nationally, helping to organize some of the biggest

demonstrations in the history of the United States. He was elected cochair of the Detroit Coalition to End the War in Vietnam. He was known for his ability to cut through sectarianism and to bring people together to work toward shared goals.

Those of you who know my father through his environmental activism, might be interested in his attitude toward the automobile when we lived in the motor city. Our family must have been one of the few middle class families that did not own a car. David bicycled to work at the university, and installed a (very unsafe) seat on the back of the bicycle for my brother Matthew to ride in. (no helmets in those day). I'm not sure how much David's decision not to own a car had to do with keeping his ecological footprint small, how much it had to do with his disdain for a system that (in an urban environment) almost forced people to rely on an inefficient form of transportation, and how much it was because he did not want an automobile forcing economic decisions on him.

To be totally truthful, I should mention that there was a two month period when a friend took pity on us and sold us his old car for a dollar. I still remember the terror I experienced when the brakes went out on that car. David, as inept as usual, threw the car into reverse, which only succeeded in stripping out the gears and leaving the car effectively in neutral. We coasted slowly to a stop. Fortunately, no one got in the way. The car was retired from service.

I want to end by talking about my visit with David in the beautifully situated Pavilion nursing home this summer. It was clear that he was getting progressively weaker. He wasn't able to sustain a conversation for more than a few minutes. And yet when I played the cello for him he became present and alert. There are theories that our ability to use language is tied to structures in our brain which predate our acquisition of language as a species and are associated with music - that music is somehow more primal. That seemed to be the case for David at any rate.

I played pieces that David and I had played together when I was in junior high school as well as pieces which were new to him. I especially played Bach - his favorite composer. On one day, I kept asking if he had had enough and he kept urging me to play more. I played for a full three hours, interrupted only by the interjection of a "bravo, bravissimo, assai" from David between movements. I think those three words are an apt response to David's life.

I would like to conclude by playing a movement from the third Bach suite for solo Cello. This summer when I was playing for David I asked him when was the first time he had heard this piece. He told me that he was 5 or 6 years old at the time, and the performer was his uncle Albert. I will play the Gigue, a lively and joyful dance from Bach's 3rd cello suite. I would like to imagine David dancing free, celebrating a well lived life.

Peter Herreshoff

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