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JOHN BEECHER:
AN ACTIVIST POET CHRONICLES
AN AMERICAN CENTURY

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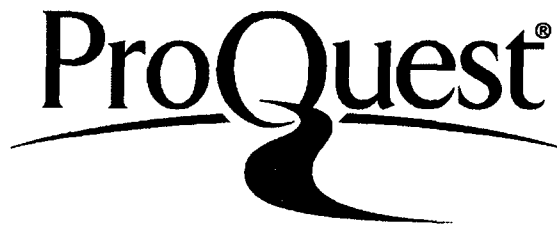
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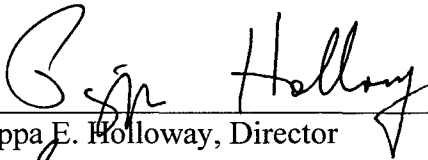


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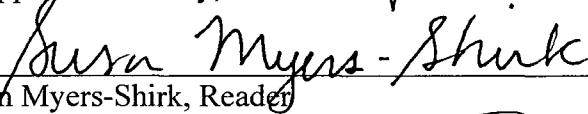
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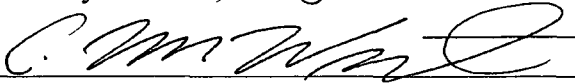
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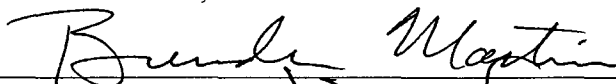
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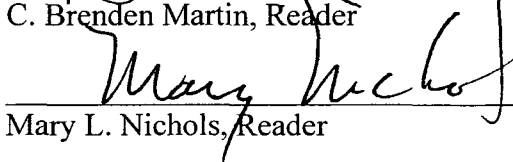
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ABSTRACT

John Beecher's legacy of poetry and non-fiction spans the pivotal social movements in America from 1920-1980. He was a great-great-nephew of the abolitionist Beechers of New England, and his own activism continued that tradition, from his work in the Southern steel mills in the early 1920s to New Deal programs in the Great Depression to civil rights reporting in the 1960s. He constantly surveyed the plight of people that he believed were marginalized by economic and racial injustice, unfair labor practices and anti-left political scrutiny. While some critics have compared him to noted American poets Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, he never gained wide critical acclaim or a significant public audience. However, his extensive letters and other papers and a dozen published books contain a record of public concerns in American history from the plight of workers in the steel mills in the 1920s to the sharecroppers' struggles in the Depression to the civil rights marches in the 1960s and their aftermath. The central aspect of my research is to study Beecher's life and work to learn how the culture and politics of the South intersected with the broader American culture at pivotal points in the twentieth-century.

CONTENTS

Chapter I: Introduction	1
Chapter II: The Family	7
Chapter III: Shaping Forces	25
Isabel Garghill Beecher, A Woman in the Public Sphere	27
A Short History of Tennessee Coal and Iron	34
Birmingham A City of the New South	44
The Beechers Move South	50
Education	55
Steel Mill	67
Father Coyle	69
<i>Alter Christus</i>	72
The Grand Tour	75
Cornell	77
Chapter IV: Becoming a Poet	83
<i>Big Boy</i>	85
Chapter V: Experimental College	103
Chapter VI: Government Work	119
University of North Carolina	120
Wilmington, N C	127
Sociological Research in Mississippi	140
Early Resettlement Administration Work	144
Birmingham Resettlement Project	147
Southern States Iron Roofing, Savannah, Georgia	162
FSA, Migratory Camps, Belle Glade, Florida	166
Excerpt from <i>Here I Stand</i>	178
FEPC	181
SS Booker T Washington	193
UNRRA	196
Institute of Social Relations	204
Chapter VII: The Loyalty Oath	208
The California Loyalty Oath	213
Beecher and the Loyalty Oath	224
<i>Inquest</i>	234
Chapter VIII: 1955-1980	235
A Small Press of Their Own	237
Return to University Teaching and a Long Walk	248
Reporting the Civil Rights Movement	253
The Final Years	263
<i>Conformity Means Death</i>	269
Bibliography	270
APPENDIX 1: 10 Thoughts and Tips for Public History Websites	293

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

John Beecher is best known—when he is known at all—for his poetry. His legacy, however, is much wider, and includes the poetry and nonfiction he wrote over five decades, the sociological research and observation he undertook for New Deal agencies, and the teaching that he cut short when he stood his ground against the Red Scare. He never had a far-reaching public audience in the span of his life, 1904 to 1980, but his work documents key episodes in the history of twentieth-century America. Though a man of the twentieth century, Beecher's roots stretch into the nineteenth century as well. As a descendant of the Beecher family of abolitionists from New England, he identified with and was inspired by the nineteenth-century Victorian social moralism of his ancestors. Regardless of his environment, whether he was in the Jim Crow South or among the New York intelligentsia, he followed his own moral compass derived from this sensibility. Many times those decisions led him down paths that made life difficult for his family, but that did not stop him.

Time after time, Beecher surveyed and documented the plight of people that he believed were marginalized by economic and racial injustice, by unfair labor practices, and by biased political scrutiny. While some critics have favorably compared elements of Beecher's poetry about the working class to the work of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, Beecher never gained their level of critical acclaim or public exposure. Despite the absence of a broad audience, he continued to write. His extensive letters, articles, unpublished manuscripts, and a dozen published books contain a record of public concerns in American history from the plight of workers in the steel mills in the 1920s, to

the struggles of sharecroppers in the Great Depression, to the battle for racial equality in the 1960s. In every one of those periods, Beecher was in a position to document the key people, places, and events in the social and cultural stories that shaped much of the century. He failed to gain lasting notice in the government, press, or academy, even though he worked in and contributed to every one of those areas through most of his life. This study of his life and work does not attempt to elevate his stature as a writer nor does it suggest that he was a man whose biography must fill a void in the historical record. Instead, this study explores Beecher's life and work as they document historical events in the twentieth century and seeks to expand our understanding of those events.

Beecher moved easily—and often—throughout the country. His ancestral home was in New England, he was born in New York City, and he grew up in Birmingham as it evolved into a key city in the New South. “My father was chief financial officer for U.S. Steel in the South for more than a generation. The things he told me! And what I could see for myself,” Beecher wrote.¹ During the span of that generation, Beecher had a front-row seat to the economic and social struggles as industry overtook agriculture, unions challenged the status quo of cheap labor, and blacks chafed under the injustice of the Jim Crow laws. He used his personal vantage point, as well as his ancestral legacy, to bear witness to a rapidly changing world as he pursued his various roles as student, teacher, and writer. Many junctures in Beecher's life show his connection to the times in which he lived and the significance his written records bring to history. He administered New Deal programs in the South and conducted fieldwork in sociology to document needs and

¹ John Newman Beecher to Fred Chappell, February 18, 1974, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

outcomes. He represented Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practice Committee to investigate racial, religious, and economic discrimination in workplaces in the South and Southwest and wrote extensively about those challenges. When he took a stand against a mandatory and far-reaching loyalty oath as a condition of employment in the McCarthy era, he was fired from his teaching job at San Francisco State College; he fought for reinstatement until just days before he died thirty years later. Finally, he worked as a freelance journalist in Alabama and Mississippi to report on the violence toward blacks in the wake of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. John Beecher's life intersected these points in history and he wrote about them in detail. This legacy is rich and deserves to be examined by historians.

Historians have produced countless volumes that examine the literary renaissance of the 1920s; the New Deal and its myriad political, social, and economic ramifications; the anti-communist fear that swept the country after World War II and in the McCarthy era; and the long march toward racial equality in the 1950s and 1960s. That historiography grows as primary and secondary sources are discovered and earlier interpretations are revisited. It is evident after spending time studying John Beecher's papers that this material adds to the record of those four periods and others with which his life intersected. The material Beecher wrote, both in volume and variety, makes it difficult to situate him within a single historiographical context. Thus, I have anchored each period of his life in the appropriate historiography.

Beecher's records are housed in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas where they remain uncatalogued after almost thirty years. There are 125 boxes in this collection of letters, unpublished writing, and oral recollections. Their content reveals

Beecher's interactions with central figures in every era—Robert Frost, Harriet Monroe, John Farrar, and Countee Cullen in the literary renaissance of the 1920s; Howard Odum, Eleanor Roosevelt, Alfred Stieglitz, and Dorothy Norman in the New Deal era; Henry Wallace, William Carlos Williams, and Alexander Meiklejohn during the McCarthy period; and John Howard Griffin, Walker Percy, Thomas Merton, and Virginia Durr during the civil rights movement. This collection is a treasure chest of information for a twentieth-century historian.

A common notion among historians is that the biography of an individual life, which in its simplest form is delineated by birth and death, is inferior to works in other historical genres. Many even argue that biography is not history at all. Historians such as David Nasaw have recently begun to discuss issues related to biography as history. To introduce essays that made up a roundtable on "Historians and Biography" in the *American Historical Review*, Nasaw quickly got to the sticking point: "Biography remains the profession's unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the riffraff."² It is true that biographies often focus on individual causation as opposed to events and patterns that historians can interpret more broadly. In some cases, biographies may be long on oversimplified conclusions and short on historical context. To examine the life of an individual also takes the historian into the realm of psychology, which is highly problematic for the historian without the training necessary to understand the interior life of their subject. However, there have been successful biographies written by historians. In their essays, the roundtable writers agreed

²David Nasaw, "Introduction, Historians and Biography," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 573.

that successful historical biographies explore ideas and historical context beyond a simple chronology of a particular individual's life. Writing style was another focal point in the roundtable articles. Historian Lois W. Banner observed that writing biography calls on the historian to write accessible prose. "Biography challenges the historian to produce lucid writing—not always the standard among academic scholars."³ This goal coincides with public history's focus on audience and meeting the needs of various publics.

With these issues in mind, I followed a particular path in research and writing about John Beecher. In my research, I looked for places in the historical record where his life and writing brought new information or insight. In those sections, I examine the historiography and explain Beecher's contribution. I also aimed to bring a narrative writing style into the dissertation. My goal was not to write a cradle-to-grave biography, but to bring Beecher's life and work into the view of contemporary historians. I also wanted to show that his life choices portray a man connected to his famous ancestors through his social consciousness—ancestors whose lives have been examined with great frequency for well over a century, but whose living legacy ended with John Beecher.

This study of John Beecher demonstrates that his life offers insights into pivotal points in twentieth-century America. The work that he produced has a place in the fields of history, literature, and sociology. In his poetry and non-fiction, he saw social issues clearly defined through a black-and-white lens; he always acknowledged, however, that the reality of addressing them was never quite so clear. Throughout his life, he identified most as a Beecher and was proud of what that represented. As the twentieth-century

³ Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 580.

moved forward and the cultural memory of his ancestors faded, his unwavering moral compass created a stark contrast. By the 1960s, he provided a strong voice from a distant past to resonate within a new generation of those fighting for social equality. Through John Beecher, we see that some patterns in American families and, thus, American history, do cycle around again.

CHAPTER II: THE FAMILY

Poet and teacher John Beecher's family history is an important lens through which to view his life and work. The renowned Beecher family of the nineteenth century influenced American religion and social consciousness. In the twentieth century, John Beecher drew from them a moral compass and social consciousness that he carried with him throughout his life. Beecher's ancestors took unpopular public stands against slavery because the institution conflicted with their understanding of a loving God. They believed that all people are God's children, whatever their race. John's beliefs were quite similar, although his were not anchored in religion. He held that all men are equal in the strictest sense, and he fought for social justice with a passion reminiscent of his famous ancestors. He exhibited this consciousness in personal and public stands and in the poetry he wrote.

From the Beechers, John inherited a fiery, outspoken voice of indignation toward injustice, and from his mother's family, the Garghills, he learned to value the authentic voice of the American working-class. Leonard Beecher, John's father, was the great-nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher and the great-grandson of Lyman Beecher. One historian observed that the Beecher family fame died in the nineteenth century with Lyman Beecher's children with but one exception—John Beecher.¹ In contrast to the elite Beechers of New England, John's mother, Isabel, came from the working-class. Her family emigrated from Ireland, and her father, Phillip Garghill, worked the coalfields of western Pennsylvania and northern Ohio. He claimed

¹ Stephen H. Snyder, *Lyman Beecher and His Children : The Transformation of a Religious Tradition* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 5.

to have worked with the violent Molly Maguires, although historians are divided about whether the secret Irish group was actually present in Pennsylvania. No matter which is true, on John's summer visits to Ohio, his grandfather entertained him with exciting adventure stories of those times.² Both family legacies made an impact on John.

The role of the Beecher family in the nineteenth century is well documented.³ Patriarch Lyman Beecher had thirteen children born between 1800-28. His first wife, Roxana Foote, was the mother of Catherine, William, Edward, Mary, Harriet, George, Harriet E., Henry Ward, and Charles. Roxana died in 1816, and a year later Lyman married Harriet Porter, with whom he had four more children, Frederick, Isabella, Thomas, and James. After his second wife's death in 1835, he married Lydia Beals Jackson. Lyman died in 1863.⁴

Lyman and his children became key figures in the transformation of religion in America from the rigid orthodoxy of Puritanism to a more human and individualistic religion. The New England Calvinist Puritan tradition was instilled in Lyman as he studied under Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University and grandson of theologian

² John Newman Beecher, "A Fanatic Heart," part of unpublished autobiography, Box 94, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 61; and John Newman Beecher, "Autobiography tapes," transcription of audio tapes, New Orleans, LA, 27 November 1965, Box 110, Folder 1, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 6.

³ Most notable are: Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America : The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Marie Caskey, "Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family," (1978); Milton Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family in the Nineteenth Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Samuel Agnew Schreiner, "The Passionate Beechers : A Family Saga of Sanctity and Scandal That Changed America," (2003); Barbara Anne White, *The Beecher Sisters* (Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴ M. Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family*, xvi-xvii.

Jonathan Edwards, author of the classic sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”⁵ Lyman began his ministry as a staunch believer in the Puritan way of salvation and pushed his children to follow that path. His children, however, rejected the God of their father and the idea of innate depravity—the theological concept that humans are inherently evil—and preached a God of love, compassion, and redemption. The Beecher children arrived at this understanding of God after wrestling with the theological issues of their day.⁶ Stephen Snyder, in his book, *Lyman Beecher and His Children*, argued that the individualism of the Beecher children was possible because of their father’s theological evolution. Over the course of his lifetime, Lyman’s view shifted from a belief in a rigid and angry God to one that was stern but loving. He also observes that the renown of the Beecher family disappeared with the death of Lyman’s children, and John Beecher is the single exception. He says, “It was not until John Beecher that a member of the family again achieved national prominence, and that for a truncated audience,” Snyder said.⁷

In several of his poems, John Beecher noted the influence of his family’s legacy on his life. His first published book of poetry, *And I Will Be Heard*, was released in 1940 by Twice a Year Press and sold through Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery in New York. In it he explained: “You have got to know my genealogy. Not because it is important, but because a lot of people in authority seem to think so these days.”⁸ In this book, which is a

⁵ S. H. Snyder, *Lyman Beecher and His Children*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁸ John Beecher, “*And I Will Be Heard*” (New York: Twice a Year Press, 1940), 6; John Newman Beecher, “Resume of My Career as a Writer, 1968,” Personal essay, p. 14, John Beecher Collection.

single long poem, he describes his forebears' journey and acknowledges the importance of his ancestors to the cultural and political history of the nation. The poem begins with the first John Beecher who came from England to help found the Connecticut colony. His son and four generations that followed were New England blacksmiths. They were then followed by three generations of ministers, the first of them being Lyman Beecher, John's great-great-grandfather. Lyman was a Yale graduate, a famous Calvinist minister, and a staunch abolitionist who took risks for what he believed was right:

He and some others organized what they called
 "The Underground Railroad."
 The school for preachers that Lyman was the head of
 was one end of the railroad.
 The other was in Canada.
 When a slave got across the Ohio River
 he went to Lyman's school and Lyman hid him out.
 Then Lyman passed him up the line and all along the line
 other people that had the same idea that Lyman had
 hid him out.
 Finally the slave got to Canada
 and when he hit Canada
 he wasn't a slave any longer.⁹

Lyman's daughter Harriet, by then married to Calvin Stowe, was with her father in Cincinnati at Lane Theological Seminary. She claimed to have interviewed slaves and former slaves for the stories that became the text of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1850 as fiction but shaped from those stories. That book, John wrote, "was read by more people than any book that was ever written except the Bible. Not only in America but all

⁹ J. Beecher, "*And I Will Be Heard*", 11.

over the world.”¹⁰ The book made an unforgettable impression on John. He described how he felt after his grandmother read it aloud to him:

“My heart was greatly stirred and troubled by the picture of injustice which was unfolded in this book and which tallied with the things that I had seen around me. I was very sympathetic with the Negroes whom I knew ... I resolved that when I grew up, I too would become a liberator of the Negroes like my ancestors. So this resolve formed when I was very young.”¹¹

Moreover, the book’s influence went far beyond young John Beecher. It was the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made an impact on the perception of slavery in America, and some argue it was one of the contributing causes of the Civil War.¹² Charles Edward Stowe, Harriet’s son, described what Lincoln said when he met his mother in the fall of 1862, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!”¹³ Harriet’s brother, Henry Ward Beecher, who was two years younger and her close confidante, also carried the anti-slavery banner. He used his powerful rhetorical skills not only to deliver sermons from the pulpit of Plymouth Church

¹⁰ Hundreds of editions and millions of copies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* have been sold around the world, 300,000 of those during the year following its March 1852 publication. Only the Bible has been translated more. Hollis Robbins, "Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Matter of Influence," *History Now, American History Online, A Quarterly Journal*, 16 (2008).

¹¹ John Newman Beecher, “Autobiography Tape Transcription, 1965,” p. 64, Harry Ransom Collection, Austin, TX.

¹² Abraham Lincoln reportedly credited *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with starting the war when introduced to Harriet Beecher Stowe in December 1862. Susan Belasco, *Stowe in Her Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of Her Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 149-151.

¹³ M. Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family*; Charles Edward Stowe and Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Story of Her Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 203. And M. Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family*, 356.

of Brooklyn, but also to take advantage of broader public forums to give fiery speeches against slavery and the Confederacy.

Before Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Edward Beecher, John's great-grandfather, had already become involved in the abolitionist cause. Edward, who died before John was born, was valedictorian of the class of 1818 at Yale University. He then spent two years as headmaster of Hartford Grammar School before enrolling at Andover Theological Seminary. According to historian Marie Caskey, Edward had a mild and diplomatic temperament and, being the third oldest of Lyman's children, became something of a second father to his younger siblings. Edward was considered the scholar of the family, and Lyman groomed him to be his primary successor in ministry.¹⁴ In 1826, Edward was ordained as the pastor of Park Street Church in Boston. His ministry at Park Street ran aground when some members of his congregation learned that he did not hold their views about baptism. His father encouraged him to remain silent about this theological questioning, but Edward was unwilling set aside his strong feeling. In November of 1830, in an effort to distance himself from the strict orthodoxy of the Boston church, Edward left New England for the Midwest.¹⁵ John wrote about Edward in his poem, *And I Will Be Heard*:

Edward, who was my great-grandfather,
was the first president of the first college in Illinois,

¹⁴ M. Caskey: 125-126; *Dictionary of Heresy Trials in American Christianity*, s.v. "Edward Beecher (1803-1895)."

¹⁵ "Edward Beecher Is Dead :The Eminent Brooklyn Preacher Was Taken Ill Three Days Ago. Brother of Henry Ward Beecher His Career as Teacher, Pastor, College President, Editor, and Author -- Almost Ninety-Three Years Old," *New York Times*, July 29, 1895; Robert Merideth, *The Politics of the Universe; Edward Beecher, Abolition, and Orthodoxy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), viii.

he also wrote books
and was pastor of one of the big churches in Boston.¹⁶

The school was Illinois College, founded in 1829 in Jacksonville, Illinois. Edward Beecher served as president for the first thirteen years of the institution's existence. Compared to Boston, Jacksonville was an undeveloped outpost, and Edward and his wife, Isabella, moved into a log cabin when they arrived. Edward faced challenges that arose out of the physical environment as well as local attitudes. The state legislature was decidedly rural and anti-intellectual, and for three years the body refused to give the college a charter.¹⁷ Edward spent years as president raising money for the struggling college. In that period, Isabella bore six of their eleven children, including John Beecher's grandfather, Frederick William.¹⁸

As a theologian, Edward had an intellectual approach. He did not blindly accept the dogma of his father, but studied his own beliefs to understand and use that knowledge to teach spiritual concepts more clearly both in the pulpit and the classroom. While president of Illinois College, Edward grew to believe that all slaves should be emancipated immediately. When he joined the Illinois Antislavery Society, he was the first of the Beechers to be actively involved in the abolitionist movement. In 1837, he nearly died with Elijah Lovejoy, the abolitionist martyr, minister, and newspaper publisher. In an effort to destroy Lovejoy's printing press, a pro-slavery mob ambushed the building in Alton, Illinois, that housed the business. This incident occurred just hours

¹⁶ John Beecher, *And I Will Be Heard* (New York: Twice a Year Press, 1940), 13.

¹⁷ M. Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family*, 196.

¹⁸ M. Caskey: 132.

after Edward had left, and it made a lasting impression. Soon afterward, he wrote about the experience in a book, *Narrative of Riots of Alton, in Connection with the Death of Elijah P. Lovejoy*.¹⁹ Thus, by the late 1830s, he led the way among clergy toward a different attitude about slavery.

Edward's biography, written by his brother Charles, explained how Edward understood slavery as a theological issue:

It may not be clear at first to the ordinary mind why slavery and theology should go hand in hand in national affairs. But if we reflect that theology is but another name for the politics of the universe, or the Kingdom of God, the problem becomes simple ... Old School theology enthrones a great slave-holder over the universe; New School enthrones a great Emancipator.²⁰

Edward believed the temporal world is the kingdom of God—Christians have a moral responsibility to help create the kingdom here and now. It is a socially active, rather than passive, Christian responsibility. Edward saw slaves as human beings and children of God and believed Christians had a moral responsibility to eliminate slavery. This belief foreshadows a movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with social gospel reformers such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Richard Ely, and Washington Gladden.

Another trait John shared with Edward was a drive for intellectual, spiritual, and moral consistency in thought, word, and deed. This characteristic drove Edward to reexamine slavery, baptism, and original sin, and to reinterpret these issues in a way he found congruent. Instead of accepting theological inconsistencies, he created his own interpretations. For example, after Catherine Beecher's fiancé, Professor Alexander

¹⁹ Edward Beecher, *Narrative of Riots at Alton, in Connection with the Death of Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy* (Alton: G. Holton, 1838).

²⁰ M. Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family*, 197-198.

Metcalf Fisher, drowned in 1822 without a salvation experience, both Catherine and Edward struggled with the Calvinistic belief that Fisher was cast to hell for eternity. Earlier that year, Edward had a salvation experience, and he first sought to use the tragedy to convince Catherine that her soul was in danger. However, Catherine soon persuaded him that there were problems with the doctrine of original sin. She appealed to his sense of logic: “The difficulty originates in my views of the doctrine of original sin ... I feel that I am guilty, but not guilty as if I had received a nature pure and uncontaminated ... Is there any satisfactory mode of explaining this doctrine, so that we can perceive its consistency while the heart is unrenewed?”²¹ According to historian Robert Merideth, her argument convinced Edward to reexamine the doctrine of original sin. He answered this question in 1853 with a complex systematic theology he called “Preexistence of Souls,” which he detailed in the book, *Conflict of the Ages*.²²

Frederick William Beecher followed his father into the ministry. Born in 1835, Frederick was Edward and Isabella’s third child and John’s grandfather. He was named for Edward’s little brother—the first child of Lyman and Harriet Porter Beecher—who died of scarlet fever in 1820 at the age of two.²³ By 1857, Frederick graduated from Williams College in Massachusetts and went on to Chicago Theological Seminary. After a year of seminary, he married Sara Hale Goodwin, to whom he had become engaged in his junior year at Williams. Frederick’s uncle, Henry Ward Beecher, officiated at their

²¹ R. Merideth, *The Politics of the Universe*, 38-40.

²² Edward Beecher, *The Conflict of Ages, or the Great Debate on the Moral Relations of God and Man*, by Edward Beecher (Boston, MA: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1853).

²³ M. Rugoff, *The Beechers: An American Family*, 86.

wedding on May 1, 1859. Many years later, Frederick wrote in a letter to John that he and his bride were married at his uncle's residence in Brooklyn Heights where "the rear windows overlook the city of New York."²⁴ According to Frederick, Sara came from a "notable N.E. colonial family" and was descended from patriots Nathan Hale and Edward Everett Hale.²⁵ Her father was a sea captain who died in a cholera epidemic in San Francisco during the Gold Rush. After this tragedy, her mother took the family to live with her brother, Paul Thurlow. Eventually Sara came to Boston to live with her older sister, who attended Edward Beecher's church.²⁶ It was there that she and Frederick met.

After their marriage, they moved to Galesburg, Illinois, and lived with Frederick's parents for a year. At the time, Edward was the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Galesburg. Frederick had a year remaining before he would complete his training at Chicago Theological Seminary, so the couple moved to Chicago. After graduation, Frederick served as pastor of a Congregational church in Milwaukee for a year and then settled down for ten years at the Congregational church in Kankakee, Illinois. During that time, Frederick and Sara had two children, Edward, who died as a young child, and Leonard, John's father.²⁷ In 1873, Frederick moved east and became the minister of the Congregational church in Wellsville, New York. He served there until 1893, when he resigned and became the rector of the Wellsville Episcopal Church, where he served until

²⁴ Frederick W. Beecher to John Newman Beecher, October 25, 1917, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

²⁵ J. N. Beecher, Autobiography Tape Transcription, 16.

²⁶ F. W. Beecher to J. N. Beecher, October 25, 1917, John Beecher Collection.

²⁷ Beecher, "To Make a Solid Road," 30.

his retirement in 1910. John explained Frederick's decision to leave the Congregational church after 30 years: "Papa himself had rejected the faith of his Calvinist forebears with its doctrine of man's total depravity, and had embraced Anglican sweetness and light. There was family precedent for this. His grandmother, Roxana, was a born Episcopalian as well as the grandfather who had raised her, the American Revolutionary General Ward."²⁸

In his poetry and his autobiography, John writes of his grandfather, whom he knew well. He describes him in "*And I Will Be Heard*":

My grandfather Frederick Beecher was a Congregational
and then an Episcopal preacher
at Sodus Point on Lake Ontario
and afterwards at Wellsville, New York—
little towns that nobody every heard of
and nobody ever heard of him
but when he went to New York City
people on the street.
thought he was Henry Ward Beecher come back to life
and this made him happy enough.²⁹

After Frederick retired in 1910, he and Sara moved to Birmingham to be near their only surviving child, Leonard, and their only grandson, John. The couple moved into what had once been servants' quarters behind Leonard's home in Graymont Estates, an upscale suburb of Birmingham. They lived there until their deaths, Sara's coming in 1916 and Frederick's in 1919.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 18.

²⁹ J. Beecher, *And I Will Be Heard*, 15.

³⁰ Beecher, "To Make a Solid Road," 29.

Leonard Thurlow Beecher's ancestry was solidly grounded in church ministry. His father Frederick, his grandfather Edward, and four uncles followed the noted patriarch, Lyman Beecher, into the pulpits of several denominations. Leonard, however, was determined to forego the family profession for a career in business. Born in 1867, he grew up in Wellsville, New York, while his father was serving as a Congregational minister.³¹ His mother, Sara Hale Goodwin, wrote children's books.³² Because Leonard's one older brother died of "infant complaint," Leonard was raised as an only child as his son, John, would be.³³

Leonard, according to John, believed that his great-aunts and uncles were "nuts," and he was determined to separate himself from his forebears.³⁴ At Cornell University, which he attended from 1885-89, he majored in history with an eye toward law school.³⁵ In a memoir Leonard wrote in 1947, he revealed that while he was still in college he had an intense concern about his future and his livelihood. "How shall this forbidding world be made to furnish a living, or an excuse for living?"³⁶ Determined to find employment that would give him financial stability, he studied history and political science to prepare for a law career. After earning his undergraduate degree at Cornell in 1889, he spent the next

³¹ Leonard Thurlow Beecher, *As It Was: Listen My Children* (Van Der Veer Press, 1947).

³² J. N. Beecher, *Autobiography Tape Transcription*, 16.

³³ John Newman Beecher, "To Make a Solid Road: An Autobiography I: 1904-1926," p. 30, John Beecher Collection.

³⁴ John Newman Beecher, "The Vital I, an Autobiography, 1904-1926," Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC, 30.

³⁵ "Eighty-Nine," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, September 18, 1885, 2.

³⁶ L. T. Beecher, *As It Was*, 6.

year at Albany Law School and clerked in the State House.³⁷ After he finished law school coursework, he moved to Elmira, New York, where he was a clerk for Colonel D. C. Robinson, the proprietor of one of the largest law firms in Western New York. At that time, a law student was required to work in a law office clerkship for a year before taking the bar exam. Leonard's great-uncle, Thomas K. Beecher—Frederick's favorite uncle—had arranged the clerkship for him. Thomas, a beloved figure in Elmira, was known throughout the state. He was a Congregational minister who was interested in science, religion, engineering, architecture, and philosophy, and he had corresponded with Charles Darwin, Aldous Huxley, and Lord Kelvin. He lived next door to Samuel Clemens and his wife, Libby, and he even officiated at their wedding in 1870. Leonard lived with Thomas and his wife, Julia, during his stay in Elmira. Thomas was the only Beecher of his grandfather's generation that Leonard was close to, and he loved and respected him tremendously.³⁸

During the year of his clerkship, Leonard discovered that he was more interested in business functions than litigation. With this new awareness in mind, he sent out several “trial balloons” into the business world in an attempt to find a job that might interest him. He contacted a cousin, Will Smythe, an executive in Atlanta and asked for advice about jobs in the booming coal, iron, and steel town of Birmingham. His cousin advised against it and directed him instead to Chicago, which offered more opportunity to a young educated man by virtue of its position as the gateway to newly opened Western natural resources. Smythe wrote a letter of introduction to H. H. Porter of Illinois Steel in

³⁷ Ibid., 9-13.

³⁸ Ibid., 13-16.

Chicago. In 1892, Leonard moved to Chicago and began working as an accountant in the steel industry.³⁹

After a short time in the accounting department, Leonard realized that his work was disconnected from the larger picture of the business. He understood his accounting job, but he did not understand what the accounting work meant to the company as a whole. Understanding the big picture of the steel industry was important to him, so he requested a transfer into the steel mill so he could learn the business from the ground up. The request shocked his supervisor, company secretary H. A. Gray. There had been many requests over the years to move from the mill to a desk job in accounting, but according to Leonard, no one had ever requested to move from accounting to the “works.” He was soon appointed to the position of chief beam clerk. Though the transition was difficult, Leonard excelled in the challenging job that required juggling information, measurements, and people. The position, which was central to the operation of the plant, provided him with a view of the intricacies of the industry. “It was here that I learned the steel business,” Leonard said.⁴⁰

When Leonard first arrived in Chicago, he lived in a downtown boarding house, but he quickly decided to escape the grease and grit of the industrial inner city by moving to another boarding house in Evanston, a suburb of Chicago near Northwestern University. At a “fancy dress ball”⁴¹ in Evanston, he met and soon began a courtship with Isabel

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰“Retired T. C. I. Executive: Leonard T. Beecher Dies in Phoenix, Arizona,” *Birmingham News*, October 11, 1959.

⁴¹ John Newman Beecher, “Autobiographical research notes,” Box 94, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Garghill, a noted dramatic reader and an instructor at Northwestern. Isabel came from a large Irish Catholic family in Warren, Ohio. She was the seventh of eight children; both of her parents were Irish immigrants. Her father came to America to work in the coal mines of Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio. The family lived most of their lives in a town called Mineral Ridge, which was near Youngstown, Ohio. Isabel was a quick learner and excelled in school. She passed the teacher's license exam when she was twelve, then left home to attend a nearby academy and returned when she was fifteen to be the town schoolteacher. The following year, she taught night school in the Brier Hill Sheet Mill district. Many children worked in the mills, but the law required them to go to school. Special night schools were opened for these children. With her earnings from teaching, Isabel saved enough money for one year of college and applied to the School of Oratory at Northwestern University. She attended Northwestern until her money ran out. She then took a teaching position at the State Normal School in Spearfish, South Dakota. The following year she returned to Northwestern and taught oratorical performance. During this period, she began her career as a dramatic performer on the Chautauqua and Lyceum circuits. It was also during this time that she met and became engaged to Leonard Beecher.⁴²

Isabel was determined to elevate herself culturally and economically from her working-class roots, and she became one of the most popular and highly paid performers on the traveling lecture circuits.⁴³ She insisted that she and Leonard would not marry

⁴² J. N. Beecher, *Autobiography Tape Transcription*, 9-12.

⁴³ John Newman Beecher, "Autobiographical research," notes, Box 94, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 11.

until she finished paying for her parents' home in Warren, Ohio. During their six-year engagement, Leonard took instruction from the Paulist Fathers in Chicago and converted to Catholicism.⁴⁴ Leonard and Isabel then married on August 18, 1898, in Chicago.⁴⁵

In light of the Beecher family history, Leonard's conversion to Catholicism was a shocking occurrence. His grandfather, Edward Beecher, had railed against Roman Catholics in *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed* in 1855, arguing that the power of papacy was dangerous because it trumped individual conscience. John explained his father's decision:

My father in his turn left his boyhood Congregationalism for the Roman Catholic Church. After meeting my mother -- I have often wondered how much the writings of Cardinal Newman had to do with it. He gave Cardinal Newman the credit. The book, which brought about his conversion, was Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. However, I'm inclined to believe that my mother had a great deal to do with because I fear if he hadn't accepted the faith Mother would never have married him. My mother was a born Irish Catholic who never questioned the primacy of Catholicism.⁴⁶

Leonard's own explanation, in a letter to Isabel in 1912 on the anniversary of his conversion, said, "Oh, what a blessed providence has brought me to the Catholic Church! You who have been born and brought up in her do not know how to the weary wanderer without, she is indeed a haven of refuge and rest. May God bless you, my very own for

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Isabel Garghill Beecher and Leonard T. Beecher Wedding Announcement, 18 August 1898, Box 1, Folder 3, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁴⁶ J. N. Beecher, Autobiography Tape Transcription, 19.

what part you had in my salvation.”⁴⁷ Then again, he had never fully embraced his father’s faith, so on this spiritual journey he was open not only to Isabel’s beliefs but also to the spiritual home he found in the Catholic Church.

After working for Illinois Steel for three years, Leonard left to become the chief accountant at Minnesota Iron Company (MIC) at its headquarters in Chicago. MIC operated iron mines in Northern Minnesota, the Duluth & Iron Range Railroad, and the Minnesota Steamship Company; thus the vertically integrated company mined the ore and shipped it via train and ship to Chicago and Pittsburgh. Though MIC was not as large as Illinois Steel, it gave Leonard an opportunity to learn about mining and transportation in the iron and steel business to round out his knowledge of the industry. Leonard worked at MIC for six years and came to have a close acquaintance with Don H. Bacon, the company president. Bacon had come to the position by working his way up through the mining sector of the company, and Leonard had tremendous respect for him.⁴⁸

Many corporate consolidations occurred during the late 1890s. Illinois Steel and Minnesota Iron merged to become Federal Steel Company, thus further vertically integrating raw materials, transportation, and production. No changes in personnel occurred during that transition, though in January 1901, Don Bacon accepted the position of chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company with headquarters in New York and operations in Birmingham, Alabama. Bacon immediately offered Leonard the position of secretary and treasurer.

⁴⁷ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, 1912, Box 8, Folder 1, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁴⁸ L. T. Beecher, *As It Was*, 34-35.

Leonard and Isabel moved to New York and Leonard began his new job at Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company.⁴⁹ While Leonard remained in industry throughout his working life and did not follow his father and grandfather into the ministry, he believed many virtues learned from his ancestors. To his son, he also modeled many of those virtues such as hard work, fairness, and honesty.

There is no question that John Beecher's ancestors influenced his life. The Beecher family had a central storyline not only in the narrative of broader American history in the nineteenth century, but also in the life of John Beecher. Lyman and then his children—particularly Edward, Charles, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Henry Ward Beecher—not only influenced the theology, social, and political world of their time, but the lives of the Beecher ancestors that followed. One descendant followed a path similar to theirs: John Beecher. He, alone, carried their legacy into the twentieth century. He drew from them a particular moral compass and social consciousness that shaped his personality and decisions throughout his life.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

CHAPTER III: SHAPING FORCES

Three fundamental forces shaped John Beecher's life: his family's legacy, his parents, and growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, during the early twentieth century. While his ancestors' legacy made an impact on John in an indirect way, his parents' influence trumped all others. As an only child, he had their undivided attention and support, though in different ways. His father's high position in the steel industry provided a degree of wealth and prestige, which in turn gave John many advantages. His mother's success as a dramatic reader in the world of the chautauqua and lyceum circuits, where she was on the same bill as the great orators of the day, gave her a confidence that was uncommon for a woman during the early twentieth century. She passed on to John a love for language, literature, and the arts. Finally, the industrial "New South" city of Birmingham provided a context to John's understanding of life, particularly in terms of race, class, and gender.

Leonard and Isabel moved to New York in 1901, and as Leonard began his new job with Tennessee Coal and Iron, Isabel continued her career as a dramatic reader. The couple believed they were unable to have children, but in 1903, after five years of marriage, they learned Isabel was pregnant. John Beecher was born on January 22, 1904, in New York City. Leonard was away on a business trip to Birmingham, but Isabel knew she was fully capable of getting through childbirth on her own. She arrived at the hospital by cab from their Upper West Side apartment and gave birth to a healthy boy.¹ As an acknowledgement of the miracle and a tribute to their faith, they named their son John

¹ J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 4.

Henry Newman Beecher, chosen to honor Cardinal Newman, whose work Leonard credited for his personal spiritual renewal. In John's autobiography, he comments on the irony of his given name. "Lennie had done a shocking thing to name Dr. Lyman Beecher's great-grandson after a Papist prelate."² He also explains that his name was "more complex than merely being named after Cardinal John Henry Newman. I also arrived like St. John the Baptist after my parents had given up hoping that they would be able to have a baby. They were both 36 years old at the time I was born and considered themselves already middle-aged, so that, like St. John the Baptist, I was considered to be something of a physiological miracle."³

² J. N. Beecher, *To Make a Solid Road: An Autobiography I: 1904-1926*, 18.

³ J. N. Beecher, *Autobiography Tape Transcription*, 105.

Isabel Garghill Beecher, A Woman in the Public Sphere

Isabel Garghill Beecher's influence on her son was complex, as was she. She was a proud, cultured, and educated woman with great confidence and poise whose life was not constrained to the domestic sphere, as was the case for many women of this period.

While John was young, Isabel traveled extensively all over the country performing as a dramatic reader. She missed his January 22nd birthday for most of his young life, but she always sent him a gift and a telegram declaring her love. A strict Roman Catholic from a working-class family, she was regimented in her approach to childrearing, and John wrote in letters as well as his biography about his fear of her disapproval. This worked to keep him in check while he was young. In addition, she held elitist class-based attitudes toward the South and pushed John to excel in order to demonstrate his superiority within the local class system. Though he rebelled against her elitist attitudes, by the time he entered young adulthood he began to gravitate toward literature and poetry, and they became much closer.

Unlike most white women with her class position, Isabel worked in the public sphere. For the first decade of the twentieth century, Isabel traveled with the lyceum circuit during midwinter and the chautauqua circuit during the summer. Having a child did not change her work schedule; she continued to perform, and her job took her away from home, her husband, and their young son. Until the dawn of the twentieth century, women were expected to live and work primarily—often solely—in the domestic sphere, the home. This division of labor and roles between women and men shaped this setting, and encouraged mothers to raise pious and pure children as model citizens. As women

ventured into public life, however, they became focused on their external roles, and men were sometimes drawn into the domestic sphere. Leonard gladly participated in childcare, and John credits him with being the more characteristically maternal of his parents. The construct of separate spheres has helped historians distinguish the gender roles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women, the idea suggests, should not work; instead, they should help. They function in outside jobs, but their place is at home, nurtured by the love of their families, rather than rewarded for contributions that are equal to those of men.⁴ With shifts in the economy by the turn of the century, the income provided by a woman may have been important, but was usually downplayed. The two-income household so prevalent in the late twentieth century existed, but the woman's income, psychologically if not literally, was superfluous rather than essential. In the Beecher family, the success of Isabel's work gave her an opportunity to earn money on the chautauqua and lyceum circuits. She had been established on the circuit before her marriage in 1898 and continued working steadily until 1912, after which she still gave occasional performances.

Isabel Beecher was one of many women who took advantage of the increasing public spaces open to women in the late nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, the lyceum, derived from England's "mechanics' institutes," appeared in the United States; it offered lectures by men and for men. Over the course of a century, however, it became a broader cultural tradition that brought women to the stage and also to the audience, as did the chautauqua movement that arose in the 1870s. Those changes, however, came about with

⁴ Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988), 27.

the changing realms of men and women in the culture.⁵ In *The Chautauqua Movement*, Andrew Reiser argued, “By treating the assembly as an extension of the typical Victorian parlor, chautauqua women would make their towns safe in preparation for women’s fuller entrance into civic life.”⁶ He suggested that the female participants made an unconscious bargain with the chautauqua leaders, who were male. In exchange, the women continued to hold moral authority within the movement, but they would not challenge the leaders’ authority. Thus, by recreating the domestic sphere within the chautauqua movement, women began to merge the spheres.⁷

From its beginning, the chautauqua movement promoted culture and education through extension courses, community colleges, adult education centers and dozens of other ventures. Among those were the traveling “big tent” chautauquas begun in 1904 by Keith Vawter, former manager of the Chicago Redpath Lyceum Bureau.⁸ Although the “big tent” was not technically an arm of the institutional Chautauqua, founded in New York State in 1874, the traveling programs had a parallel mission to bring culture and education to rural America. They grew to include opera, concerts, lectures, entertainment, and recreation, as well as study courses. Vawter began the traveling chautauqua because he believed intelligent planning could produce a financially successful venture. Mass

⁵ Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 7.

⁶ Andrew Chamberlin Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

transportation had begun to open up rural areas, so planning became the key to his success. At first, he lost money, but by 1907 he calculated a way to make the enterprise profitable by partnering with independent chautauquas. According to Joseph Gould, “The connotation of wickedness and abandon that rural American associated with the theatre were not applied to tent chautauquas. The name itself was a warrant of respectability, and the reputations of the personalities who appeared behind the chautauqua footlights were above reproach.” It was in this context that Isabel Garghill Beecher performed works from Shakespeare, Parsifal, and other literature.⁹

The lyceum performances were initially the province of men, from Mark Twain to Bronson Alcott to Henry Ward Beecher, but after women gained a spot onstage, they became integral to the chautauquas’ mission. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were one of the main attractions on the traveling lecture circuit. In fact, Isabel Beecher “became the highest paid and most popular dramatic reader of her time.”¹⁰ Harry P. Harrison, a manager with the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, which operated in Birmingham and eleven other cities, spoke of her appeal: “The fact that we advertised her as a niece of Henry Ward Beecher did not hurt her with the ticket buyers.”¹¹ She was not only popular, but also talented, as Charles Wagner noted when he said she “certainly

⁹ Joseph Edward Gould, *The Chautauqua Movement; an Episode in the Continuing American Revolution* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1961), 79.; and “Isabel Garghill Beecher Honored,” *Evanston Press*, 17 June 1911.

¹⁰ Charles Ludwig Wagner, *Seeing Stars* (Manchester, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 2006), 33.

¹¹ Harry P. Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas: The Story of Tent Chautauqua* (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1958), 196.

could have had a great success as a dramatic actress had she so chosen.”¹² Many years after Isabel’s death in 1955, “a very old lady” wrote to John Beecher: “I heard your mother read Ibsen’s *Ghosts* in Cleveland once. ... In the pauses you could hear the men’s watches ticking in their pockets.”¹³

In Isabel’s own mind—and with a nod to the traditional women’s sphere—pursuing a career as an actress was not in the cards. “Her attitude towards the theater was the common view of these supermoral times,” Charles Wagner said. “The stage was looked down upon; society was knocking, not knocking at, the stage door in that period. She told me: ‘My son John [then two years old] will grow up and I want him to have every advantage. I feel that he might not be proud of an actress mother.’”¹⁴ Her son would not have held that against her, though. When he was a sophomore at Cornell, his mother spent a week with him and charmed his friends. “When she left, John told her: ‘The boys are all wild about you, Mother. They all know you do something on the stage, but they don’t quite seem to grasp it. Gee, I wish you were a regular actress.’” She was a good sport about their query and later shared it with promoter Wagner, who had failed in all his efforts to convince her to take up the stage.¹⁵

In spite of her absences, it seems that John did not feel that his mother neglected him, although he certainly noticed her absence. John described his mother’s return from reading *Peter Pan* in Chicago. “She sat down beside me on the porch swing. ‘Hold out

¹² Wagner, *Seeing Stars*, 33.

¹³ Beecher, “The Vital I,” 7.

¹⁴ Wagner, *Seeing Stars*, 34.

¹⁵ Ibid.

your hands!’ she commanded. ‘I’m going to give you all the money I got for reading *Peter Pan* to those children in Chicago. Then will you forgive me?’ ... What would I do with this sudden fortune? An electric train perhaps? But my mother swept the [five] crinkly twenty-dollar bills out of my hands and returned them to her purse. ‘This money is going into your savings account,’ she said.”¹⁶ On another occasion, there was a St. Patrick’s Day treat. “She sent me a little green stovepipe hat with tiny green candies and a clay bubble-pipe inside. I piously sucked one of the candies every night because if I rationed myself to a single candy per nocturn, my father said, mother would be home just as I finished the last one.” Meanwhile, he would have to get by with his father, the household help, and his writing.

In 1979, the year before his death, John wrote a letter profiling his education. He includes his mother as one of his most influential teachers:

My first teacher was my mother, Isabel Garghill Beecher (1867-1955) who was a quondam member of the faculty at Northwestern University’s School of Oratory, the first college level school of speech in the United States. Before and after marriage to my father in 1898, she was one of the ornaments of the Lyceum and Chautauqua stage and was certainly the greatest Shakespearean reader (“interpreter” was the fancy word) this country has ever known. ... She should, and could, have been a tragic actress but this was incompatible with being the wife of a high official of U.S. Steel, my father, Leonard T. Beecher (1867-1959), and the mother of what she called, in Touchstone’s phrase, “an ill-favored thing, but mine own,” namely the aforementioned “universal man” who was in his earliest youth an ugly duckling.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 7-8.

¹⁷ John N. Beecher, Letter from John Beecher to Dr. Graham C. Wilson, English Department Chair, San Francisco State University, 13 August 1979. Barbara Beecher.

Isabel Beecher might have been atypical in her upper-class social niche; it was not acceptable for an educated woman who had “married well” to work outside the home. Her role, in the parlance of the time, was to use her education, talents, and affluence to raise accomplished children. That emphasis on child nurture and education was to be used to keep “sons out of the work force in order to extend their education and improve their chances for upward mobility.”¹⁸ She worked outside the home but also engaged in appropriate parenting, even though there was a shift in the distribution of responsibilities in her home. Most important, that shift in her family and in others did not lead to the destruction of the moral fiber of the nation. Though still not in great numbers, men increasingly stepped up and filled some of the gaps left by working women. While the traditional spheres had overlapped, there were distinct boundaries in some areas, many of which are exemplified in both Isabel’s family life and her lucrative work. In newspapers around the country, the reviews following her appearances always identified her as a “lady reader,” called her “Mrs. Beecher,” and almost without fail mentioned her “charming womanliness” or “womanly manner.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place,” 24.

¹⁹ Charles Ludwig Wagner, *Interpretive Recitals with Isabel Garghill Beecher*, advertisement, 1905, Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

A Short History of Tennessee Coal and Iron

Tennessee Coal and Iron played a central role in John Beecher's life. Not only was his father a high-ranking executive of the company for thirty-six years, but John also worked there in several positions over the years. It was while working the open hearth in 1923 that John began to write poetry. Moreover, Leonard's job at TCI provided the means for much of John's life and even in the lives of his children. Finally, the company influenced the birth and growth of Birmingham in matters of politics, race, and class. Birmingham was labeled a "City of the New South," and TCI was the company that represented this newly articulated ideal.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the growth and development of American cities, railroads, and industries demanded a steady supply of coal, iron, and steel. Before the Civil War, small companies provided a sufficient supply, but as the nation and the need for the products grew, larger companies run by the barons of industry swallowed many of the mid-century providers. Regional companies became national companies. This industrial consolidation continued into the twentieth century. In 1898, the House of Morgan sponsored a merger between Illinois Steel, Minnesota Steel, and several smaller firms to form Federal Steel. Three years later, in what was then the largest merger in history, Federal Steel, Carnegie Steel, and several smaller producers combined to form United States Steel. In an effort to increase efficiency, production, and profits, the ventures linked companies that could manufacture iron and steel with companies that had large holdings of natural resources. Leonard Beecher's decision to move to Chicago and accept the position of accountant at Illinois Steel in 1892 put him in the right place at the

right time to move up in the steel industry. By the time he accepted the position of secretary and treasurer of Tennessee Coal and Iron (TCI) in 1901, he was at the hub of these industrial shifts, and they helped shape his future and ultimately the future of his son.²⁰

Leonard spent most of his life working for TCI, while John worked at various times in the plant as a young man. By the early twentieth century, the company was the largest steel producing company in the South and the third largest in the nation. When Leonard was hired as the secretary and treasurer, TCI was a major competitor in the world market.²¹ However, the large company where Leonard and John worked was very different from the operation that began in 1852 as a coal mining company in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee.

Between the mid-1870s and 1900, TCI bought out many smaller coal and iron operators in the southern Appalachian region. After the Civil War, small operators began to develop the mineral wealth in the region. Over the next thirty years, investors and entrepreneurs built a booming business empire by buying up the small operations. They used convict labor to work the minefields, convert coal into the essential coke, and build furnaces to make iron and steel. In 1881, wealthy cotton broker John H. Inman put together a group of investors from Wall Street to purchase controlling interest of TCI.

²⁰ James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984*, New Perspectives on the South. (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 19-20; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, A History of the South (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 299.

²¹ "Retired T.C.I. Executive: Leonard T. Beecher Dies in Phoenix, Ariz.," *Birmingham News*, October 11, 1959.

Mergers and acquisitions dominated business during the late nineteenth century as larger companies gobbled up their smaller competitors; this was particularly evident in the iron and steel industry.²²

TCI's headquarters moved to Birmingham in 1886 to take advantage of the city's natural resources in the foothills of the Appalachians and a growing industrial infrastructure. Birmingham, developed after the Civil War as the first New South city, was designed with an eye toward the future. Civic boosters gushed about the "magic city" where work could be found, touting an all-out effort to build an industrial South. TCI headquarters moved there when Colonel Enoch Ensley, a Memphis entrepreneur, purchased controlling interest. Ensley owned Pratt Coal and Coke in Birmingham, and he merged it with TCI to create the largest coal, iron, and steel company in the South.²³ Nathaniel Baxter, a Nashville banker and investor, became TCI's president in 1881 after being appointed by John Inman. He held the position for most of two decades.²⁴ The company, staffed by officers of Southern origin, continued to grow.

²² Justin Fuller, "History of the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company, 1852-1907," (PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1966), 67; A. V. Wiebel, *Biography of a Business: Tennessee Coal and Iron* (Birmingham, AL: United States Steel Corporation, 1960).

²³ W. David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University Alabama Press, 1994), 20; Henry M. McKiven, *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

²⁴ He was ousted for a short time from 1892-1893. Baxter also invested in several Nashville industries, Nashville Street Railway Company and Tennessee Central Railroad. His brother was Jere Baxter, the founder of Tennessee Central Railroad. J. Fuller, 129.

The final decade of the nineteenth century was volatile for the company as production methods improved, older equipment became outdated, prices of pig iron fluctuated wildly, and the nation endured an economic depression followed by a four-year recovery. In an effort to survive as well as to consolidate Birmingham's coal, iron, and steel production capabilities, TCI merged with DeBardeleben Coal and Iron in 1892. Henry DeBardeleben became the largest shareholder and first vice president in the newly organized TCI. In an effort to increase the value of TCI stock, he embarked on a high-risk mission to raise the company's stock price. Within six weeks, he had lost his fortune and control of TCI because he tried to "bull" the market, though he continued to hold the chair of first vice president until he was pushed out in 1894 by New York investors, a fate that also befell John Inman two years later. Inman's ouster came when he tried to get more margins from his loans to TCI because he was in a difficult financial position. He suffered a nervous breakdown and died of heart failure at the end of 1896. The board of directors was then left in the charge of James Woodward, the president of Hanover National Bank of New York and a northeast financier; for the first time in the company's history, there was not a Southerner at the helm.²⁵ TCI survived the period, but not without coming perilously close to bankruptcy.²⁶

The New York investors that John Inman recruited in 1881 had been relatively uninvolved in company decisions until 1894. Then, with the departure of Henry DeBardeleben, they gradually began to exercise their power to increase profits and

²⁵ Ibid., 122-125.

²⁶ W. D. Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic*, 195.

dividends. Since the company's economic circumstances had been difficult for much of the 1890s, the investors pushed to bypass vital infrastructure upgrades. Although TCI desperately needed to keep up with the changing technology of iron and steel manufacturing to meet demand, the essential capital was slow to materialize. They did, however, have a strategic advantage. By 1900, most Northern steel makers were using the better quality Southern pig iron in their steel manufacturing process; TCI was in an excellent position to capitalize on this turn of events. Given the good position the company had in the market, the board of directors lost faith in TCI's homegrown management to bring the company forward and decided to replace Nat Baxter with an iron and steel professional rather than a banker or investor. In 1901, industry veteran Don Bacon, then president of Federal Steel in Chicago, became chief executive officer and chairman of the board.²⁷

Bacon had been in the coal, iron, steel, and railroad business for most of his life and had come up through the ranks, first at Minnesota Iron Company and then at Federal Steel. Leonard went to work for him in 1895 as chief accountant at Minnesota Iron. In 1898, Illinois Steel and Minnesota Iron merged to form Federal Steel. Bacon was chosen as the president of the new company, and Leonard continued as chief accountant of the new entity. Leonard described Bacon as a "small vigorous and absolutely tireless man of fifty or thereabouts. His background was mining and he had come up the hard way. He was, nevertheless, a forceful and able executive though careless equally of dress and the

²⁷ Ibid., 265.

amenities of official position.”²⁸ Soon after Bacon became president, he offered Leonard the position of secretary and treasurer of TCI. In his memoir, Leonard notes that when he accepted the job at TCI it marked a completed passage in his life. “Then of a sudden I saw it all as it was. Something had happened to me. Something had ended. I was no longer looking for a job. I belonged. I was ‘in the steel business’—and I was ready. Chicago had prepared me. As far as I was concerned, Chicago had meant that.”²⁹ Thus, Leonard Beecher began working for TCI at the beginning of a new century and a new phase of his life.

The team spent the next five years making significant improvements. According to historian Justin Fuller, Bacon was one of the finest ore men in the country. “Bacon made his greatest achievements in renovating Red Mountain mines. Spending almost \$900,000, he installed new boilers, air compressors, and hoists; he erected new houses for the miners and constructed hospitals at the mining camps. Through his efforts these mines achieved greater efficiency than ever before.”³⁰ He eliminated the contractors and expanded the company’s own facilities. Fuller also noted that Bacon’s biggest failure was with labor. Between 1901 and 1906, when he resigned, the company endured six major strikes. Laborers in the South were different from the Midwestern workers. They were less experienced and the racial makeup of the workforce created additional issues that Bacon had never confronted. Taking a hard line, he tried to force changes in labor and

²⁸ L. T. Beecher, *As It Was*, 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰ J. Fuller, 228.

met intense resistance. No matter what he attempted, the company remained unprofitable. Orders from the North and abroad, however, had grown steadily during Bacon's tenure. By all accounts, when he resigned from TCI, the company was on more stable footing than when he arrived. He, like Baxter before him, knew the company needed more capital investment to fully realize its potential. The company did have great value. However, the value was not in short-term profits or dividends, but in the vast property and natural resource holdings and the transportation systems that could move raw materials quickly from mines to steel production and then to market.

A Texas wire and steel man, John W. Gates, understood the value of TCI. Though TCI had not been profitable in the past, with some infrastructure investment it could be a major competitor to U.S. Steel. In December 1905, a syndicate that Gates led took over the company. Several years earlier, Gates, who had a reputation for being a high-stakes gambler, had attempted to create chaos in the steel market by driving down prices through his company, Republic Steel. He believed he could build TCI's competitive advantage by using a syndicate, a group of investors who would agree to work together to purchase groups of stocks and wrestle control of a company at the lowest price possible. The syndicate worked for nearly a year to purchase the majority of outstanding TCI stock from the bankers led by James Woodward. The Wall Street firm of Moore and Schley managed the stock pool for the syndicate, and it had authorization to use the giant block of stock as collateral on loans or other securities. The syndicate soon brought in John Topping to replace Don Bacon as president. After gaining control of the company, Gates immediately raised the funds to expand and improve the company by completing a second steel mill and second rail mill. Steel production increased rapidly as the open-

hearth technique grew to be preferred over the older Bessemer technique that U.S. Steel used. TCI's superior ore, transportation logistics, and processes, gave the company an edge over U.S. Steel.³¹

By 1907, the economy began to contract, and the rampant stock speculation created volatility in the market that ultimately destabilized it. TCI's orders began to drop, and falling prices in steel and pig iron followed. By the beginning of October, the country was in a full-scale recession. By the end of the month, a panic had begun and banks were forced to close. J. Pierpont Morgan, one of the wealthiest and most successful men in the world by that time, stepped in to help stop the panic. He met with leading bankers and organized the resources to cover the runs. The measures worked and the panic slowed.

Despite the improvement, a week later there was the threat of another crisis, this one involving the brokerage house of Moore and Schley, manager of the TCI syndicate. The banks demanded payment on outstanding loans and then refused to accept the collateral the firm had pledged because the collateral had lost value in the panic. Moore and Schley, forced to pay off its debts or put up additional collateral, was unable to do either. One of the syndicate members, Oliver H. Payne, suggested that Moore and Schley sell TCI to U.S. Steel to get out of the predicament. Payne's lawyer made the proposal to Morgan, who immediately contacted Elbert Gary, president of U.S. Steel, and urged him to purchase the TCI stock at a reduced price. Gary agreed, but on the condition that President Theodore Roosevelt would not prosecute U.S. Steel in an antitrust suit. Gary and his colleague, Henry Frick, went to Washington to consult with the president on

³¹ Ibid., 142-153.

November 3, 1907. They couched their proposal as an act of altruism, insisting that under normal conditions, they would not consider purchasing TCI. Their main concern was “to prevent a panic and general industrial smashup.”³² Roosevelt agreed because he thought this was one way to prevent an economic collapse and he believed Gary and Frick. With Roosevelt’s assurances, they returned to New York to close the deal. U.S. Steel got \$30 million in TCI common stock in exchange for \$632,000 in cash and \$34 million in U.S. Steel bonds.³³ The banks accepted the U.S. Steel stock as collateral for Moore and Schley and the markets and banks began to stabilize.³⁴

Leonard, who continued at his post with TCI in New York after Don Bacon left, was unsure about his future once U.S. Steel acquired the company. In a letter to Isabel on November 12, 1907, just after the transaction occurred, he said,

I am existing. That is about all that can be said of my present state of mind. The entire unsettlement regarding even our immediate future operates to leave me in a state of suspense not conducive to concentrations of mind on any specific occupation, even if your absence did not leave me devoid of resources in my self as it does. ... My first rather too confident thought expressed in my first letter to you was based on Mr. Topping’s very confident assurance that he would see that I was well taken care of in the Corporation. I now see what I did not then appreciate, that nothing he can say or do is going to make the slightest difference about anybody’s position and although I have no reason to doubt his sincere purpose to

³² Ibid., 162.

³³ Ibid., 163.

³⁴ See also “Roosevelt Resents Senate Usurpation,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 1909; “Steel Trust Aid Not Opposed,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1907; “Steel Trust Deal Is Put Through,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1907; “Steel Trust Took in a Dangerous Rival,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 1909.

serve me I realize that whatever I get will be due to myself and not to him.³⁵

U.S. Steel chose George Crawford, an engineer from Georgia, as the new president of TCI; Leonard was retained as secretary and treasurer of the division and relocated to Birmingham with the rest of the management team. This dramatic episode marked a new chapter for Leonard and his family. In 1892, Leonard heeded the advice of his cousin, William Smythe, to go to Chicago rather than Birmingham for his first job in the steel industry. Nevertheless, in fifteen years Leonard moved to Birmingham, where he would spend the next thirty years working for TCI as a subsidiary of U.S. Steel.

³⁵ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, 12 November 1907, Box 8, Folder 1, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 3.

Birmingham: A City of the New South

Certainly, a womanly manner was expected of the wife of an executive in a growing, but still conventional, city in the Deep South. For Isabel, as well as for Leonard and John, the “New South” world they entered was quite different from the northeastern metropolis they left behind. It was consciously designed to promote a new kind of industrial order—one based on a separation of people by race and class to harmonize the social order. Historians have long debated the source of this order, asking whether the attitudes about race and class order descended from the working-class or the bourbon class. Ultimately, the distinction was irrelevant; many factors outside the elite’s control, such as national economy, the chaos of the stock market, the market for produced goods, competition, and the availability of capital and labor, affected the industrial order in the South. The world the Southern industrialists created was chaotic and at times unstable. It developed in fits and starts. By the time U.S. Steel purchased TCI, the city of Birmingham was jubilant at the promise of stability the steel giant could bring.³⁶

The Jones Valley was a predominantly agrarian landscape until the early 1870s, when a group of businessmen filed incorporation papers for the city of Birmingham. To the south was Red Mountain, rich with iron ore, and to the north were the Warrior coalfields.

³⁶ W. D. Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic*, 2-4; H. M. McKiven, *Iron and Steel*, 7-9; J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines : Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Bobby M. Wilson, *America's Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 92-94; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, *A History of the South*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 172-173.

Land speculators and city boosters, many of them from the railroad companies, jockeyed for the best trade routes to move products to market in the South. The central locality and mineral wealth of the valley made it an attractive option. By the 1870s, two railways ran across Alabama and intersected in Jones Valley, and this was where Birmingham's founders chose to locate the city.³⁷

The city's founders wanted to capitalize on future industrial growth in the South. Few regions showed as much promise as Birmingham, the "magic city," due to the available mineral resources in proximity to transportation systems capable of carrying products and raw materials to market. In the early 1870s, men like Daniel Pratt and his son-in-law, Henry Fairchild DeBardeleben, helped fulfill the promise by becoming the first large-scale iron and coal producers. They built the first iron furnace within the city limits and named it Alice, after DeBardeleben's daughter. By 1880, the furnace was operational; by 1883, it had nearly 500 employees. Tennessee Coal and Iron moved its headquarters and consolidated other operations from Tennessee to Birmingham in 1886, thus becoming Alabama's largest industrial company. By 1890, the city had twenty-five blast furnaces with several others on the drawing board. There was some resistance to the growth, but it came from other Alabama cities like Montgomery and Mobile, where there was resentment toward Birmingham's rapid growth.³⁸

The growth of a "New South" industrial city required a different approach to urban planning if the leaders wanted to avoid the pitfalls of the North. With the unraveling of the Southern slave economy after the Civil War, Birmingham's leaders inherited a new

³⁷ B. M. Wilson, *America's Johannesburg*, 84-85.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

labor market. The challenge for the industrialist managers was to manage both white and black work forces; they began by segregating jobs. For skilled labor, they employed white craftsmen, and initially a relationship developed between these valued workers and the capitalists. During the 1880s, a large number of the skilled laborers moved to Birmingham from the industrial cities of the North and Midwest. During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, power struggles between the skilled unions and the capitalists occurred at regular intervals as each vied for power to define the terms of their relationship. Unions and their members were instrumental in keeping black workers out of the skilled trades. Almost 50 percent of the iron and steel jobs before 1900 were in the unskilled trades. These jobs were the lowest paid, as well as the hottest, dirtiest, and most dangerous in the industry. Birmingham's founders envisioned white workers in these positions, but by the 1880s, it became clear the urban white labor pool was insufficient. Many of the rural whites owned land and held to their Jeffersonian belief that land was the key to freedom and self-determination. Thus, employers reluctantly appealed to blacks throughout the South to work as common laborers.³⁹ The situation was not much better for blacks working in the steel industry than as a sharecropper working in the fields. Many years later, John described the difficult working situation at TCI when he worked there in the early 1920s:

No black was a helper on a furnace, a melter, a craneman, a blower or a manipulator on the Bessemer converters, a mixer-man or a dog-house chemist. The slag-hole gang was all black. So was the fertilizer plant crew except for the foreman and the two cranemen. It was the same at the lime plant which I used to visit. The main job there was sweeping under the

³⁹ H. M. McKiven, *Iron and Steel*, 18-19; B. M. Wilson, *America's Johannesburg*, 94-95.

huge cylindrical rotating kilns which calcined limestone and dolomite. Each shift had a crew of black sweepers, captained by a head sweeper. The burnt lime was a very fine white powder. It sifted out and covered everything around the lime plant, settling thickly on the floor under the kilns. If you got a little in your high workshoes it would slake and blister your feet. When it blew in your eye it would raise a blister on your eyeball. But the black sweepers had to go under the kilns and sweep up the dust with no more protection than bandanas tied over their noses and mouths.⁴⁰

The hierarchy of labor carried over into life outside of work where sharp boundaries divided skilled white workers and unskilled black workers. This division extended to neighborhoods. During the 1880s, the industrial opportunities of Birmingham attracted young males of both races who came there to work. As this generation grew up and settled down with wives and children, they rented, built, or purchased the best homes they could afford in neighborhoods populated by their peers in the labor force. Consequently, each area developed fraternal organizations, churches, and saloons for their particular group. The suburbs began to develop by the turn of the century. These communities were made up largely of white skilled workers who earned more money than unskilled workers and had more power and influence in the growing city.⁴¹

This industrial boom brought people from outside the region and the country into the city. By 1909, Birmingham was the largest city in Alabama. Census records show that the city's population increased 145.4 percent between 1900 and 1910, leading population growth in the state.⁴² The racial mix in the urban areas of the state was comprised of 57.6

⁴⁰ J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 205-206.

⁴¹ H. M. McKiven, *Iron and Steel*, 55-60.

⁴² Birmingham's population in 1900 was 38,415, and increased to 132,685 in the 1910 according to the Federal Census. Some of the growth is attributed to city annexations. William C. Hunt, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Reports by States, with*

percent white, native-born citizens and 42.3 percent black. There were 19,286 immigrants in urban areas of the state, up more than 5,000 since 1900.⁴³ The majority of the population was Protestant, though the number of Catholics was increasing. By 1910, nearly 33 percent of the people who lived in Birmingham belonged to the Catholic church. Many of them were skilled laborers and management who had come south from the industrial northern states and abroad.⁴⁴ Between 1889 and 1909, coal production increased exponentially. By 1908, Alabama was the largest producer of coal in the South and sixth largest producer in the country.⁴⁵

During the early twentieth century, the influential industrial leaders and businessmen of the Birmingham area were tagged the “Big Mules,” and they often found political common ground with the Black Belt land owners at the state and national level. The term was first coined and described by politician Bibb Graves. He said they “reminded him of a farmer who had harnessed a small mule to a wagon heavily loaded with corn. Behind the wagon he had hitched a big mule who amused itself by leisurely munching corn out

Statistics for Counties, Cities and Other Civil Divisions, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, U.S. Government, 1910), 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁴ Steve Suits, *Hugo Black of Alabama : How His Roots and Early Career Shaped the Great Champion of the Constitution* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2005), 110.

⁴⁵ In 1909, 13,692,000 tons of coal was produced in the state of Alabama, up from 3,573,000 produced in 1889. Only Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Illinois, Ohio and Indiana produced more coal than Alabama in 1909. Isaac A. Hourwich, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Mines and Quarries*, vol. XI (Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, U.S. Government, 1909), 187.

of the wagon, while the small mule strained every muscle to pull the entire load.”⁴⁶ As secretary and treasurer, Leonard was one of the top executives of Tennessee Coal and Iron, a position that would certainly have put him among the “Big Mules.”

Leonard’s position, along with both his and Isabel’s income, set them apart from many in the world of the New South. In Birmingham, the separation of people in factories as well as neighborhoods was based primarily on race and class. The function of the separation to promote the most effective labor configuration possible was not out of the ordinary for the time; a divide that was often patently racist was less common.

⁴⁶ William Warren; Robert David Ward; Leah Rawls Atkins; Wayne Flynt Rogers, ed. *Alabama : The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 413.

The Beechers Move South

When the Beechers arrived at the train station in Birmingham in early 1908, it was clear that they were solidly upper class. Their well-known family name and their Roman Catholicism would set them apart within that class in the coming decades, although their religion was rarely addressed to them directly. What an observer would have seen that day is what John wrote many years later: “I clambered from the Pullman in a fur suit and fur leggings, clutching a Teddy bear in each hand,” John wrote. “My golden curls cascaded around a fur hat. At my side was Emelia Mertling, my nurse, whom I called ‘Mia.’ Behind us followed my mother in peacock-feathered hat and sealskin coat, looking like the great tragic actress she chose not to be. Next came my father with his mustachios, high-crowned derby and velvet-collared Chesterfield, lacking but the toothy grin to double for his idol, President Theodore Roosevelt.” The family stepped off the train and into a city that shaped all their lives for the next half-century. “A line of hacks in various stages of decay stood along the curb of Twentieth Street where two ten-story ‘sky scrapers’ reared above dreary small-town stores. On a near corner rose the skeleton of the Brown-Marx Building, soon to be the biggest structure south of the Potomac and the Ohio. My father’s offices would take up half of the fourteenth floor for the next generation. He, for one, had come to stay.” While Isabel’s career on the Chautauqua circuit took her out of Birmingham frequently for the next decade, John, because of his age, and Leonard, because of his position with TCI, were destined to settle quickly into a very new life.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 1.

The first casualty of their new life was John's devoted nurse. "All the other children's nurses there were black. Custom prohibited her associating with them," John wrote. "She could neither sit at table with my parents nor discuss anything with them save the consistency of my stools. She was utterly isolated from life by caste and class restrictions. We put the inconsolable 'Mia' on the train back to New York, but I never heard from or of her again." In due course, Isabel and Leonard hired a black nurse for John. She fit in with her peers, but John did not. "[She] took me down to where the nursemaids foregathered with their charges and sat gossiping on a wall while the future masters of Birmingham pelted me with chunks of red hematite ore from the mountainside." They berated "the Yankee boy" for his accent, his clothing, and his curls. He soon refused to go out and took refuge at home.⁴⁸

After living for some months in a rented bungalow, Leonard and Isabel chose a lot where they planned to build a permanent home in an upscale section of the city. It was easily accessible to Leonard's office and the country club where he played golf and to the Highland Avenue book club that gave Isabel access to cultural programs, of which there was a scarcity in Birmingham. Isabel, however, was on tour in California when Leonard was approached by Colonel Thomas Octavious Smith about building in a restricted development about three miles from downtown Birmingham. The colonel, a graduate of Virginia Military Academy and commander of a volunteer regiment in the Spanish-American War, was head of the Birmingham Trust and Savings Bank. Leonard, as secretary and treasurer of TCI, had chosen that bank as the principal depository for TCI's

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

funds, which included a weekly payroll of around one million dollars.⁴⁹ In a reciprocal gesture, Smith offered to sell Leonard “the finest acre on the heights, located on Emma Avenue just a block from Colonel T.O.’s own home...” He convinced Leonard that the amenities so accessible from Highland Avenue were accessible from Graymont as well. “Pending the acquisition of a carriage and pair, my father could ride the Owenton streetcar to his office downtown. [It was] at the bottom of the hill only a half-mile away.” Leonard decided on the spot to buy the lot, and by the time Isabel returned, the servants’ quarters and stable on the back of the lot were under construction.⁵⁰

Leonard’s purchase, which overrode the joint decision he and his wife made earlier, served to further isolate Isabel. “My mother accepted her defeat with good grace,” John wrote. “She always maintained an admirably stoical front when things could not be helped.” She did, however, point out to Leonard that the streetcar line that was a half-mile downhill also required a half-mile uphill walk to return—and the ride from Graymont to South Highlands was a three-hour round trip. When the servants’ quarters were completed, the family moved in there as a temporary residence so that they were onsite as the mansion that Leonard designed was under way.⁵¹

With that move, four-year-old John found a friend and a profound influence in Rob Perdue, a black teenager who was the younger brother of Thomas Perdue, a servant for Colonel T.O. and his family. His job was to serve as plumber, electrician, carpenter,

⁴⁹ Joel Campbell DuBose, *Notable Men of Alabama: Personal and Genealogical* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Historical Association, 1904), 133.

⁵⁰ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 7-10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

painter, paperhanger, butler, and ultimately automobile mechanic and chauffeur, and he worked for the Beechers for the next thirty years. Yet, Robert's supreme gift was storytelling. According to John, "He was in a class with Uncle Remus though his material was not West African folklore but actual Alabama black life." The stories reflected the race and class issues that John witnessed in Birmingham in the coming years, issues that were very close to home.

From Rob I learned about the convict mines where men were kept shackled, put into sweat boxes, spread-eagled and lashed with lead-loaded thongs. Sometimes they were beaten to death by murderous "trusties" and their bodies thrown down old shafts. TCI had 500 of these convicts working its mines when we came south in 1907. According to a Southern-born Yale historian the average lifespan of a convict in an Alabama mine of that period was six months.

Rob also told me gruesome tales of the blast furnaces and steel mills, of men being burnt up by ladles of slag, of molten steel exploding or of corpses strewn about the blast furnace cast house when carbon monoxide leaked from a main. The gas had no smell. You simply keeled over dead. W.C. Handy came from Birmingham and had once been a molder's helper on a TCI blast furnace. Rob sang or whistled all Handy's blues to me.

As a child, John considered Rob his best friend. Not only was he a playmate, he also taught John about life as a Negro in the south.⁵²

John's immersion in the realities of racism continued, as Leonard's parents moved to Birmingham following "Papa" Frederick Beecher's retirement from his service as an Episcopal rector in upstate New York in 1909 when he was five years old. They lived first in a bungalow near Graymont. Soon they moved into what had been the servants' quarters of their son's house so that as they aged they were near him and his family. "Mama" Sara Beecher began to educate John about his ancestors. Even though Sara's

⁵² Ibid., 14.

own family history included American patriots, in her eyes the Beecher lineage was far loftier. By her account, John declared, “Ours was the greatest family in American history. Having married into it, she was prouder of the Beecher clan than if the blood of Grandfather Lyman and his prodigious progeny flowed in her own veins. She had besought Lennie, my father, to name me ‘Ward’ after Uncle Henry, ‘the Shakespeare of the pulpit’ as well as my great-great-great-grandfather, General Andrew Ward of George Washington’s staff. Lennie had not heeded her, calling me after that wrong-headed person, John Henry Cardinal Newman, who had enticed Lennie into the Church of Rome.” Neither had Leonard embraced his mother’s enthusiasm for the Beecher forebears’ causes and eccentricities. However, “Mama” further pointed out the importance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* aloud to John, who was still just four. “The book affected me most not because a Beecher had written it but because it corroborated the contemporary social evils which Rob Perdue was describing to me. It seemed to me that there was a lot of emancipating still needing to be done. Between them, Rob Perdue and Mama made a Twentieth Century Abolitionist out of me.”⁵³

⁵³ Ibid., 15-17.

Education

As an only child, John had the attention not only of his grandmother, but also of Leonard, who held great ambitions for his son. By the time John was ready for first grade—the starting age at that time was seven—he had learned to read, write, and do simple mathematics. His academic work continued as he challenged the teachers in the Birmingham public schools, who moved him forward until, by the end of his first semester, he was in the fourth grade. While Isabel was traveling, Leonard tutored John at home in arithmetic, geography, grammar, and history.

The only subject which my father waived was Alabama History,” John wrote. “He examined the prescribed text which had a Confederate flag on the cover and went into a towering rage. It occasioned his only visit to my school. He marched in on Mr. Bush, our Principal, a former football hero at the Citadel in South Carolina, and told him that he wouldn’t allow me to be misguided by this pernicious book. Though Alabama History was required by State law and one might not be graduated without it, Mr. Bush absolved me by virtue of my father’s position as the chief financial officer of Birmingham’s greatest corporate enterprise.⁵⁴

Banishing a schoolbook from John’s life, however, did not limit his exposure to racism in Birmingham. In the 1912 election year, Leonard was a “Bull Mooser” supporting Theodore Roosevelt. John later realized that “it was a curious anomaly that TR was our household hero. His craven treachery in OK’ing Morgan’s exile of TCI head office from NY to Birmingham had exiled us in 1907.” As a fifth-grader following his father’s political lead, however, John was “the sole supporter of Theodore Roosevelt in the whole Graymont School.”⁵⁵ His classmates’ derided Roosevelt as a “nigger-lover,” and John

⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 62.

soon convinced his parents to let him leave the classroom and return to home schooling. He and Leonard resumed their old routine. This time, however, the two walked together to the TCI offices, and along the way, Leonard drilled John in academics. “Then I rode the streetcar back home through ‘niggertown,’ passing the black ‘high school’ en route, two rows of alley shacks with planks laid from stoop to stoop. Each shack was a ‘classroom.’ At the end of the double row was a dilapidated frame church with a leaning steeple like a gnome’s hat. This was the ‘auditorium.’ It was the only black high school in Jefferson County.”⁵⁶ A report by the Bureau of Education noted that the school was condemned in 1915 and moved to rented quarters. At the time, the county had more than 90,000 black residents, more than any other county in the United States.⁵⁷

John returned to the Graymont School for the sixth grade, but once more, he was far ahead of the curriculum. “After various conferences with Mr. Bush and the teachers, it was decided to try me out in the seventh grade, then the concluding step of elementary school, even though I was only nine.” In May 1914, he received his elementary school diploma just four months after his tenth birthday. Dr. John Phillips, superintendent of schools, noted that he was the youngest pupil ever to be graduated from elementary school in the city.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁷ African Americans schools were poorly served in Birmingham. The rapid growth of the city made schools overcrowded and underserved by teachers; 428 students were enrolled in a high school with nine teachers. Thomas Jesse Jones, *Negro Education: A Study of the Private and Higher Schools for Colored People in the United States* 1917. Vol. II.

⁵⁸ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 82.

The question about what John would do next was a troublesome one for his parents. As an elementary school graduate in Birmingham's public school system, John—in the customary sequence—would move on to Central High School, “along with everybody else in town save the steel workers' and coal miners' children.” The latter group went to the brand-new Ensley High School, where Isabel had recently begun to teach English and drama. However, the Beechers realized that neither school was an option for an immature ten-year-old boy, no matter how great his academic ability. In due course, they decided that Isabel would go ahead on her requisite Chautauqua tour. At the end of the summer, Leonard, Isabel and John would vacation in Canada; Isabel and John would sail from Montreal to Europe and extend their vacation; and then, John wrote, “She would drop me off at some fine school in Switzerland.” That changed quickly after a Serbian patriot assassinated the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir-apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and set off World War I.⁵⁹

This turn of events changed Leonard and Isabel's plan for John, and after a year off, it opened the door for John to go to military preparation school. His parents allowed him to take a year off because he was too young to enter high school. During that time, John frequently accompanied his mother on short trips for performances and his father on business trips for TCI.⁶⁰ As the summer of 1915 approached, “my father decided that the least he could do was to sacrifice his only son to the war god, or at least prepare him for sacrifice,” John wrote. He enrolled eleven-year-old John in summer camp at Culver

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁰ John Newman Beecher, “Autobiography tapes,” transcription of audio tapes, New Orleans, LA, 27 November 1965, Box 110, Folder 1, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 146.

Military Academy even though the minimum age was twelve. John was hesitant, but Leonard sweetened the deal with a vacation. “During my eleventh year I was taken to the San Francisco and San Diego expositions, allowed to set foot on Mexican soil, then deposited for the summer at Culver Military Academy, as the martial discipline was at that time considered a sovereign corrective for all problems of adjustment.” At Culver, John excelled at military strategy and fed his war fantasies, as illustrated by a Birmingham fortification plan he created.⁶¹ He returned to Culver for the next three summers and spent each of the subsequent school years at Ensley High School, fulfilling the attendance requirement even though he believed the school had little to offer him academically.⁶²

When the Beechers decided to keep John out of school for a year, class distinction was also a contributing factor to their decision. Isabel, in particular, was conscious of their place in the social hierarchy of Birmingham. In Ohio, Isabel had been the schoolteacher for the coal miners’ children in Mineral Ridge and the steel miners’ children in Brier Hill. “Having been a proletarian kid herself she knew what they were like,” John wrote. “‘Blackguards’ was her terse judgment of them. I accepted it. I knew what upper-class Southern kids were like. Blackguards.” A year later, however, John entered Ensley High School as a sophomore, despite the blackguards. He was twelve years old, and he faced taunts and bullying from the boys in his class every day. He

⁶¹ John Newman Beecher, childhood drawing notebooks, Box 3, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁶² J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 88-89.

made one friend, Alban Derryberry, who provided some advice that he felt John needed:

“Don’t let anybody out here know you’re a Cath’lic.” John was furious.

The reborn Ku Klux Klan was just getting started, spurred by the D.W. Griffiths film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which I had seen myself. The audience had leaped up on the seats to whoop when the Klansmen in their hoods and sheets rode after the villainous carpetbaggers and their allies, the ‘uppity niggers.’ This time around the Klan was aimed at Catholics and Jews as well as blacks. Birmingham was a Klan town and Ensley one of the Invisible Empire’s greatest strongholds.⁶³

That was reinforced for him in many ways, including the fact that the head of the household next door to the Beecher family “was reputedly the Kleagle of the local Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan.” His name was Walter McNeill, and he was an executive with Pratt Consolidated Coal Company, which continued to use black convict labor long after TCI ended the practice. While McNeill’s profession would seem to have put his family on equal footing with the Beechers, Isabel did not see it that way. McNeill, who came from a family of the Scots-Irish working-class, was married to a woman from a prominent family in South Carolina, where her brother was governor. “She was not society in Birmingham, however, perhaps because she had married beneath her or perhaps simply because the McNeills didn’t have enough money. My mother never once invited her to a party despite her genteel origins,” John wrote. Isabel apparently did not see in the McNeills any reflection of her own family—the Irish coal miner’s daughter who married into what was sometimes called “the most famous family in America.” Both the McNeills, however, were kind to John. Mrs. McNeill often sent him home with a

⁶³ Ibid.

plate of cookies and Mr. McNeill made him senior patrol leader of the new Boy Scout troop he had started.⁶⁴

In the summer of 1917, a few weeks before John was to begin his third stint at Culver, his parents learned that he needed only a single mathematics course in order to graduate from Ensley High School in the spring of 1918. Leonard arranged for a tutor, the head of the math department at Central High School, to help John finish the required course. John described the sessions: “We met for two or three hours every morning in his office at the school. In exactly twelve sessions we disposed of solid geometry.”⁶⁵

John Beecher learned lessons about class and race distinction during his third year at Culver. He went off to camp, flushed with the triumph of completing the required work for a high school diploma. He was sure he would earn the rank of first sergeant. Meanwhile, he took his first turn in the rotation of “officer of the day,” barking orders at the younger campers while strutting in his red sash. “Encountering a new boy with his hat on crooked, his shirt-tail dangling from his shorts behind, and his socks rolled unevenly, I stopped him,” John wrote. “He looked Jewish. My mother wrinkled her nose at people she termed ‘Jewy.’ My father said they were ruining New York.” John did note that the previous summer when his mother visited him at Culver, she took him to dinner, along with Bernie Steiner, a fellow camper at Culver and son of a Birmingham banker. Back in Birmingham, however, the Beechers had never invited the Steiners to dinner, nor had they entertained any other “nice Jews.” Thus, John’s initial reaction to the boy at Culver might have been in keeping with his upbringing. There was no name-calling; in fact,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 107-109.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 111.

when John demanded the boy tell his name, the boy remained silent. John ordered him to the guardhouse, which was neither a house nor was it guarded, but it symbolized the punishment and the authority of “Officer of the Day,” John Beecher. The commandant found out about the incident quickly; he stripped John of his rank and ordered him to turn in his sash and belt. “I had your name down for First-Sergeant of B Company,” the commandant told him. “But you have forfeited that. You have grossly exceeded your authority. There is something radically wrong with you, Beecher.” John went back to his tent, accepting the rebuke, but cringing over the remark that something about him was “radically wrong.” He wrote to his father, insisting that the commandant had given him a raw deal, and asking to come home. Leonard replied that John would not come home, but would stay the entire term and “take the bitter with the sweet.” Isabel signed her reply with the initials V.N.H. John later explained, demonstrating that his frustration with his mother's response still nagged at him. “These initials stood for ‘Voice of Your Higher Nature.’ They were always appended to the same sententious platitudes and old saws designed to inspire me to be a ‘better boy.’ But who called people ‘Jewy’ or said the Jews were ‘ruining New York’?”⁶⁶

His parents still had an eye on a military career for John, so with a nod to West Point, his father enrolled him in the Junior Plattsburgh Training Camp during the summer of 1918. The army had just inaugurated the camp that year; its aim was to recruit for the war effort. John was incredibly critical of the camp and the training. He believed his training at Culver was certainly a cut above that of Plattsburgh, though his superiors failed to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 111-114.

make use of his aptitude. "Once more my age disqualified me from military office although I had more knowledge of infantry tactics than any other cadet. I remained a front rank private while receiving orders from cadet captains, lieutenants, sergeants and corporals who were ignorant of the most elementary maneuvers."⁶⁷

After John arrived home after his summer in Plattsburgh, his father announced that he had gotten him a job working for the Birmingham Southern Railroad, TCI's industrial railroad. John was to be part of a survey crew planning a new road to Mobile from Birmingham. TCI had a ship building company on the coast and wanted a more efficient way to transport steel to Mobile. His father believed this job might be a good fit because John could use his newly mastered trigonometry. He was a rear rodman, responsible to hold one end of a survey chain so the surveyor could measure. Within a week, he became bored with the job; he contended that he was learning nothing. John soon deserted the crew and found a ride back home to Birmingham, where his parents were once again faced with what to do with him. This was the first in a lifetime of impulsive decisions about employment that John would make.⁶⁸

At 14, John was still too young for college, but his mother spoke to the president of Notre Dame, the Rev. John Cavanaugh, who agreed to take John for the year. He was excluded from much of the social life of the university because of his age, which left only classes or his own diversions to occupy his time. For entertainment, he frequented the main train station in South Bend. On one occasion, tired of the monotony of Notre Dame, John went to the station, hopped a train to Chicago, and went to visit family friends. They

⁶⁷ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 126-128.

immediately sent a telegram to his mother, and she came to get him two days later. “Do you intend to keep running away from everything that’s hard?” she asked him. Both of his parents were worried at his inability to complete his endeavors. They were at a loss for how to deal with his rebellious and stubborn nature.⁶⁹

Back in Birmingham in the fall of 1918, John’s father got him a job as an apprentice for the chief chemist at TCI’s Ensley Steel Works, Dr. Harris. Though he was too young to legally work in the lab, they covered up the issue with a false entry in the employment registry. He would work daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and until 1 p.m. Saturdays; he would be paid \$60 per month. All of the workers in the lab were college graduates, and Harris put John under the tutelage of Mr. McFarland, a very patient and kind mentor. John learned to work with nitric acid and to conduct analyses of carbon and phosphorus. He learned about the chemical makeup of steel—an alloy made up of iron and carbon—and how the carbon content determined the hardness of the metal. When McFarland was drafted to work toward the war effort, his newly trained apprentice took over his work. John described the tasks in the lab as mundane; he was appalled that college graduates were occupied in such mind-numbing work. One morning as he was conducting his repetitive routine, he mistakenly cracked a five-gallon glass of undiluted nitric acid, spilling it all over his lower legs and feet. Coworkers quickly neutralized the acid with ammonia. John described the incident:

I was in shock from the pain. . . . My pants were burnt entirely off below the knees. They came away in charred bits. My socks were pulp. The laces had been burned out of my shoes. The leather crumbled into something like corn flakes.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 132.

Rob came with the Buick. They put me into the back seat. The TCI hospital was by-passed. No accident report was ever filed. It would have revealed that I was under-age, fifteen at this time. The company doctor came to see me at the house. He said he hoped he wouldn't have to amputate my legs. It was close. They swelled to gigantic, dropsical size. The flesh sloughed off. I ran a fever of 104. Then I slowly got better, my fever began to drop, my feet and legs diminished in size. They were covered with deep channels where the acid had run. I could examine the arterioles and venous structures as in an anatomical transparency.⁷⁰

A month later, he was back at work, but McFarland, however, was back from the army; the lab managers decided they no longer needed an apprentice. Having lost his job, John and his parents again faced the question of what to do next.

John still had a dream of being a soldier. His father sent a query to Oscar W. Underwood, the senior senator from Alabama and a good friend of TCI. He wanted to know if the senator would sponsor an appointment to West Point for John. The senator was glad to comply with the request, but the minimum age for entrance to the academy was 17. Thus, John Beecher was once more denied entrance because of his age. Then Colonel T.O. Smith, their neighbor and friend, suggested that John attend his alma mater, Virginia Military Institute. Smith had graduated in 1882, and his sons and many of their friends had also attended the well-known military school in Lexington, Virginia. The school had no minimum age requirement, it was highly regarded in military circles, and it would give John an excellent opportunity for a commission when he graduated. It was decided. After a final summer at Culver, he enrolled at Virginia Military Institute in the fall of 1919.

With great difficulty, John Beecher endured one year and eight days at Virginia Military Institute. He contracted a bladder infection near the end of the first semester and

⁷⁰ Ibid., 138.

was sent home to recover. He was opposed to returning in January because he hated the continuous hazing he received as a “rat,” the name given to first-year cadets. His parents, however, believed that he needed to learn to finish his endeavors. His mother, in particular, was convinced that he needed to remain in school and not be a quitter. John, however, was less certain. On the trip back, he bypassed Lexington and headed for New York where he visited his mother’s good friend and former student, Miss Theodora Ursula Irvine. She secretly notified Isabel, who arrived within two days to escort him back to VMI. In a final effort to escape his fate, John bought some chloric acid at the druggist’s and poured it in his shoe on his healed acid burns. He managed the pain until his mother dropped him off, and then went to the infirmary. He spent most of the semester in the infirmary, which he preferred over the barracks where he was regularly hazed. John, finally resigned to stay at VMI, said, “My feelings of rebellious panic had given way to sullen resignation. I would get through the year. I lived what was left of it one day at a time.”⁷¹ In early June 1920, Leonard and Isabel welcomed him home as a hero for completing the entire school year. Leonard, however, recognized that John was not cut out for the military, though Isabel was not ready to accept defeat. John was determined not to return to VMI in the fall, but his mother was adamant that he would finish two years. She could see him collecting on Senator Underwood’s promise and entering West Point if he would just finish one more year at VMI. They wrangled with the decision, and finally Leonard and Isabel made a deal with John. If he would return to VMI for just one more year, he could then go on to the college of his choice. According

⁷¹ Ibid., 164.

to John, “I could attend any college I pleased in the fall of 1921—Cornell, my father’s alma mater; or Williams, where Papa had graduated in 1857; Yale, where Great-great grandfather Lyman had been valedictorian in 1797 and Great-grandfather Edward in 1822; Harvard even or Columbia if I wanted to go back to my birthplace. I was sick at heart at the prospect of slouching through another year at VMI as a ‘slimy third classman’, but she gave me no choice.”⁷² When he returned to Lexington, expecting to endure one more school year, he found that VMI had begun a concentrated effort to end hazing. John and his classmates were infuriated that they would be prohibited from inflicting on the incoming cadet “rats” the same punishment they had endured. Despite the crackdown, some hazing continued; in one incident, John was present. When the situation came to the attention of administrators, John refused to name the culprit. Soon after the term began, the honor court expelled him. Thus John’s youthful military endeavors ended, much to his relief.⁷³

⁷² Ibid., 170.

⁷³ Ibid., 178.

Steel Mill

When John returned to Birmingham in the fall of 1920, Dick Bowron, the superintendent of the Ensley open hearth and the son of one of TCI's founders, hired John as a delay boy. In this position, he moved throughout the different sections of the plant and created reports. According to John, the Delay Report showed

the status of every open hearth furnace, the delays incurred over the time allotted for a normal run from tap to tap, the reasons for the delays, the number of pots blown on the converters, the amount of pig iron in the mixers, the heats of steel tapped, the analyses run in the "dog-house" and other miscellaneous "dope" which Ralph had posted in his hip pocket notebook. When the report was complete Ralph phoned it to Mr. Mathias' office in the Brown-Marx Building downtown in Birmingham. Mr. Mathias was a man of great importance, the assistant to Mr. H.C. Ryding, who was the assistant to Mr. Frank Crockard, the operating vice president.⁷⁴

While working around the Ensley steel manufacturing plant, he was exposed to many kinds of men, including many who were associated with the KKK. Some would tease him about his religion, telling him jokes about priests and nuns. He seemed to take it in stride. In January 1921, after Bowron fired the night delay man, John replaced him and became the assistant to the night superintendent. "I felt very important, drawing all that money and holding down such a responsible job when I was just turning seventeen. ... I didn't mind the hours since I was happier on the open hearth than I had ever been anywhere else in my life." John wrote.⁷⁵ The sights, sounds, and flavor of the mill inspired him. Much of John's poetry both then and later reflects observations from this period, although at the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 186-187.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 203.

time he thought he was headed for a management career at TCI like his father or Dick Bowron.

After John worked for nine months at the Ensley plant, his parents pushed him to make a decision about where he would attend college. John made a case for staying on at the plant, arguing that he liked the job immensely, and all of the men he worked for had found success without finishing college. "I wanted to be an operating man, not a technician going through motions in a laboratory or sitting up in some office," John remembered.⁷⁶ Leonard pushed him toward attending Cornell, his alma mater. John could study engineering like TCI president George Crawford, and then he could return to the open hearth in some kind of management capacity, his father told him. John dutifully sent transcripts to Cornell and to Williams College, his grandfather's alma mater. Finally, his parents bribed him with a spring trip with his father to Cornell and then a summer trip to Europe.⁷⁷ While at Cornell, he hit it off with the members of his father's fraternity, Chi Psi. Near the end of the visit, he was invited to join. It was decided. Leonard had maneuvered his way around John and also around Isabel, who wanted her son to attend Williams and become immersed in liberal arts. By mid-June, John was on a train to New York with William Rushton, also a student, and William Wright, a Birmingham elementary school principal who would be their European guide.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 208.

⁷⁸ In his autobiography, Beecher used pseudonyms for these two men. Their real names were discovered on the ship's log, Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M237, 675 rolls); Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Father Coyle

When John was young, the family attended church at Saint Paul's Cathedral in downtown Birmingham where Father James E. Coyle had been priest since 1904. Coyle, who was born in 1873 in County Roscommon, Ireland, began his ministry in Mobile when he was 23 and moved to Birmingham eight years later. John shared his respectful feeling for the priest in a description of his first communion with Father Coyle presiding:

“John Hennery [sic] Newman Beecher, who made you?”

“God made me, to know, to love, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.”

Father Coyle pronounced my full name reverentially, unlike my contemporaries on Graymont, who sometimes called me “John Henry Oldman Beecher” with mirthful cackles... Father Coyle was the gentlest of men, except for his hatred of the British who had hanged his grandfather. When the time came for my first confession I dredged up every conceivable sin from the dark bogs of memory. Father Coyle was unimpressed with my iniquity. He waved away from serious consideration my dalliance with Delphine and my corrupting the innocent youth of Upper Montclair. He told me that all little boys had similar experiences. Far from God's hating me, I was infinitely precious to Him and I must never forget it. Now all my sins were forgiven. As a penance, I could just say three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers. The next morning at my First Communion the sacred host which Father Coyle placed on my tongue blissfully melted away. I was now armor-plated against sin like St. Michael with his foot on Satan's neck in the painting above the altar.⁷⁹ The Beecher family had been members of Father Coyle's parish since moved to Birmingham; they had a warm relationship with Father Coyle.

Hence, when Father Coyle was shot to death in broad daylight on an August afternoon in 1921, many in Birmingham were aggrieved, including John Beecher and his family. The gunman was Edwin R. Stephenson, a Ku Klux Klan member and a Methodist minister.

⁷⁹ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 42.

He did not pastor a congregation, but he was known as the marrying minister because he camped out at the courthouse and, for a small fee, would perform a wedding ceremony after a couple obtained a marriage license. Stephenson was upset that Coyle had performed a marriage ceremony for Ruth Stephenson, his only child, and Pedro Gussman, a paperhanger who had come to Birmingham from his native Puerto Rico two decades earlier. Ruth, 18, had converted to Catholicism in order to marry Pedro, who was 44. Initially, Ruth's parents thought she had been kidnapped by a group of Catholics. When her father learned of the marriage, he went to the rectory and shot Father Coyle three times. Stephenson then walked to the courthouse next door and admitted the shooting. He immediately requested that Hugo Black, who would become a two-term senator from Alabama and a Supreme Court justice, defend him. A stellar defense team was arranged with money donated from KKK sources, who saw Stephenson as a hero for shooting the priest. The trial was an obvious attack on Catholicism interspersed with racial prejudice. The prosecution did not present a single witness to testify that Stephenson committed the crime or to establish Father Coyle's good character and the fact that he never carried a weapon. The jury of twelve white, male Protestants rendered a verdict of not guilty; they reasoned that Stephenson acted in self-defense.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Steve Suitts discusses the murder and trial in a biography of Hugo Black. Ohio State law professor Sharon Davies wrote a book about the incident and trial, and Isabel Beecher wrote an article about the death and funeral of Father Coyle for the local Catholic newspaper. Mrs. L.T. Beecher, "The Passing of Father Coyle," *Catholic Monthly*, September, 1921; Sharon L. Davies, *Rising Road : A True Tale of Love, Race, and Religion in America* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 66-67; S. Suitts, *Hugo Black of Alabama : How His Roots and Early Career Shaped the Great Champion of the Constitution*, 332-365.

The timing of Coyle's assassination revealed some changes in the social and political world of Birmingham and the South. The new Ku Klux Klan was reborn before World War I from remnants of Southern populism and a Protestant middle-class whose voice had been ignored by an entrenched power structure.⁸¹ The organization was somewhat different from the extralegal terrorist organization that originated after the Civil War. The new Klan formed as a fraternal organization concerned with controlling local moral sensibilities and fighting for temperance in the social and political arenas. As David Chalmers noted in *Hooded Americanism*, the Klan was very active in Jefferson County where Birmingham is the county seat.⁸² "Most Klansmen did not believe that they were opposing the Catholic because of his religion, but because hierarchical control from Rome prevented his assimilation."⁸³ The murder of Father Coyle and the trial outcome illustrates the rising voice and power of the new Klan and Southern nativism in the early 1920s.⁸⁴ The loss of Father Coyle and the inroads of the resurgent Klan had a powerful impact on John. In 1966, the poems collected in *To Live and Die in Dixie* included "Alter

⁸¹ There are three key arguments concerning the rebirth of the Klan and the makeup of the membership: the first argues the members were largely rural and uneducated; or rural and urban, concerned with defending Protestant values and temperance; or the most recent argument claims they were Populist-Civic School that argues the attitudes of the group was not uncommon, and their visibility provided a political voice to the middle-class masses. According to Feldman the Populist-Civic School comes closest to explaining much of the behavior of the Klan in Birmingham. G. Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949*, 4-5.

⁸² David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism : The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965*, 3rd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981), 78-79.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁴ Though there was no mention of KKK involvement in newspaper reports of the case at the time, his daughter testified that he was an active Klan member and the KKK was financed his defense. S. L. Davies, *Rising Road*, 13.

Christus.” In that poem, John recalled the killing of Father Coyle and mocked the townspeople who passed on gossip and allowed a murderer to go free:

Alter Christus

written about Father Coyle

Yes I remember him
 a truly saintly priest
 alter Christus
 that is to say another Christ
 such as we priests are all supposed to be
 but yet you know a man like that
 can do more mischief than a hundred
 of the humdrum usual kind
 That trouble he got into
 could so easily have been avoided
 Foolhardy was the word for him
 I remember how for years he set his face against
 all plans of his parishioners
 to provide him with a car and driver
 The Twelve Disciples went on foot he said
 so trolleys should be good enough for him
 Off he'd go to nowhere on the trolley all
 alone and in the dead of night
 taking the sacraments to some poor soul
 The Ku Klux Klan was capable of luring him to
 some abode of vice
 on a fake call
 and compromising him in people's eyes
 thus doing all of us priests an injury
 The Bishop tried to make him see
 the folly of his ways but he just shook his head
 and smiled angelically
 No harm could come to him he said on such a holy errand
 Our Lord Himself was there to guard him
 So when this woman came to him and said
 she'd like him to instruct her in the faith
 he went ahead despite her character
 Why she was a fallen woman
 a very Magdalen!
 He should have been more prudent
 but no he treated her as if she'd been
 a bona fide convert

and found a husband for her in the Church
Some kind of foreigner
I never went along with those who claimed
the foreigner had Negro blood
though to be sure his skin was rather swarthy
but still the woman's father had good cause
to feel aggrieved
He was a Klansman
a sort of jackleg preacher
who hung around the court house
and eked a living out by marrying couples
hot off the license bureau
Perhaps he felt his business was infringed
Right in broad day he took his gun
the priest was sitting on his porch
reading his breviary for Passion Week
and hearing feet come up the steps
he must have raised his eyes and looked into the pistol's mouth
Some might consider him a martyr
but do you know
he actually did us all a lot of harm
The murderer was acquitted of his crime
by a jury packed with Klansmen
and the woman didn't even stick
She fell away soon afterwards
They always do that kind
The town believed that there had been
something between the two of them
The whisper went around
and where a priest's involved
such whispers find a ready ear

That's why I always say
we can't be too suspicious
of those who come to us from lives of public vice and sin
with tears of feigned repentance
The safest thing for us to do
is shut our door against such persons
lest scandal enter in.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ John Beecher and Barbara Beecher, *To Live and Die in Dixie & Other Poems* (Birmingham, Ala.: Red Mountain Editions, 1966), 47.

The Grand Tour

John had signed up for a European tour with Dr. Oliver Cromwell Carmichael, a principal at one of the Birmingham high schools and the future president of Montevallo College and later Vanderbilt University.⁸⁶ Cromwell dropped out because only two boys signed up, but an understudy, William Wright, the 38-year old principal of a Birmingham Elementary School, took his place.⁸⁷ By the middle of June 1921, John was on a train to New York with Beecher and another student, William Rushton. They departed for Naples on the Dante Alighieri, an Italian Line ship. Many of their fellow passengers were young men and women making a similar European tour. They arrived in Naples around the beginning of July. John, full of gratitude, wrote his parents after arriving in Italy, “I certainly wish you were both with me—you would have the time of your lives. Again, I want you to know of the deep gratitude I feel for your generosity in giving me this trip.”⁸⁸ After seeing Pompeii, they traveled to Rome, Florence, Milan, Venice, Lake Maggiore, Basel, Berlin, and Paris. While in Paris, they went to the battlefield trenches of the Great War that had ended just two years earlier. John describes the experience in his

⁸⁶ Dr. Carmichael, an Alabama native, had a distinguished career in the field of education. He came up through the public education system in Birmingham, and at different times had been principal of two high schools in Birmingham before becoming president of Montevallo College in 1926. He was selected to become chancellor of Vanderbilt University in 1937, and then in 1946 he became director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In 1954, as the race issue escalated in the South, he became president of the University of Alabama. He resigned in 1957 to become a consultant to the Ford Foundation. “Dr. Oliver Carmichael, 74, Dies; Ex-President of U. Of Alabama,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1966, 47.

⁸⁷ In his autobiography, John uses pseudonyms for his traveling companions. Their real names were determined from letters to and from his parents and ship records.

⁸⁸ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, July 5, 1921, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

autobiography, “From Paris we visited the battlefields, the shattered Reims cathedral, the trenches where femurs and other interesting fragments of humankind stuck up from the parapets, the cemeteries with their lines of white crosses stretching to infinity.”⁸⁹ From Reims they took the train to Brussels, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and finally London. While he was in London, Isabel wrote him, “It seems like a dream that you are in London! How I do hope you will enjoy England, as I am sure I would. Give yourself up to all the lovely part of the traditions of your family and all that makes a link with the ages. I am following you every minute.”⁹⁰ They returned to New York on September 4, 1921.⁹¹

John Beecher was exposed to a wider world very early in his life. “The grand tour,” for him and for many others in his affluent social class, provided an education in European history and culture. This gift from his parents also helped to solidify his place in that world of wealth and privilege. This was particularly important to Isabel, who had risen above her working-class lineage and wanted to make sure that her son’s education was in line with the Beecher family’s social standing.

⁸⁹ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 227.

⁹⁰ Isabel Garghill Beecher to John Newman Beecher, 3 August 1921, Box 8, Folder 2, Personal Correspondence (1921-22), John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 2.

⁹¹ Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M237, 675 rolls); Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Cornell

John entered his father's alma mater, Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, after his return from Europe in the fall of 1921 with the goal of becoming an engineer. He and Leonard visited the university for several days in June and Leonard enjoyed introducing his son to his fraternity brothers at the Chi Psi Lodge, where Leonard lived while he was at Cornell.⁹² The lodge had been the Fiske-McGraw Mansion, home of one of the primary benefactors of the university, and was converted to a fraternity house in 1896.⁹³ John hit it off with the other young men and pre-pledged the fraternity as a legacy pledge. When he arrived in the fall, he hit the ground running both academically and socially. He initially studied engineering, but his greatest education at Cornell took place outside the classroom.

John's first term was different from any social or intellectual experience he had known. He took advanced courses and tried out to be a writer for the student newspaper, the *Cornell Daily Sun*. As the only freshman in the Chi Psi Lodge that year, he was quickly introduced to the vices of upper classmen such as women and alcohol. Though prohibition was in effect, there were plenty of avenues to procure alcohol.

The men of Cornell were primarily from middle-and upper-class families, and they were particularly conscious of style during the early 1920s. Even though there was class-consciousness at Cornell, historian Carol Kammen's research shows that the university

⁹² Andrew Robert Warner, ed. *The Sixth Decennial Catalogue of the Chi Psi Fraternity* (Auburn, NY: Fifty-Eighth Annual Convention, 1902), 446.

⁹³ Morris Bishop, *A History of Cornell* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 334.

was also sociologically complex. One-quarter of the men belonged to fraternities, while the others were independent.⁹⁴ The independents had an organization representing their interests. Thus, there was both an independent spirit and fraternal consideration alive on the campus.

A tradition suggested that one could recognize a Cornell man by the clothes he wore; John was no exception. Leonard Beecher wrote John many letters reprimanding him for the money he spent on clothing. Long fur coats for men were all the rage, and John had to have one, too. He even created drawings of the definitive Cornell man. John wrote of his fashion sense in his autobiography:

Each week the tailors and haberdashers of New York and New Haven put on an exhibition of their wares in the Hotel Ithaca. Sometimes they gave a showing of swatches of materials in the Lodge, took orders and measured us for custom-made suits. Though my father was giving me an over-generous allowance of \$250 a month it was insufficient to meet all the bills I ran up. I had won the name of “best dressed freshman in the university”. My outfits included imported British shoes, Scottish Argyll socks, foulard ties and regimental stripes from the racks of Liberty’s in London, a Norfolk jacket, a couple of four-button herringbones, a new “tuxedo” and, capping all, a coonskin fur coat so voluminous that when I walked abroad in it I kicked up the back with my heels.⁹⁵

Like many young men of the day, he binged on alcohol and women, and his academic work took a backseat to fun. His father wrote him many long letters encouraging him to buckle down and study. As was often true, John paid little attention. Before long, his grades suffered and he was placed on academic probation. After Christmas, he went back to Cornell to settle down, but he soon became ill. The illness lingered so long that his

⁹⁴ Carol Kammen, “The 1920s at Cornell,” Cornell University http://reading.cornell.edu/reading_project_06/gatsby/The1920satCornell.htm (accessed 11-20-2010 2010).

⁹⁵ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 241.

mother came to Ithaca so she could go with him to a doctor in New York. He was diagnosed with a severe sinus infection and scheduled for surgery. After the surgery, he spent three weeks in the hospital, and his mother remained with him. This was a turning point in his relationship with Isabel.

“My mother never left me. She read to me all day and slept in my room, serving as my night nurse. For the first time in my life I became acquainted with contemporary literature. She was beginning to give public readings of the newer poets and fiction writers. She read to me poems by Sandburg, Masters, Lindsay, Millay, Frost, Robinson, Housman, Masefield and Yeats, novels and stories by Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, C.S. Montague, and Ivan Bunin. It opened up a rich and exciting world of which I had been totally unaware. I couldn’t hear enough of it.”⁹⁶

He had always had a difficult relationship with his mother. His father had been the nurturer in the family; his mother had consistently pushed him to the highest standard in all things and rarely encouraged him to be emotionally close to her. During his hospital recovery, literature and art became a bond between them that would continue for the rest of their lives. After he was discharged from the hospital, they headed back to Birmingham. The doctor advised him to go home. The warmer environment and rest were vital to his recovery.

He returned to Cornell in the fall of 1922. As he convalesced, he decided that he was tired of his wild ways and resolved to settle down, focus on his studies, and find a steady girlfriend. He soon began dating Caroline Brooks, a student at the all-female Wells College in Aurora, New York, which was near Ithaca. She was from a strict Presbyterian family that did not allow smoking or drinking. She and John quickly became serious. He wrote her letters every day, and they went on properly chaperoned dates on the weekends.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 253.

However, he did not adhere to his resolution perfectly. He would on occasion go out with his friends for wine and women. His grades continued to suffer. His father, afraid that he was squandering his opportunity for a good education, sent a warning letter early in the term:

You have got to get a clear record established at Cornell now if you have any expectation or ambition of pursuing your education hereafter, either there or anywhere else. At the present stage of the game, you are distinctly 'on probation' as far as home is concerned. You have it in you to deliver the goods if you will, but in order to do that you have got to understand and act on the theory that your work is 1st and everything else is 2nd. ... I have not the slightest intention of sending you to Cornell or anywhere else just to have a good time. I want you to have a good time, as you know, but not now or ever at the expense of your work.⁹⁷

No amount of coaxing from his parents seemed to work; he was 19 years old and extremely stubborn.

By November, John was thinking of asking Caroline to marry him. He wrote to his father, who advised him to slow down. Leonard warned of the difficulty men faced finishing their education and supporting a family. "You are still very young. You have practically four years of school before you, even if you forego a post-graduate year. After that you have to establish yourself in some kind of work that will enable you to support yourself and a wife and possibly a family."⁹⁸ Nothing deterred him, however, and while in Birmingham on spring break, with his parents' blessing he bought an engagement ring. He asked Caroline to marry him on Easter 1923. For the rest of the term, she tried to persuade him to attend her Presbyterian church. He refused. She then suggested they both

⁹⁷ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, September 13, 1922, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁹⁸ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, October 13, 1922, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

become Episcopalians, much more palatable to her parents than Catholicism. Again, he refused. He was not an active Catholic, but he was not ashamed to be a Catholic. They came up with a plan for the summer; he would work in Birmingham and she would come for a visit at the end of the summer to be introduced to his Southern home.

Once school was out, John traveled back home and began working once again in the open hearth. His father also agreed to buy him a new car. After shopping around, they chose a new Buick Sports Roadster. "It was fire engine red with leather upholstery to match, fancy disc wheels, a canvas top that folded down and a rumble seat."⁹⁹ Caroline arrived in Birmingham near the end of the summer and with plans to return to Ithaca with John and his parents on a road trip in September. The visit did not go well. She hated the city, the weather, and the dirtiness of the steel mills. The relationship was going downhill. Once back at school, she renewed her attempts to persuade him to change his religious affiliation. Failing in that, she told him that she could not marry him because he was a Catholic; she returned his engagement ring and his Chi Psi pin.¹⁰⁰

He spent some time indulging his hurt feelings by drinking heavily, but finally made it through the fog with new insight:

I now experienced a revulsion against my whole style of life. Though I was attending classes and labs—even studying faithfully—none of it meant anything to me. I was in a state of inner turmoil, a prey to rage and despair. I wrote my parents saying I could no longer stand Cornell, Ithaca, or the Chi Psi Lodge. I wanted to come home and go back to work on the open hearth. To my amazement, they both agreed without demurring. They knew I had broken off with Caroline because she demanded that I turn Episcopalian. They had been very proud of me for this. Perhaps they feared she would change her mind and start things up again if I stayed in

⁹⁹ J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 267.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.

Ithaca. They were quite right in their suspicion of her though they didn't know me. Once done with somebody I stayed done.¹⁰¹

He wanted to come home immediately, but his father pushed him to stay and finish the term. "It will be the manly thing to do and after it is done, it is done right you will look to this year as having contributed greatly to the development and strengthening of your character," Leonard wrote.¹⁰² John finished the term.

His mother arrived in Ithaca by train after Christmas and together they traveled back to Birmingham. He said, "I began to perceive that she was the best sport in the world, tough-fibred and witty, a delightful companion. Our whole relationship changed. She had decided to love me after nineteen years."¹⁰³ Once back in Birmingham, he worked at the open hearth again on eight-hour day shifts. The plant had changed throughout the operation from twelve- to eight-hour shifts while he was gone. In addition, he enrolled in the University of Chicago correspondence school and studied liberal arts. His mother worked with him on his studies every evening, much as his father had when he was young.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 281.

¹⁰² Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, November 16, 1922, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁰³ J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 282.

CHAPTER IV: BECOMING A POET

In the winter of 1923, John Beecher changed his career goals. At Cornell University, where he had studied engineering and hoped to follow his father into the steel business, he almost failed physics and found little that sparked him in the engineering courses. His academic interests shifted to liberal arts, and there he embraced literature and language. This allowed him not only to pursue the creativity that he could not find in the sciences, but also to bond with his mother around a shared academic interest. At the end of the term, he returned to Birmingham and to his job as a helper on the Number 8 furnace—a job that in the previous summer had inspired him and his creativity. In his autobiography, he noted that he liked the men on the job and felt a sense of pride in the work. Thus, the catalyst for the new personal direction had come the summer before while he worked at the steel mill. One evening that summer after a long shift, poetry came to him for the first time:

One Saturday when I was on night turn, Number 8 tapped out its last heat of the week at three in the morning and went on bottom. I was through and free to leave. I had already worked 87½ hours that week. But I was in the grip of a curious possession. I felt a terrifying emotion. It was like talons seizing my chest. The open-hearth office where I used to work was deserted. I went in and grabbed a sheaf of scratch paper, which I attached to my clipboard along with my notes on the operation of Number 8. I sat down on the parapet outside and began writing with my stub of pencil. Every so often, a dinky engine would storm right by me with a string of charging pans. It would spray me with smoke and cinders. The line of furnaces stretched away down the floor, their peepholes winking in the gloom, the helpers marching with their scoops, flinging loads of dolomite against the backwalls, the floor crane tilting a hot metal car into Number 9, light bursting where the molten stuff flowed through the spout. When I finished writing the sun was high in the sky. It was eight o'clock. I had

been writing for five hours. In the dining room at home, we had a grandfather clock from Scotland dated 1810. The face bore a primitive painting of the Muse accosting Bobby Burns at the plow. It was not so strange to me therefore that the Muse should have grabbed me on the open-hearth floor. I had written my first poem. It was about the steel mills.¹

John Beecher believed that at this point he became a poet. He found inspiration at the mill, and he allowed the muse to flow through him onto the paper. Though he did not realize it, the event marked a new direction for him. By winter, he no longer saw himself as a future steel engineer or metallurgist or a big boss for TCI; he saw himself as a poet.

During the late winter and spring of 1924, he worked full-time at the mill and continued to take correspondence courses. The courses contributed to his transformation from aspiring engineer to a poet. He completed courses in English literature, German, history, and creative writing. For the creative writing course, he made his first attempt at an autobiography, which he called “The Fading Margin.” His parents were so proud of the result that his father’s secretary typed copies, and his mother sent them to her literary friends. In return, they sent letters of praise to Isabel, who showed great pride in his new direction.

John’s next significant writing accomplishment was the poem “Big Boy.” He returned home from his shift at the mill one day and sat down to complete an assignment for a correspondence course in English, but instead a poem came to him. “In less than an hour, I had written it out. . . . The speaker was a steelworker talking to another. It was composed of five stanzas of six lines each with a regular rhyme scheme which somehow imposed itself on the material. The language was steelworker’s lingo, very rough for those times

¹ Ibid., 270.

and exceedingly anti-poetic. The general thrust was stoical but angry and bitter, proto-revolutionary even. I called it “Big Boy”, a common form of address out on the floor. “Big boy, come help me ram out this tap-hole.” “Big boy, grab your scoop. We’re making backwall on Number 8.”

Big Boy

Skirt turned you down
 Because you worked in a steel mill?
 Told it over town,
 Gave you the gate, laughed fit to kill?
 Hell, what do you expect?
 You can’t help this big boy!

Burns on your eye,
 On your arms, your chest, your hands?
 Goin’ to cry?
 Them things an open hearth feller stands.
 Damn, snap to, you buck up.
 make the best of it, big boy!

Can’t stand the work?
 Back sore, shovel handle cuts like a knife?
 How can you shirk?
 You got to eat, ain’t you, in this dirty life?
 Hell, swing on to that hammer.
 Put your back into it, big boy!

Hop on a freight?
 Go some place where a man’s got a chance?
 That ain’t your fate!
 Weak head, strong back, and you got on pants.
 Why, you’re as dumb as me!
 What else can you do, big boy?

Wish you could die,
 Wish 'twas pneumonia 'stead of smoke has got you to coughin'?
 Wish you could lie
 Under the ground in a varnished pine coffin?
 Christ, you wish you were dead?
 Huh, you ain't got nothing on me, big boy!

*Ensley Steel Works, 1924*²

When John finished the poem, he immediately showed it to his mother. She was shocked by its common tone and pessimism, but that did not stop her from sending it to her accomplished literary friends. Isabel knew some important figures in poetry circles because of her work in the Chautauqua, and she used her contacts to promote her son. One such friend, poet Lew Sarett, who was a speech teacher at Northwestern, sent the poem to Harriet Monroe, the influential founder of *Poetry Magazine* and an important voice in the burgeoning modernist poetry movement.³ Monroe had befriended many of the most renowned poets of the era, including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, and T.S. Eliot.⁴ Monroe wanted to publish “Big Boy” if John

² John Beecher, *Collected Poems, 1924-1974* (New York,: Macmillan, 1974), 8-9.

³ Lew Sarett, nicknamed “the woodsman-poet,” wrote poems about Native Americans and the natural world. “Lew Sarett, 66, Poet and Author: Writer of 5 Verse Volumes Is Dead in Florida—Taught 30 Years at Northwestern,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1954; “Pushcarts and Other Poetic Things,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1922.

⁴ Monroe is celebrated for her role in the modernist poetry movement. She began *Poetry Magazine* after she saw how patronage money was given to architecture and sculpture and how little was given to poetry. She set out to change that by promoting the profile of poets and their work through her magazine and try to raise poetry to a high art. Ann M. Fine, “Harriet Monroe and Poetry: A Magazine of Verse,” in *America, Meet Modernism!: Women of the Little Magazine Movement*, ed. Barbara Probst Solomon (New York: Great Marsh Press, 2003); Edith Wylie Miller, “Harriet Monroe: The Formative Years,” (Masters, Stephen F. Austin State University, 1991).

would make some changes. She wanted him to change the title, eliminate profanity, and soften a few of the words. He refused. Writers and artists had embraced modernism, and the movement set aside the old rules and shaped a new cultural era.

Modernism, a movement that manifested itself in art, literature, and architecture, has its roots in the nineteenth century as a response to a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society. The 1920s was a particularly rich time for artists of all kinds in the United States and in Europe. The movement was characterized by a recultivation of past forms into new styles in art and literature; Robert Adams described this idea as the use of “the past structurally, not for decorative end.”⁵ Adams also noted the movement emphasized grotesque disparities, dehumanization with a sexual presence, concerned with Marx, Freud, science, and technology, exhibiting an anti-rationalist vane, as well as an absence of political engagement. Well-known artists who practiced in the modern style were Picasso and writers T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Franz Kafka.⁶ Though John did not write in a modernist style—his work is in the mode of traditional Americanists like Walt Whitman—his early, freeform experimental style shows the influence of the modernists.

While John had been introduced to the movement and to modern literature and had begun to see himself as a poet, he was still a young man in Birmingham, torn between personal passion and parental expectations. After a few months in the mills, John traveled with his parents to different places. He and his father went on a tour of U.S. Steel plants

⁵ Robert Martin Adams, "What Was Modernism?," *The Hudson Review* 31, no. 1 (1978): 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

in Pittsburgh and Chicago, where his father tried to convince him to return to Cornell and continue to study engineering. After they returned to Birmingham, John only became more convinced that he wanted to be a poet. His mother, thrilled that he was pursuing art and literature, offered to accompany him to Ithaca. They could rent a house together and John would enroll in summer school at Cornell while she kept the house for him and audited courses. Isabel was eager to escape the heat of Birmingham in the summer and longed for the intellectual companionship that a university town offered. John readily agreed.

It was also during this summer session at Cornell that John met his first great writing mentor, Professor William Strunk, co-author of the now classic little book, *The Elements of Style*. Strunk was a well-respected, longtime professor of composition at Cornell, and that summer John enrolled in two of his classes, Advanced Composition and Shakespearean Tragedy. According to John, his encounter with Strunk was a turning point in his life, and he discovered himself as a writer. “He intervened at just the right time to teach me restraint, directness, a stripped, lean style,” John explained. “At the same time he encouraged me, saying I was a natural writer and one of the most promising students he had ever had.”⁷ The relationship with Strunk was the most important connection he made at Cornell—even more important than his fraternity or any of his other classes.⁸

By the end of the summer, John had explored many options for continuing his education. A fraternity brother at Cornell advised him to go to Harvard, but John found

⁷ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 286.

⁸ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 3.

that Harvard would not give him credit for any of the college work he had done at VMI, Cornell, or Chicago. It was unacceptable for him to begin at Harvard as a freshman, so he went back to Birmingham and again worked in the open hearth. He continued to write poetry and signed up for more correspondence courses from the University of Chicago. A month or so after he returned to Birmingham, a young professor from the University of Alabama, Hudson Strode, contacted him. Strode, having seen some of John's poems, wanted him to consider attending the university and studying English under his tutelage. When John visited Strode at the university in Tuscaloosa, the dean agreed to admit him immediately and classify him a senior. If he took twenty credit hours during the fall and spring and a full load in summer school, he could graduate in a year. John believed it would be advantageous to finish his undergraduate work quickly at Alabama and then move on to a more prestigious university like Harvard for graduate school. His mother loved the idea, but his father was somewhat concerned about the quality of the education at the University of Alabama. However, Leonard would always relinquish his doubt and defer to Isabel's judgment in the end.⁹

In the fall of 1924, when John was 20, he entered the University of Alabama as a student of Hudson Strode. At the time, Strode was a Shakespeare scholar, writer, playwright, and advisor to the Blackfriars, the theatre group on campus. He became well known later in his career for a three-volume biography of the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. He is perhaps even better known for inspiring many successful authors

⁹ John Newman Beecher, "Autobiography Tape Transcription," Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, New Orleans, 694; J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 5; J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 290.

through his creative writing courses, which he taught at the University of Alabama for almost forty years.¹⁰ For John, Strode opened a window into the new world of modern literature, citing the importance of contemporary writers like James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Strode thought John's work followed in the vein of this new style of writing and wanted to nurture his young talent. John took Strode's classes in creative writing, Shakespeare, modern drama, and public speaking. He also became good friends with the young professor—Strode was 32—and even participated in his December 1924 wedding.¹¹

That same month, in a letter to his mother, John explained what he had learned about himself during the previous year:

I have come to realize that I will never be a horse thief, or an alcoholic, or a drug addict. That is soul satisfying is it not? It has always been my firm conviction that I had the makings of a demon. But no. I'm afraid not. Another illusion smashed. The truth is merely that I am an incurable sentimentalist and shall never have common sense or peace of mind. That sounds more hopeless than I intended. And besides you know a great deal more about me than I do myself.

¹⁰ Hudson Strode is credited with inspiring some of the most well known writers to come out of Alabama. By the mid-1930s, he had gained a reputation for nurturing writers and there was competition from students to get into his creative writing courses, which only had 14 open slots. Published writers from the mid-twentieth century such as Harriet Hassell, Elise Sanguinetti, Helen Norris, Ann Waldron, and Lonnie Coleman took his course and went on to successful writing careers. Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, took his Shakespeare course. In her letters, she noted Strode as an influence. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, eds., *The Companion to Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 28; *Online Encyclopedia of Alabama* (Auburn, AL: Auburn University, 2009), s.v. "Hudson Strode."; Charles J. Shields, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 184; Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis*, [1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1955)]; Hudson Strode, *The Eleventh House* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

¹¹ John Newman Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, December 9, 1924, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX; J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 289-290.

He notes what he believed about himself as a writer. “I have two things at present—descriptive power and pathos. I am wise enough not to go out of my depth. In time, I will mature of course.”¹²

Early in his first semester at the University of Alabama, John met Virginia St. Cloud Donovan, the woman who would become his first wife and the mother of four of his five children. Virginia, a student from the small town of Roebuck near Birmingham, was involved in theater at the University of Alabama and aspired to be a writer. Though her family did not move in the same social circles as the Beechers, her father owned the successful Donovan Coffee Company. They met in Hudson Strode’s creative writing course, and one of John’s friends dated Virginia’s sister. Virginia was engaged to a medical student at Harvard when she and John first met, but John pursued her with vigor and ultimately won her heart. Their love affair was passionate and the early letters between them reveal the intensity of their physical and emotional relationship during the courtship. By January 1925, they discussed marriage in their letters.¹³ Of course, Isabel Beecher was not thrilled at the prospect of John’s involvement with Virginia. Early in the relationship, Isabel asked Hudson Strode to steer John toward girls within their social circle.¹⁴ John, of course, ignored the advice of both his mother and his mentor.

Throughout the year at the university, John concentrated on his writing. In addition to poetry, he wrote a short novel about the steel mills called *Dust to Dust*. He also spent a

¹² J. N. Beecher to I. G. Beecher, December 9, 1924, John Beecher Collection.

¹³ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Donovan, January 23, 1925, 1925, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁴ J. N. Beecher, “The Vital I,” 294.

great deal of time reading to Strode, who was struggling with a vision problem. Through both coursework and reading for Strode, John was immersed in modernist literature.

Isabel continued to use her contacts from the chautauquas and Northwestern to promote her son. In the spring of 1925, she received a letter from her friend Lew Sarett praising John's poetry. Sarett wrote:

The enclosed poems are so unusually fine, so rich in their promise, and so meritorious that in this case it is a pleasure to comment on them. Without question your son has the gift! The poems are far above average. There is very little about them of the amateur; and they show very definitely the fine sense of values, the fine imagination, the excellent restraint—nearly all the qualities that one expects to find only in a seasoned artist.

Your son has some things to learn; but the beautiful thing about it all is that I believe that fundamentally he has the gift, and with it an unusually advanced power of expression. The defects in technique can be easily removed.¹⁵

He noted that John had some important things to learn, but also that he was well on his way to becoming a real poet. With praise like that, Isabel resolved to put her son in a position to move his talent forward. The next step, she concluded, was to take John to a place where he could be discovered. What better place than the new, but already notable, Bread Loaf Summer School of English, which just happened to be very nearly in Robert Frost's backyard.

The Bread Loaf School of English was established in 1920 as part of Middlebury College in Vermont and conducted about twenty miles from Middlebury at the Bread Loaf Inn. John and Isabel spent the summer of 1925 there, and John completed his undergraduate coursework by taking courses in Advanced Composition, British and

¹⁵ Lew Sarett to Isabel Garghill Beecher, April 13, 1925, 1925, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

American Literature, and Poetics. His mother audited courses, and both of them soaked up the beautiful mountain landscape and literary atmosphere.¹⁶ Robert Frost, who lived in the nearby town of Ripton, was instrumental in the founding of Bread Loaf and played an active role in the annual assembly for the next forty years. The school brought in visiting professors to teach the courses, and many writers and publishers visited the campus during the term. The English School was the predecessor to the famous Bread Loaf Writer's Conference that debuted in 1926.¹⁷ During the 1925 session, professors Sidney Cox of Dartmouth, Edith Mirrielees of Stanford, and Morris Spear of Johns Hopkins taught courses. Other well-known writers and publishers who visited that summer were Carl Sandburg, Louis Untermeyer, Thomas Boyd, and John Farrar. Another student that summer was B.F. Skinner, the future behaviorist.¹⁸

¹⁶ A wealthy benefactor, Joseph Battell, had willed the Bread Loaf Inn, surrounding cottages, and about 31,000 acres to the college in 1915. Battell, a publisher, legislator, and breeder of Morgan horses was an alumni of Middlebury and willed a large part of his fortune, including the Bread Loaf Inn, to the school. For the first few years after his death, the college operated the inn at a loss. In 1920, the inn became part of the summer adult education program and focused on English Language and Literature. The school adhered to a model of rigorous and focused study of a subject in an uninterrupted period. Andrew W. Jewell, "At the Edge of the Circle: Willa Cather and American Arts Communities," (University of Nebraska, 2004), 91-93; Federal Writers' Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), 272-274; Douglas Earl Wood, "Teaching as Learning: From Content Knowledge to Pedagogical Practice," (Education, Harvard University, 2000), 12-14.

¹⁷ Many famous writers have attended and taught at the Bread Loaf Conference through the years. It is considered the oldest and one of the most notable in the country. Some notable attendees or teachers have been Carson McCullers, Stephen Vincent Benet, Donald Davidson, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, May Sarton, Anne Sexton, Eudora Welty, John Gardner, and John Irving. David Bain, *Whose Woods These Are: A History of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 1926-1992* (New York: Ecco Press, 1993).

¹⁸ J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 307-310.

It was through Farrar that John Beecher's first poem, "Big Boy," was eventually published. Farrar was the publisher of *Bookman*¹⁹ and head of the editorial department at George H. Doran (later Doubleday), one of the largest publishers in New York at the time.²⁰ He bought the poem and published it without changes to run in a future issue of the magazine.²¹ Writing to Virginia, John broke the good news: "I am an author! A poet! "Big Boy" will shortly grace the pages of the *Bookman*. Johnny Farrar stopped by my room tonight to say goodbye, demanded that I produce the poem, and purchased it. Moreover, I am to shape up other things to send him. Then a novel. And so on to vague and splendid triumphs."²² John received positive, constructive feedback at Breadloaf about his writing. He befriended Sydney Cox, an English teacher at Dartmouth and author of *A Swinger of Birches*, the first biography of his good friend, Robert Frost. Cox read John's work and offered criticism, and John shared it in a letter to Virginia:

Cox, who is quite rightly unimpressed with my work, broke forth today and said that he knew that eventually I would do something of magnitude,

¹⁹ *The Bookman* was a serious monthly literary magazine. John C. Farrar was the editor from 1919 until 1926, when he became an editor for Doubleday, Doran, and Rinehart publishers. Edward E. Chielen, *American Literary Magazines: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1986), 67.

²⁰ John Farrar was a writer and one of the founding partners of Farrar and Rinehart, then Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. In 1925, when John met him, he was only 28 years old. A Yale graduate and good friend of poet Stephen Vincent Benet, he became editor of *Bookman* in 1921—and held the post until 1927. The following year he became the first director of the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. He is noted for publishing T.S. Eliot, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Flannery O'Connor, Edmund Wilson, and Bernard Malamud. C. Gerald Fraser, "John C. Farrar, Publisher, Editor and Writer, Is Dead," *New York Times*, November 7, 1974.

²¹ John Beecher, "Big Boy," *The Bookman; a Review of Books and Life*, April 1927.

²² John Newman Beecher to Virginia St. Clair Donovan, August 2, 1925, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

that it would have to come out for I had so much 'primordial energy' as he called it. Nothing has heartened me so much for along time — for that energy is what I honestly believe is the one talent I have. What writing I have done stinks the more I look at it — it is all very good for a twenty-one year old, but as literature it isn't'. A few elements of permanence it has, far above the average, but in finish, technique it is juvenile. Bret Harte wrote constantly for twelve years without publishing and then published —“The Luck of Roaring Camp” which made him nationally known in a month — and so many others —I know that I can be great if I work and work and work.²³

The experience exposed his strengths and weaknesses as a writer and motivated him to continue writing and experience life. John explained in a letter to Virginia that everyone advised him to sit down and write a novel, but he wondered if he has a novel in him.²⁴ At the conclusion of the Bread Loaf summer school, John and his parents vacationed in upstate New York where they were joined by old New York friends as well as Hudson Strode.

John faced a decision about his next move. Before he left Birmingham, he told Virginia that he wanted to return and work in the steel mill, where he felt most inspired. His mother and Strode tried to persuade him to go to Harvard to pursue a graduate degree, but he resisted. Virginia had chosen to stay in Birmingham and take a teaching job because he said he would be back in the fall. So, he returned to Birmingham and the steel mill. He wanted to try a new job in the mill and chose to work at the Fairfield Works rolling mill. This position was harder, more dangerous, and had lower pay than his previous job on the open hearth. In an effort to prove himself a man and earn the respect

²³ John Newman Beecher to Virginia St. Clair Donovan, July 21, 1925, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

²⁴ John Newman Beecher to Virginia St. Clair Donovan, July 31, 1925, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

of his coworkers, he continued to work the position. That all changed in late December 1925, his knee buckled while he was moving heavy materials. The kneecap was dislodged, an injury so bad that it required that John have surgery and a three-week stay in the hospital. During his recuperation, he and Virginia began to talk more seriously about marriage and the future. It was not what his mother wanted, and she and Strode pushed him to sign up for the winter term at Harvard. It was a hard decision for him, but after extracting a promise from his parents that he could marry Virginia in the fall and spend a study year abroad the following year, he decided to go.²⁵

In February 1926, he enrolled at Harvard University to work on a master's degree in English. His goal, reinforced by his mother and Strode, was to earn credentials to teach English in a university, a job that could free up some time for him to write popular fiction. By the end of the first term, he became disillusioned with what he saw as a lack of connection to the human experience in the English department at Harvard. He explained:

In English 5, the famous course in 'Advanced Composition,' I had for a classmate the black poet, Countee Cullen. This was the first time I had ever sat in a classroom with a black man. However, nothing of value was produced in the course, either by Cullen or by me or by anyone else. When a student read one of his stories in which some characters were seated around a table drinking moonshine whiskey, the professor interrupted sternly, "Coffee will do!"²⁶

²⁵ J. N. Beecher, "The Vital I," 311-322.

²⁶ Countee Cullen (1903-1946) was a celebrated African-American poet and a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He wrote in conventional forms and his style is often contrasted to Langston Hughes' experimental form. Briefly married to W.E.B DuBois' daughter, Nina Yolande, he was an assistant editor to *Opportunity*, *Journal of Negro Life*. After being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1928, he spent the next two years in Paris. The remainder of his life was spent teaching French and English in New York Public Schools where he is noted for influencing James Baldwin. He wanted to be known

By the end of his second term—Christmas 1926—John described himself as “on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” He wrote to his friend from Bread Loaf, Sidney Cox of Dartmouth, and asked for help in finding a teaching job. He and Virginia had been married in September and the couple returned to Cambridge for John’s final term at Harvard. When Sidney Cox learned that a professor was leaving for sabbatical during the winter term, he invited John to interview for position, which required teaching three sections of freshman English at Dartmouth during the winter term of 1927. John interviewed for and accepted the position, and he and Virginia promptly moved to Hanover, New Hampshire.²⁷ John said that he “... taught freshman English with some success since I made a point of rigorously excluding from the classroom everything I had learned at Harvard. ... I did not like English departments, either at Harvard or at Dartmouth; I detested their approach to an art which I thought should be approached as an art, and not as a subject. So consequently my relationships with the faculty at Dartmouth were not good, with the exception of one man, a very great writing teacher by

as a poet, not an African American poet. Abraham Chapman, ed. *Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 382. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross, eds., *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 172-173. John Newman Beecher, “Resume of My Career as a Writer,” Long narrative resume, Durham, April 1968, Box 27, Folder 9; Beecher non-fiction papers, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 7.

²⁷ Sidney Cox to John Newman Beecher, January 21, 1927, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

the name of Sidney Cox.”²⁸ The position was for single term and at its conclusion, John decided to cash in on his parents’ promise of a year abroad.²⁹

By that time it was clear that John would stay just beyond the lines of societal and parental expectation; the experience at Harvard and Dartmouth confirmed his inability to move with the status quo. He was independent, rebellious, and filled with passion. In a letter to his parents, he reflected on what he learned from this situation:

After all, I mustn’t forget that I am a writer. Everything else is secondary and ought to be contributory. I can make a living without a string of degrees - I have done it before and I am doing it now, so I guess I can in the future. The important thing is to remain free. Goethe, after alternate periods of whooping it up in the city and vegetating in the country writing amorous verses to patron’s daughters, graduated in law from Strasburg. He then took some government job in the country, had a disastrous love affair, threw up girl and job to return to the city and write it out of his system. And so he went all his days bouncing from the diplomatic service to naturalism to poetry. I don’t know where he picked up his training in natural science - but he was in the end a great naturalist as well as a great poet. I’m afraid he wasn’t a great diplomat. Anyhow, he was a great person. When I contemplate my essential ‘vagabondery’ I take comfort from him. I feel closer to him than to any literary or historical person.³⁰

He was determined to be a writer. During the summer at Bread Loaf, he began a novel, *The Freshman*, that he finished while he was at Harvard; two publishers rejected it.³¹ He

²⁸ John Newman Beecher, “Transcript of Autobiographical Tapes 3003-3004, 1965,” p. 2, John Beecher Collection.

²⁹Ibid., 3.

³⁰ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher and Isabel Garghill Beecher, March 16, 1927, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³¹ Strunk told him not to worry about rejection from two publishers, for rejection letters always come. Begin to worry if nine publishers turned him down. William Strunk to John Newman Beecher, April 27, 1928, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

also had come to understand that the material for good writing comes not from the academy, but from life. He was drawn to the steel mills because he believed the men who worked there were living authentic, although difficult, lives. From his experience at Harvard and Dartmouth, he concluded that the ivory tower was disconnected from the real life that is grist for a writer.

Before he and Virginia departed for Europe, John contemplated enrolling in the Sorbonne, Oxford, or perhaps a German university, but in the end, he decided to forego an application; he would simply audit a class if he had the interest. The couple made a conscious decision to experience life from day to day and follow the writing muse. John explains this to his parents:

If I became interested in some special subject, I might work singly in it and come up for the degree. If not, I wouldn't. I would read widely and as my taste dictated. If I got started writing I would drop everything—there would be no reason why I couldn't—and keep writing until the vein gave out.³²

In the letter, he repeated his earlier, insistent thought: “I am a writer. . . . The important thing is to remain free.”³³ During a Dartmouth campus visit in late April, Robert Frost affirmed John’s decision to forego Oxford. “I asked him about study abroad, and the first thing he said was ‘Don’t go to Oxford!’ . . . He advised browsing about on the continent

³² John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher and Isabel Garghill Beecher, 16 March 1927, Box 11, Folder 1: 1927, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³³ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher and Isabel Garghill Beecher, 16 March 1927, Box 11, Folder 1: 1927, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

getting to know their civilizations, following where my interests led me.”³⁴ Thus without a specific plan, John and Virginia anticipated moving from place to place with only an idea of sites they wanted to see, experience, and write about. He planned to write both fiction and nonfiction as they traveled, his idea being that he would publish a travel book or a novel once they return to Birmingham.³⁵

When they arrived in Europe from New York in the summer of 1927, they focused on France first, traveling throughout the country by train and bicycle. Then they pushed on to other areas of the continent. After they explored Western Europe, they headed to Paris where they stayed for several months, auditing courses at the Sorbonne.³⁶ Their final destination was London, where they spent the final leg of their trip engrossed in the British Museum and writing. Two months before they began their journey home, John summed up the experience in a letter to his mother. “Home seems a place of sowing, Europe of reaping. One can become as stultified over here as at home.”³⁷ They returned

³⁴ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher and Isabel Garghill Beecher, April 23, 1927, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³⁵ J. N. Beecher to L. T. Beecher and I. G. Beecher, March 16, 1927, John Beecher Collection.

³⁶ John Newman Beecher, “Summary of Education, Teaching Experience and Publications, 1968,” Teaching Resume, John Beecher Collection.

³⁷ John Newman Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, 24 September 1928, Box 11, Folder 1; 1928, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 3.

to the United States in November of 1928 when Virginia could not longer travel comfortably because she was pregnant with their first child.³⁸

With a child on the way, they went back to Birmingham, and John landed a job as a metallurgist on the open hearth. “Once again it was my intention to blend writing with working in the mills, believing this would be productive of better writing than the teaching of freshman English or the random absorption of culture,” John explained.³⁹

When John dropped out of Cornell in 1923 and moved back to Birmingham to work in the steel mill, he had changed the trajectory of his life. Instead of following in his father’s path and finding his place in the world of industry, he chose to follow his passion for language and poetry, a passion he shared with his mother. He found his poetic voice in the steel mill, painting a picture of the authentic worker in words—a world that he visited in his working life, even though he inhabited another social class in his personal life. With teachers like William Strunk and Hudson Strode, he developed his voice and identity as a writer. The experience during the summer of 1925 at Bread Loaf School of English gave him confidence and connections. He believed that without life experience, a writer has nothing to write. Meanwhile, his inability to focus on any large task to the finish was a trait that continued with him for the rest of his life. However, his passion and drive pushed him to explore new things such as accepting the Dartmouth teaching position and traveling for a year in Europe. In his mind, though, these experiences were

³⁸ John Newman Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, 8 August 1928, Box 11, Folder 1; 1928, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 1; and John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow, 14 November 1928, Box 11, Folder 1, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 2.

³⁹J. N. Beecher, Resume of My Career as a Writer, 7-8.

fodder for the writer and nothing more. At the age of 20, he heard the writer's call, and by the age of 25 he had learned and was practicing the art that he hoped could be his vocation.

CHAPTER V: EXPERIMENTAL COLLEGE

During the late summer of 1929, John Beecher received an unexpected opportunity; he was offered a faculty position at the Experimental College, a higher education initiative begun two years earlier at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Though John had landed a prize position working as an open-hearth metallurgist in Birmingham after his return from Europe, he immediately quit and accepted the job in Wisconsin. He and his wife, Virginia, and their three-month-old son, David, moved to Madison, where they stayed for the next four years.¹ The appointment allowed John to teach, but not in a typical college setting. The Experimental College was the brainchild of Alexander Meiklejohn, former president of Amherst College. Meiklejohn, who had spent more than a decade shaping his ideas about liberal education, came to Madison determined to find a path to implement these ideas in a university system.² With its mission to teach young men to think in ways that prepared them for participation in society, the Experimental College was a model that John Beecher could believe in. He described the college as “the

¹ John Newman Beecher to Howard W. Odum, 26 August 1933, Box 11, Folder 4; 1933, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 6.

² Two scholars have written extensively on Meiklejohn. Their work includes detailed information about the Experimental College. Cynthia Stokes Brown wrote a short biographical study that prefaces a collection of Meiklejohn’s writings, and Adam R. Nelson has written the definitive study of Meiklejohn. Cynthia Stokes Brown, ed. *Alexander Meiklejohn, Teacher of Freedom* (Berkeley, CA: Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1981); Adam R. Nelson, *Education and Democracy: The Meaning of Alexander Meiklejohn, 1872-1964* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

most exciting place in the country,” and he credited his experience there with shaping him as an educator and as a person.³

Meiklejohn believed the role of higher education was to teach students to question assumptions and learn to think deeply—in other words, to train the student mind. He attended Brown University as an undergraduate and earned his doctorate in philosophy at Cornell in 1897. He then returned to Brown in 1901, first serving as a member of the faculty and then as a dean until he was named president of Amherst in 1912. Academic standards had suffered at Amherst, and the board of directors saw Meiklejohn as a fresh solution to the school’s problems. They believed that his innovative ideas about education could return the Massachusetts college to its past high standards and reputation. Their strategy worked, but some of his choices would raise future issues. While Meiklejohn succeeded in raising standards and promoting student learning, he also touched off several controversies with alumni and the board of directors. His most contentious action was an educational collaboration with labor unions at the paper and textile mills in Holyoke and Springfield in which Amherst students and faculty taught courses in history, government, economics, reading, and writing for the mill workers. Meiklejohn’s mill initiative project crossed class barriers, and that riled the school’s trustees and its wealthy parents and alumni. They expected Amherst to produce leaders for the next generation of the privileged class, not educate the underclass in the mills—the same mills that some of them owned. Powerful voices opposed this as well as several

³ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 7-8.; J. N. Beecher, *Transcript of Autobiographical Tapes 3003-3004*, 19.

other initiatives Meiklejohn put in place.⁴ In 1923, the board asked for his resignation. He complied, though not without disruption among the students and faculty. Eight faculty members resigned and twelve students refused to take their diplomas. For Meiklejohn, a period of unemployment simply allowed him to further develop the ideas about education that had cost him his job at Amherst. In the fall of 1924, *Century Magazine* published an article in which he articulated his vision for a higher education system that promoted intellectual inquisitiveness and lifelong learning. The following year, Meiklejohn began talks with a New York group that included Glenn Frank, editor of *Century*, about opening a new college to implement these ideas in the New York area.⁵ Before the committee could move forward with the proposal, Frank was offered the presidency of the University of Wisconsin.⁶ Born and raised in Missouri, Frank had attended Northwestern University and, through several posts, had earned a stellar reputation as an editor and writer.⁷ After his appointment in 1925, Frank immediately invited Meiklejohn to join the

⁴ Meiklejohn took controversial positions on several issues. He did not believe in intercollegiate athletics, but opted instead for intramurals. He argued that every activity within the university system should promote learning, and hiring a professional to coach an intercollegiate team did not promote the democratic values the university wants to teach. During World War I, he encouraged students to stay in school rather than enter the service, arguing that education was also patriotic. C. S. Brown, ed., 14-16.

⁵ Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College*, ed. John Walker Powell (Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, Inc., 1971), 126.

⁶ Frank was not the first choice of the regents, but the third. Ultimately regent Zona Gale, a famous writer and alumni, and the other progressives on the committee championed him. Thought to be the LaFollette's choice—a powerful progressive political family in Wisconsin—for president of the university, that turned out to be a false rumor. Lawrence H. Larson, "How Glenn Frank Became President of the University of Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Spring 1963.

⁷ George F. Thomson, "Missourians Abroad—Glenn Frank," *Missouri Historical Review* 16, no. (1922).

faculty of the philosophy department. Meiklejohn accepted, and the two began to discuss the possibility of creating the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. The following year, Frank managed to get both board approval and funding for a two-year experiment that was later extended for a total of five years. The Experimental College operated within the university structure to test new ways of teaching liberal studies to first-year and second-year students; Meiklejohn led the initiative.⁸

Meiklejohn developed a specific intellectual framework for liberal education that was distinguished from professional or vocational schools in both content and purpose. He had worked out the details for what he believed would be the ideal liberal college during more than ten years as president of Amherst.⁹ To have truly liberal education, he said, “Instruction is dominated by no special interest, is limited to no single human task, but is intended to take human activity as a whole, to understand human endeavors not in their isolation but in their relations to one another and to the total experience which we call the life of our people.”¹⁰ Such liberal study, he argued, made the lives of individuals richer and stronger through the development of the mind and through rigorous, regimented

⁸ Roland Lincoln Guyotte, “Liberal Education and the American Dream: Public Attitudes and the Emergence of Mass Higher Education, 1920-1952,” (Northwestern University, 1980), 79; “Meiklejohn to Realize His College of Future: Dr. Frank Has Wisconsin U., Set Aside Buildings for the Experiment,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 1927.

⁹ R. L. Guyotte, 69.

¹⁰ Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Liberal College* (Boston, MA: Marshall Jones Company, 1920), 38.

questioning.¹¹ In terms of content, he explained the intellectual scope of a liberal education:

The liberal college would learn and teach what can be known about a man's moral experience, our common speech, our social relations, our political institutions, our religious aspirations and beliefs, the world of nature which surrounds and molds us, our intellectual and aesthetic strivings and yearnings—all these, the human things that all men share, the liberal school attempts to understand, believing that if they are understood, men can live them better than they would live them by mere tradition and blind custom.¹²

The core mission of the liberal college, according to Meiklejohn, was “not a place of the body, or of the feelings, nor even of the will; it is, first all, a place of the mind.”¹³

Leading the student to this “place of the mind” were the faculty members, who should be not only leaders within the college, but also intellectual leaders in the community.

Finally, the questioning and thinking should be applied to give greater understanding of the larger world. As Meiklejohn explained, “The development of human thought and attitude, the development of human institutions, the development of the world and of the beings about us—all these must be known, as throwing light upon present problems, present instrumentalities, present opportunities in the life of human endeavor.”¹⁴

The Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin was designed with a distinct goal in mind: immersion into a guided world of learning and thinking. With only one course per year, all students and advisers—the term given to the teaching staff—

¹¹ Ibid., iv.

¹² Ibid., 26.

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

attended all classes. An expert adviser in each field chose the readings and taught a topic, but all advisers contributed to the course, bringing their own background and intelligence into the process. There were no formal lectures or classrooms. Instead, learning came through individual instruction and group discussion. To reach the immersion goal, however, the program had to continue outside the classroom. “The members of the college will live closely together as a community,” Meiklejohn explained. All the students will have rooms in the same building, in which will be also the offices and studies of the teachers.”¹⁵ This also meant that the Experimental College was men only, not out of gender bias, but because of the logistics of housing—in the 1920s, the two sexes could not live in the same dormitory. The subject for the first-year course was fifth-century Athens, and students learned about life in the Greek Republic. During the second year, they studied contemporary American culture. Each year’s study was divided into six-week segments, and each segment focused on a particular area: class structure, government, economics, literature, the arts, and philosophy. Required readings were from primary as well as secondary sources, and the papers the students wrote evaluated their perceptions and reactions. While in the Experimental College, the students focused on the nature of culture and the great problems of civilization; in the next two years, they focused on a chosen specialization. In the Experimental College. There were no courses; Beecher explained, “When we were on Greece, we might start with Greek science, spend

¹⁵ Alexander Meiklejohn, “A New College with a New Idea: Meiklejohn Describes the Experiment to Be Undertaken at the University of Wisconsin -- Individual Instruction, with Group Discussion, Takes the Place of Lecture and Classroom a College with a New Idea,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 1927.

six weeks on Greek science under the general direction of a scientist.”¹⁶ After completing the two-year curriculum, each student received a grade before reentering the regular university for the junior year. Meiklejohn and his advisers revised the curriculum after the first year and added a second-year requirement—students must conduct a regional study of a single American community, usually their hometown. The analysis of the community included their study of its economy, educational system, and social classes. The goal was to give students an opportunity to apply what they had learned in a practical way. The Experimental College was unique, but many of the elements had been tried before. The main characteristic, however, that differentiated it from earlier—and later—educational models was liberal teaching with the core goal of creating and cultivating insight and intelligence.¹⁷

Meiklejohn handpicked the advisers for the college. President Frank wanted him to enlist as many of the men who resigned their faculty posts at Amherst as possible. He eventually chose ten of his best friends, some of whom had been at Amherst. Those who accepted posts as advisers were John Gaus, Walter Agard, Laurance Saunders, Carl Bogholt, Malcolm Sharp, Paul Raushenbush, Samuel Rogers, John Walker Powell, William Phillips, and Percy Dawson. All but one were under the age of thirty-five. Agard was a classical Greek scholar; Gaus and Raushenbush, were economists; Bogholt, Sharp, Powell, and Phillips were idealist philosophers; Rogers was a French scholar; Saunders

¹⁶ J. N. Beecher, Transcript of Autobiographical Tapes 3003-3004, 10.

¹⁷ A. Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College*, xvii-xix.

was a medical doctor with a specialty in otology [study of the ear]; and Dawson was a biologist.¹⁸

The Experimental College had a separate admissions procedure and location apart from the University of Wisconsin. The school began with sixteen faculty members and an enrollment of 119 male students. Advisers held joint appointments. In addition to their work in the Experimental College, each was part of an academic department in the larger university. In their conventional faculty roles, they were also required to teach one course per term in the regular university.¹⁹ In the Experimental College, each adviser was assigned students to mentor and evaluate while in the program.²⁰ Because of Meiklejohn's fame and the unusual course of study, the college drew a different kind of student. Where the regular university drew largely from rural areas in Wisconsin, the Experimental College drew students primarily from urban areas outside the state and also had more ethnic diversity. The unusual living arrangements and academic environment created a stigma for the Experimental College students. Evidence of radical behavior further separated the students and advisers from the regular student body, faculty, and the community.²¹

Meiklejohn discovered John Beecher through John's cousin, Isabel Moser Sexton, (named after John's mother), who was living in Madison while her husband finished graduate school. She interviewed Meiklejohn for a local newspaper.

¹⁸ A. R. Nelson, *Education and Democracy*, 145.

¹⁹ A. Meiklejohn.

²⁰ "Adventuring in Education," *The Independent (1922-1928)* 1927, 598.

²¹ C. S. Brown, ed., 30-31; A. R. Nelson, *Education and Democracy*, 148.

My cousin Isabel... told him about this marvelous cousin/brother, that's me, that she had, who was wasting his life at the steel mill, and should be in academia again. He was greatly impressed, and this resulted ultimately in an invitation to join the staff. ... At this time the Experimental College was the only thing of its kind in the country, and the most hopeful.²²

After John settled in Madison with his wife and son, he began his work teaching at the Experimental College. His split assignment had him teaching literature in the English department in addition to his work as an adviser in the Experimental College. Beecher's academic focus as an adviser was literature and poetry. In the fall of 1930, when his second year at the school began, John presented "An Approach to Poetry," while other advisers' talks covered topics that included "Homer," and "The Three Great Tragedians."²³

John loved the openness and engagement he found with both his peers and the students in the college. He credited his experience there for his intellectual development and his informed world-view.

The [Experimental] College was really my education. It broadened my comprehension of the world inconceivably. And I felt that my salary was a kind of a pension I was drawing, because I was getting so much more than I was giving; I had this feeling constantly. ... I did learn, and was changed by it, and was given direction to my inchoate social feelings by it to a degree inconceivable.²⁴

He gave most of the credit to Meiklejohn; he believed him to be "one of the greatest educators I ever came within arm's reach of."²⁵ The process used in the Experimental

²² J. N. Beecher, Transcript of Autobiographical Tapes 3003-3004, 8.

²³ A. Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College*, 144.

²⁴ J. N. Beecher, Transcript of Autobiographical Tapes 3003-3004, 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

College was unlike any he had experienced before. Even as an adviser, he was reading Plato, Marx, Veblen, and learning about history as process rather than a sequence of dates.

The culture of the past came alive in the light of the demise of the present for solutions to its pressing problems. We studied things like the causes of war, systems of economic organization, the function of art and literature. We compared Plato's ideal Republic with the actualities of the new Soviet world. The study of Sparta led to an awareness of the evil nature of its Fascist and Nazi analogues in the contemporary world. For the first time in my life, I felt that academic life could be as real as life outside.²⁶

The practical application of education was the missing element for John in his previous university experiences, particularly at Harvard, where he nearly had a nervous breakdown because the course content was so disconnected from the practical application of writing.

All through the literature and art periods my office has been full of boys, reading, looking at pictures, arguing. That's the sort of thing I value. People coming around because they want to, discussion not on set and formal topics, but growing out of individual and momentary problems, spontaneous, unpretentious.²⁷

He was inspired and motivated by his work in the Experimental College so much that he completed his master's degree in English at the University of Wisconsin and continued his steady writing of poetry and prose for the four years he was there.²⁸

²⁶ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 8-10.

²⁷ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, 6 February 1931, Box 11, Folder 2; 1930-31, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 2.

²⁸ John Newman Beecher, "Summary of Education, Teaching Experience and Publications," *Resume*, April 1968, Box 27, Folder 9; Beecher Papers/Writings, non-fiction, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 1.

While John enjoyed teaching in the Experimental College, he was not pleased with interactions in the English department interactions and the attitude of the faculty as a whole toward Meiklejohn's experiment. John arrived for the third year of the college, and attitudes and relationships between the Experimental College and the rest of the university had already hardened. "Happy as I was in the Experimental College, my dual role in the English department kept me in a fever of rebellion."²⁹ By that time, there was political ill will between President Glenn Frank, the faculty, and the newly elected governor, Phillip LaFollette. Frank came to the University of Wisconsin by way of the support of progressive members of the Wisconsin Board of Regents, and in turn, they supported the Experimental College. From the beginning, however, the faculty response to the Experimental College generally ranged from ambivalent to hostile. LaFollette, more with an eye to his political future rather than to education, soon began to stack the board with regents who would oppose Frank. Thus, the long-term prospects for the experiment were in jeopardy. The economic realities of the deepening Great Depression also made the advisers insecure about their jobs. John wrote to his father:

Nothing further to report about the college, except that in any case we shall have a sophomore class next year (the present freshman class), and I shall have a job teaching them. Mr. Meiklejohn told me definitely today that I could count on that. The proposal on foot is not to give up the college, but to demand that the university, or rather the Letters and Science faculty, take official cognizance of the college for what it is supposed to be - a place for the working out of a plan to be applied to the first two years. Mr. Meiklejohn feels that the systematic ignoring of us must stop, that there is a basic falsehood underlying our project if the faculty refuses to take us seriously, and if the curriculum committee works

²⁹ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 9.

out its reforms without attempting to consult with us, to find out about us, and to accept or reject. He'd rather quit and go on this way.³⁰

The chair of the English department, Professor Neil Dodge, encouraged John to pursue a doctorate in literature if he wanted to stay at the university. With an ambivalent attitude about the real-life value of a Ph.D., he nonetheless moved forward and chose the social novels of Dickens as his topic. He was interested in the topic, but he found the study irrelevant to contemporary life. For John, relevance was the key to prolonged focus. He had no patience for debate and argument among scholars on issues of little significance to the larger questions in the culture. He shared these feelings with his father:

The trouble with the college is, it is connected with the university. When I think of the academic emptiness of such a place, I could weep tears of anger. I can face the prospect of setting up on English Literature, but the specializing and the weaving of a tissue of esoteric references into a thesis! You can't conceive what I am driving at without reading some samples of research. Sometimes I kid myself into believing vaguely that I will take a Ph.D., but I never will, never. God knows I'm dry enough now. Never have a thought or an inspiration; nothing eager or spontaneous can exist in such a blighting mechanical system.³¹

Some of his choices, such as not completing the M.A. at Harvard, made an impact on his options at the university. "I'm not entirely ignorant, but my learning isn't systematic or

³⁰ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, January 1931, Box 11, Folder 2; 1930, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³¹ John Newman Beecher and Leonard Thurlow Beecher, 10 February 1930, Box 11, Folder 2, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

consecutive—odds and ends—and system is what’s wanted.”³² He vacillated between wanting the security that a Ph.D. might bring him and following his passion, writing.

The security afforded by the degree is a pitifully inadequate one. And until I am convinced that I had better give up writing or the thought of it, and that experimental education is defunct for a generation, and that an unbroken and irrefragable conformity has settled down over the land, I shan’t capitulate, for a capitulation it would unquestionably be. Growth, for me, and active happiness lie in different directions. As you said yourself, a Ph.D. would add nothing to my personal stature, although it might increase my prestige in certain quarters. Not taking the degree will very possibly close some institutions to me, but what I shall be able to do with the time I would otherwise have to devote to getting it, should open up new and it may be better avenues. . . . “If there was nothing in the world I wanted to do but teach English, I would unquestioningly take it, or would have taken it by now. However, the sacrifice of what we all think important is simply disproportionate to the return. I could give a year to it but not four years. I may be mistaken, but I expect to realize something during the next four years out of the rich and variegated experience of the previous ones. As you said, only I can decide this, and my decision comes only after a long, searching, painful consideration.”³³

He weighed the four years required to complete a Ph.D. against his desire to continue writing; ultimately writing won.

He and the rest of the Experimental College advisors were regarded with suspicion by the regular university faculty. This affected his duties in the English Department.

Meiklejohn’s most powerful adversary was George Clark Sellery, the dean of Letters and Science, who saw Meiklejohn and his experiment as a threat to the status quo. He ignored the college, prompting Meiklejohn to observe, “Therefore there has been no cooperation

³² John Newman Beecher and Leonard Thurlow Beecher, 9 February 1930, Box 11, Folder 2, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 5.

³³ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, 15 September 1932, Box 11, Folder 2; 1930-31, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

and a great deal of underhandedness.”³⁴ John explained in a letter that Meiklejohn wanted the faculty to accept or reject the Experimental College, rather than to subtly work against it through curriculum and financial decisions.³⁵

In February 1931, Glenn Frank, the president of the university, announced that the following academic year would be the last for the Experimental College. The college had come under attack from inside and outside the university—the state’s poor economy was partly to blame, but adversaries believed the Experimental College was a hotbed of radicalism and sought to see it end. LaFollette, under pressure from political foes, slashed the university’s budget by \$400,000. In the announcement, Frank hailed the five-year experiment as a success and noted that educational research would continue in other directions, but this project would be finished after five years.³⁶ John commented on the announcement, “The divine Phil [LaFollette] has slashed a large chunk out of the university budget, so there will be no raises and no increases in departmental budgets...There is bad blood between the president (Frank) and the governor. Phil finds him a convenient object to pummel and show his zeal for the public weal.”³⁷

³⁴ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, January 1931, Box 11, Folder 2; 1930, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³⁵ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, January 1931, Box 11, Folder 2, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 1-2.

³⁶ “To Survey Results of 'Test College': Wisconsin Adopts Proposal by Meiklejohn to Close It after Next Year.,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1931.

³⁷ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, 6 February 1931, Box 11, Folder 2; 1930-31, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 2.

Though the announcement was hard on the Experimental College faculty, John enjoyed the work and did not want it to end. In addition, he and Virginia were expecting their third child, so he also had family responsibilities. He described the attitude of the regular university faculty after the announcement and noted his feelings about the college:

Now that we have been neatly shelved and are no longer considered dangerous, hostility has relaxed. We are harmless enough lunatics and can be safely let alone. That reacts adversely upon us - worse than if we were under violent attack. Advisors feel stranded, cut off, and hurry back into routine teaching. ...There is a good deal of discouragement around, not so much with the plan or with the possibilities of the plan, but with the terribly difficult situation we are in. As for me, I have been happier since I returned from home than at any time since I came to college. I like it and I believe in it, have coped with a flock of doubts and disposed of them. I don't think we have the best possible plan. There is an enormous amount to be worked out. But we are on the right scent. I'm sure of that, and I'm going to stick with it.³⁸

Late in his life, he described the camaraderie he had with the faculty of the Experimental College as the most congenial and stimulating environment he had ever encountered. He understood that the teaching model was not perfect, but he believed they succeeded in breaking new ground.

With the conclusion of the Experimental College in the spring of 1932, Beecher was offered a position in the English Department, which he accepted for the next school year. During that year, however, he was miserable. He found no joy teaching survey courses in a traditional academic environment, particularly with the world erupting at home and abroad. He became depressed. He described his state of mind after the January break of

³⁸ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, January 1931, Box 11, Folder 2; 1930, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

1933. "Classes are over for two weeks of examinations, during which time I hope to effect some inner reorganization which will enable me to carry through the second semester with less sterility. Preoccupation with the chaotic world has almost undone me, destroying my connections with and interest in the past. I shall have to drug myself to carry on, take course or something like that."³⁹ In the spring he was offered a contract for another year; initially he accepted the offer, but soon changed his mind. He wanted to work in a place where he could make a difference. The previous summer he volunteered for the Red Cross in Birmingham. He loved the work and believed he made an impact. Consequently, he applied to attend the University of North Carolina's School of Social Sciences under Howard Odum so he could be trained to conduct social work.

John's experience at the Experimental College was an intellectual high point in his life. He thrived in the social and academic environment, finished his master's degree, and decided not to pursue a Ph.D. in literature. Though his work in the Experimental College sometimes produced anxiety because of the uncertainty of the project, John gained immense respect for Alexander Meiklejohn and his understanding of education. For the rest of his life, he remained close to Meiklejohn and many of his peers in the college. He learned that whatever work he did needed to be more than theoretical; he needed to make a difference in the world outside of the mind.

³⁹ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, 20 January 1933, Box 11, Folder 4; 1933, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

CHAPTER VI: GOVERNMENT WORK

John Beecher's choice to return to the South and study sociology under Howard W. Odum at the University of North Carolina opened up new professional avenues to him. It was in the South that he believed he could do the most good because he understood the social, economic, and cultural issues the region faced. He also wanted to write, and he was beginning to understand that he was inspired through real-life situations like the steel mills and his work with the Red Cross during the summer of 1932, rather than what he perceived as the sterile environment of higher education. After Beecher completed a year of coursework, Odum recommended him for a position in a New Deal project in Wilmington, North Carolina. He took the job as a work relief administrator in June 1934. Over the next fifteen years he held various government administrative and research positions that included homestead administrator in the Birmingham area; migrant worker camp administrator in South Florida; field investigator for the President's Fair Employment Practices Committee; and sailor on the SS Booker T. Washington, an integrated transport ship commanded by an African American. Though he changed jobs often, John Beecher was driven by a desire to record what he observed honestly and push the bureaucratic systems he worked in toward fairness and equity for all participants. The motivation for this drive was inspired by the Beecher family legacy and a single-minded, stubborn personality. His unyielding temperament caused many problems both personally and professionally. However, he excelled in organizational leadership and many of his superiors and subordinates were exceedingly loyal to him.

University of North Carolina

In the summer of 1933, Beecher was still at the University of Wisconsin and had a relatively safe job in the midst of the worst economic depression in American history. His contract had been renewed, and Neil Dodge, chair of the English Department, assured him that he had a secure position as long as he continued to pursue his Ph.D. He halfheartedly continued his dissertation research on the social novels of Charles Dickens. However, he was extremely dissatisfied with teaching literature in the “ivory tower” of the English Department. Forty years later, he recalled his misery, saying, “I have never been more unhappy in my unhappy life than I was that summer.” He went on to explain that with the country in the midst of such suffering caused by the economic circumstances of the Great Depression, he wanted to do work that contributed to the greater good.¹ He had volunteered in the summer of 1932 as a social worker for the Red Cross in Birmingham. A year later, he longed to be back in the South; the region faced enormous social and economic problems and he believed he could make a difference. While he still wanted to complete the work for a Ph.D., he resolved to go to a southern university. The two schools he considered were Vanderbilt University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Vanderbilt’s English Department faculty included the Southern Agrarians, who had gained attention with their 1929 manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*. Beecher saw the group’s brand of populism as an effort to return to a mythical, agrarian South to escape the cultural difficulties of industrialization. “Romantic nonsense,” he called it. “To me this book was extremely Quixotic and false. . . . I was

¹ John Newman Beecher, “C2669-New Deal Tape, 1972,” Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

completely out of sympathy because of their romanticism, their reactionary tendencies, their desire to return to a never-never land South that had never existed at all.”² That ruled out Vanderbilt for him.³ The University of North Carolina, however, housed the Institute for Research in Social Science, where sociologist Howard W. Odum was leading a systematic sociological study to examine the problems the people of the South faced. Beecher resolved to try to join this group of people in Chapel Hill.

The professional study of social work and sociology was young. The first university programs began in the late 1890s. The field advanced in the Progressive Era as educated, middle-class professionals sought scientific solutions to counter the harmful effects of industrialization on the health, education, and welfare of the poor. To accomplish that, training and professional criteria had to be standardized, and social work had to be separated from the excesses of religion and politics. That need became more pressing when New Deal relief programs kicked in. The need for social workers multiplied quickly, and many were hired without proper training. Beecher’s volunteer work during the summer of 1932 with the Red Cross in Birmingham put him in touch with both the hunger on the streets and the necessity for professionally trained workers in the field.⁴

² J. N. Beecher, Transcript of Autobiographical Tapes 3003-3004, 58.

³ Emily Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood, *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal : Essays after I'll Take My Stand*, The Publications of the Southern Texts Society (Charlottesville: Published for the Southern Texts Society by the University Press of Virginia, 2001); Paul Keith Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001); Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand; the South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930).

⁴ Phillip Pople and P. Nelson Reid, “A Profession for the Poor? A History of Social Work in the United States,” in *The Professionalization of Poverty: Social Work and the Poor in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gary R. Lowe and Nelson P. Reid (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999), 13-14.

Thus, Beecher impulsively chose to pursue a new career in sociology and social work. In August 1933, he wrote Odum and asked to be admitted to the doctoral program in sociology—even though he had never taken a sociology course. He carefully crafted a detailed letter that explained to Odum why he wanted to study with him. “I am an English instructor who, at a time when he should be resigned to browsing contentedly in his field—I am 29—is on the contrary eyeing what seems to him a greener pasture, the social sciences,” he wrote.⁵ He shared information about his education both in and out of the academy and his interest in pursuing a sociological study of Birmingham and its history as part of Odum’s “New South” project. In the long letter, he initially claimed that he was a Southerner and ultimately wanted to teach in a Southern university. Near the end of the letter, he amended his claim, “Though I called myself a southerner earlier, I am one only by adoption. ...”⁶ By September, Odum had phoned Beecher, encouraged him to attend, and admitted him provisionally to the program, but without financial aid.⁷

Odum had a first-rate reputation for his work in sociology. Born in 1884, he grew up in rural Georgia, attended Emory College as an undergraduate, and later earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Clark University. He was dissatisfied with that field of behavioral study since, during his years as a student, he had developed an interest in the folk life and culture of Southern Negroes. He turned to sociology, a new field in the social sciences, and earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1910. After several years on the

⁵ John Newman Beecher to Howard W. Odum, August 26, 1933, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

faculties and administration of the University of Georgia and Emory, Odum moved on to the University of North Carolina in 1920. Harry M. Chase, the new UNC president, asked Odum to become the head of the new Department of Sociology and School of Public Welfare, which would provide training for social workers. In 1922, he established *Social Forces*, a journal that focused primarily on the South, and two years later he established the Institute for Research in Social Science, the first of its kind in the nation. The institute undertook regional studies in the problems of race relations, economics, mill villages, penology, and other Southern social issues. The research provided data for *Social Forces* and for professors and fellows whose work the University of North Carolina Press published.⁸ Odum was a major influence in the modernization of the twentieth-century South and wrote more than twenty-five books and one hundred articles about his sociological studies of the region.⁹ Beecher noted that Odum was a disappointment as a teacher in the classroom, but had a gift for administration. "His great achievement was to make the foundations in New York and administrators in Washington, D.C. aware of the need to do something about the South," Beecher said. "He managed to get financing for his institute when it was looked on with great suspicion."¹⁰

Odum was an intellectual bridge from the old South to the modern South, evaluating the economic, social, and environmental reality of the era, but maintaining a restrained

⁸ George Brown Tindall, "The Significance of Howard W. Odum to Southern History: A Preliminary Estimate," *The Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 3 (1958).

⁹ Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance through African American Folk Studies* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), ix.

¹⁰ J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape.

attitude toward advocating outright social change in the region. Historian Daniel Joseph Singal includes a biography of Odum in *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945*.

[Odum] was able to look both ways, at ‘the old and the new,’ to see not only the strengths and moral virtues of southern society but the conflicts, tensions, and evils as well. . . . But Odum’s all-embracing portraiture approach also had its limitations. When younger sociologists, many of them his disciples, began moving beyond mere description to analyze specific southern problems like lynching, mill villages, and sharecropping with an eye to drawing causal connections and assigning responsibility, Odum could encourage but not join them. Willing to acknowledge the evil in his society, he consistently stopped short of exploring its roots; the same state of mind that brought him to his initial vision of the South prevented him from doing so.¹¹

Even with his moderation, during the 1920s Odum stood almost alone in his realistic approach to evaluating the problems of the South; it was Odum’s approach that attracted John Beecher. Where the Vanderbilt agrarians wanted to go back to an imaginary South, Odum focused on the real people and real problems that faced the region.

Beecher entered the sociology graduate program in Chapel Hill in September 1933, after first moving his pregnant wife and two young sons, David and Leonard, to Birmingham to live with his parents. During his first semester, he took courses with Odum, Rupert Vance, and Guy Johnson. Johnson, who was black, taught the first course in cultural anthropology in the Department of Sociology. Beecher enrolled in the course, which examined the cultures and problems of southern blacks. For his research in the class, Beecher wanted to follow up on a sharecroppers’ revolt that occurred in December 1932 in Tallapoosa County, Alabama. For several years, the sheriff’s department had

¹¹ Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 116.

attempted to shut down both the outside organizers and the local supporters of the Alabama Sharecropper's Union. When the faltering cotton market put a black landowner in arrears on his mortgage, sheriff's deputies raided the farm. In the incident and its aftermath, the landowner and a friend were killed, and several others were wounded. Beecher had read conflicting accounts of these events, and he wanted to write about them. With Johnson's encouragement, Beecher conducted fieldwork, traveling to Birmingham after the birth of his daughter Joan in November 1933. Beecher's paper, "The Share Croppers' Union in Alabama," appeared in *Social Forces* in November 1934.¹² Initially, Odum was reluctant to publish the article because he was afraid of white reaction. Johnson eventually persuaded him to run it. Odum's response illustrates that he was not a revolutionary, but a moderate progressive who was particularly cautious about racial matters. Though Beecher respected Odum, he was conscious of his fear of backlash. Committed to a gradualist approach to cultural change, Odum's views did shift over time. By the 1950s, with the influence of people like Guy Johnson, he came to believe that the South needed to be desegregated.¹³

In the winter of 1934, as Beecher continued taking courses, his family joined him in Chapel Hill. He found that sociology could be as dry as he had found English to be at the University of Wisconsin. In a letter to his mother, he wrote, "My classes have been

¹² John Beecher, "The Share Croppers' Union in Alabama," *Social Forces* 13, no. 1 (1934).

¹³ L. M. Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance through African American Folk Studies*, 114.

deadly.”¹⁴ His father was backing him financially, but John felt pressure to find employment that would support his family. Thus, he decided to pursue the degree on his own terms. “It is understood with Odum that I am here not to check off all the courses in the department one by one, but to take what I need. If my research is thorough and sufficiently intelligent, he will give me the degree... From now on I know where I am around here, what I will do and what I won’t.”¹⁵ He had come to Chapel Hill with the primary goal of writing a sociological study of Birmingham, but he made it clear to Odum that he needed to get out of the classroom and into a situation that would provide both an income and an opportunity for fieldwork. Odum was applying for a Rockefeller Foundation grant to study the “Negro worker,” and he recommended Beecher to work as the lead writer and researcher. When the project was complete, Beecher would have earned his Ph.D in sociology. Sociologist Charles Johnson of Fisk University was on the search committee that interviewed Beecher and pronounced him qualified, but the job went to Columbia University professor George Mitchell. Odum, an appointee to the five-member Emergency Relief Commission, recommended him for a position as the state administrator of New Deal relief work in Wilmington, North Carolina. He accepted the position and in June 1934 moved his family to the Atlantic coastal town of Wilmington.

¹⁴ John Newman Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, undated, 1934, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Wilmington, N.C.

The Great Depression's impact on Wilmington was severe. While it had been the largest city in North Carolina throughout the nineteenth century, the city was stagnant in 1934; the port was dead and textile mills had closed leaving many of the residents on relief.¹⁶ The local government relief effort was one of the largest employers in the area. However, the relief organization was mired in cronyism and fraud that caught the attention of the state relief administrators in Raleigh. Beecher settled in Wilmington to take on the task of straightening out and professionalizing the district.¹⁷

Local implementation of New Deal programs often put them on a collision path with state interests. North Carolina, like most other states, had focused relief efforts on civic projects for those who were able to work and monetary aid for those who could not. At the end of her term, the state administrator assessed the projects:

The relief program provided both direct relief, and work relief for persons able to work. In selecting work projects, preference was given to public works of permanent value that would not have been undertaken at this time except for the availability of Federal funds. These projects included: assistance in highway and road maintenance; construction, and repair of public buildings; beautification and improvement of school grounds and other public buildings; improvement and beautification of municipal parks; drainage; water and sewer extensions; city streets; geodetic surveys;

¹⁶ In September 1934, 18.7 percent of the population was on relief, though many more were in need but did not qualify. Individuals were not eligible for relief if they owned a house or had a bank account. Hugh P. Brinton, *Analysis of Relief Cases, September 1934, 1935*.

¹⁷ Douglas Carl Abrams, *Conservative Constraints : North Carolina and the New Deal*, Twentieth-Century America Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 117; J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape.

lunches for school children of families on relief; farm and garden work; and other work benefiting communities at large.¹⁸

Beecher was initially appointed assistant city relief administrator under a local Democratic boss, J. Allen Taylor, an older man who was a wholesale grocer with a long history of leadership in Wilmington government and civic organizations. In Taylor's capacity as administrator of the local relief organization, he was at odds with Annie O'Berry, the state administrator of the North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration (NCERA). O'Berry, though she was a political appointee, had also been trained in social work and had held relief posts in Goldsboro. She insisted that the NCERA be run professionally and nonpolitically, and this infuriated Taylor. He wanted to be able to appoint those who would help him politically when it came to government work and appointments.¹⁹ Beecher described Wilmington as "clannish, withdrawn, suspicious, cast [sic] ridden, and class bound sort of community."²⁰

Another element in the difficult racial climate of Wilmington was the legacy of the 1898 race riot and the fact that 1934 WPA boss, J. Allen Taylor, had been involved in leading the group responsible for the violence in 1898. The riot changed the demographics of the town. Wilmington had become a booming town in the decades after

¹⁸ "Emergency Relief in North Carolina, a Record of the Development and Activities of the North Carolina Relief Administration, 1932-1935," ed. J. S. Kirk, Walter A. Cutter, and Thomas W. Morse (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1936). <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/emergencyrelief/menu.html> (accessed 2-19-2011).

¹⁹ D. C. Abrams, *Conservative Constraints : North Carolina and the New Deal*, 117-118; J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape; William S. Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 384-385.

²⁰ J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape.

the Civil War for both blacks and whites. Before the war, whites were in the majority, but the black population grew quickly, and from 1870 until 1898 blacks outnumbered whites in the city. A complex society developed in the black community, and some business leaders attained wealth that rivaled that of their white counterparts. Since blacks dominated trades, they created unions. A secure black middle class arose. Black workers and businesses thrived, and many were in Republican politics and held elective offices in black districts. As the 1894 election approached, a coalition of the Populists and Republicans created the Fusion Party. Organizers believed if they could get the votes of black Republicans and disaffected farmers, they could garner enough votes to defeat the Democrats. It worked. The coalition managed to get a majority in the state house, and in 1896, Daniel Russell became the first Republican governor since Reconstruction. The Fusionists methodically dismantled many of the government systems that had kept Democrats in power.

The racial and political tensions in late nineteenth century Wilmington were heightened when white Democrats began a plot to overturn the Fusionist gains. A plan organized by a group of Wilmington city leaders called the “Secret Nine” emerged, and they declared they would win the November 1898 election by whatever means necessary. J. Allen Taylor, whom Beecher would know as the relief administrator in 1934, was a member of this secret group.²¹ The local plan coincided with the state election strategy,

²¹ Taylor, a member of Sons of Confederate Veterans, president of the Chamber of Commerce, and served on several governing boards, owned a wholesale grocery business begun in January 1899. Note that he began his business less than two months after the riot. R. H. Fisher, “Biographical Sketches of Wilmington Citizens,” (Wilmington, NC: Wilmington Stamp and Printing Company, 1929). <http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/historyfiction/fullview.aspx?id=swc> (accessed 2-19-2011);

which was to “write, speak, and ride.” Men who could write would create propaganda in the newspapers; those who could speak were sent to inflame voters using the race card; and those who could ride horses were to intimidate voters to keep them away from the polls. In Wilmington, they paraded with guns through black neighborhoods and used threats of violence to warn them away from the polls. The rhetoric reached a fever pitch with a column in the *Wilmington Daily Record*, the city’s black newspaper. Owner and editor Alex Manly wrote a column in response to a speech the previous year by Rebecca Latimer Felton, the wife of a Georgia populist. Felton claimed that the biggest threat to farm wives was the threat of black rapists. In his column, Manly not only declared that black men were not rapists, but also that white women sometimes encouraged black male advances. His response was seen as a direct insult to the purity of women, and his words were used across the state as fuel for the Democrats. In Wilmington, whites demanded that Manly’s paper be shut down. In an effort to keep the peace, blacks soon joined the campaign against Manly. On Election Day—November 8, 1898—the Democrats won without a major incident. The following day, however, several hundred white citizens of Wilmington gathered in a mass meeting and demanded that Manly leave the state within 24 hours. A day later local Democrats led a white militia that terrorized the black citizens, and burned the offices of black businesses and quickly became even more violent.²²

“Wilmington up-to-Date: The Metropolis of North Carolina,” ed. I. J. Isaacs (Wilmington, NC: Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, 1902).
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/uptodate/uptodate.html> (accessed 2-19-2011).

²² For more detail, see David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Soon what the press and some historians have labeled the Wilmington Riot engulfed the city. In reality, it was an armed insurrection and takeover of local government accompanied by the slaughter of blacks to ensure an election outcome favorable to the Democrats. The official casualty number was eight, but many believed the number to be much higher. After the incident, there was an exodus of blacks from the city. By 1900, nearly a third of the black population had moved away from the city dismantling black business and culture.

The people who came into power in 1898 ruled the city for the next generation and J. Allen Taylor was front and center in that group. In 1934 when John Beecher arrived, Taylor was in his seventies and still the city boss. White domination in city politics continued to be the rule. According to Beecher, "The racial situation is ... very ticklish, the whites being unanimously determined to squeeze the niggers out in so far as they can."²³

When Beecher arrived as second in command to Taylor in the Wilmington relief organization, Taylor did not know that his tenure as administrator was almost over. Taylor welcomed Beecher, believing that a white man who had grown up in Alabama would understand the way he managed affairs in Wilmington. He would soon learn that

Carolina Press, 1998); John L. Godwin, *Black Wilmington and the North Carolina Way: Portrait of a Community in the Era of Civil Rights Protest* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000); Jerome A. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington and New Hanover County, 1865-1900. The Genesis of a Race Riot.," (Dissertation, Kent State, 1979); H. Leon Prather, *We Have Taken a City : Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984); LeRae S. Umfleet, *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission Report*, 2006.

²³ John Newman Beecher, July 2, 1934, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Beecher was a fiery soul, descended from abolitionist stock, and was there on behalf of O'Berry and Odum to professionalize the relief agency. Beecher described the situation he entered as an "impossible situation" to manage, and initially had no control over the organization. The work relief supervisor, Burke Bridgers, reported to Taylor and he refused to talk directly to Beecher. Caseworkers distributed relief based on unscientific and unsystematic criteria with extreme prejudice toward blacks. If Beecher was going to make the changes that the state administrator in Raleigh wanted him to make, he had his work cut out for him.²⁴

Beecher saw much need and had access to little money. "The problem at present is to make the relief dollar stretch. Our caseload is increasing enormously (25% up between July 1 and August 1) and we have less money to take care of it. We averaged \$7.91 per month per family of 4.13 persons on direct relief during July. That comes out at 6 cents per person per day, you care to know."²⁵ He encouraged his relief workers to have a "proper" attitude toward the clients and not just reward the people they thought were the "deserving poor." He distributed a *Social Services Bulletin* and shared a tone of compassion that he wanted to create within the relief organization:

The development growth of complex human beings, like that of trees, cannot be hurried. We commit grave error if we become restive when our clients fail to reach or develop quickly enough. A little reflection on general social development, on the long debasing influences to which many persons have succumbed, will service to remind us how slow is the upward course of human development and how delicately must be administered the kindly, intelligence, stimulus which will assist in the re-creation of free human beings. We endeavor to surround the person with

²⁴ J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape.

²⁵ John Newman Beecher, August 13, 1934, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

the possibilities of freedom. He creates in himself the desire to apprehend that freedom.²⁶

He also explained the attitudes necessary for successful casework: courtesy, understanding, poise, patience, spirit, a sense of humor, accuracy, and organization. One of his prime objectives and ultimate successes was to distribute aid based on an established formula for and to refuse to accept kickbacks from anyone. When the supervisor of the community farm brought him vegetables—as he had every other administrator in the agency—Beecher made it clear that the farm was there to help those on relief not for his personal gain.²⁷ Beecher's ethical stand throughout his tenure in Wilmington is further evidence that throughout his life he was guided by an internal moral compass, a compass that gave him clear guidance even in very murky waters.

Beecher arrived in June, and by mid-summer the organization began to change. In July, district auditors discovered that the disbursing officer was forging checks. Beecher wrote to his parents about the incident:

... a scandal in the paymaster's office began to develop — which occupied me the rest of the week until Saturday, with nightly sessions Thursday and Friday nights until midnight. Evidence is not all in and further investigation is required, which we must do next week with the District Auditor, who will be here from Monday on. ... The thing looks bad and may eventuate in an indictment or two. We have spotted four forgeries already.²⁸

²⁶ John Newman Beecher, *Social Service Bulletin #1*, (Wilmington, NC: North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration, 1935), 6.

²⁷ J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape.

²⁸ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Beecher and Isabel Garghill Beecher, July 22, 1934, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Later in the letter he commented on Taylor's involvement, "He is not dishonest, but simply cuts a corner here and there through his position as relief administrator and he can serve his own best interests. His prejudices are his guide, and what they are goes without saying."²⁹ Beecher despaired that Taylor would ever be relieved of the position, "I found out from my Chapel Hill- Raleigh trip what I had begun to suspect, that Taylor is likely to be a permanent feature. He is a political power."³⁰ Yet, by January 1935, Beecher had been promoted to district administrator and had reorganized the district with department heads he could depend on. Taylor was no longer in charge. It is not clear how Beecher accomplished this feat, only that a new organization was in place by January 14, 1935.³¹ In a memo with that date, he delineated the criteria for a case visit,

The primary purpose of the home visit to the work relief family is not to check up on how earnings are being spent. The caseworker does not enter to the home to snoop, to peer into cupboards and spy under beds. Officious tactics are worse than useless, whatever knowledge they may yield up, since they arouse antagonism, and render the caseworker powerless to enter into and affect that human situation. The main reason for the visit is to get intimately acquainted with that family, to win acceptance into the group as a trusted friend and adviser. When that status has been achieved, the caseworker will be frankly told all she needs to know without resort to the artificial question-and-answer method, and, what is more important, she will be in a position to help the family solve its problems.³²

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John Newman Beecher, July 15, 1934, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³¹ J. N. Beecher, *Social Service Bulletin #1*, ; J. N. Beecher, C2669-New Deal Tape.

³² John Newman Beecher, "Memo to Caseworkers, January 14, 1935," Relief Administrator Memo, John Beecher Collection.

His objective for change in the organization, according to an interview in 1972, was to reorient the relief workers and establish professional standards to address the suffering in the district. That meant that workers would not reward the “deserving poor” and leave out those they judged unworthy.

Beecher also managed to scramble the racial hierarchy of the organization and to attempt to provide discounted worker’s compensation and physical exams for relief workers. When he first arrived, whites had all the administrative positions and controlled the relief administered to everyone. He hired Augusta Cooper, a black woman who was a trained social worker, as the head caseworker to supervise those working in the black community. “We developed, what I suppose, was the only all black casework department in the entire South,” he said. When an older black relief worker drowned in a shallow swamp after suffering a heart attack, Beecher decided to provide physical examinations when relief workers were hired. A young white doctor in Wilmington agreed to conduct physicals for \$5 per person, but the local medical association threatened to expel him from the organization, claiming he was practicing socialized medicine. Fearful that the other doctors would hurt his young practice, he withdrew before the program got off the ground. Beecher tried to negotiate with the association, but they refused to provide care for the rates the relief organization could afford.³³

³³ The statistical numbers bear out Beecher’s description of events. The total number of relief cases dropped in May, June, and July of 1934 and 1935. John Newman Beecher, “Carolina: Could Anything Be Finer?,” Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX, 9; John Newman Beecher, “NCERA Budget Report, New Hanover County, 1935,” John Beecher Collection; John Newman Beecher, “C2670-New Deal Tape, 1972,” Cassette, John Beecher Collection; Hugh P. Brinton, *Net Number of Cases by County and by Month, April 1934-August 1935*, (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Emergency Relief Department, 1935).

During the spring of 1935, a crisis arose in the district. The county commissioner headed a group of farms that complained to Beecher that their strawberry crop was in danger of rotting because they did not have enough workers for the harvest. They claimed that blacks did not want to work because they were on relief; they wanted to stop distribution of relief checks to blacks until after the strawberry harvest. Beecher refused to comply, and they took their complaint to Raleigh to the state administrator, Annie O'Berry. Beecher soon received a telegram from O'Berry ordering him to halt aid to blacks until the strawberries were harvested. He complied, but he sent his wife, Virginia, and another social worker to observe the conditions.

Beecher soon found that the lure of relief was not discouraging workers from participating in the harvest, but instead they were dissuaded by the poor wages and working conditions. They were not lazy, but making rational choices in the labor market. Virginia found that workers were earning less than a \$1 a day and were forced to live in crowded, unsanitary barracks. In an effort to put political pressure on the state administrator, Beecher contacted Jonathan Daniels of the Raleigh *News and Observer*, and Daniels sent a reporter. When the story came out in the newspaper, the local response was outrage, not because relief was withheld for blacks, but because the living situation for the workers put white women and black men in the same building. Without permission from Raleigh, Beecher put blacks back on the relief rolls a week or two after the story ran. ³⁴ The practice of removing specific ethnic groups from the relief rolls

³⁴ Anthony J. Badger, *North Carolina and the New Deal* (Raleigh: North Carolina Dept. of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1981), 45; J. N. Beecher, "Carolina: Could Anything Be Finer?," 10-11; J. N. Beecher, C2670-New Deal Tape; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*, ed. Wendell

when growers needed seasonal help was common during the New Deal. It was most prevalent in areas that needed seasonal workers for products like tobacco and cotton and areas that needed domestic service help.³⁵

In May 1935, Beecher drove to Washington to look for a new opportunity. In a letter to his parents earlier in the year, he wrote, "I am beginning to see that is not a job at all, but a front-line post. That makes me feel better about it. The human spirit couldn't stand it year in and year out."³⁶ Consequently, he arranged a trip to meet with administration officials to talk about his work in Wilmington and possible options beyond that.

Beecher's trip in May coincided with changes in New Deal agencies. The Supreme Court declared Title I of the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional. Most of the law was already set to expire in June, and many agencies were already in a state of flux. Beecher visited the Department of Agriculture and met with George Mitchell, the man who was hired instead of him for the Negro Worker Study Grant. Mitchell's new job was to help plan and staff the labor relations division of the new Resettlement Administration (RA), which had been created by the president and his close adviser, Rexford Tugwell, then undersecretary of agriculture. The RA would help to relocate both rural and urban low-income families in homesteads, as well as carry out other relief and

Holmes Stephenson and Merton E. Coulter, 11 vols., *A History of the South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 478-479.

³⁵ Nancy E. Rose, *Workfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare, and Government Work Programs* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 46-47.

³⁶ John Newman Beecher, February 10, 1935, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

conservation projects.³⁷ Mitchell told Beecher he had heard about the work he had done in Wilmington, particularly his fight for black workers in the strawberry fields. He wanted Beecher to work in a resettlement field staff that would start in Birmingham in a few months. Until that time, Beecher would lead a fieldwork team in Mississippi for a government sociological study of plantations using methodology established by T.J. Woofter.³⁸

Beecher brought his experience from his first government job in Wilmington to Mississippi. Years later, looking back on Wilmington, he said, “I learned more about human nature and human institutions than I had in all my prior life.” Dealing with the bureaucracy was full of demanding twists and turns, but he created an efficient organization that was in much better shape than the way he had found it. He was appalled at the waste in programs administered for political gain — one of those brought ailing cattle from the Midwest to the South in an attempt to save them from the drought. It was ridiculous and expensive on the front end and ultimately unsuccessful as the cattle died in southern fields and relief workers faced yet another set of issues—such as the problem of what to do with the cow carcasses. Beecher was most infuriated by politics played out with people’s lives. He believed a centralized attempt to manage relief from Washington was problematic, but he also saw firsthand the pitfalls of local relief control.

³⁷ Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950: A Study of Their Origins and Developments* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), 324-325.

³⁸ J. N. Beecher, C2670-New Deal Tape; T. J. Woofter and others, *Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation*, ed. Works Progress Administration Division of Social Research (Washington D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

The experience also changed Beecher political ideology. He went to Wilmington believing that socialism was a viable solution to the economic challenge facing the country. When he saw the reality, his position shifted. “My faith in Socialism is at a low ebb from experience with bureaucracy. ... The trouble is they are trying to do everything from Washington - central, inflexible, and half-baked control. Very low salaries, poor personnel on the whole, and plenty of politics.”³⁹ He learned to inspire employees and build a team whose members worked well together. By the time he left, he believed he had contributed as much as he was able in Wilmington and it was time for a new challenge.

³⁹ J. N. Beecher, August 13, 1934, John Beecher Collection.

Sociological Research in Mississippi

In June 1935, Beecher left Wilmington, dropped his family off in Birmingham with his parents, and proceeded to Jackson, Mississippi. He was state director of a statistical study to document cotton plantations in Mississippi, one of seven Southern states to be surveyed. He quickly put together a fourteen-member team of young college students to travel to various counties and work as enumerators. The statistical schedule had been developed by T.J. Woofter, who worked with Howard Odum at the University of North Carolina, but who was then on loan to the government as coordinator of rural research for the Works Progress Administration.⁴⁰

Beecher's team in Mississippi was the first group in the field with the new survey. They began their study in Natchez.⁴¹ The team soon had to deal with serious statistical issues in the form, which was in two parts, one for the landowner and one for the tenant farmer. The complex landowner survey called for detailed financial information about the farm and profits, not unlike a federal tax form, Beecher later explained. The tenant survey was simpler, although it also asked for farm and financial information. After two surveys were completed for a plantation, the totals for the tenants and the landowners were compared. Woofter assumed they would equal the same number, but they never did. Beecher reported the problem, and Woofter made a trip to Natchez to determine how to proceed. Woofter's solution was to balance the survey based on the information provided

⁴⁰ T. J. Woofter and others, *Landlord and Tenant*.

⁴¹ John Newman Beecher, "C2671-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

by the landowners rather than the tenants. In typical fashion, Beecher defied Woofter and ordered his team to balance the survey to the tenants' numbers instead.⁴²

As the work continued, Beecher recorded several disturbing incidents of fraud. The first issue that came to his attention was the fact that on plantation after plantation, there were dairy cattle present, though they were not claimed on the surveys. He soon discovered that both landowners and tenants were shipping untested dairy products to New Orleans as a way to subsidize their income. The cotton market in southwestern Mississippi had been transitioning to other agricultural activities for decades, and this discovery was further evidence of this trend.⁴³

Beecher also discovered another more shocking pattern of abuse. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), one of the New Deal programs for farmers, paid plantations for unused acreage in an effort to raise cotton prices by lowering the supply. Payment went to the landowner, who was then responsible for distributing the money to the sharecroppers. According to Beecher, every tenant he or his team interviewed declared they had never received any government money from the landowner. "The landlords got it all," Beecher said.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Many historians, most notably Donald Grubbs, Harvard Sitkoff, and Sidney Baldwin, have argued that the landowners benefitted significantly more than the sharecropper tenants from AAA policies. Beecher's report of property owners cheating tenants out of government money is not corroborated by evidence, but is not difficult to believe based on reports from other areas during the mid-1930s. In Arkansas with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, Grubbs explained, the property owners kept the money as rent. The result of these incidents was that the tenants were unable to fully utilize the land for its maximum payoff and they were not receiving the government subsidy. This dynamic forced sharecroppers off the land. Grubbs argued that for some in the

The Department of Agriculture knew that the AAA program was problematical for sharecroppers, and in 1935 the issue split the department between the social progressives and agricultural conservatives. Jerome Frank, liberal head of the legal division of the AAA, tried to institute a policy that would require landowners to keep their tenants once they enrolled. The rest of the agency leadership initially fought the idea. Cotton farmers had enrolled in the program in large numbers, and most of the administrators were afraid farmers would pull out if the liberal policy were implemented. However, they finally agreed to a compromise provided for the landowners to get the subsidy only if they kept

Agriculture Department, this was the goal. Because they saw the plantation system as untenable, the best solution was to create a system that would push the farmers off the land and into the industrial sector. The allegation that landowners stole the money intended for the tenants is not discussed specifically in the primary historical literature. Gavin Wright notes that distribution of money was always an issue that faced the agency and the landlords essentially won the upper hand because the local extension services managed the program. Nan Woodruff argued that during the 1940s, landowners took government subsidies to modernize their farms with new equipment, a move that ultimately forced sharecroppers off the land. See: Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics; the Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 78-80; James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth : The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 184-197; Pete Daniel, "The New Deal, Southern Agriculture," in *The New Deal and the South: Essays*, ed. Michael V. Namorato (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), 41; Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 19-26; Dennis Roth, "The New Deal," in *Federal Rural Development Policy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. United States Department of Agriculture (Beltsville, MD: USDA, Rural Information Center, 2002); Harvard Sitkoff, "The Impact of the New Deal on Black Southerners," in *The New Deal and the South: Essays*, ed. Michael V. Namorato (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), 121-122; Harvard Sitkoff, *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 23-24; G. B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945*, 409-414; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s," *The Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 2 (1994); G. Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War*, 227-229.

the same number of tenants as when they enrolled in the program. Frank soon learned that landowners had found ways to work around the intent of the new policy — they removed headstrong tenants and replaced them with others they thought would be more manageable, keeping the number of tenants steady. Consequently, while head administrator Chester Davis was on a trip, Frank issued an interpretation of the directive that required that landowners keep the same tenants on the land to qualify for the subsidy. When Davis returned, he fired Frank; the agency became focused primarily on the mechanics of production and price control.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ D. Roth; Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 218-219.

Early Resettlement Administration Work

The Resettlement Administration (RA), which President Roosevelt created under the power of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, merged several existing programs from New Deal agencies. Its objectives included aid to rural and urban low-income or destitute families; financial and technical assistance for farm families on relief to enable more economic independence; and implementation of certain land conservation projects.⁴⁶ Roosevelt was also reacting to some legislators who were drafting proposals to combat rural poverty and help desperate tenants and sharecroppers — the president's preemptive strike was to centralize all of the rural agencies of the New Deal. Agencies folded into RA were the Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH), which was administered through the Department of the Interior and Secretary Harold Ickes, and the Rural Rehabilitation and Stranded Populations (DRRSP), which was part of FERA and was overseen by director Harry Hopkins. As a result, the RA then managed projects begun by both agencies as well as new ones created to fulfill its own stated mission. Tugwell structured the agency elaborately with fifteen divisions and a centralized command structure, linking Washington to decisions in the rural communities. Twelve regional offices answered to the RA in Washington. Within a year, the staff included 15,000 people, one of whom was John Beecher.⁴⁷

In mid-July 1935, Beecher was on the Mississippi plantation project when he received a telegram from George Mitchell ordering him to report for duty at the regional

⁴⁶ M. R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950: A Study of Their Origins and Developments*, 324-325.

⁴⁷ D. Roth, 18.

office of the Resettlement Administration in Gainesville, Florida. Beecher was to be a Southern regional representative for the labor division of the Resettlement Administration. He would travel around the South and conduct studies to determine the prevailing labor rates for specific areas. For the next six months, he was constantly on the road traveling from town to town to conduct his studies.

Power struggles within the new agency dominated the first months of Beecher's employment at RA. Three people — Dr. William Hartman, Phillip Weltner, and R. W. (Pete) Hudgens — were vying for the position of Southeast region director. According to Beecher, Tugwell deliberately left the selection uncertain so the candidates could work through their conflicts and the best man would come out on top. During the interim, however, those working in the field had their own uncertainty. Beecher was transferred to the regional headquarters in Gainesville, Florida. He rented a house there for his family, but before they had time to move, the RA headquarters was moved from Gainesville to Montgomery. This move coincided with Hudgens' selection to be the Southern regional director. Beecher found a house to rent in Montgomery and moved his family there — for a little while.

In January 1936, Beecher was promoted to regional labor relations advisor and regional family selector supervisor, a position that required that he relocate to Birmingham. In this position, he decided which families would be resettled into the new communities. Only a couple of months after he moved his family to Montgomery, they packed once more and headed ninety miles north to Birmingham. "It was rough to be married to me," Beecher later said. Fortunately for Virginia Beecher, she was moving back to a familiar setting. Her mother had recently died and her parents' family home in

Roebuck—a rural town a short distance from Birmingham—was available to them. It was here that they spent the next three years—the longest period in one place since their marriage in 1926. ⁴⁸

⁴⁸ J. N. Beecher, C2671-New Deal Tape.

Birmingham Resettlement Project

The Resettlement Administration began and ended in a span of just two years. Rexford Tugwell, with FDR's backing, aimed to move impoverished farmers from poor land to good and to give them the guidance and financial help they needed to succeed. However, he also wanted to apply new community planning ideas in suburban areas where residents would have one foot on the land for family life and one foot in the city for work.⁴⁹ President Roosevelt supported the idea because he had a "Utopian notion out of the past — the idea that men are better off close to nature and working with the hands on their own acres," Tugwell wrote.⁵⁰ John Beecher, working in the field for the new agency, found that brainstorms out of Washington were not necessarily suited to smooth implementation in Alabama.

Beecher was in charge of labor relations and family selection for five suburban resettlement communities near Birmingham that were in various stages of completion. The five communities, inherited from the Interior Department's Division of Subsistence Homesteads program, included 276 homesteads. Four of the projects were already under way when Beecher arrived in January 1936; the fifth was in the approval process. His job was to find qualified people to live in the communities and to find adequate employment for them at satisfactory rates. He rented an office in downtown Birmingham and hired a

⁴⁹ Ibid; Michael Vincent Namorato, ed. *The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: The New Deal, 1932-1935* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 226; Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824-2000* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 115-120.

⁵⁰ Rexford G. Tugwell, *Democratic Roosevelt* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 158.

secretary. Hudgens soon gave him the added responsibility of community management. As he had done in Wilmington, Beecher built a team to run the office professionally and efficiently. He hired women trained in social work to make the family selections. He hired a maintenance supervisor, building overseer, and a couple of co-op men for construction and maintenance work in the communities.⁵¹

Beecher had difficulty finding qualified families to live in the communities. To be eligible, the family had to have gainful employment, which would continue after they moved. The income could be no more than \$100 a month, and they would be required to pay from \$15 to \$20 a month rent in the homestead settlement. A significant drawback was that several of the communities were too far from central workplaces; workers could not manage the cost of rent along with increased transportation costs. The Resettlement Administration inherited these locations and the decisions had been made through political channels rather than through a study of the local social and employment conditions. For example, Robert Jemison, Jr., a powerful real estate broker in Birmingham, was on the board that chose the sites for the communities. Of the five, four were in Jefferson County, where Birmingham and its heavy industries were located. The fifth was in Walker County, which was immediately north of Jefferson County. Only one of the five was suitable for the program. Greenwood was over the mountain from Bessemer, southwest of Birmingham. It was intended to provide housing for industrial workers in the city. This project, according to Beecher, was the best-situated homestead.

⁵¹ John Newman Beecher, "Radio Address by John Beecher, Community Manager, Resettlement Administration over Station WBRC, Birmingham, Al, 1936," transcript, p. 4, John Beecher Collection; J. N. Beecher, C2671-New Deal Tape.

The others were incompatible with the aims of the program. According to Beecher, “The sites were unsuitable. Palmerdale was 20 miles to the northeast of Birmingham with no work nearby or public transportation available... Very inconvenient and untenable for tenants.”⁵² Gardendale was near the coalfields north of Birmingham and had land that was too poor to cultivate gardens. The coal industry was limping along and companies had reduced the miners’ hours. Perhaps the two most problematic were Slagheap Village near Trussville and Bankhead Farms, the lone Alabama project that was outside Jefferson County.

Early in his Birmingham tenure, Beecher raised a red flag regarding the suitability of the proposed project near Trussville that was to be built near an old furnace on a slagheap — a mound of mining waste. The project had not been approved, and Beecher was concerned that he would be unable to place families there because of the environmental conditions. He simply did not proceed with his effort to promote the project to potential residents. In a few months, Rex Tugwell arrived with George Sutherland, who was in charge of building projects for the RA. According to Beecher, they visited the site, and approved a suburban project there immediately. Tugwell boldly named the project Slagheap Village, although residents later renamed it Cahaba after a local river. He and his team departed without ever meeting or talking to Beecher. Within about a year, the slag was removed and used to build foundations and roads and the community became a

⁵² J. N. Beecher, C2671-New Deal Tape.

respectable place for residents to live. Bankhead Farms in Walker County, however, did not work out so tidily.⁵³

Beecher's attempts to place qualified families in Bankhead Farms, the most inconvenient of all the homesteads, were fruitless. The Bankheads, a powerful family in national politics, spearheaded this project. At the time, William B. Bankhead was the Speaker of the House of Representatives and his older brother, John Bankhead II, was a senator from Alabama. Unlike many of their fellow Southern Democrats, they were powerful allies of Roosevelt and were particularly interested in rural resettlement. There was pressure from Washington to make placements in that development because the RA had jumped the gun and advertised their great success in housing coal miners and their families in Bankhead Farms. The economic reality of Walker County and the logistical distance from the coalmines made it impossible to fill the 102 homesteads in the development with coal miners. Earlier homesteads had about five acres, while those in Bankhead Farms had 20 acres of land with them. They were too big for subsistence homesteads, but too small to grow a cash crop. During this time, Beecher became well acquainted with Will Bankhead.⁵⁴ Occasionally Bankhead would invite Beecher to his house to discuss a placement of an unqualified friend or acquaintance that had petitioned him to intercede so they could live in Bankhead Farms. Beecher would listen politely, and then quietly leave but never bent the rules to comply with his request. Bankhead

⁵³ John Newman Beecher, "C2672-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

⁵⁴ Will Bankhead, Speaker of the House from 1936-1940, was the father of the actress Tallulah Bankhead. Tallulah, according to Beecher, was one of two outrageous women the state of Alabama produced. The other is Zelda Fitzgerald.; *ibid.*

never pushed him further and Beecher respected the man because of the way he handled the situation. Finally, because he was unable to place qualified families, Beecher compromised and filled the project with middle-class families who worked in Jasper, the county seat. This bothered him, but he felt he had no other choice.⁵⁵

In another instance, this one in Cahaba, Beecher fought for a qualified applicant even though Pete Hudgens had asked him to deny the application. Joseph Gelders certainly was not a typical applicant. He was born in Alabama, but he was Jewish, a former physics professor at the University of Alabama, and a Communist who had been kidnapped and nearly beaten to death in 1936 when he tried to get a union organizer who was ill with tuberculosis out of jail in Bessemer. Gelders was a controversial figure in Birmingham because of his affiliation with both the Communist Party and labor unions, and many liberals both in and out of government were incensed because of the violence that had been directed at him.⁵⁶ Hudgens wanted to deny the application, but Beecher argued for Gelders because he was qualified and he wanted to demonstrate that the agency did not discriminate. Beecher's father had confidentially shared that US Steel was behind the beating; while Beecher swore to neutrality and avoided favoritism, he may

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Leonard Beecher confirmed to John that U.S. Steel bankrolled those who beat Gelders. Several scholars have credited Gelders with being a critical bridge between the Communist party and southern liberals. He went on to become the first secretary of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1938. See Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 254-258; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe, Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 128-131; Thomas A. Krueger, "And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938-1948," (1967): 3-6; Linda Reed, *Simple Decency, Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 257.

have also been motivated by pity and sympathy for Gelders. Gelders turned out to be a good community citizen, according to Beecher.⁵⁷

Until that time, Beecher, who was then in his early 30s, had a sense of idealism and perfectionism that compelled him to push the envelope regardless of the circumstances; that began to change during the years in Birmingham with the RA. He began to understand that the situation surrounding the homestead communities he managed was not perfect in almost any respect, but he gave his best effort to manage them efficiently and fairly. He did not relinquish all battles, because complete compliance was not then—or ever—in his nature. Reflecting on his ability to stay in one place for three years, as he did with the Birmingham project, he said, “My natural lifelong rebellion remained in check for three years.” He was trying to make his marriage work and bring stability to his family. Furthermore, for the first time in his life, he was living without the financial assistance of his father. He also liked to manage organizations and achieved success in his administrative endeavors. “I was proud of the organization in spite of the limitations.” The Washington and the regional offices generally left him alone, and he liked that. “They gave me a tremendous amount of freedom. It’s your show, you run it.”⁵⁸

In addresses at public gatherings and on the radio, Beecher touted the success of the homestead projects. He believed they were making a difference in Birmingham and he shared those views with the public. “The mere fact that nearly five million dollars will have been spent on the five projects when they are finished, and most of it spent locally,

⁵⁷ J. N. Beecher, C2672-New Deal Tape.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

should convince anyone that Resettlement has been a strong shoulder at the wheel.”⁵⁹ He also admitted the communities faced issues such as integrating the resettlement community into the surrounding community, the ability of the residents to have the time and equipment for subsistence farming, and a timetable for turning the communities over to the residents. In a public address, Beecher said:

Possibly the most puzzling and complicated problem of all centers about the system of tenure to be adopted in disposing of the homesteads to the individual occupants, who now hold them upon a temporary and probationary basis. This may sound easy, but we are now in the thick of it, and feel assured that is a sound, permanent, and acceptable to the people involved. The primary consideration must be the preservation of what we may call the community’s integrity. This involves continued control to the hands of speculative interests, to keep of undesirable occupants, like hot-dog stands and beer-joints. In short, we must take all possible precautions to insure the community’s continuing to fulfill the purpose for which it was planned.⁶⁰

Beecher’s experiences at Wilmington and in Birmingham taught him that social planning “can not be carried out under laboratory conditions.” He went on to explain that planning and managing projects such as the five suburban homesteads near Birmingham was as much an art as a science.⁶¹

The Resettlement Administration came under increasing fire during the presidential election of 1936. Critics in congress had their eye on the agency and accused Tugwell of spending money recklessly on pet projects. Moreover, because the agency was created by executive order, Congress had no oversight. It became apparent to the administration that

⁵⁹ J. N. Beecher, Radio Address by John Beecher, Community Manager, Resettlement Administration over Station WBRC, Birmingham, Al, 2.

⁶⁰ John Newman Beecher, “Can Social Planning Work Out? Address at Birmingham-Southern College, 1937,” Transcript, p. 6, John Beecher Collection.

⁶¹ Ibid., 7.

if they wanted to pursue the mission of the agency, legislation would need to be written and passed that authorized it. Consequently, the president signed an executive order that transferred the Resettlement Administration to the Department of Agriculture under Henry A. Wallace, and Tugwell resigned on December 31, 1936. Will Alexander, a former minister and founder of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, was named the new administrator, and C.B. Baldwin, who would go on to become Wallace's presidential campaign manager in 1948, was named deputy. Beecher noted that he and his friends at the regional office of resettlement in Montgomery were concerned that the transition would eliminate much of the idealism and experimentation within the RA. The Department of Agriculture had a history of dividing liberals, who were interested in rural social planning, and conservatives, who were concerned almost exclusively with price controls and farm profitability. By 1937, many of the liberals had been forced out. Beecher knew and trusted Will Alexander, and he was surprised when he discovered that the shift actually stabilized the resettlement organization.

Six months later, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act of 1937 was passed. From the administration's perspective, this legislation legitimized the work that the Resettlement Administration had been doing previously through executive order. The legislation, first introduced in 1935, focused on helping tenant farmers become landowners. Sen. John Bankhead and Marvin Jones, long-time house member from Texas, sponsored the act. The Bankhead-Jones legislation created the Farm Security Administration (FSA) within the Department of Agriculture. The FSA replaced the Resettlement Administration but it had not only many of the same objectives, but also

had provisions to extend loans to farmers, grant low-interest, long-term loans to enable tenants to buy farms, and aid migrant workers.⁶²

Henry Wallace visited the resettlement projects around Birmingham in early 1937 with a huge entourage that included Hugo Black and Will Alexander. Wallace—known for his empathy with African Americans and others outside the mainstream power structure—wanted to go to a black church, so Beecher arranged to take him and Alexander to 16th Street Baptist Church, noted later for the bombing in 1963 in which four young girls were killed. They sat in the balcony and tried to be unobtrusive, but the pastor asked them to introduce themselves. Will Alexander stood up. When he introduced Beecher, he explained that he was a descendant of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and there was strong applause. Beecher recalled that this was the first time his ancestry had ever been brought up to a public audience in Birmingham. The fact that Wallace wanted to go to a black church and his attitude toward the work made Beecher respect him greatly.⁶³

Beecher believed in telling the truth regardless of the circumstances. This was a lifelong practice—even when the truth did not flatter him or those around him. In government work, however, it usually proved to be the best choice. For instance, when

⁶² S. Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics; the Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*, 121-123, 132; J. N. Beecher, C2672-New Deal Tape; Paul Keith Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, N.Y: American Historical Association, Cornell University Press, 1959), 87-89; Jr. Irvin M. May, “Jones, John Marvin,” *The Handbook of Texas Online* (2011). <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fjo82> (accessed February 27, 2011); William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 140-141.

⁶³ J. N. Beecher, C2672-New Deal Tape.

Beecher had an inquiry from anti-New Deal journalist Garet Garrett of the *Saturday Evening Post*, he called Pete Hudgens and asked him what to do. Beecher said Garrett was “a professional hatchet man for those who criticized the New Deal around the country.” Hudgens told him not to talk to Garrett, but Beecher argued that he could make a case for the contributions the homesteads were bringing to the area. Hudgens was uncomfortable, but he let Beecher make the decision. Beecher invited Garrett to come and observe the homesteads. He took him around and explained to him the realities of the program, both positive and negative. Garrett’s article came out in the *Saturday Evening Post* in September 1938, and it gave the Birmingham projects a rather favorable evaluation.⁶⁴

The homestead program proceeded satisfactorily until Beecher received a disconcerting telegram in late 1937. In that communication, Dexdale Hosiery Company of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, proposed creating a cooperative hosiery mill for the residents of Bankhead Farms. The company was disposing of its silk knitting machines and offered to sell them to the government for six mills in homesteads around the South, and one of them was to be at Bankhead Farms. The FSA would loan the community co-op in Bankhead Farms the startup money to buy the equipment and set up the mills, and the co-op would contract with the hosiery company to run the mills.⁶⁵ For two years, Beecher had tried unsuccessfully to eliminate Bankhead Farms as a regional responsibility

⁶⁴ Ibid; Garet Garrett, “Roads Going South,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 3 1938.

⁶⁵ *Farm Security Administration House Hearings Transcript*, 78 Cong., First sess., 1943. 492.

because it was impossible to place qualified families there. He was troubled because middle-class families were living there and purchasing homes intended for the poor.

When the proposal arrived, Beecher was immediately suspicious because most of the residents already had jobs, and the rural location of Bankhead Farms was not an intelligent choice for textile factory location. His father, who as the chief financial officer of T.C.I. had access to confidential business data, offered to get a Dunn and Bradstreet Report on the company; he discovered that Dexdale was nearly bankrupt. The machines the company was offering at a discount to FSA were silk knitting machines for women's hosiery. The industry was shifting to nylon, and the machines were nearly obsolete. Beecher suspected the scheme was also Dexdale's effort to get away from unions and move their mills to the South with the U.S. government footing the bill. It also turned out that the owners were friends of Henry Wallace and the Roosevelt administration and contributors to the Democratic Party. In short, this would be a political favor.

When Washington sent a man to Birmingham to try to convince Beecher to get on board, he became even more determined to stop the venture. "The more I heard about it, the more I didn't like it, and more stubborn I became. I was fanatical about this thing."⁶⁶ Beecher knew that most of the residents of Bankhead Farms were leading middle-class lives and working in middle class jobs, and they did not need the jobs a hosiery mill might offer. Finally, Pete Hudgens came to Birmingham and explained there was no way to stop the project. The president wants it, Hudgens told Beecher. The project went forward, and the agency allowed Beecher to refuse responsibility for it. Beecher recalled

⁶⁶ J. N. Beecher, C2672-New Deal Tape.

talking to Eleanor Roosevelt confidant Clarence Pickett, executive director of the American Friends Service Committee, about the situation on one of his trips to Washington. Pickett told Beecher that he had been trying to stop the project at the White House. He knew the Dexdales and their financial situation, and he knew pushing the proposal through was a favor to friends of the administration to ultimately rescue a failing business and escape Northern labor unions. In Pickett's view, everyone was being dishonest about it, and he was afraid it would come out and eventually hurt the administration.⁶⁷

The experience disillusioned Beecher and hastened his departure from the FSA office in Birmingham. It also dampened his spirit and commitment to the homestead projects. "I stayed on in my position, but something had gone out of my feeling for what I was doing," he explained. He had wanted to write a novel about his experience in Wilmington, but the job in Birmingham was demanding and he had been unable to get any traction in his writing. He resigned on September 22, 1938. In a letter to Jim Wood, the assistant regional director, Beecher evaluated the experience:

I have no complaints over the way you treated me all along, except perhaps that you have me too much rope. I guess we all have occasion to fear our freedom in this thing, when it is coupled with such responsibility. When you ask me how I fee about being out of the picture I am tempted to answer with Father Divine's followers: 'Peace! It's wonderful.' Not that I don't deeply regret the severance from a lot of people that I have grown mighty fond of, though even that regret is turned into a kind of sad pleasure when they make it plain that they have grown fond of me too. Parting is bad, but having a destination is damn good for a change. My personal compass needle had been swinging around and around for some

⁶⁷ The House investigation of FSA in 1943 brought out the folly of the decision to open the mills in the homesteads. However, the political favor was not addressed in the hearings. Ibid; Farm Security Administration House Hearings Transcript. 492-493.

time... Write me in two or three months and tell me that they are doing a better job than when I headed them, and I'll consider that the finest compliment you could pay me on my work with the suburban projects.⁶⁸

The resettlement projects provided resources for social and community planning and helped develop model communities where families flourished, but politics and funding limited their long-term impact. Beecher was not the only one disappointed in the lack of scope for the projects. By the time he resigned, 750 homes had been built in the five homestead communities to house approximately 3,200 white people. All subsistence programs built only 99 communities, with 10,938 homes throughout the country. This number was pitifully small considering the needs of the rural poor. In addition, no black families were allowed in the Birmingham projects, and very few were approved for projects nationwide. There was one homestead constructed for blacks in Alabama and that was at Gee's Bend near Selma. Beecher had gone into the resettlement program as a social idealist and came out with a much more pragmatic understanding of the workings of government. These lessons paid off over the next ten years.⁶⁹

When he left his job in Birmingham, he returned to writing *By Bread Alone*, a novel about his experience as a New Deal administrator in Wilmington. He completed a draft of the novel in December 1938 and immediately drove to Tuscaloosa to visit Hudson Strode, his old friend and English professor at the University of Alabama. Strode encouraged him to send a copy to Edward Aswell at Harper & Brothers Publishers.

⁶⁸ John Newman Beecher, February 10, 1935, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁶⁹ J. N. Beecher, Radio Address by John Beecher, Community Manager, Resettlement Administration over Station WBRC, Birmingham, Al, 1; J. N. Beecher, C2672-New Deal Tape; P. K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, 337.

Aswell was well known in publishing and had edited books for Thomas Wolfe and Richard Wright. In fact, Wolfe left the famous editor, Maxwell Perkins for Harper and Aswell. In a letter to his friend John Powell in San Francisco, Beecher described Aswell's response:

I finally heard from the novel last week, and am vastly encouraged. The publisher was Harper's, and the editor's letter opened as follows: "Your novel, entitled 'By Bread Alone,' has now been carefully read by most of the staff, including myself. We all agree that it is a promising piece of work, more promising, in fact, than the first draft of any first novel we have seen in quite some time. I think you will be justified in spending as much more time as may be necessary to make of it the finished novel which it ought be, and let me say here that we want very much to see it when it is revised." There follow a couple of pages of criticisms and suggestions which encourage me still more than the kind words quoted above, since they concern form exclusively, rather than content and character. I now feel that I am writing definitely at somebody, at a publisher, and not simply to relieve my pent-up feelings, and I am full of confidence that I can improve the job about 100%. Maybe not, but I'm going to try like hell.⁷⁰

The response gave Beecher encouragement and motivation. It also gave him hope that the novel might be published, although he was resistant to the changes Aswell suggested. He was traveling when he responded to Aswell, and he mixed up two letters. The one that was intended for Aswell went to his wife Virginia; the one to Virginia, with scathing comments about the editor's suggestions, went to Aswell. The mistake cost him what might have been a major opportunity. Beecher continued to send the novel out to publishers, but there was no market for a work of fiction based on New Deal administration, let alone one that brought up the pain and suffering the most difficult years of the Great Depression. The nation had turned the page.

⁷⁰ John Newman Beecher, December 6, 1938, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

In March 1939, Pete Hudgens, his old boss and the Southern regional director of the Farm Security Administration in Montgomery, contacted Beecher with an offer of a short-term job. Beecher accepted the offer to conduct the first sociological study of living and working conditions of migrant workers. His final report detailed the poor environmental conditions and health problems they endured. Hudgens urged him to stay on and manage the labor camps the FSA was building in South Florida, but Beecher declined; he had decided to make a career change.

Southern States Iron Roofing, Savannah, Georgia

Out of a sense of obligation and gratitude to his father, John decided in the spring of 1939 to go into the family business. Leonard Beecher had retired reluctantly from Tennessee Coal and Iron in the fall of 1937 when he reached the mandatory retirement age of 70.⁷¹ John said his father was in good health and believed he had much to contribute to a business venture of some kind. He was a “wise, calm, tireless, business executive.”⁷² Besides that, Leonard experienced severe financial losses when the stock market crashed in 1929, and he wanted to replenish his reserves before a final retirement. He soon found the right opportunity. While still at Tennessee Coal and Iron, Leonard had become friends with a T.C.I. client and owner of Southern States Iron Roofing, based in Savannah, Georgia. T.C.I. sold steel to Southern States, a company that manufactured steel roofing, steel shingles, steel barrels, and turpentine cups. Before Leonard retired from T.C.I., Southern States’ owner Harry Fulenwider approached him. Southern States, had taken a hit in the economic decline, and Bethlehem Steel was trying to buy them out. Fulenwider, however, wanted T.C.I. to purchase the company, and he wanted Leonard to partner with him. Leonard negotiated a deal with T.C.I. Secretly, T.C.I. would give Leonard the money to buy the company, and he would pay them back. Therefore, with

⁷¹ “T.C.I Official Lineup Shifted,” *Birmingham News*, October 1, 1937; “Two among Many,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 9, 1937.

⁷² John Newman Beecher, “C2673-New Deal Tape, 1972,” Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

the financial backing of T.C.I., Leonard made the purchase and began working as Southern States' vice president, secretary, and treasurer in January 1938.⁷³

After a short time, Leonard discovered that Fulenwider was trying to sabotage the company. He forced Fulenwider to retire and subsequently reorganized the company and was appointed president and chairman of the board.⁷⁴ Leonard and John toyed with the idea of working together, but each of them vacillated. Leonard did not want John to join the company out of any obligation to him "I have hesitated to urge you ... You've got to make the decision for yourself and assume the responsibility for it."⁷⁵ As usual, Leonard was clear that his son's happiness was more important to him than anything else, "Whatever you do, I want you to know that the first consideration in my mind has been and will continue to be, that you shall be happy in your choice."⁷⁶

By March 1939, Leonard became convinced he needed to hire some people he could trust, so he approached John seriously about coming to work for him. John had nearly completed the migrant study, and the position of secretary-treasurer of Southern States had opened up. After extensive soul searching and many discussions with Virginia, John decided to take it. Of course, John felt obligated to help his father. His father had supported him and his family selflessly for his entire life. He owed him. He also believed

⁷³ *ibid*; Leonard Thurlow Beecher, January 1, 1938, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁷⁴ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, May 16, 1938, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁷⁵ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, April 11, 1939, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

this kind of position could give him and his family financial security he had never known in his university or government positions. He wrote to his friend Hudson Strode, "... so Savannah it is to be, irrevocably, or at least for as long as I can hold down my job in the company. It is understood by everybody concerned that I do not intend to be a business man indefinitely, but will aim toward full-time writing after perhaps five years."⁷⁷ He accepted the position as secretary-treasurer of Southern States Iron Roofing in May 1939 with the ultimate goal of making enough money to become devote himself to fulltime writing.⁷⁸ Everything in John's life prior to that point suggested that the private sector was the last place he would be happy, and he soon realized that. His mother's choice to forsake the stage for domesticity and suppress pursuing her true gifts haunted him once he accepted the position SSIR. He did not want to end up resenting his parents and his family by taking a job that was not right for him.

I was aware that my mother had been destined for a much bigger stage than this, but denied herself the opportunity to what she was born to do. She did this not only because she was afraid to donate herself to the stage, but also because she devoted herself to her father and me. This affected me profoundly. ...I realized I could not work at this job. I had fooled myself and my family to make money and please my father. It just wasn't in me to do it.⁷⁹

Just three months after joining his father's company, John called Pete Hudgens and found that the FSA still had an open position for manager of the South Florida migrant camps.

⁷⁷ John Newman Beecher to Hudson Strode, December 7, 1938, John Beecher Collection Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁷⁸ John Newman Beecher, "C2674-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection; Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, April 26, 1939, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁷⁹J. N. Beecher, C2674-New Deal Tape.

John took the job and moved his pregnant wife and three young children to Belle Glade, Florida, on the southern rim of Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades. Leonard responded in his typical supportive manner, "I really feel, too, that it is probably the right decision for you, and you may depend, as always, on our sympathetic understanding."⁸⁰ His father retired from Southern States Iron Roofing five years later. In those five years, he repaid the T.C.I. loan and passed on a profitable and stable company to the team of executives he assembled to lead the company. According to John, Leonard took nothing away from the company when he left and received a \$100 per month pension until he died in 1959.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *ibid*; Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, May 6, 1939, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁸¹ J. N. Beecher, C2674-New Deal Tape.

FSA, Migratory Camps, Belle Glade, Florida

Poor land conditions, low prices for cash crops, and unemployment in the Great Depression had increased the number of migratory farm workers exponentially. Some estimated that a million people were migrating from harvest to harvest throughout the country. By the late 1930s, their oppressive working conditions had come into the national consciousness. FSA photographer Dorothea Lange's images revealed the desperate plight of the migrants in the central valley of California. John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, depicted the lives of Dust Bowl sharecroppers who went west to try to find work. Henry Fonda starred in the film version that opened theaters in 1940. The FSA-sponsored Florida migrant study Beecher conducted in 1939 revealed that same depth of inhumane conditions in the camps, and political pressure increased for the government to act.

The campaign to drain the Everglades to produce a fertile agricultural area in South Florida began in the early twentieth century. Before 1920, the region had little agricultural importance, although it had the interest of industrial barons. By 1930, speculators and developers had acquired the land and created a system of drains, dikes, and ditches to make way for fields of celery, tomatoes, sugar cane, cabbage, beans, potatoes, and peas. Draining the swamps produced black muck, some of the richest farmland in the country. Zora Neale Hurston, the black writer and anthropologist who spent many years of her life in Florida, described that fertile land in her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything.

Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too.⁸²

Both big agriculture companies and suitcase growers planted crops. So-called “suitcase growers” rented farmland for the growing season and lived elsewhere. Farm automation was still in the future, so growers needed a large number of unskilled laborers to harvest and pack the crops. Growers did not take responsibility for providing an infrastructure to accommodate the huge influx of migrant workers. Consequently, the migrants lived in crowded barracks with inadequate water, electricity, and sanitation. In a 1939 report for the FSA, Beecher wrote:

The typical Negro migrant occupies a single 10’x10’ stall, as it is termed, in a long shed or barrack. This is partitioned down the center and chopped up into a dozen or fourteen stalls, each with a door opened onto a court surrounded by similar barracks. In the center of the court is probably a common toilet and the water spigot, if any spigot is provided. ...When there is no spigot provided in the central court, but only a pitcher pump or a muck-well water connection, they must buy drinking water at the nearest ‘juke’ or store, and tote it home.⁸³

Another report around the same time noted that the barracks were “filthy” and expressed amazement that an epidemic had not yet spread through the camp.⁸⁴ Farm laborers were

⁸² Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1937), 156.

⁸³ John Newman Beecher, *Living and Working Conditions of Migratory Farm Workers in the Florida Vegetable Area. Testimony of John Beecher, FSA* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture, 1940), 3.

⁸⁴ Alfred Jackson Hanna and Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Lake Okeechobee: Wellspring of the Everglades* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1948), 317-318.

exempt from the Wagner Labor Act of 1935, so laborers could not unionize and bargain for better working conditions.⁸⁵

The farm work, camps, and towns, as well as the medical and educational facilities, were all segregated. According to Beecher, black workers — the majority of the work force — labored in the fields; white workers held jobs in the packinghouses. Children often worked with their parents in the fields or the packinghouses; their opportunities for education were limited. Belle Glade had separate elementary schools for blacks and whites, but those schools were not prepared for the influx of migrant workers' children, whatever their race. In his FSA report, Beecher said the children of white migrant workers brought atypical issues to elementary teachers — “irregular attendance, badly retarded, and difficult to adjust to the school. It is seldom indeed . . . that a child from a migratory white family advances beyond the fourth grade.” Odds were even worse for young black students. The elementary school for blacks in Belle Glade had 280 desks to serve a peak enrollment of 503 students in the late 1930s. Black students had no local high school, so their only option was in West Palm Beach, fifty miles away. The nearest hospital for blacks was also in West Palm Beach. The dreadful conditions Beecher detailed in his report gave at least some of the impetus for the FSA to act on behalf of the migrant farm workers.⁸⁶

The FSA created a plan for migrant camps in South Florida based on the successful model built in California's central valley a few years earlier. The first camp, schedule to

⁸⁵ Gail M. Hollander, *Raising Cane in the 'Glades: The Global Sugar Trade and the Transformation of Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 136-138.

⁸⁶ J. N. Beecher, 5.

open in April 1940, was under construction when Beecher and his family moved to a large house in Belle Glade in the fall of 1939. Soon after the move, the FSA sent Beecher to California for two months to study the camps there and get training and field experience with the administrators. He first visited Visalia, and from there he traveled to San Francisco and attempted to moderate an ongoing conflict within the FSA Western Region. While there, he met FSA photographer Dorothea Lange and Carey McWilliams, California Commissioner of Immigration and Housing and a member of the Communist party. He then traveled to a camp in Indio where he met Tom Collins, the model for Jim Rawley, a kind administrator in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck and Collins met in 1936. Collins was managing the Resettlement Administration's migrant camp in Kern County, California, and Steinbeck was working on a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* to document life in the camps. Collins and Steinbeck traveled together throughout the San Joaquin Valley, offered help, and documented what they found. Beecher said that by the time he met Collins, the camp administrator was bitter about Steinbeck's success and the money he made. Still, Beecher was inspired by the way Collins ran the camp and saw it as a true democracy. When he returned to Belle Glade, he learned that he had been successful in his mediation role of the Western Region, and the administrators there wanted him to return and work with them. Both he and Virginia thought the move to California would be a good fit for their family, but federal bosses vetoed the move because they needed Beecher in Florida.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ John Newman Beecher, "C2675-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

The already difficult circumstances in Belle Glade worsened early in January 1940, when South Florida was hit with a severe freeze, still one of the worst on record. The government-built migrant camps were not yet open, and workers had no blankets, clothes, or food. Beecher appealed to FSA administrator Will Alexander and got a \$500,000 relief grant. In administering the grant, Beecher had an opportunity to put his prospective camp managers to work for a trial run, but the emergency relief raised the ire of people in the town of Belle Glade. They claimed that if the workers were fed they would not work in the fields. On a near freezing day, a crowd from the Silver Dollar Saloon turned a fire hose on the migrant workers in the relief line. Beecher said they were so intimidated they did not fight back.⁸⁸

The first two camps, one for blacks and one for whites, opened near Belle Glade in April 1940 to great fanfare. Members of the national press were there, along with government workers and politicians such as C.B. Baldwin of the FSA; H. L. Mitchell, head of the Southern Sharecroppers Union in Arkansas — he wanted to organize a nationwide farm worker's union; and Nelson Crookshank, the migratory program administrator for FSA. Crookshank told Beecher the LaFollette Committee planned to investigate migratory labor, and the FSA wanted Beecher to testify. FSA leaders hoped Beecher could shine a light on the Florida situation the way Steinbeck had brought California's migrant workers to national attention. Eleanor Roosevelt visited soon after the camps opened. Beecher picked her up in Miami and gave her a tour. "Mrs.

⁸⁸ John Newman Beecher, "C2676-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

Roosevelt's trip to glades accomplished on schedule and I believe satisfactorily," Beecher told Will Alexander. "She showed great interest in camps and basic social situation."⁸⁹

Beecher was called to testify before the LaFollette Committee in May 1940. "My arrival was coincidental with Hitler's great march in Europe—Holland and Belgium. The spotlight was shifted from what was happening at home, and shifted to Europe and then Asia." He testified for two days. The senators had no idea that these conditions existed in a Florida county that was home — at least for part of each year — to some of the richest people in the world. Palm Beach was only fifty miles away in distance, but a world away in living conditions. Beecher's testimony made an impact on the senators; the FSA received much needed support as a result.⁹⁰ The FSA made copies of his report and handed it out throughout the capital. The event and the reaction to his report "pleased me as much as anything in my government career." While still in Washington, Beecher was inspired to write his poem, *And I Will be Heard*, but he found he could not finish it there. This was his cue that it was time to go home, where he finished the poem.⁹¹ The last stanza illustrates the hope he felt:

Yes, we
the Americans
we the people of the new world
will take over
the empire

⁸⁹ John Newman Beecher to Dr. W. W. Alexander, April 24, 1940, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center; John Newman Beecher, "C2677-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection; Malvina C. Thompson to John Newman Beecher, April 22, 1940, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center.

⁹⁰ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, May 17, 1940, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center.

⁹¹ J. N. Beecher, C2677-New Deal Tape.

you tried to found
 but your idea
 was death
 and ours is life
 and the thirteen bars in the American flag
 will stay thirteen
 but the forty-eight stars
 will multiply
 will get to be
 from a constellation
 a galaxy
 because humanity
 will join us.

*And I Will Be Heard, May 1940*⁹²

Beecher took a short trip to New York and had 3000 copies printed in a small book form. He began mailing them out immediately to publishers and reviewers. *Time* magazine reviewed the little book favorably. On a subsequent trip to New York later in the year, a small publisher picked it up and published it.⁹³ Beecher heard that Eleanor Roosevelt sent out copies as Christmas gifts. The poem played a key role in his development. “It launched my career as a poet,” he said. “This was really the beginning of my career.”⁹⁴

Summertime was the off-season for migrant workers and tended to be quiet in Belle Glade, so Beecher asked to take the summer of 1940 to teach English at the Hudson Shore Labor School, a school for women in industry that was sponsored by the government’s National Youth Administration. Hilda Smith, former dean of Bryn Mawr and a good friend of Eleanor Roosevelt’s, had started the school many years earlier on

⁹² J. Beecher, *Collected Poems, 1924-1974*, 69.

⁹³ J. Beecher, “*And I Will Be Heard*”; “Books: Poetry,” *Time Magazine*, October 14 1940.

⁹⁴ J. N. Beecher, C2677-New Deal Tape.

her property along the Hudson River north of New York City. Beecher met Smith while he was in Washington to testify in May, and she had approached him about possibly teaching at the school. Virginia, who had been having emotional difficulties after the birth of Michael in March, went with him for the summer. They left the children with his parents in Savannah, where they had moved after Leonard began working for Southern States Iron Roofing. The boys attended a nearby camp, Isabel looked after Joan, and a nurse was hired to take care of three-month-old Michael. Beecher said he went to the Hudson River School with idealistic notions about unions. He learned from his students that the process within the New York unions was anything but democratic. He and Virginia became good friends with Hilda Smith and became acquainted with Eleanor Roosevelt. Hyde Park was across the river and the school picnicked on occasions with the First Lady. Before the summer was over, Smith offered Virginia the job of hiring unemployed teachers for workers' education for the state of Alabama. She would be based in Birmingham. Virginia wanted the job, but she felt extremely ambivalent because she did not want to compromise the well being of the children. Beecher said that throughout their marriage, Virginia believed she would work at some point, perhaps when the children were older. With this new opportunity in their hometown, however, he urged her to take the job and she accepted it. When they returned from New York, Virginia and the children moved back to Birmingham. Beecher continued in his role as migrant camp director in South Florida.

The year had already been difficult for the couple. While Beecher was in California in late 1939, he had a brief relationship with a woman there. When he returned, he revealed the affair to Virginia, who was pregnant with their fourth child, Michael. John told her he

had never been unfaithful to her before. However, he became involved with a second woman while he was in Washington for the Senate hearing, and again, he shared this information with Virginia when he returned. He was as compulsive about honesty as he was about moving or changing jobs. Near the end of his life, he looked back on his behavior and acknowledged that he had been cruel in revealing the affairs to Virginia. Their decision to spend the summer in New York together was an attempt to bring them closer and repair their marriage. When Virginia began her new job in Birmingham and Beecher was alone in Florida without the children or his wife, he became increasingly depressed. In a letter to Virginia in late summer, he said, "If the trouble is all with me, that doesn't make it any the less trouble, and I definitely belong in an institution. I am violently, persistently, unhappy, and nothing but a change of scene and occupation can cure me."⁹⁵ By the end of October, he decided to make a change for the sake of his mental wellbeing. The best cure he knew was to become engrossed in a project that would occupy his time and energy, so he traveled again, first to Washington and then to New York in search of something new.⁹⁶

He arrived in Washington on October 24, 1940. He told his superiors in the FSA that he was unhappy with his position in Belle Glade. They offered him a place in the information division, but he declined it. The Red Cross was interested in sending him to Spain, but they were not acting immediately. Without any inspiration or other offers in Washington, he proceeded to New York where he stayed with a former student from the

⁹⁵ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, September 29, 1940, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁹⁶ J. N. Beecher, C2676-New Deal Tape.

Experimental College, Van Fisher, in his loft apartment. Fisher, an industrial photographer who was trying to break into the New York market, introduced Beecher to some of his artist friends. Through Fisher, he met Alfred Stieglitz at An American Place, his gallery on Madison Avenue. In a letter to Virginia, he described the meeting,

Stieglitz, whose portrait appears twice, is the grand old man of American Photography, the introducer of modern art into America, etc. Dying of heart disease, he lay on a cot and talked to me as if I were his favorite son or something. He thinks maybe I am “the voice” he has been waiting to hear. It was good to be talked to by him like that. He proposes to send a copy of the book to each of the president’s close advisers with stern admonitions to take heed of my words.⁹⁷

While there, Beecher also met Dorothy Norman, then a well-known patron of the arts and social activist. Stieglitz had become Norman’s mentor after they met in 1927. Both of them were married, Norman to a Sears and Roebuck heir and Stieglitz to artist Georgia O’Keeffe. Biographies of both say that while they were lovers only briefly, they maintained a friendship until the end of his life. In 1929, she raised funds from family and friends to rent the building for An American Place, Stieglitz’s third and final New York gallery. From 1938-1948, Norman published *Twice a Year*, a semi-annual journal of arts, literature, and civil liberties. Over the years, the book included work by such notables Stieglitz, Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller, E. E. Cummings, Richard Wright, Rainer Maria Rilke, Albert Einstein, Margaret Sanger, and William Carlos Williams. During the early 1940s, she hoped to add books to her publishing endeavors. While Beecher was in New York in November and December, she offered to publish *And I Will Be Heard*. He agreed. She also published another poem from Beecher in the same volume—*Think it*

⁹⁷ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, November 19, 1940, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Over Americas. With this accomplished, he was ready to go home. Beecher said, “I suddenly realized that I had finished what I had come north do,” and returned to live in Birmingham.⁹⁸

Beecher returned home at the end of January of 1941 to save his relationship with his wife and family. Virginia was pushing for a divorce, but he was determined to make the marriage work.⁹⁹ He wrote to her in November, “Again, I love you as it was in the beginning, only much more complex because you are you, not because you are my lawfully wedded wife and the mother of my children. We can and shall keep it that way. And we certainly can draw much strength from one another without any surrender of identity.”¹⁰⁰ At this point, however, she had decided they were not good for each other and wanted a divorce, but he convinced her to stay in the marriage.¹⁰¹

While managing the Birmingham homesteads in 1936, Beecher and his family had lived down the street from Ted Vandiver, chief editorial writer for the *Birmingham Age-Herald*. When Beecher moved back to Birmingham in 1941, Vandiver told him that one of the editorial writers at the newspaper was leaving, and there would be a job opening. “I convened on a new career,” Beecher said. “I had often thought of becoming a reporter, but had never thought about becoming an editorial writer.” As the assistant editorial

⁹⁸ J. N. Beecher, C2677-New Deal Tape; John Newman Beecher, “C2678-New Deal Tape, 1972,” Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

⁹⁹ Virginia Beecher to John Beecher, November 13, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁰⁰ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, November 12, 1940, 1940, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁰¹ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, January 23, 1941, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

writer, he had the freedom to address political, social, and labor issues that had interested him in his life and his work. In fact, he used the editorial forum to explain the nuances of some of the FSA programs, which garnered him praise from his old friends at the agency. Because he had to write three editorials a day, Beecher read voraciously from newspapers and magazines published around the country. He loved everything about the job except the salary. He was only making \$37 per week, which was not enough to support his family. Virginia continued to organize workers' education classes for the WPA. During this period, his personal life seemed to settle down. In his recorded memoir, he said that he and Virginia worked through their problems and regained their closeness.¹⁰²

At the same time, the war in Europe was escalating. Beecher watched the government and the larger culture change its focus from domestic survival and recovery to a much broader concern. Beecher found it difficult to stay in one place when so much was going on in the world. He took a leave of absence from the newspaper in September 1941, just nine months after he began. He set off on a "miniature odyssey" to Washington and New York where he hoped to write and to have more of his work published.¹⁰³ While in Washington, he visited the FSA offices and saw George Mitchell, who was the assistant administrator under C.B. Baldwin. He then proceeded to New York where he once more stayed with Van Fisher. He immediately began work on a new poem that was more personal than anything he had written before.

The writing is of course the big business of these days. And it is coming excellently. I have finished some 20 typewritten pages, six sections. And have no idea really how much more. At least as much again according to

¹⁰² J. N. Beecher, C2678-New Deal Tape.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

my feeling for the thing grows in my mind and under my hand as I go on with it. ... Anyhow, I am very certain that it is what I came up here to do and nothing else counts till it is done. Then we'll see.¹⁰⁴

When he finished the poem, *Here I Stand*, he immediately showed it to Alfred Stieglitz and Dorothy Norman. "This afternoon we went up to the [An American] Place and I read them to Stieglitz and showed them to Dorothy — were much liked by both," he wrote in a letter to Virginia Nov. 5, 1941.¹⁰⁵ This poem reflected the emotional tension that he shared with much of America, and Dorothy Norman published it immediately. A month later, the Japanese attacked the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor. "The thing about the poem was that it reflected where the world was at the moment," he said. "I had never thought of myself as a prophet, but that poem would indicate that I had some extrasensory perception that something was going to happen ... before Pearl Harbor."¹⁰⁶

Excerpt from *Here I Stand*

This America
 this part of America
 this much of America
 and what have we done with it?
 what are we doing with?
 so the doing is bigger than the talk about doing?
 this American South?

Here the last eight years of my life
 have gone
 working with people in lost unthought-of places
 and what to show?

¹⁰⁴ John Beecher to Virginia Beecher, October 6, 1941, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁰⁵ John Beecher to Virginia Beecher, November 5, 1941, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁰⁶ John Newman Beecher, "C2679-New Deal Tape, 1972," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

Eight years given up
 the years that count
 that fix the lines of a man
 beyond any future unshaping
 except he be hammered to pieces.

Aimed years these were
 not years at random
 sniffing tonguing this and that
 but years like great shells hurled at their objective
 or bombs dropped after sighting
 years of my full strength
 being fully used
 and my strength grew the more it was called on.

I learned
 that strength is a matter of the made-up mind
 that knowing what is to be done
 clenched with the will to do it
 and the way then comes of itself
 obstacles explode into rubble
 enemies fall back.

This knowledge then to show
 for eight years of going up against
 what must be gone against everywhere
 if we mean the words we are saying
 and no armistice anywhere
 least of all in Wilmington, Birmingham, Natchez and Belle Glade
 places I know.

—*John Beecher, 1941*

After his quick success in writing and publication, he decided it was time to leave the South and bring his family to New York. He rented an apartment on the East Side and moved Virginia and the children to the city, where he planned to pursue a writing life.¹⁰⁷ In the midst of this, Beecher got a call from Will Alexander, who wanted him to

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

spearhead a program in the South that would handle discrimination complaints in the defense industry. He turned down the position in November, but when he learned what the job entailed and that he would be a Southern field representative in the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), he could not resist the opportunity. In January 1942, weeks after he had moved his family once more, he began his work with the FEPC.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ John Beecher to Virginia Beecher, November 6, 1941, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX; J. N. Beecher, C2679-New Deal Tape; Merl Elwyn Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 25.

FEPC

As the war advanced in Europe, the United States moved to boost its military preparedness. Defense industry jobs expanded, but racial discrimination in hiring was widespread. President Roosevelt knew about the problem, but was caught between emerging black leaders in urban areas and a powerful white constituency in the Jim Crow South. On June 25, 1941, Roosevelt signed an executive order that established the Fair Employment Practices Commission. The president's action was in response to the "Call to Negro America to March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense on July, 1, 1941" organized by A. Phillip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph had gathered a coalition of black leaders who helped organize the Washington march to pressure the president into doing something about the massive discrimination that was occurring in defense industries and the armed forces.

Over a year earlier in an attempt to remedy the discrimination problem, Randolph and other black organizers met with Roosevelt and asked him to end segregation in the armed services. Following the meeting, Roosevelt set up the National Defense Advisory Commission (NDAC). Labor leader Sidney Hillman of the CIO headed the NDAC Labor Division but made little progress because the agency was powerless to enforce the mandate or penalize the employers. By January 1941, when it was clear the approach was ineffective and accusations of discrimination grew, Roosevelt eliminated the NDAC and created a more robust agency, the Office of Production Management (OPM). This agency took over what had been NDAC's Labor Division and left Hillman in charge. He split

the division into two sections: the Negro Employment and Training Branch, operating under black economist Robert Weaver, and the Minorities Group Service, under Will Alexander. The effort was too slow to appease black leaders, and by spring Randolph announced a protest march to be held on July 1 in Washington. Roosevelt was determined to find a way to stop the marchers, who were demanding action to end discrimination in both the military and the defense industry.

The president, fearing that the protests might break down the fragile Democratic Party coalition and spark racial violence in the nation's capital, pressured the OPM to deal with the discrimination issues in defense industries immediately. The black leaders, however, held firm in their demands, though they agreed to negotiate with the administration. Randolph was unable to reach a deal that would desegregate the military, but Roosevelt did agree to a prohibition against discriminatory policies in hiring workers in defense industries and federal agencies. The president signed the order on June 25 and Randolph called off the march.¹⁰⁹ The order stated, "Reaffirming policy of full participation in the defense program by all persons, regardless of race, creed, color or national origin, and directing certain action in furtherance of said policy."¹¹⁰

After FDR's order established the FEPC, his administration negotiated with black leaders to create an integrated and qualified committee. The composition of the

¹⁰⁹ M. E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946*, 13-15, 25; Committee on Fair Employment Practice United States, *Records of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, 1941-1946*, 213 vols., vol. Reel 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2005).

¹¹⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Executive Order 8802: Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry," Our Documents Initiative <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=old&doc=72#> (accessed March 8 2011).

committee and the rules governing its operation shifted several times. Initially, the committee had six members, plus an executive secretary and assistant executive secretary. One of the six members was designated the committee chair. The executive secretary ran the day-to-day operations and reported to the committee. The first executive secretary was Lawrence W. Cramer, the former governor of the Virgin Islands and an administrator who had a reputation for being low-key and effective. His assistant was George M. Johnson, former dean of the Howard University Law School. The first committee members were Mark Etheridge, editor of the *Louisville Courier Journal*, who served as chairman; David Sarnoff, president of RCA; Milton P. Webster, a black labor leader; Earl B. Dickerson, a black Chicago alderman; Frank Fenton, AFL representative; and John Brophy, CIO representative. Etheridge, who was opposed to the committee moving ahead of public opinion, resigned as chair in early 1942 but remained on the committee. His replacement was Malcolm MacLean, the white president of the historically black Hampton Institute in Virginia. Cramer conducted most of the setup and planning for the agency and was conscious of the need to integrate the committee's field personnel.¹¹¹ He was also a fraternity brother of Beecher, and he had worked for the fraternity when Beecher was a student at Cornell.¹¹²

Beecher began his work in January 1942 with great drive and energy. In a letter in February to Virginia, who was at their new apartment in New York with the children, he was enthusiastic about what he was doing.

¹¹¹ M. E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946*, 21-48.

¹¹² J. N. Beecher, C2679-New Deal Tape.

And this is the chance I have been asking for, for years: an absolutely free and roving assignment as a social investigator from the Potomac to the Rio Grande with no “by your leaves” to be asked anybody if I decide t go to San Antonio or Memphis or Charleston next. I should be glad that Larry Cramer is not telling me what moves to make, nor when, but leaving it entirely up to me to get the dope. I haven’t had an official word from him or anybody else since I left out from up yonder.¹¹³

His charge was to investigate discrimination complaints, and then, with the power of the United States government behind him, push Southern industrial leaders into compliance. This work, he believed, could make a difference in the region. By the time Beecher arrived, the organization and investigation process was largely solidified, so he hit the ground running.

With an unlimited expense account and one assistant, he traveled throughout the South investigating complaints, meeting with community and union leaders, and throwing his energy behind the committee’s larger mandate—to eliminate employment discrimination.¹¹⁴ His first stop was the port city of Mobile, Alabama, which had a large shipbuilding industry. He soon discovered the difficulty of the regional situation when he saw the conflicts between AFL and CIO union members fighting for turf and stubbornly prejudiced company men determined to keep blacks out of their work forces. Beecher explained the challenge in a letter to Virginia, “It is almost impossible to get any of the union people, on either side, to talk about anything except the local fight—(between the AFL and CIO). The Negroes, I fear, are

¹¹³ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, February 16, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹¹⁴ J. N. Beecher, C2679-New Deal Tape.

just a pawn between them. I am walking as cautiously as I know how, and hope that I can escape getting embroiled.”¹¹⁵

Beecher traveled all over the South investigating—Houston, New Orleans, Mobile, Nashville, Talladega, Atlanta, Birmingham, San Antonio—for seven months, but with only a month in the field, he came to understand the challenge of his job.

Soldiers and sailors everywhere you look these days. New Orleans is jammed with them. The sense of things being rapidly militarized is deepened and deepened as I go about. The sort of thing I’m working on is given the quick brush-off by most people I talk to. Hell, they seem to think so long as we’re getting the planes and ships built, what does it matter whether niggers helped build them? I really don’t know what I’m accomplishing, except self-education, which perhaps is something. The government really isn’t going to MAKE these folks do anything I’m afraid, so long as they succeed in the basic job of producing armaments. Perhaps, though, what the committee is doing will have some beneficial affect in the long, long run. The field representative of the US Office of Education told me that other day in Mobile that he believed the ‘Nazis’ were back of all this agitation to give Negroes defense training and jobs, backing up his assertion with a silly tale about what somebody’s cook was supposed to have said. And he is the liaison man from Washington who is charged with getting Negroes equality of training opportunities in the South!¹¹⁶

He wrote a report about his research, evidentiary findings, and the extreme resistance he found throughout the South. He hand delivered it to Washington with the hope that the committee would address some of the issues immediately—which they never did. By the end of March, he realized that the FEPC did not have the power to force change and that it might even be a sham. He wrote, “For I have undertaken to compel all the persons and agencies involved to come to grips with the question: is the President’s Executive Order,

¹¹⁵ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, February 10, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹¹⁶ J. N. Beecher to V. Beecher, February 16, 1942, John Beecher Collection.

is the law relating to national defense training to be enforced here and now with respect to the Negroes of Atlanta and the training program for Bell Aircraft? If not, then I shall have to face the fact that I am engaged in a thoroughly dishonest, even fraudulent activity..."¹¹⁷ Even with his reservations, Beecher kept pushing. He successfully forced the first "real Negro training program in the whole country" at Bell Aircraft in Atlanta.¹¹⁸

The first Southern hearing was held in Birmingham June 17, 1942. Beecher was responsible for planning and setting up the event. Shortly before the hearings, the conservative business interests turned up the heat on Beecher in *Alabama Magazine*,

The smear is out—Alabama Magazine—a long editorial, a long news article, and a column. Cy [Record] called me up just as I was going to bed and read them all over the phone. "The boldest attempt yet made at regimentation" – "Beecher the hatchet man" etc. My first reaction is one of great hilarity... I am flattered to be considered a hatchet man. I can tell you. It appears that I coined a phrase—when interviewed, I wouldn't give the names of the firms to be cited, saying "They know who they are." This is made the caption under my picture. Frankly, I think it isn't such a bad remark.¹¹⁹

Beecher wrote Virginia that there was political pressure back in Washington to call off the hearings. Beecher thought the president's secretary, Marvin McIntyre, was getting pressure from Coca-Cola.¹²⁰ Cramer stood up to McIntyre and assured Beecher that he

¹¹⁷ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, March 22, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹¹⁸ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, April 3, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹¹⁹ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, June 12, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹²⁰ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, June 15, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX; M. E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946*, 66-76.

was committed and the hearings would go on.¹²¹ To Beecher's credit, the hearings were a success,

Things tipped heavily in our direction today:

1. *Montgomery Advertiser* blasted *Alabama Magazine*.
2. *Birmingham News* carried a good story on us.
3. Conferred nearly all day on the Coca Cola case—finally settled out of court with President and Vice President of company who came over from Atlanta and sat around a table with all of us (including Negro field workers). Great love fest. President wants me to take up any further trouble with him personally. Capt. Cross of the Ordnance Dept. wants me to take charge of working out the proposed program for Negroes as a production supervisor at the plant, etc. At any rate, a manifest and almost unbelievable triumph which will have far-reaching effects in all the other ordnance plants over the US. This is very confidential—a military secret.¹²²

Coca-Cola ran a plant at Talladega, Alabama, and their compliance with training and hiring blacks was one of Beecher's success stories. Beecher visited the plant more than a month later and reported to Virginia that they were following their agreement "to the letter."¹²³

The Roosevelt administration pushed an FEPC reorganization through during the summer of 1942. At the end of July, the FEPC was placed under the umbrella of the War Manpower Commission (WMC), and Paul McNutt, director of WMC, became the new committee chairman. Beecher noted that the remaining committee members were

¹²¹ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, June 14, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹²² John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, June 17, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹²³ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, July 24, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX; M. E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946*, 72.

shocked with this development. Fortunately for Beecher, he had applied for and been granted a transfer and promotion to the New York Regional Investigator for the FEPC, a post which came with a substantial raise and took Beecher back home to Virginia and the children.

While the family was happy to be back together, Beecher remained troubled with what he found at work. Discrimination in New York was as bad or worse than what he had seen in the South. The number of complaints coming into the New York office dwarfed the complaints he had seen in the Southern Region, Beecher noted.

I'm finding plenty of discrimination – against Negroes, Jews, aliens, etc. and having perhaps more trouble with government agencies than with employers. But of course the victims are far more alert and vocal here than in the South. The stream of complaints is turning into a perfect deluge.¹²⁴

In addition, after the FEPC had fewer dollars and more bureaucratic layers after it was put under the domain of the Manpower Commission. Beecher immediately had to begin running advance copies of speeches and press releases through a central press secretary in the Northeast Regional Office.

Manpower Commission is trying to shut my mouth. I had an awful time getting “clearance” on the Bridgeport speech in advance, and I was flatly refused clearance on the one I made at the Astor — I made it anyhow. It's squarely up to them to do something about it, if they try to fire me for it, there will be a real hullabaloo. Probably it will be passed over, since Manpower is evidently going under Ickes and will be reorganized beyond recognition.

¹²⁴ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, September 8, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

He explained the difficulties in a letter to his father, "I can't honestly tell you where I am with my work. One day everything seems worked out, the next it is all different."¹²⁵ He found himself in a kind of bureaucratic limbo. He did not have the budget to adequately investigate discrimination complaints or the power to force businesses to stop their discrimination. "Hanging in midair is a permanent position," he said in a letter to his parents.¹²⁶ Sapped of energy, he resigned in mid-January 1943, a year after he had begun.

Beecher made important connections during his FEPC work that opened many doors for him. He became acquainted with A. Phillip Randolph, founder of the landmark labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Walter White and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; James Dombrowski, executive director of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare; Myles Horton, founder of Highlander Folk School; and many others in progressive circles throughout the country. Walter White urged him to continue working for the committee. According to Beecher, White told him that the committee impact was limited, but more could be done with him than without him.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, Beecher could not continue work that he had come to believe was a farce.

¹²⁵ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, November 29, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹²⁶ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, December 8, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹²⁷ Beecher attended the annual Southern Conference meeting in Nashville during April 1942. He discovered first hand the issues posed by the Communist to the conference. In addition, Eleanor Roosevelt invited him to have lunch with her, Lucy Mason, and Jim Dombrowski during the conference. John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, April 20, 1942, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX; John Newman Beecher, "C2697-FEPC/UNRRA Tape, 1979," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

Beecher's work for the President's Fair Employment Practices Commission made an impact. Power limitations constrained the committee. The committee did not have written law or subpoena power, making its effort rather toothless. The only tools available were a presidential mandate, the power of publicity, and the ability to hold public hearings. Regardless of the committee's shortcomings, Beecher, as an individual, had some success in pushing industrial and union leaders to accept blacks into their ranks. When confronting noncompliant executives, he was firm, unwavering, and authoritative. Consequently, his ability to stand up to those in power without fear or reservation yielded modest results. In the case of the FEPC, Beecher's moral compass served the cause of justice for minorities throughout the South and New York. However, his impatience with the lack of change always pushed him on to the next adventure.

After Beecher quit the FEPC, he began freelance writing for the *New Republic* and *New York Post*. Initially, his aim was to use his inside knowledge to expose the sham he believed the FEPC had become under the Manpower Commission, but he soon discovered that he liked the discipline of journalistic writing. He knew he was qualified to write about government issues, and he had a large network of old friends and colleagues in Washington. His first article, "How the Administration's Negro Policy Fell to Pieces," which was the first in a series of articles on the FEPC, ran in the *New York Post* on February 1, 1943.¹²⁸ Four days later, the *Post* ran an editorial, "Nick of Time," that thanked Beecher for successfully putting pressure on the president through his articles.

¹²⁸ John Beecher, "How the Administration's Negro Policy Fell to Pieces," *New York Post*, February 1, 1943.

President Roosevelt acted in the nick of time when he called upon War Manpower Chairman McNutt yesterday to get busy about revising and increasing the powers of the Fair Employment Practice Committee. The run-around was getting too obvious and talk was growing about a mass civil disobedience movement to impress upon Washington that the Negroes would like a little of the Four Freedoms they hear so much talk about.”

Thanks for ending the run-around should go, among others, to our John Beecher who has been writing a fact packed series of articles, exposing... politics. Now let's see what Mr. McNutt does.¹²⁹

NAACP director Walter White also commented on Beecher's reporting. In a letter to the wrote, “I want to express appreciation to the *New York Post* for its magnificent series by John Beecher on the FEPC and the whole question of discrimination by the government and war industries about minorities. The whole question has been treated so gingerly and inadequately by most newspapers, that it is most heartening to see the treatment accorded it by *The Post*. Only by exposure of the facts so that the public may know what is going on can the present sinister efforts to destroy or cripple the FEPC be thwarted.”¹³⁰ Again, Beecher's moral sensibilities had enabled him to take fearless action that made a difference for one of the causes he believed in.

Soon, the editor of the *Post* considered making him a regular staff reporter. In a letter to Virginia from Washington in February 1943, he explained his short-term goal with the paper. “I've got to stay here till I have this business in the bag and can do a job that shows I can write on something besides discrimination. I think they are waiting to see whether I am just a one-string expert or can play all the instruments in the band. I hope to

¹²⁹ “Nick of Time,” *New York Post*, February 5, 1943.

¹³⁰ Letter to the Editor, Walter White, “Expose of Run-around of Negroes Hailed,” *New York Post*, February 6, 1943.

show ‘em.’”¹³¹ However, by the end of April, the *Post* had sent him on several assignments that seemed inconsequential to him. He feared that the editor had gotten political pressure to restrain him. In typical John Beecher fashion, he ejected himself from the situation.

In May 1943, Beecher went to hear Hugh Mulzac, commander of the S.S. Booker T. Washington, speak in New York. After the talk on a Friday, Beecher introduced himself and asked if he had any positions open. Mulzac indicated he did, but the ship was departing Monday. Beecher applied for the job, got it, and three days later he was headed for Europe on the Booker T. Washington, the first Liberty Ship named for a black American.¹³²

¹³¹ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, February 12, 1943, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

SS Booker T. Washington

Wearing a uniform and operating in a rigid structure were not unfamiliar to John Beecher. At his parents' request, he had compliantly—if not always successfully—negotiated five summers at Culver Military Academy and spent a year at Virginia Military Institute. More than twenty-five years later, with ten years of government work under his belt by then, he was quite capable of signing up for duty on a ship to carry troops and munitions in the service of his country. It was not just his ability and the wartime needs, however, that brought him to the SS Booker T. Washington, In late 1942, the U.S. Merchant Marine had commissioned Hugh Mulzac as its first black captain and given him command of the first ship in World War II that carried racially integrated personnel, both officers and crew. Mulzac earned his captain's rating in 1920, but racial prejudice had limited his merchant marine service to the posts of mate and cook. In the late 1930s, he was involved in the National Maritime Union (NMU) that was trying to obtain better wages and working conditions for seamen of all races.¹³³ That John Beecher would meet Hugh Mulzac was something that was bound to happen. "Chance played no part in bringing me here, however, nor did external compulsion," Beecher wrote while he was aboard ship. "My being here is inevitable, the reasons for it going back through my whole life and the lives of my forefathers, back as far as another John Beecher, who came to America from England in 1637."¹³⁴ When Beecher followed this legacy to the Booker T. Washington, he planned to make one trip and then return to his family and his

¹³³ René De La Pedraja Tomán, *A Historical Dictionary of the U.S. Merchant Marine and Shipping Industry* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994), 422.

¹³⁴ John Beecher, *All Brave Sailors : The Story of the SS Booker T. Washington* (New York: L.B. Fischer, 1945), 39.

freelance writing; instead, he stayed on for five voyages that kept him on board for 10 months over the next two years. His official post was purser, but he sometimes served also as medic, pharmacist, teacher, or whatever other job needed to be done. He became a part of the life on and off the ship:

We who sailed under Captain Hugh Mulzac were no band of saints, no select company of fanatic volunteers, but just the common run of men. ... Among us were white men, born and bred in the South, who took orders from Negro officers, ate and slept alongside Negro shipmates, went ashore in foreign ports with Negroes — and on occasion knocked down those who wanted to make something out of it.¹³⁵

All of this was in keeping with Beecher's family history of abolitionism and his own history of standing up for racial equality, but he also saw an opportunity for personal gain. While his initial meeting with Mulzac might have been predestined, about two months after he boarded the Booker T. Washington, he was negotiating a book deal about his experiences. The company was L.B. Fischer Corp., owned by Gottfried Bermann Fischer, a successful publisher in Berlin who fled the Nazis in 1936 and ended up in New York in 1940. On July 11, 1943, Beecher wrote to his mother that "Fischer, who used to be the greatest publisher in Germany ... has started out again in America. Upon my return I am to deliver the first installment, for which I have been promised a contract and a cash advance."¹³⁶ By early 1945, he was back in New York with the writing he had done while serving on the Booker T. Washington, and by March he had delivered the manuscript to Fischer. "The publisher thinks the book is 'important' as well as powerfully written and says he is happy to have it," Beecher wrote to his wife.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹³⁶ John Newman Beecher to Isabel Garghill Beecher, July 11, 1943, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

I still don't know what I'm going to do next. Possibly, I ought to get it settled before I come down for the visit, so I won't be pacing the floor. We'll see. At The Southern Conference banquet last week the director of the National Committee for Abolition of the Poll Tax felt me out about becoming their publicity director. That would involve going to Washington and \$100 per week would hardly keep me there and the family up here. Important as the work would be, it is rather a narrow task compared to what I have been doing over the past years and I doubt whether I could get sufficiently steamed up to do a first-class job. Furthermore, I find I am still focused on affairs overseas, the fight itself and the problems of all the world's peoples. I'm afraid my conscience or whatever it is, is going to make me go back in some capacity.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, June 15, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

UNRRA

Beecher left the ship sometime in February or early March 1945.¹³⁸ He had written *All Brave Sailors* aboard ship and had already arranged to have it published by Fischer & Sons, an exiled German publisher. He turned in the manuscript on his return to New York, and by March 15, the editing process was complete.¹³⁹ As always, the question of his next job confronted him. He thought he wanted to do relief work in Europe. Before long, he signed up for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). By April 21, he was in training at the UNRRA training center in College Park, Maryland.¹⁴⁰

UNRRA was established by FDR in conjunction with the Allies in November 1943. Created before the formation of the United Nations, Roosevelt wanted to create a multilateral initiative that would provide core needs to the people of the war torn regions. Its mission was to “plan, coordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities, medical and other essential services.”¹⁴¹ FDR and his advisers also understood that even after the fighting was over, the battle for “hearts and minds” would

¹³⁸ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, January 25, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹³⁹ J. N. Beecher to L. T. Beecher, June 15, 1945, John Beecher Collection.

¹⁴⁰ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, April 21, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁴¹ George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 4.

continue. UNRRA would be an important factor in winning that battle by providing compassionate relief to devastated people. Forty-eight nations signed onto the agreement, but funding came primarily from the United States and Great Britain and the UNRAA initiative became the largest relief effort in history. The logistics of providing food, shelter, clothing, and transportation to eight million displaced people (DPs) was a giant challenge to organizers. Herbert H. Lehman, governor of New York from 1933-1942, was the first director of the agency. He began organizing in early 1944, but his efforts could provide little relief until the war had almost ended because the government's priority was keeping the armed forces supplied.¹⁴² When the war was winding down and the agency kicked into high gear in the spring of 1945, Beecher arrived.

After completing two weeks of basic training, Beecher and his team of 22 trainees shipped out to London for more training. Because UNRAA was a government agency, Beecher's position was considered a transfer from his position in the merchant marines. He left the USS Booker T. Washington with the rank of junior grade lieutenant. In UNRRA, he began as a lieutenant colonel in UNRRA and assigned as the military displaced persons director in Stuttgart, Germany, serving under the military commander. They chose him because of his New Deal work, particularly in the Florida migrant camps.¹⁴³ While in London, he wrote Virginia,

My present inclination is to count on staying over here a substantially shorter time than I first thought. The problem is proving (if one can trust

¹⁴²William I. Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 212-213.

¹⁴³ John Newman Beecher, "C2698-UNRRA Tape, 1979," Cassette, John Beecher Collection; John Newman Beecher, "C2711-UNRRA Tape, 1979," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

reports) far less vast than was at first believed. And the army is moving the DP's out at a much faster pace than seemed possible a couple of months ago. The movement will be way past its peak by the time I get to Germany, which may be a month from now.

I will not entrust to fragile paper my current impressions of the outfit here. And remembering the early days of the New Deal, I am reserving judgment—something may yet shape up, as happened there, though the difficulties and interferences are colossally greater in this experiment.

After attending the British Army School of Hygiene, he moved on to France with a team of fifty, called an echelon, to pick up more supplies and then traveled on to southern Germany.¹⁴⁴

Once in Stuttgart near the end of June 1945, the work of feeding, clothing, housing, and getting refugees back to their homes began. It went much faster than he anticipated. In the first six weeks, he had successfully transferred 30,000 Russians home on cattle cars. The combination of UNRRA teams and army personnel moved the process along quickly. Ethnic conflicts arose in the camps that Beecher had to deal with, particularly between the Poles and the Russians. This was partly due to the agreement FDR, Churchill, and Stalin had made in Yalta that designated Poland's eastern boundary at the Curzon Line, which was west of the previous Russian-Polish boundary. The huge sacrifices and success on the Eastern Front that Russian forces had made gave Stalin the sway he needed to convince FDR and Churchill that he had earned the concession. The Curzon Line was also an ethnic boundary. To the west of the line, the population was primarily Poles. To the east, there were some Poles, but also many Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, and Lithuanians. This diverse group of war refugees returned to a

¹⁴⁴ John Newman Beecher to Virginia Beecher, June 16, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

home that was a different country although it was the same geographically. Their home was to the east of the Curzon Line, which was Russia.¹⁴⁵ This caused tremendous anxiety among both the refugees and the British leaders. Churchill had lobbied for an independent Poland, but was overruled due to the Russian sacrifice made in the course of the war. With a close relationship to the exiled Polish government in London, the prime minister was aware of the larger European issues that surrounded Poland's autonomy. However, he lost that diplomatic battle. Beecher believed that the setup for another world war could come out of the Poland-Russia divide and the subsequent maneuvers by other powers that feared Russia. Beecher, looking back thirty years later, said it was the beginning of the Cold War.¹⁴⁶

Beecher claimed that no Poles were sent home for almost a year after the war in Europe ended in May of 1945. In action that reflected Churchill's distrust of Stalin, Poles were being secretly trained in the refugee camps to protect themselves and their region from Russia, Beecher claimed. He said he remembered one particular boxcar full of Poles who had traveled for a week after leaving Munich. They thought they were headed to Warsaw, but when the doors were opened in Stuttgart and they realized they were still in Germany, they refused to leave the train. He explained to them that he empathized with their plight, but they had to disembark. He finally had to call on the military forces,

¹⁴⁵ W. I. Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe*; Serhii Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (New York: Penguin 2010).

¹⁴⁶ J. N. Beecher, C2698-UNRRA Tape.

which threatened them with bayonets to force them from the train. From this incident and many others, Beecher observed that refugees just wanted to go home.¹⁴⁷

Beecher's sense of fairness was severely tested in this environment. He saw French and American military officials taking the clothing that had been issued to the Displaced Persons to sell on the black market. He saw the extreme regimentation and discipline of Russians that produced great fear in the people they were managing. In the midst of the great chaos after the war, Beecher noted, "I was trying to build an honest organization in Stuttgart for repatriation for everybody."¹⁴⁸ Honesty and fairness were, as always, most important to him.

Near the end of the summer, Beecher was fired, and the rest of his team resigned in protest. He was never quite sure why he was dismissed. He had just been offered the job of unit chief information officer, which he refused because he did not want to leave the team he had built. He suspected that he was let go because he refused to show favoritism to a group of Jews who had moved into former SS housing without permission. Beecher forced them to leave because he believed it was unfair to show favoritism to any particular group. "I didn't feel that they themselves were emaciated and required special favor. They had not been in the camps—and were taking advantage of these means. My ultimate crime was to deny special treatment of the Jews."¹⁴⁹ He had no animosity toward the Jews—he had been their staunchest defender in the New York office of the FEPC several years before, but in his position of leadership he was committed to fairness for all.

¹⁴⁷ J. N. Beecher, C2697-FEPC/UNRRA Tape.

¹⁴⁸ J. N. Beecher, C2711-UNRRA Tape.

¹⁴⁹ J. N. Beecher, C2697-FEPC/UNRRA Tape.

When Beecher returned to New York in the fall, he found that his marriage to Virginia was irreparably broken. His long absences and numerous affairs during the past several years had taken a severe toll on their relationship.

I came home in the fall of 1945, and returned to my home in New York where I made the final break with my first wife, who had what was then called a nervous breakdown. A sort of combination of hysteria and schizophrenia which came from long years of pressure and years of our widening breach—which neither of us wanted to admit.¹⁵⁰

However, Virginia did not blame John. In letters to both John and his parents, she took much of the responsibility for the split.

I have become firmly convinced that I am not good for John. The proof of this is the irregularity of our relations during the last five years, and my present contemplation of my present destructive effect on him. After all I have lived with him for twenty years, and whatever he is or does today is as much my being and doing as his. We have both finished with our rage, detraction and even hate of each other, which I think was built up as a temporary wall of self-protection by each of us, to make it possible to take the first steps toward what has to be done – that is to recognize that in reality our marriage has come to an end.¹⁵¹

By December 1945, they both concluded that divorce was inevitable.

With the divorce moving forward, John moved to Washington and resumed a relationship with a woman he had met in UNRRA basic training. He also started writing a novel based on his experiences in UNRRA. As he looked for work, he talked to government officials to let them know what he had experienced in UNRRA and to attempt to get justice for himself and his team for being fired.

My stay here is at last beginning to pay off. Yesterday and today have been exceedingly profitable and hopeful. First, I seem to be on the right

¹⁵⁰ J. N. Beecher, C2711-UNRRA Tape.

¹⁵¹ Virginia Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, December, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

track at last with regard to influencing the UNRRA policies with which I disagreed, and rectifying the injustice, which was done me and my crowd. Yesterday I talked at considerable length with Dean Acheson, Acting Secretary of State, and Col. C.T. Wood, head of UNRRA liaison in State. Wood has taken my case in hand and promises to follow through until everything is satisfactorily disposed of. After the conference with Acheson, I went over to his office and gave him further details, as well as a copy of the article I prepared for the New Republic. I saw him again today—he came down to his office specially, thought it was a holiday—and he had called in the new Director of the UNRRA Displaced Persons Division, a former friend of mine in FSA, named Meyer Cohen. They are going to develop the current facts on the DP situation in Germany—London Poles, etc. I have apparently hit on a tender spot, for the Soviet and Polish governments have been raising hell and plan to bring the matter up at the forthcoming UNRRA Council meeting.¹⁵²

Beecher was following his lifelong pattern of shining a light on injustice to try to force those in power to see. Sometimes there were results from his efforts, and sometimes not. From his papers, it is not clear how much change followed the meetings with Acheson, though he does mention that 600 people were fired from UNRRA soon after for black market activity.¹⁵³

His other focus was his relationship with Lydia Robertson, who had been his administrative assistant in Germany after they had completed training in London. They both believed they had a deep understanding of each other. Beecher described her as a very practical, self-reliant woman who had emigrated from Scotland with her parents

¹⁵² John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, December 22, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁵³ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, December, 1945, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

when she was young. Though she was more than ten years younger than Beecher, for a few years, she was a very stabilizing influence on him.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ J. N. Beecher, C2711-UNRRA Tape; Lydia Robertson to Third Naval District, September 1, 1943, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Institute of Social Relations

In early January 1946, Lieutenant Colonel Julius Schreiber, who ran the Institute of Social Relations, hired Beecher as chief of the editorial section. Schreiber, a 34 year-old U.S. trained psychiatrist born in the Ukraine, had been a leader in the Army's Information and Education Division during the war. He had conducted information retention research on soldiers and discovered that they did not understand what they were fighting for.¹⁵⁵ He concluded the most effective process to teach the soldiers why they were fighting was to have them read assignments and follow up the readings with group discussions. The Army implemented the program during the last years of the war.¹⁵⁶ After the war, Schreiber began the non-profit Institute of Social Relations with the objective of implementing adult education and citizenship programs in six pilot project cities around the country. The first year, 1946, was an experimental year for the program. Discussion guide booklets were written and produced for adult education in citizenship and public problems. Field representatives then facilitated workgroups in target cities to process the material. With funding from the American Jewish Committee, Schreiber and his backers attempted to use what he had learned in the army to address prejudice and other issues of social and political importance. The discussion manuals dealt with issues

¹⁵⁵ "Doctor Is Silent at Army Inquiry: Asserts He Wasn't Red When an Education Officer, but Won't Say If He Ever Was," *New York Times*, July 8, 1954; Edward T. Folliard, "Psychiatrists Meet to Tackle Problem of War's Mental Misfits," *Washington Post*, May 10, 1943.

¹⁵⁶ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 70; Alfred Kazin, "War, Education, and People: Impression of Life and Popular Education in Britain at the End of the War," in *Civil Liberties and the Arts: Selections from Twice a Year, 1938-1948*, ed. William Wasserman (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1964), 195-196.

such as racism, public housing, health care, and a great many other topics. After reading *All Brave Sailors*, Schreiber believed Beecher would be a good fit for the organization, and Beecher saw it as a good opportunity.

They are putting on an experimental program of mass education in democracy in six American communities, mobilizing all local resources but utilizing materials and discussion guides put out by the office here, which as a staff of writers and research people. I am to be in charge of the fieldwork in one of the communities, which are Syracuse, New York; Pittsfield, Mass.; Muncie, Indiana; Allentown, Pennsylvania; Canton, Ohio; Greensboro, NC.¹⁵⁷

Beecher was paid \$6,000 per year for the job—more money than he had ever made. He had a staff to research facts and write articles that were published in booklets and distributed to participating cities.¹⁵⁸

For the year he worked at the Institute of Social Relations, Beecher became much more settled. He and Lydia found an apartment, bought furniture, and created a home together. His divorce from Virginia was finalized and he and Lydia were married in July. Unfortunately, this period of calm was not to last. Funding for the institute became unstable later in the year, and Beecher wanted time and space to write for himself again. He resigned in January 1947 to take an assignment to write about the history of the Farm-Labor Party movement in Minnesota.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, January 2, 1946, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid; John Newman Beecher, "C2712-Institute of Social Relations/Farm Labor Book, 1979," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

¹⁵⁹ J. N. Beecher to L. T. Beecher, January 2, 1946, John Beecher Collection; J. N. Beecher, C2712-Institute of Social Relations/Farm Labor Book.

A representative of former Minnesota Governor Elmer Benson approached Beecher about the project in late 1946 and offered him an advance payment. Beecher would be responsible for finding a publisher, researching, and writing the book. Beecher accepted the proposition and began work on it right away. His father agreed to help support him until it was completed.¹⁶⁰ He immediately began conducting background research in the Library of Congress. During January and February of 1947, he read about Populism, the Non-Partisan league, the Grange, and the general history of Minnesota. From March through September, he and Lydia traveled around Minnesota to conduct oral histories and mine archives for information. They interviewed Benson several times, and he seemed pleased with their progress. When they returned to Washington in September, Beecher reserved a study in the Library of Congress and began writing. When he was finished nearly a year later, he soon found that he had not understood Benson's motivation. The book was designed to coincide with a resurrection of the Farm-Labor Party in the 1948 general election. Benson planned to run for the U.S. Senate in the 1948 election, and he saw the Henry Wallace candidacy as an opportunity to revive the party to that end. Benson insisted on approving the final version—a request that was problematical for John Beecher. Benson pushed for a somewhat sanitized version that painted a particular picture of the party that he hoped would create a narrative he could use during the election. In the end, they compromised. The manuscript was sent to a publisher mid-

¹⁶⁰ Leonard Thurlow Beecher to John Newman Beecher, January 29, 1947, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

April, and the publisher rejected the book. It went unpublished until 1980 when Vanguard issued *Tomorrow is a Day*.¹⁶¹

The completion of that manuscript marked the end of Beecher's work in the service of government and politics. A few months later, he began teaching sociology at San Francisco State College, where he drew on his New Deal administrative experiences for material for his courses, particularly in rural sociology. In the 1930s, he struggled against the bureaucracy of federal agencies in the nation's capital in order to help marginalized people in the rural South. He believed that he had made a contribution, that his work in the homestead project and the migrant camps had left things a little better than he found them. Beecher knew that the Southern workers still faced inequity in social and economic matters, and he prepared to continue the struggle by educating another generation to focus on the ongoing needs and take on the system. He would soon see, however, that his own fight was not over.

¹⁶¹ John Beecher, *Tomorrow Is a Day : A Story of the People in Politics* (Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1980); J. N. Beecher, C2712-Institute of Social Relations/Farm Labor Book.

CHAPTER VII: THE LOYALTY OATH

John Beecher began teaching sociology and creative writing at San Francisco State College in September 1948.¹ Appointed to a tenure track position, he was scheduled to earn tenure by 1951. He was 46 years old and had made the transition to what he believed would be his final career. His new life as a professor was not to be, however, due to his refusal to sign the Levering oath, also known as the California loyalty oath, in 1950. By not complying with the law, Beecher made a decision that would cost him his job and consume enormous amounts of money, time, and energy for the rest of his life. This decision, like many of his previous decisions, was made because he could not passively align himself with bureaucratic actions he believed were wrong—regardless of the price.

He began a journey back to teaching in 1947. As he was writing the Minnesota Farm-Labor book, he contemplated his next career move options. He concluded that he wanted to return to teaching. Teaching would give him a profession that he could settle into at this point in his life. Having spent most of his adult life constantly moving from place to place he explained that he wanted steady, secure employment. As he explained in a letter to Howard Odum,

I am on the last leg of my personal Odyssey, which has led me into so many situations, places, and parts in the social drama of recent times. I now know beyond any question what I want to do with the rest of my life. I want to teach in a southern college or university.

I am now trying to plan solidly for next year so that I can translate the dream of what I want into realizable terms. A job of some kind can always be unearthed, but that is to what I am looking for.

¹John Newman Beecher to Birmingham student, 1974, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

...should I forget about the Ph.D. and continue writing on the subjects that interest me, in the hope that my published work will counterbalance my lack of the highest degree?²

Odum replied several months later with advice based on an understanding of Beecher and his temperament,

What you will have to decide is whether you will be willing to go into a Sociology Department teaching a "Subject" or "Subjects." In other words, I doubt if you will be willing to do the technique of teaching theory or teaching technical aspects of special sociology, like the family, race, labor, etc. Naturally, as an artist and world citizen, your field would be the whole field of human relations and your inner spirit refuses to be fenced in.³

He decided not to pursue a Ph.D., but to market his real-world sociology experience to the academy. Initially, he targeted Southern institutions, but when a position did not materialize quickly, he decided teaching in a particular region was not important. By the time he finished writing the Farm-Labor book and delivered it to the publisher in 1948, he had contacted many of his past associates—many of whom worked in higher education. During the summer of 1948, he received a reply to a query he had made to Malcolm MacLean, the past president of Hampton Institute and former chairman of the FEPC, who was now a professor of education at UCLA. MacLean remembered Beecher fondly and offered to help him. He wrote, "I shall do what I can to get you anchored in the quiet waters of academia where you can study, contemplate and synthesize, and best of all teach from the wealth of experience you have packed into the years of your

² John Newman Beecher to Howard W. Odum, July 10, 1947, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³ Howard W. Odum to John Newman Beecher, October 16, 1947, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

living.”⁴ MacLean agreed to send letters of recommendation to J. Paul Leonard, president of San Francisco State College; B. Lamar Johnson, dean of instruction and longtime librarian of Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri Walter Hepner, president of San Diego State College; and A. J. Hamilton, president of Chico State College. MacLean encouraged Beecher to send each of these men copies of his casework. He explained his thoughts about where Beecher would find the best fit.

My first hope for you would be with Leonard at San Francisco. Paul is one of the grandest men in the game, an understander of people, and a great battler. He is reorganizing his staff, is developing a program of general education based on human needs rather than on subject matter syntheses as at Chicago. He is well along in the plans and resources for a new campus and new buildings so that they can move out of the present ratty buildings in downtown San Francisco. With him I think you would find the mental and emotional climate you want. And to develop his program he will need “casual rats” like you and me.⁵

On August 11, Beecher received a telegram from Dr. Leonard with an offer of a job at San Francisco State. “Upon Dr. MacLean’s recommendation would like to invite you to accept appointment as assistant professor of sociology for coming academic year. Salary will be \$4,100 for 9 months teaching assignment in basic Sociology; a course in Social Pathology; and one in history of Sociological Theory. Please wire response Collect.”⁶ Beecher promptly accepted the offer and made plans to move to San Francisco as quickly as possible. He had three weeks to move, and prepare for the fall classes. His wife, Lydia, and son, Tom, would stay with her parents in New Jersey until he was settled and found a

⁴ Malcolm S. MacLean to John Newman Beecher, July 16, 1948, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ J. Paul Leonard to John Newman Beecher, August 11, 1948, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

place for the family to live in San Francisco.⁷ By the end of the 1948-49 academic year, he had a job he loved, he had bought a house and settled in with his wife and son, and his elderly parents had bought the house next door. The stable life he wanted was becoming a reality.

Beecher taught upper division courses in population programs, social theory, rural sociology, recent social trends, and race relations. He also taught lower division courses in sociology, social problems, and general social science.⁸ By his third year, he had 397 students in four courses, more than half in the upper division classes he taught. According to Beecher, his student enrollment was higher than any other instructor's in the institution that year.⁹ In the last year of his life, he recalled the fulfillment of that brief period.

I had been very happy in my three years at SFSC, which I found to be achieving the most democratic profile I had ever seen in an American institution. In consequence I had decided to spend the rest of my life there and even in my very first year sent for my father and mother both in their eighties, to join me in San Francisco. They bought a house and I bought one next door to it on the assurance of President J. Paul Leonard and Dean Rex Bell that I would be automatically awarded tenure at the end of 1950-1951, on the basis of my spectacular success as a teacher.¹⁰

Because those years at San Francisco State provided great personal and professional satisfaction, their abrupt ending was devastating. In 1950, professors

⁷ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, August 15, 1948, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁸ John Newman Beecher to Personnel Record, 1952, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ John Newman Beecher, "State Board of Control of the State of California Claim Form for John Beecher, 1979," p. 2, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

in the California state university system were required to sign a newly shaped loyalty oath. He had signed many such oaths in his years of public service, but the language of the California oath challenged his principles. He believed its objective wrongfully came out of Cold War hysteria and propaganda, and he refused to sign it.

The California Loyalty Oath

Loyalty oaths were not new to post-war America, but the broad application of them throughout the country was a Cold War phenomenon. The Republican Congress elected in 1946 had wasted no time shifting the national consciousness from a flag-waving victory to a defensive position regarding Communism. The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), a special investigative body established in the late 1930s and first known as the Dies Committee, became a permanent committee after the war ended. Its leadership created a picture of America's vulnerability through demonizing left-leaning political figures within both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. The election of 1948 was approaching in an increasingly hostile political landscape, with Republicans putting pressure on the incumbent Democratic administration by hinting at the party's proximity to Communism. Though the United States had partnered with the USSR to win World War II, their post-war relationship quickly became antagonistic. When the Russians tested a nuclear weapon in 1949, the alliance was essentially dead. Many members of Congress believed that spies in the U.S. government had provided information that increased the nuclear capability of the USSR, and the Truman administration found itself in unfavorable domestic territory because of this accusation. Truman's response was to crack down on Communist Party members within the government, beginning with a loyalty oath. When he signed the Executive Loyalty Order of 1947, he established the requirement that all people seeking to be employed by the

federal government must first declare they were not communists. This was the first in a series of anti-communist loyalty oaths instituted after the war.¹¹

Truman's federal order had far-reaching consequences as a number of state governments soon enacted similar laws. At the state level, laws to protect the public from perceived communist subversion targeted state-supported education organizations. Within two years of the federal law's enactment, California was embroiled in a heated debate over an expanded loyalty oath required of state higher education employees. Since 1942, every state employee had been required to pledge allegiance to California and the United States and to their respective constitutions. In the spring of 1949, however, the Board of Regents of the University of California system introduced a new oath that required not only allegiance but also abstention from certain beliefs and specific groups. This oath had the objective of eliminating the Communist Party. Interestingly, Communist Party candidates legally and regularly appeared on state and federal ballots. However, the burgeoning Cold War generated public and private paranoia over the fear that communists were secretly embedded in the United States government.¹²

The concern about such threats within the government is perhaps understandable in the context of post-war America, but question of why politicians and political appointees targeted universities at that time is more complex. There was little radicalism in American universities after World War II. Even before the war, most organized

¹¹ Francis H. Thompson, *The Frustration of Politics: Truman, Congress, and the Loyalty Issue, 1945-1953* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979), 7.

¹² Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: Mccarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press 1986), 116.

radicalism was centered primarily in the student body and not in the faculty circles. Ellen Schrecker writes in *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*, “By the early fifties, as we have seen, the student left was all but extinct on American campuses, its demise the product of external repression and personal prudence.”¹³ Still, higher education faced significant and vocal pressure to unearth any pockets of radicalism, and some of it came not from politicians but from educators. As events unfolded and the United States and the Soviet Union became engaged in the Cold War, opportunistic politicians were pushing their anti-Communist agenda outside the universities. At the same time, however, the tone inside academia toward former and current Communist sympathizers began to change as well. In 1947, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) raised the question of dismissing anyone in its ranks that held membership in the Communist Party. Though the organization did not make a determination regarding the fitness of Communists for the profession, members of the national board were closely divided on the issue.¹⁴ This was the beginning of a period of intense struggle between universities and professors, between the ideals of academic freedom and the fear born from the awareness of atomic weapons and their potential impact.

The University of Washington in Seattle found itself in the middle of a brewing firestorm in late 1948. The Washington State Committee on Un-American Activities had discovered six tenured professors at the university who had been members of the

¹³ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴ Ibid., 93-94.

Communist Party. Raymond B. Allen, the university president, agreed to cooperate with the committee; the state board of regents eventually fired three of the professors because of their party membership and their refusal to cooperate with the committee. Allen understood the issues this raised for the university, and, according to Schrecker, “he was conscious of the necessity for trying to accomplish the purge without such a serious breach of academic freedom that it would hurt the university’s standing within the wider academic community.”¹⁵ To accomplish this, accused professors had to be provided a fair hearing from a committee of their peers. It was the role of the committee to demonstrate that membership in the Communist Party was by its very nature incongruent with the ethics of the teaching profession because of the party’s penchant for secrecy. When the process was completed months later, there were negative reactions throughout the country from other faculty and students. This state of affairs put university professors in the middle of the loyalty oath controversy.

The outcome at the University of Washington revealed a precarious ideological environment in American higher education, which has valued the unfettered pursuit of ideas and knowledge for both students and faculty. Universities suddenly found themselves torn between policing their employees and opening themselves up to investigations by external political entities. While the Washington episode exposed the fault lines, it also illuminated options available to university administrators. Within a year, most institutions were aware of the implication of the oaths, and many attempted to be proactive to deal with it.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

California, like Washington, had a state un-American activities committee that had pushed for more stringent loyalty oaths in state government. As in Washington, a loyalty oath had been in place since the early 1940s, but the language of the earlier oath did not prohibit membership or association with specific groups. From 1942 until 1949, California state employees had to sign the following statement:

I agree to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of California against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of California; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties upon which I am about to enter.¹⁶

California legislators wanted more; they wanted an oath with teeth. State Senator Jack B. Tenney of Los Angeles, who chaired the un-American activities committee, introduced a joint action of both houses designed to “isolate, expose and remove from positions of power and influence persons who are a dangerous menace to our freedom and security.”¹⁷ As the bills moved through the state legislature, it became clear to the board of regents of the university system that they must either self-regulate by imposing their own oath or step aside to let the legislature do it for them. Tenney had already threatened to include a state constitutional amendment that would allow the legislature to force university employees to sign the oath, thus usurping the board’s power.¹⁸

¹⁶ Frank Rowe, *The Enemy among Us: A Story of Witch-Hunting in the Mccarthy Era* (Sacramento, CA: Cougar Books, 1980), xiv.

¹⁷ David P. Gardner, *The California Oath Controversy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 9.

¹⁸ “Expanded Timeline: Events of the Loyalty Oath Controversy and Historical Background, January-February, 1949,” University of California

Meanwhile, controversial programs were ahead for UCLA, including a debate between Herbert Phillips, one of the fired professors from Washington, and Merritt Benson, UCLA professor of journalism, and a talk by radical British Labour Party leader Harold J. Laski. The regents and the UCLA administration were afraid these two public events violated a state law that prohibited the use of university facilities by known Communists. If that were true, board members and administrators would be open to new political threats from Tenney and like-minded politicians.

By the end of March 1949, the University of California system's board of regents quietly approved an addendum to the loyalty oath.¹⁹ Professors were not aware of the change until May, when they received their new contracts for the following school year. Most of them reacted strongly and refused to sign. The faculty senate at UC-Berkeley acted quickly; within a month, the group demanded the Board of Regents rescind the new oath, but the board refused. The regents split into two factions. Publishing heir Randolph Hearst's appointee, John Francis Neylan, led a strong anti-communist contingent that wanted to push the faculty toward compliance. University of California president Robert Sproul led a more liberal contingent. Professors had until April 30, 1950, to sign the oath, and there was much negotiation between the board and faculty representatives during that period. The faculty senate met and voted against the addendum to the oath, but added an anti-communist resolution in March 1950 as a compromise solution and agreed to investigate and hold hearings on the non-signers. This proposal passed the board of

http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/timeline1949_1.html (accessed March 14 2011).

¹⁹ D. P. Gardner, *The California Oath Controversy*, 14-28.

regents. The faculty held hearings and cleared 73 of the 79 non-signers. This did not satisfy Neylan, who thought they were too lenient; he became even more determined that the new oath should be implemented. The next round in the conflict occurred at the end of July when the board voted on the possible dismissal of the non-signers. The number of non-signers had dwindled by then to 39 as more employees signed in a patriotic gesture when the Korean conflict broke out. By a vote of 12 to 10, the regents decided to dismiss the non-signers. This action, however, was short-lived.²⁰

Historians Schrecker and Gardner have observed that the conflict between the regents and the faculty had become more of a power struggle than a genuine effort to root out communist beliefs. Neylan was determined to make the faculty comply with his anti-communist agenda. The faculty was determined to uphold academic freedom, which they believed was the ideal basis for higher education. During the July meeting, all the regents agreed (on the record) that some of the non-signers were not Communists. Schrecker quoted one of the regents: "Now I learn we aren't discussing communism. The issue now as I see it, we are talking about a matter of discipline of the professors who refused to sign the oath and employment contract as submitted. There is no longer an impugning of those individuals as Communists. It is now a matter of demanding obedience to the law of the Regents."²¹ By the end of the summer, the faculty was demoralized by the sixteen-month conflict with the board.

²⁰ Ibid., 201; E. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: Mccarthyism and the Universities*, 120-123.

²¹ E. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: Mccarthyism and the Universities*, 122.

Another figure in the ongoing conflict was California Governor Earl Warren, who became involved in the controversy in January 1950. He sat on the board of regents by virtue of his position and became allied with Neylan's faction. Warren had indicated in previous public statements that he was against the oath addendum, but by the summer of 1950, facing re-election, he expressed a different view. It is also worth noting that the Red Scare was in high gear at this point—in February Sen. Joe McCarthy had declared there was a nest of Communists in America and in August Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were indicted for espionage. Warren's tactical shift toward support of an oath for state workers helped him win his third term, not unlike successes by others in the political climate of the day. By September, Warren signed on to the Levering Act to mandate a more comprehensive loyalty oath bill for state employees. The act, which passed easily, made all California public employees civil defense workers and subject to new regulations, which included a new anti-communist oath. Interestingly, passage of the Levering Act quieted the professors because the oath was applied to all state employees, not just the universities.²²

The Levering oath went further than the one proposed by the regents; it required that employees sign in order to be paid from state funds. The oath reads as follows:

And I do further swear (or affirm) that I do not advocate nor am I a member of any party or organization, political or otherwise, that now advocated the overthrow of the Government of the United States or of the State of California by force or violence or other unlawful means; that within five years immediately preceding the taking of this oath (or affirmation) I have not been a member of any party or organization,

²² Jim Newton, *Justice for All: Earl Warren and the Nation He Made* (New York: Riverside Books, 2006), 215-238; E. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: Mccarthyism and the Universities*, 122.

political or otherwise, that advocated the overthrow of the Government of the United States or of the State of California by force or violence or other unlawful means except as follows, _____ (if no affiliations, write in the word “No Exceptions”) and that during such time as I am a member or employee of the _____ (name of public agency) I will not advocate nor become a member of any party or organization, political or otherwise, that advocates the overthrow of the Government of the United States or of the State of California by force or violence or other unlawful means.²³

Implementation of the Levering oath in October 1950 essentially ended the institutional conflict about the loyalty oath in California, with the exception of several lawsuits filed by non-signers from 1950 through the 1980s.

In 1952, the California Supreme Court heard two cases that had an impact on the non-signers. In *Tolman v. Underhill*, the court held that the Levering oath superseded the loyalty oath imposed by the California Board of Regents. This decision reinstated the professors fired in the summer of 1950. The second decision was made in the *Pockman v. Leonard* case, which upheld the constitutionality of the Levering oath. In 1967, the California Supreme Court reversed this decision and declared the Levering oath unconstitutional.

Historians have written primarily about the UC Berkeley’s reaction to the first oath controversy and have interpreted the impact in three different ways. The analyses of David Gardner, Ellen Schrecker, and Bob Blauer suggest answers for understanding the

²³ F. Rowe, *The Enemy among Us: A Story of Witch-Hunting in the Mccarthy Era*, xv.

Levering Oath as well.²⁴ David Gardner wrote the first scholarly study of the subject in 1967. Begun as an education dissertation from UC Berkeley, Gardner took a clear position in favor of administrators. By the time his book was published in 1967, he was chancellor of the University of California, Santa Barbara.²⁵ He concluded that the protestors' actions were vain and futile and they were as much to blame for the controversy as the regents. In contrast, Schrecker has argued that many in higher education in the University of California system were in effect partners with political opportunists in spreading the gospel of fear. She has contended that academics policed themselves so the politicians did not have to, and non-signers were heroes willing to stand up for freedom of speech. "The academy's enforcement of McCarthyism had silenced an entire generation of radical intellectuals and snuffed out all meaningful opposition to the official version of the Cold War."²⁶ The newest literature on the topic is *Resisting McCarthyism*, published after the 50th anniversary symposium held at UC Berkeley in 1999. Author Bob Blauer, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, argued that the resistance of Berkeley professors during the controversy increased their awareness of academic freedom and the consequences of failing to protect it. It also created a larger gap between the worldview of the state's citizenry and its academics. Blauer diminished the links between the oath controversy and the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. He argued that the larger political climate in

²⁴ There are no scholarly studies of the loyalty oath controversy at San Francisco State College. All three scholars briefly mention the situation at SFSC, but do not discuss it at length.

²⁵ D. P. Gardner, *The California Oath Controversy*.

²⁶ E. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: Mccarthyism and the Universities*, 341.

the McCarthy era dampened dissent, in stark contrast to the open radicalism of the 1960s and the Free Speech Movement. “It ... produced timidity and caution in a university administration made even more fearful of how conservative regents and legislators might react to student activism.”²⁷

²⁷ Bob Blauner, *Resisting Mccarthyism: To Sign or Not to Sign California's Loyalty Oath* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 241-242.

Beecher and the Loyalty Oath

Beecher refused to sign the Levering oath—the second oath passed by the general assembly for all state workers—because he believed it was wrong to sign a document that, to him, was clearly unconstitutional. It was not loyalty oaths in general, but the wide reach of this particular one, that Beecher challenged in October 1950. Almost thirty years later, he remained steadfast in his position. “The California State Constitution, adopted in 1850, expressly forbade test oaths of any character, providing for an oath of allegiance to the constitutions of the State and Nation, which I had taken every year of my employment. I had taken similar oaths repeatedly during my long previous career with the federal government and in the Maritime Service where I held a commission and served during World War II.”²⁸ Beecher was the first professor at San Francisco State to publicly declare that he would not sign the oath. Shortly after the state legislature passed the law in 1950, a group of faculty and students gathered at the local Unitarian church to discuss the issue. At the meeting, Beecher announced he would not sign the oath. Frank Rowe, an art professor at SFSC—and one who also refused to sign—described Beecher at the meeting: “It was John Beecher, Assistant Professor of Sociology, who brought the students to their feet with thunderous applause when he announced that he would refuse to sign the oath ... Proud and erect, his head topped with prematurely white hair, Beecher held our attention not only with his appearance, but with his incisive ideas and strong

²⁸John Newman Beecher to Mel Levine State Representative, January 11, 1978, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

language.”²⁹ Because of his prominence in the group from San Francisco State, Beecher became a leader and spokesperson for the non-signers.

In his leadership role, Beecher helped organize a mass meeting. His old mentor, Alexander Meiklejohn, lived in Berkeley, and Beecher approached him to speak at the upcoming meeting. In the years since the close of the Experimental College, Meiklejohn had become an articulate spokesperson for civil liberties in general and the First Amendment specifically. He had entered a very public intellectual debate with Sidney Hook in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1949 about the nature of the First Amendment and how far the government could go to control dissenting ideas. He argued that the language in the amendment was very specific and should not be parsed. Beecher thought he would be the perfect spokesperson for their cause. However, Meiklejohn declined. According to Beecher, Meiklejohn explained, “You cannot cooperate with the Communists, I’ve tried it and they will betray you. John, I regret it, but I cannot help you.”³⁰ Beecher contacted Carey McWilliams, a writer of nonfiction and friend from his New Deal days, and he agreed to speak. He wrote the book, *Witch Hunt*, about the erosion of civil liberties after World War II.³¹

Meiklejohn’s decision to forego an opportunity to speak at the meeting was puzzling, for he had already spoken out clearly and articulately against the oath, and he continued to do so in the years to come. Beecher knew Meiklejohn’s refusal was not

²⁹ F. Rowe, *The Enemy among Us: A Story of Witch-Hunting in the Mccarthy Era*, 35.

³⁰ John Newman Beecher, “C2702-Meiklejohn, 1979,” Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

³¹ Carey McWilliams, *Witch Hunt : The Revival of Heresy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1950).

ideological and believed it may have been personal. As John and Virginia's marriage came to an end, Virginia reached out to Meiklejohn for support. In a taped interview, Beecher recounted that history.

My first wife suffered a schizophrenic, hysterical breakdown upon my final return from the war in 1945 and decided, not perhaps totally irrationally, that I had been very cruel and thoughtless in my treatment of her—in my putting my treatment of my own career ahead of hers. Before her death I think she took that back, but that was her feeling at the time. In the illness, she virtually lived on the telephone talking to all my friends telling them how I had wronged her. And perhaps I did wrong her. Certainly it seemed so to her at the time. And one of the people she called most persistently was Meiklejohn.... In her breakdown, she bombarded him with her denunciations of me. Long distance, late night—all my other friends too—that she never would have made if it weren't for me—as my phone bill will attest.

Meiklejohn told me in his last years. He had suffered a nervous breakdown because of Virginia's. He himself had collapsed because of Virginia. He liked me. I had many evidences of it. He repeatedly assured me that I was one of the most effective teachers on his staff. So, suddenly to hear that I was a human beast with horns and a tail came as something of a shock. He had a real kind of father surrogate relationship with Virginia.³²

Beecher claimed he and Meiklejohn, whom he greatly respected, never again mentioned the speaking engagement and continued to have a friendly acquaintance. In 1955, after Meiklejohn testified before the Senate subcommittee on constitutional rights about his interpretation of the First Amendment, Beecher wrote a poem that was published in his mentor's honor.³³

Beecher felt he had nothing to fear by not signing the oath. The unconstitutionality of the oath was evident to him, and he thought a court would overturn the law and he would

³² John Newman Beecher, "C2703-Meiklejohn, 1979," Cassette, John Beecher Collection.

³³ J. Beecher, *Collected Poems, 1924-1974*, 166; C. S. Brown, ed., 230.

be reinstated to his position. He also knew he was innocent of any association with the Communist Party or any other threat to the country; he had nothing to hide. In a formal complaint to the State Control Board of California in 1979, Beecher stated: “No accusations of disloyal connections were ever made against me, even at the time when the Levering Act was adopted and I was illegally fired for not signing it.”³⁴ Nevertheless, he was discharged from his job on November 8, 1950. In court briefs from the 1970s, Beecher explained that he was not given due process in his firing, and he was particularly upset about the administration’s language in his discharge papers that he was dismissed for “gross unprofessional conduct.”³⁵ He passionately protested against this characterization in many letters to friends and legislators over the next thirty years.

After he was fired, he traveled to Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York to alert liberal circles about what had happened to civil liberties in California. He also tested the waters for possible teaching positions in other regions. Potential employers were not interested because the political fires were too hot.³⁶ “I sought a new teaching connection but was turned down universally by intimidated administrators to whom I offered my services.”³⁷ When he returned to San Francisco, he looked unsuccessfully for work.

³⁴ John Newman Beecher, “California State Board of Control Claim Form, 1979,” p. 2, Burnsville, NC.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ John Newman Beecher to Dr. Glenn S. Dumke, December 29, 1967, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

³⁷ J. N. Beecher, State Board of Control of the State of California Claim Form for John Beecher, 2.

A State Employment Service worker said to him, “It would be easier to place a convict on parole than you.”³⁸

After a brief jaunt to Mexico where he contemplated living as an expatriate, he returned to San Francisco and landed a job in 1951 as a medical book salesman.³⁹ It seemed—at least for a short time—that good fortune might have arrived. “After quite a few months of trudging about with my heavy sample case and cajoling medical secretaries into giving me a minute with the doctor, I was suddenly notified that I had been chosen to be the recipient of a fellowship from the Fund for the Advancement of Education, a Ford Foundation subsidiary.”⁴⁰ He was awarded a \$4,800 grant to study small farmers in California. The basis of his grant application had been his FSA experiences. According to Beecher, “This fellowship was granted for the express purpose of helping me to further my academic career. I decided to use it to complete my Ph.D. at Stanford University. I applied to the Stanford graduate school and was rejected on the grounds that I was ‘too old.’”⁴¹ He used the study as an opportunity to try his hand at ranching. He purchased a 32-acre ranch in Sonoma County near Sebastopol, where he maintained an orchard and raised poultry and sheep.⁴² Unfortunately, the price of eggs dropped significantly in the early 1950s as chicken farms became mechanized. Small

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Robert McEwen, “30-Year Nightmare: Teacher Who Refused Loyalty Oath Would Do It Again,” *Sacramento Bee*, March 9, 1977.

⁴⁰ J. N. Beecher to D. G. S. Dumke, December 29, 1967.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 18-19; John Newman Beecher, “Vita since 1950, 1977,” Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

farmers like Beecher were unable to profit because of the labor necessary to harvest eggs that got such low prices at market. Beecher kept the ranch for seven years, although he gave up the farm work and moved to Oakland in January 1955 Oakland to attend the Aquinas Institute, a Dominican school for the laity. He considered becoming a semi-monastic monk and starting a monastic community, but fate took him in another direction when he met Barbara Scholz in 1955.⁴³

Few records remain to document Beecher's life between 1949 and 1955. In an interview in 2005, Barbara Beecher said that he was so depressed during this period that he corresponded little and at some point destroyed even the little material that remained. Information about his life during that period is gleaned from letters written after 1955. It is clear that this period was his darkest and was instrumental in wrecking his personal life. In 1951, Malcolm MacLean, the former chair of the FEPC and the UCLA professor who had helped Beecher land the USFC position, wrote a letter to Lydia, Beecher's second wife.

It comforts us to know that you and young Thomas have ridden out the storm and for the while at least, are in quiet waters. Havens are necessary indeed and from yours you can move out soundly to do the two important things you name, establishing the rightful security for Thomas and yourself and the building up of the competence and skills to find satisfying, useful and paying work to do. We have not doubts of either.

Our visit with John was a good one. We have for him a very deep affection and with a hope that with some more aging he will come out, at least in part, from under the shadow of his stormy neuroses and as you say find peace of some sort and a way of pouring out what we consider his

⁴³ Joan Beecher to John Newman Beecher, October 28, 1954, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

genius. At this same time, we sense how impossible he is for any woman to live with and sense the much pain he must have caused you.⁴⁴

His marriage to Lydia ended in 1951, and he soon married and quickly divorced Joan Stuck, a former student.⁴⁵ His parents' failing health also presented difficulties.

In a letter to Don West, another radical Southern poet, Beecher described this period of his life and the difficulties he faced, "Various calamities smote me here, getting run over by an automobile, collapse of egg prices, etc. I came out of the valley of the shadow in 1955 when I met and married my present wife, Barbara. She got me back on the ball with my writing and we founded our private press which has been a tremendous source of satisfaction."⁴⁶ In many interviews and letters, Beecher says that meeting and marrying Barbara saved his life.

When the 1952 California Supreme Court decision came in, Beecher knew that he would not be reinstated to his position in the near future, but this did not stop him from continuing to fight. With the 1967 overturn of the Levering Oath, Beecher immediately requested reinstatement to the faculty at San Francisco State, but his effort was denied until 1977 when he was rehired, as opposed to being reinstated with accrued benefits. The Los Angeles Times marked the occasion a story and photo of Beecher, then 73, under the headline, "Blacklisted Teacher Returns as Hero." Quoted in the story, Beecher said, "I

⁴⁴ Malcolm S. MacLean to Lydia Robertson Beecher, June 26, 1951, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁴⁵ There is very little information about Joan Stuck. Her name appears in a list of marriages twice in his papers, but there are no letters or notes about her. Barbara Beecher verified that she was a former student, but remembered nothing about her.

⁴⁶ John Newman Beecher to Donald L. West, February 9, 1962, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

never doubted I would be vindicated. I always had faith in the American system. I just wondered if I would live to see it.⁴⁷ “ After a little more than two years back at the school where he had expected to spend his teaching career, Beecher died in 1980, vindicated but still without any compensation for his loss. On December 27, 1988, his widow, Barbara, signed a release that discharged the state of California from any further damages regarding Beecher’s dismissal in 1950. A month later, she received a \$25,000 settlement.⁴⁸

The original point of the oath was lost in the power struggle between the regents, the governor, and the professors. Many argued that oaths, which required only the signer’s own declaration of loyalty and little or no further investigation, were not an effective way to unearth communists. The process accomplished little; a handful of professors were dismissed, but they never faced criminal or civil charges. Beecher acknowledged the difficulty in understanding the tone of the period in a 1977 letter. When he was rehired at San Francisco State, he wrote a letter of appreciation to the chair of the sociology department at San Francisco State, who facilitated his return to the classroom.

Can you credit this now? It must be hard, even for a social scientist, to reconstitute the terror-stricken atmosphere of those times. Even such a man as Governor Earl Warren who had the year before opposed the far less objectionable “Regents” Oath for the University of California,’ now sought to propitiate his right-wing allies in both parties by signing into law such a monstrosity as the Levering Act, while a man I know to be an academic liberal, President Leonard, became the architect of such a

⁴⁷ Robert McEwen, “Blacklisted Teacher Returns as Hero,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1977.

⁴⁸ Copy of Canceled Settlement Check “1989,” Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

totalitarian subterfuge as I have just described. I was not merely driven out of San Francisco State College but, branded as “guilty of gross unprofessional conduct,” banished from my profession for nine years. It was tantamount to a sentence of internal exile.⁴⁹

In the end, the central issue became the diminished boundaries of academic freedom.

Beecher’s poems on the subject reflect his understanding of why it was so important to take such a costly political stand.

Scholars have paid little attention to the Levering Oath controversy. The first California oath controversy and its impact on the University of California garnered most of the attention. Beecher and his fellow non-signers paid a considerable price; they were blacklisted and unemployable for years. While the first loyalty oath was struck down in 1952, the Levering Oath was not struck down until 1967. Another possible factor in the lack of attention to Beecher and his fellow non-signers could be the SFSC’s lack of prominence when compared to UC Berkeley. Geographically, the schools were on opposite sides of San Francisco Bay; academically, they were set apart by size and prestige. San Francisco State was founded as a local teacher’s college, and UC Berkeley was one of the foremost public universities in the country. Their respective faculties reflected this distinction. These differences perhaps demonstrate that the controversy at Berkeley had a perceived standing that outclassed San Francisco State. Additionally, Berkeley’s group of non-signers as well as those who supported them was far larger and more vocal. Even before the deadline for signing had passed, the non-signers at Berkeley filed a lawsuit challenging the Levering oath. The fact that they went on record quickly

⁴⁹John N. Beecher to Sociology Chair Dr. Marjorie J. Seashore, SFSU, March 7, 1977, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

and in large number gave the public and, later, historians a fuller view of what had taken place.

Much of the historiography about the California loyalty oath controversy focuses on the first oath, which the University of California board of regents enacted in 1949. Historians have paid little attention to the sacrifices of California public employees. The cost to Beecher and his fellow Levering Oath non-signers was much greater than what the University of California non-signers faced almost two years earlier. Like most of his colleagues at San Francisco State, Beecher was never reinstated or compensated sufficiently for the unconstitutional dismissal. When the dissenters held to their values, they lost their livelihood and were blacklisted as a result of Cold War politics; for the same political reason, the State of California was never held fully accountable.

The words Beecher wrote as he returned to SFSC in 1977, when he described the terror and subterfuge there twenty-five years earlier, demonstrate the difficulty of understanding the fever pitch of the climate in 1949 and 1950. Nevertheless, it is important to look closely at this incident in history to try and understand the social and political dynamics that produced it. There are valid reasons to give credit to a man like John Beecher, one who stood up to institutional injustice regardless of the personal cost—which was very high. Beecher, however, recognized that the personal cost was even greater for others than for him. In his poem, “Inquest,” he honors another San Francisco State professor whose failure to sign cost him his life, and he raises a question about loyalty to the government that remains relevant in a new century.

Inquest

A man lies dead today who yesterday
 was working in his laboratory. He killed
 himself. Killing himself he killed far more
 besides. His research centered on the link
 between twin scourges of mankind, cancer
 and schizophrenia. This died with him.
 Who knows what else? And for all what good end?
 The man lies dead and cannot be subpoenaed
 by the Committee but awaits
 That judgment which the Congressmen themselves
 Will some day stand to. He was accused of what?
 Of nothing. If you prefer, of everything
 That wild surmise can dream or sickest mind
 Invent. No fire in all the smoke? This much
 Perhaps, that in his youth he was deceived
 By some who promised to redress world wrong.
 (The constitution left him free to make
 his own mistakes.) Now, deep in a career
 of dedicated service to mankind
 he must confess, recant his early errors,
 inform on friends whose guilt was no more real
 than was his own. Or he must choose the way
 of silence while men break him on the wheel
 of public degradation, his sweating face
 on television screens across the land,
 a super-pillory where all may mock
 and spit at him, his wife and children shamed
 in every circle where they move, and then
 the ultimate: his scientific work
 halted, himself without a job or hope
 of finding one, his family destitute. . .
 And so he took the poison. What would you
 have had him do, gentlemen of the Committee?⁵⁰

Written in 1955 by John Beecher

⁵⁰ John Beecher, *Hear the Wind Blow! Poems of Protest & Prophecy*, [1st ed. (New York,: International Publishers, 1968), 138.

CHAPTER VIII: 1955-1980

In his *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit*, Henry Ward Beecher said, “Genius is a steed too fiery for the plow or the cart.” Perhaps he was writing about himself, or perhaps his words were unknowingly prophetic, for his great-nephew John Newman Beecher lived and worked with a passion that could never be reined in. Throughout his life, John Beecher made innumerable career decisions with the “future” in mind, leaving one pursuit for another out of stubbornness, impulsiveness, or speculative optimism. When it became clear that he would not be reinstated at San Francisco State College and his status on the blacklist eliminated both his government and teaching position options, he entered a dark personal place. His ranching effort failed and his employment options became limited. In 1955, he began a training program through the Dominican Priory of St. Albert in Oakland with the goal of becoming a Trappist monk, but he left the program when he met and married Barbara Scholz.¹ She accompanied him throughout the next twenty-five years as he reestablished himself as a socially conscious poet, civil rights reporter, and teacher.

John and Barbara met in the summer of 1955 when they lived in adjacent rooms at a boardinghouse in Oakland. She was a 30-year-old graphic artist who worked in a civilian clerical position with the Army. Beecher, 51 years old, had three divorces behind him and all but one of his children were grown; he was preparing for a monastic lifestyle. They shared a bathroom that was situated between the two rooms. As Barbara tells the story,

¹ J. Beecher to J. N. Beecher, October 28, 1954, John Beecher Collection; John Newman Beecher, “St. Thomas Aquinas Training Notes, 1955,” John Beecher Collection, Oakland, CA.

John would forget to unlock the bathroom door on her side when he finished getting ready to leave in the morning. This happened for a week, and one morning, out of frustration, she waited for him outside the front door. “Mr. Beecher, I would like to talk with you!” She then asked him to remember to unlock the bathroom door; he was making her late for work. Remembering the incident, she smiles and says this was the beginning of their relationship.² They married a month later. Beecher shared the event in a letter to his father the day of their August 16, 1955, marriage:

We drove right on through to Carson City last night, arriving about 12:30. Here we put up at a very nice motel—the Crystal Fountain—built by an ex-seaman and MGM Hollywood cameraman. He took our wedding pictures this morning after the ceremony had been performed at the Court House, very simply though slightly oratorical. The name of the Justice of the Peace was Dan Murphy, a faithful son of Holy Mother Church no doubt, but a man has to live, n'est pas? Anyhow it was very much OK. Bob [Beecher's pet name for Barbara] wore a white linen dress and fixed her own corsage from the asters the boys gave her yesterday. She got ribbons from the dime store and it looked really impressive. She was, is, and will perpetually remain very happy about it all. Ditto for me. We both know it is right, absolutely good, and right.³

They soon moved back to the ranch in Sebastopol and embarked on their life together.

² Barbara Beecher to Angela J. Smith, June, 2005.

³ John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, August 16, 1955, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

A Small Press of Their Own

Shortly after they married, the couple bought an antique press and began printing handcrafted books of Beecher's poetry. Barbara, who was an accomplished artist and also trained in graphic arts, produced calligraphy and block carvings; Beecher wrote, and managed the typesetting and printing. Together, they were a team, and over the next seven years they printed and sold small-run, handcrafted books of poetry. In a letter to his old friend Dorothy Norman, Beecher explained the purchase of their first press,

The story on the printing is this. I picked up a cast-off and relatively antique 10x15 platen press for \$175 last December, bought a trade-school textbook for printing, second-hand equipment and the finest types and inks and papers available, and set about being a printer. The operation is installed in a room in our house. My wife cuts the decorative blocks and counsels me on layout and design, scans my proofs with the eye of an avenging angel and detects the least blemish or misalignment. She, in short, supplies the conscience, I being just the brawn. I set the type by hand, lock up the forms, and turn the wheel of the press by hand. Though I have a motor attachment, I prefer being a Gutenberg.⁴

Initially, they considered expanding the operation, but quickly decided they had no desire to become a commercial printer. They wanted only to print fine art works for themselves and for others with similar sensibilities. Beecher wrote to Dorothy Norman,

Our present thinking is along these lines: to bring out books as beautiful as we can make them, by hand methods, with perhaps a bigger press than we now have so that we can print four pages at a time instead of one or two but still no automatic gadgets. ... I get a tremendous satisfaction out of doing it, which indicates that it must be right and I would like to think that a printing-writing combination is what I am supposed to do with the rest of my life. I just don't want to make any false or premature moves. And I want to stick to beautiful stuff, or at least as beautiful as I can make it. I think so often of Steiglitz and of his unfailing sense of values, his penetration which exposed the hollowness of all commercialism and fame.

⁴ John Newman Beecher to Dorothy Norman, April 13, 1956, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

“America corrupts her best and puts them to no use.” How not to be corrupted; how still to be used? It never gets any easier.⁵

As Beecher recovered from the deep depression he had descended into after being fired from San Francisco State, he began to write poetry again. In 1956, he published and printed *Land of the Free*, his first published work of poetry since the early 1940s.⁶ *Land of the Free* was a single, long work that he wrote when he was asked to deliver a speech about the state of civil liberties in the nation.⁷ The couple named their publishing/printing venture Morning Star Press; in the fall of 1956, they began producing a quarterly edited poetry journal called *Morning Star Quartos*.⁸

Beecher was not the only poet with a printing press in the Bay area. In the mid-1950s, what would later be called the San Francisco Renaissance was under way with poet, translator and political activist Kenneth Rexroth mapping out the way. San Francisco—and its neighbors, Berkeley and Oakland—had long been an outpost for many who did not fit into typical American molds. The region’s unique culture brought Rexroth from his native Chicago in 1927, and after World War II ended, many more writers and artists arrived, drawn to San Francisco and its alternative subcultures.⁹ Rexroth was a key figure in the literary subculture, using his book review program on radio station KPFA to bring

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Newman Beecher, *Land of the Free: A Portfolio of Poems on the State of the Union* (Oakland, CA: Morning Star Press, 1956).

⁷ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 19.

⁸ J. N. Beecher, State Board of Control of the State of California Claim Form for John Beecher, 3.

⁹ Mick Sinclair, *San Francisco: A Cultural and Literary History* (London: Signal Books Limited, 2004), 180-181.

writers to the public and holding weekly salons and poetry readings in his Haight-Ashbury apartment to bring artists and admirers together.¹⁰ Only after the war did San Francisco become a frequent destination for writers and poets. It was easier for them to make a living in New York, the location of the major book and magazine publishers, or Los Angeles, where the film industry provided job opportunities. Rexroth, however, saw that the puritan aesthetic predominant in the rest of the country had never conquered San Francisco.

San Francisco was not just a wide-open town. It is the only city in the United States which was not settled overland by the westward-spreading puritan tradition, or by the Walter Scott, fake-cavalier tradition of the South. It had been settled mostly, in spite of all the romances of the overland migration, by gamblers, prostitutes, rascals, and fortune seekers who came across the Isthmus and around the Horn. They had their faults, but they were not influenced by Cotton Mather.¹¹

Within this open environment, Rexroth helped to create an incubator for avant-garde forms that combined diverse artistic works that previously were distinct. In the mid-1950s, many of the young artists wanted to break out of the mundane world they saw in the broader American culture. Poets in San Francisco began to read their work—often with taboo subjects and language—with a backdrop of jazz. This merging of the arts is key to what produced the tone and content of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. The same tone and content produced the Beat movement, but that was a part of the

¹⁰ Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 304.

¹¹ Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 366-367.

renaissance for which Rexroth wanted no credit.¹² The Beats questioned conventional American cultural values and wanted to put “the idealism of the American dream of individual freedom to its ultimate test. They rebelled against what they saw as their country’s social conformity, political repression, and prevailing materialism by championing unconventional aesthetic, sexual, and spiritual values.”¹³ Such was the case with Allen Ginsberg and his performance of “Howl” in October of 1955. A year earlier, Ginsberg traveled from New York to San Francisco with a letter of introduction to Rexroth from modernist poet William Carlos Williams. Ginsberg began to attend Rexroth’s salons and he, along with some other artists who attended Rexroth’s meetings, formed what would grow to become “The Beat Generation.” Since Beecher had been in the San Francisco Bay area since 1948, he had networked in many of these artistic circles. Among other things, his age, state of mind, and the content of his poetry precluded him from being part of the Beat movement. He was, however, a close friend of the Beat poet and monk, Brother Antonius, with whom he attended church in San Francisco, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, another small publisher.¹⁴ One letter from a friend noted that Ginsberg had attended one of Beecher’s classes, but it is not clear when or where.¹⁵ However, Beecher’s primary poetry circle during this period became a group of

¹²Ann Charters, “Beat Poetry and the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance,” in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 582.

¹⁴ Barbara Beecher to Angela J. Smith, March 24, 2011; K. Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963*, 347.

¹⁵ Leslie Woolf Hedley to John Newman Beecher, March 1, 1959, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

small magazine poets and small printers with whom he shared similar aesthetic and political values.¹⁶

Beecher's foray into printing coincided with what is called a small press and little magazine movement. The "little mags," as they were called, were an outlet for the explosion of new non-traditional prose and poetry that the mainstream and university presses would not publish during the 1950s. John Bennett, editor of a small magazine called *Vagabond*, explained their importance in a 1973 essay,

The reason small magazines in the '20s enjoyed status is that they worked well within the existing literary structure; the people these magazines published made the transition to the big established publishing houses without so much as a blinking an eye; and the fact that they would go big time was practically a foregone conclusion. The ties between the little mags of the '20s and the established literary structure were intimate and strong.

In the '50s, it was basically a mimeo revolution. Before *Howl* there were a number of little mags, isolated in places like L.A., Denver, New Orleans and New York City. Mags with runs of 200 and 300, mags run on mimeo—cheap paper and bare wire content with nothing to lose. The chances of any of these magazines ever receiving status recognition was so slight and so absurd that the idea never crossed anyone's mind. These were little mags born of 100% pure disenchantment. They were, in my opinion, the most genuine little mags. They were serving the function that a little mag should serve—offering *real* alternatives to the big New York publishing houses.¹⁷

The little magazines and small presses avoided the gatekeepers of commercial magazines and established academic and literary journals. While they did have editors who served as gatekeepers, they were much more open to unconventional art and artists. If the goal of a

¹⁶ This observation is based on who he maintained correspondence from the late 1950s and early 1960s.

¹⁷ John Bennett and Curt Johnson, "The Chicago Review Little Magazine Symposium," *Chicago Review* 24, no. 4 (1973): 36-37.

publisher is to sell as many books as possible, and the goal of a poet is artistic expression, then their two objectives will rarely overlap. Unlike the big publishing house, the small printers and magazine publishers were not motivated by money; they wanted to distribute their work to like-minded people rather than a mass market. James Boyer May, a little mag publisher and a friend of Beecher's, said publications like his were designed to "preserve a spirit of disinterested inquiry into the relationship of literary expression to an understanding of existence. ... The ideal practice of the little-mag editor should be an endeavor to forward *being* in the sense of meaningful exploration and possible differentiation."¹⁸

Soon after beginning his own printing venture, Beecher tapped into a national network of small printers and magazines, many of them printing the work of poets who were also the publishers. Some of them, like Antonius and Ferlinghetti, were tapped into the San Francisco poetry renaissance. In 1956, Beecher wrote to his old friend from the Farm Service Administration, John Fischer, who had since become the publisher of *Harper's Weekly*.

For the past two years everything has been going my way again—a wonderful wife after disastrous experiments, lots of writing (verse) and now the printing which has brought me into touch with many new people, new ideas, and a whole world (that of the little magazines & small presses) which I hardly knew the existence of before.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 41-42.

¹⁹ John Newman Beecher to John Fischer, October 19, 1956, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

He corresponded frequently with small press writers and publishers such as Jim Singer of Hennypenny Press, Henry Geiger, Lilith Lorraine, Phoenix, Phivos Delphis, Lori Petri, Felix Anselm Pollak, and Florence Keene.²⁰

Two people in this circle with whom he corresponded most frequently and who became his good friends were James Boyer May and Leslie Woolf Hedley. May ran a small press in the Los Angeles area and produced a small, but modestly influential literary magazine called *Trace*, and Hedley was a poet and publisher of the little poetry magazine, *Inferno*, in San Francisco. The Beat scene exploded in San Francisco after 1955, and Hedley wrote Beecher in February 1957 about a break that had occurred between the group of small mag publishers and the North Beach writers.

You may be aware of our break with Mr. [Lawrence] Lipton since he's now champion of the neofascist bohemianism of Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley—in other words, a complete sellout—so we didn't want him around to clutter up the china shop. This may sound very harsh coming about so suddenly, but I'm sure May would give you an interesting picture of the shifting tides. I see a great philosophical battle beginning to take shape—one that will make the battles of the 30's & 40's seem pigmy by comparison. Basically, I think, it's going to be a fight between those men who believe in conscience and those who have no conscience, between honor & lack of honor, between responsibility & irresponsibility.²¹

Hedley told Beecher that their informal group was beginning a cooperative and wanted him involved. He also lamented that the press equated all Bay Area poets with the Beats.

We're forming a subversive group, in a sense. This will be a kind of cooperative between the various responsible non-conformist magazines & presses. ... We must stick together or, as Ben Franklin once said, hang separately. As you no doubt have noticed all the publicity both here & in

²⁰ Letters present in the 1956 folder. Box 17, Folder 57, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

²¹ Leslie Woolf Hedley to John Newman Beecher, February 5, 1957, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

the east is being given the bohemian groups. The NY Times, for example, in speaking of the Bay Area, listed everyone but those that are creatively active—The Misc. Man, The Morning Star & Inferno Press. The only way we can counteract this dogmatic & irresponsible bias is through combined action, thus showing what readers are left that there's an important responsible segment still enduring, still alive, still maintaining certain basic humanitarian principles the others have laughed away.²²

These friends and colleagues helped Beecher define his goals for Morning Star Press and provided an economic, social, and ideological support system for his publishing. As he defined the mission to a friend in March 1957, he said, "I guess Morning Star is extremely personal, and liable to remain so. First, an outlet for a poet who loves the craft of printing and wants to present his things to the public as beautifully as he can. Secondly, a place for that poet to present the work of other poets whom he feels to be akin to himself and thus advance their common values."²³ It was important to Beecher and his friends, Hedley and May, to remain true to their political and artistic ideals and not sell out. They ridiculed the San Francisco Beat poets for selling out to a conventional audience. Hedley wrote,

American literature being sent overseas as "cultural exchange" was the work of Eliot, Hemingway, Auden, WC & Tenn. Williams, Salinger, Mailer, Capote, Merton, Ransom, Tate, and that bunch, STRICTLY BECAUSE THIS WORK PRESENTED NO THREAT TO THE STATUS QUO. One or two actually thought Mailer, Hemingway, Eliot, Salinger, Kerouac were revolutionary writers. This, I tried to prove, is nonsense, for these are the very pets of Luce, Inc., of the State Dept. fashion in "artiness." Jackie K, after all, thinks "way out art" ... cute... All the rich little Bennington girls think beatnikism "cute." What a problem of

²² Ibid.

²³ John Newman Beecher to Ellen Edelman, March 5, 1957, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

communication! ...Did you know that Rexroth is now employed by Hearst? I love the thought of these radicals becoming Hearstings!²⁴

In *The Poet as Rebel and Seer: Some New Poets in an Old Role*, Beecher reveals a moralistic tone in his language toward the “Beat Generation” behavior, but turns around and notes the dynamic impact the movement has had on poetry.

Doubtless you have heard a great deal about the “Beat Generation” poets in San Francisco with their beards, sandals, dark glasses and sticks of marijuana who strip off all their clothes in exhibitionistic frenzy while reading their works to jazz; a contemptible rabble of phonies, misfits, homosexuals, weirdies of every stripe who are caricatured in all the slick magazines on your dentist’s waiting room table; a slick and sinister bunch of clowns mouthing obscene drivel and in comprehensible gibberish which they write on the backs of envelopes or wads of toilet paper pilfered from the public jakes. This is the picture you get. There is a modicum of truth in it. But there is far more seriousness even in the overpublicized “beats” than they are given credit for. And they are only the most theatrical manifestation of a general upheaval in poetry.²⁵

He explained that the new poetry is not appearing in the academic journals or mainstream magazines, but in the increasing number of little magazines devoted to poetry. He then described the new breed of poet as “an alien outcast in his world, jeered at by the grey-flannel-suited battalions and their female auxiliaries, a figure for cheap comedians, and the Philistine mob to taunt with their stock epithet: ‘sick, sick, sick.’”²⁶ The little magazine movement was a good fit for Beecher and his work. It gave him an individualistic outlet for his poetry that he could share with like-minded people and an

²⁴ Leslie Woolf Hedley to John Newman Beecher, July 26, 1961, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

²⁵ John Newman Beecher, “The Poet as Rebel and Seer: Some New Poets in an Old Role, 1959,” Essay, p. 1, John Beecher Papers.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

active craft where he could produce his work in a form that reflected his poetic sensibilities.

Never likely to stay in one place for long, in the summer of 1958, they moved their entire operation to Jerome, Arizona, a small mountain town southwest of Sedona. Beecher described Jerome as a “picturesque ghost-town in the mountains with a 10,000 square mile view from our studio.”²⁷ They created their studio from a Methodist parsonage they rented, completely furnished, which provided plenty of room for the printing operation and living space.²⁸

Beecher had been taking care of Leonard, his 91-year-old father, since his mother died in 1955. When John and Barbara moved to Jerome, they took Leonard with them, but the mile-high elevation was too hard on his health. He moved into a nursing home near Phoenix, where he died a year later.²⁹ Beecher, who had always been particularly close to his father, wrote of his feelings after his father’s death.

Now that dad is gone it is with me as if the whole American past which was brought so close and made so vivid, had suddenly receded far far away, and from reality was turning into legend. Even he begins to seem legendary, that there could have been such a man, so great a soul, so pure and absolute a paternal love. Mother once said that his life had been given to one big love affair — with me. She said this half-humorously in her way and without any resentment but what she said was true. Please be assured that I was aware of this, however poor a return I made for it. He

²⁷ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 19.

²⁸ John Newman Beecher to Jim Singer, August 25, 1958, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

²⁹ Retired T. C. I. Executive: Leonard T. Beecher Dies in Phoenix, Arizona.

was always satisfied, no matter how small a thing I did for him. I wish I had done a hundred times as much, but that is nearly always the way.³⁰

Leonard had been the single constant in John Beecher's life. He had always supported him with a love, encouragement, and unselfish financial support. He had been the safety net that allowed his only son to roam.

³⁰ John Newman Beecher to Mable Edens, October 11, 1959, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Return to University Teaching and a Long Walk

In August 1959, just before Leonard died, Beecher received a telegram from the president of Arizona State University in Tempe offering him a position as English lecturer for the upcoming academic year. He accepted the post and entered a classroom as the instructor of record for the first time since 1950. He and Barbara moved the ninety miles from Jerome to a place near the university. John began his new job and they continued their printing operation, changing the name from Morning Star Press to Rampart Press. In a letter to his old friend Carey McWilliams, who had become editor of *The Nation* in 1955, he wrote, "I am again teaching, English and Humanities at, of all places, Arizona State University. . . . I say what I please in class, write what I please, and publish what I please on our private press which in its small way is flourishing."³¹ During this period, the Beechers' finely printed books won several book awards in the Huntington Library's Western Book competition, which brought some moderate success at getting their work into the public eye. In addition, *In Egypt Land*, the poem that Beecher wrote in 1940 about the sharecroppers revolt in Alabama, was finally published. Two printings sold out quickly to libraries and collectors, but the work did not make a significant splash in the poetry world.³²

Beecher was doing two things that he loved —teaching and writing — when the San Francisco to Moscow Peace Walk proceeded through Phoenix in January 1961. The walk

³¹ John Newman Beecher to Carey McWilliams, July 26, 1960, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

³² John Newman Beecher to Leonard Thurlow Beecher, August, 1959, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX; J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 19.

was part of an undertaking of the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA), a small pacifist group committed to non-violent action against nuclear weapons. Among the group's leaders were Lawrence Scott, Bayard Rustin, A. J. Muste, George Willoughby, Neil Haworth, and Brad Lyttle.³³ Muste, a minister, lifelong pacifist, and activist for peace, chaired the committee. Muste, described by theologian Reinhold Neibuhr as a perfect innocent, was committed to action and the CNVA was committed to acting.³⁴ Founded in 1957, the CNVA launched radical, non-violent acts such as entering a Nevada nuclear test site in 1958 and entering an Omaha nuclear missile base in 1958. They launched the San Francisco to Moscow Peace Walk with the idea of taking their protest to the Russians and to talk not only the government, but also the people. Marchers could only be accepted if they committed to non-violent civil disobedience, and not cooperate with any Communist fronts. The walkers departed from San Francisco on December 1, 1960.³⁵

Beecher and his wife were on the welcoming committee that a local church set up to house and aid the walkers while they were in Phoenix in early January. "Great hostility

³³ Swarthmore Library, "The Quaker Testimony for Peace: Archival Resources at Swarthmore College," Swarthmore College http://www.swarthmore.edu/Library/peace/manuscriptcollections/Peace%20in%20Friends/Peace_Testimony_Archives.html (accessed March 30 2011).

³⁴ "Rev. A. J. Muste, Pacifist, 82, Dies," *New York Times*, February 12, 1967.

³⁵ There were strategy conflicts within the CNVA committee. D'Emilio found that Rustin was completely opposed to the walk because he believed it would be impossible to carry a cohesive message of peace and non-violence through Eastern Europe, but the younger activists won the debate with passion and idealism and preceded with the action. John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet, the Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 304-307; Günter Wernicke and Lawrence S. Wittner, "Lifting the Iron Curtain: The Peace March to Moscow of 1960-1961," *The International History Review* 21, no. 4 (1999): 900-902.

and many threats were encountered by the marchers,” Beecher recalled. “My wife and I decided to show our solidarity with them by accompanying them a few miles along the road to Tucson.”³⁶ When the walkers were close to Arizona State, where Beecher taught, a mob of male students who claimed to represent “Christians United Against Communism” threatened them. The walkers, committed to non-violence, persuaded the men to step aside and allow the walkers to pass.³⁷ Their activism struck a chord in Beecher. “I resigned my teaching job at the midyear break and joined the march together with Barbara.”³⁸ In his letter of resignation to the English Department chair at Arizona State on January 13, 1961, Beecher explained their motivation:

We are answering no appeal save that of our own hearts and minds. We hope our presence among the walkers will demonstrate the significance of this action for peace to the more mature and established as well as to the adventurous youth. We have come to believe that the enormous threat of thermonuclear war, which might easily terminate all life on earth, and not merely destroy the peoples of the sparring nations, takes precedence over all our other concerns. Feeling as we now do, it would be psychologically impossible to continue in the usual academic routines or to devote ourselves to poetry, art and the production of beautiful books. We must acknowledge ourselves compelled by a force stronger than ourselves to live our beliefs, demonstrate by concrete, self-sacrificing action our abhorrence of war and violence, our faith in the power of truth and love.

It is with the deepest regret that I take leave of my students at the university, for whom I have developed great respect for their intellectual capacities as well as genuine affection for their human qualities. I believe, however, that I can teach them more by taking this present step than I could teach them in the classroom in a dozen semesters. Many may not understand or may misinterpret my action. ...I am still the same person, only I hope more completely a person.

³⁶ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 19.

³⁷ G. Wernicke and L. S. Wittner: 903.

³⁸ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 19.

I trust that my decision to leave so suddenly will not embarrass the department too greatly. I do not like to break off our relationship so abruptly but the walkers are on the road and will not wait for us. Neither will time.³⁹

By early April, the walkers had reached Chicago, and it was there that Beecher parted ways with the group because of philosophical differences. The points of disagreement are not clear, but Beecher explained some of his thoughts on leaving the group in letters to Don West and Dorothy Norman. To West, he described the march as "... a mixed up affair, wonderful in many ways but blighted also by left-infantilism, nihilistic beatism, irresponsible anarchism."⁴⁰ To Dorothy Norman, he elaborated on the reasons for his departure and what he had learned about himself in the process.

While believing strongly in the purpose of the Walk and its avowed philosophy, I felt increasingly that the enterprise was full of rigidity, self-righteousness & callow exhibitionism. As I grow older, I am less and less able to merge my personality with any cause whatsoever, however noble and necessary it may be. Thomas Merton writes in "Wisdom of the Desert" that this is a time for solitaries and I guess I belong in this category. (Incidentally, we spent a day with Merton at Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky this spring. We liked him very much).⁴¹

The walk for peace continued to New York and then on to Moscow. After their arrival October 3, 1961, they marched through Red Square, though they were prohibited from delivering speeches. In a quote that echoes a sentiment that could have come from John Beecher, Bradford Lyttle, one of the groups leaders, was quoted in the *New York*

³⁹ John Newman Beecher to Collice Portnoff, January 13, 1961, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁴⁰ J. N. Beecher to D. L. West, February 9, 1962, John Beecher Collection.

⁴¹ John Newman Beecher to Dorothy Norman, August 2, 1961, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Times as saying, “We wanted to speak to the people, not just to reporters.”⁴² After leaving the walkers in Chicago, John and Barbara traveled around the country for several months and returned to Phoenix in mid-June and continued writing, painting, and printing in the desert.

The next three years were busy as Beecher achieved some success with his poetry and managed to land his first poet-in-residence position. During the summer of 1962, Beecher printed and published his most ambitious book to date, *Report to the Stockholders*. The collection of poems written over a generation sold quite well for poetry, according to Beecher. He began to give more poetry readings at colleges and universities. Louis Untermeyer, poetry consultant for the Library of Congress, arranged for the library to make recordings of Beecher reading the book. Beecher also printed broadsides of individual poems to sell at his poetry readings.⁴³ John and Barbara moved back to the San Francisco Bay area in 1963. Beecher became the poet-in-residence at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school in a small community in the South Bay near San Jose. He was hired without a contract to teach freshman composition and creative writing courses, a three-quarter-time position.⁴⁴ They decided to store their press until they had more time, but their printing days were over.⁴⁵

⁴² “Peace Marchers Reach Red Square but Soviet Prohibit Speeches,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1961.

⁴³ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 20.

⁴⁴ “Letter to the Editor, Beecher Resignation Story Rebutted,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, March 31, 1965.

⁴⁵ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*.

Reporting the Civil Rights Movement

By the summer of 1964, the civil rights movement was boiling over and the *San Francisco Chronicle* hired Beecher as a correspondent to cover the South.⁴⁶ He also wrote articles for *The New Republic* and *The Nation* and was an associate editor for *Ramparts* magazine. He took a leave of absence from Santa Clara University and made his home base in New Orleans for six months. While there, he traveled widely throughout the South reporting on the front lines of the civil rights movement, which he described as a “revolution.”

Ramparts, started as a Catholic lay publication with a literary bent in 1962. Beecher met Edward M. Keating, a wealthy attorney and *Ramparts* publisher, through contacts at Santa Clara University. Keating converted to Catholicism after the death of one of his children and he was looking for ways to deepen his faith; publishing *Ramparts* was part of that effort. In May of 1962, he spelled out his mission in the first edition of the magazine: “*Ramparts* seeks out the Christian intellectual and offers him an uninhibited opportunity to explore all the areas of the mind.” Before he founded the magazine, Keating was offered the chance to teach an English composition class and later a Shakespeare class at Santa Clara, and he jumped at both chances. However, he resigned in protest when he was pressured to change a failing grade for a star athlete. He was

⁴⁶ The *San Francisco Chronicle* had the second largest circulation in the West, nearly 300,000, during the 1960s; the *Los Angeles Times* had the largest circulation. Carl Nolte, “134 Years of the Chronicle,” *San Francisco Chronicle* <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1999/06/16/noltehistory.DTL> (accessed March 30 2011).

disillusioned, but he thought the Jesuits would share his principle. Instead, they allowed the resignation to go forward.

Keating was a man that John Beecher could relate to, and *Ramparts* reflected that common interest in justice.⁴⁷ The magazine evolved dramatically between 1962 and 1966, shifting from a religiously based quarterly to a serious journalistic endeavor with investigative stories, liberal social commentary and a circulation that reached 299,000 at its peak. *Ramparts* folded in 1975, but many of the staff and contributors carried on the muckraking tradition. Among them were Jann Wenner and Ralph J. Gleason, who left to found *Rolling Stone*; Adam Hochschild, one of the founders of *Mother Jones*; Seymour Hersh, whose Vietnam reporting earned him a Pulitzer Prize; Christopher Hitchens, columnist and literary critic; and Robert Scheer, longtime syndicated political columnist.⁴⁸ Beecher, like the other liberal reporters, cared about social justice, peace, and civil rights. Those concerns took him to the South, where he had grown up and remained connected throughout his life.

In early 1963, Virginia Durr contacted Beecher as a favor for Southern novelist Walker Percy. Durr, the sister-in-law of Hugo Black, was a longtime Southern liberal who had grown up with Beecher; her father had also worked for TCI in Birmingham. Percy was writing a novel about contemporary South and wanted more information about Birmingham. Durr thought Beecher might be able to help. She pointed out that both Percy's father and grandfather who were corporate lawyers for TCI.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey M. Burns, "No Longer Emerging: "Ramparts" Magazine and the Catholic Laity, 1962-1968," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 9, no. 3 (1990): 324-325.

⁴⁸ Peter Richardson, *A Bomb in Every Issue, How the Short, Unruly Life of Ramparts Magazine Changed America* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 1.

As you may remember both his father his grandfather, Leroy Percy and Walker Percy, committed suicide and did it in exactly the same way, went up into the attic on a hot August afternoon, carefully took off all of their clothes except their shorts, put a shot gun to their heads and killed themselves by blowing their heads off. A most horrible death and a most horrible story, but true. Walker has been a Doctor and I understand a psychiatrist and is now a novelist and above all he seems to be a searcher for the truth. There are many stories of the Percys who were the great Percys from the Mississippi Delta and one of them wrote a typical "Old South" book called *Lanterns on the Levee*, full of nostalgia and all about how the dear good kind Negroes loved the dear, good, kind white folks and only the horrible old red necks came between and ruined this idyllic love and caused trouble.⁴⁹

Percy and Beecher struck up a correspondence and Beecher stayed with Percy on one of his Southern trips. When Beecher was planning his trip, he wrote to Percy, "My occasion is to warn you that we are about to invade Dixie again. I have been commissioned as a roving correspondent by the *San Francisco Chronicle* to report on the crisis in the South, response to passage of the Civil Rights Act, etc. and we are leaving here for New Orleans Monday."⁵⁰ Percy lived in Covington, Louisiana, near New Orleans.

In the first of two periods in which they would live in New Orleans, John and Barbara rented an apartment in the French Quarter and maintained a base for the next six months. James Helton, who wrote a dissertation about Beecher's poetry, explains the impact Beecher had in the 1960s as a journalist working in the South.

Beecher was, first and foremost, a practical frontline fighter who employed his art to complement his political activity. His white flowing hair, his white neatly-trimmed beard, and his tanned, weather beaten face facilitated easy recognition, as did his 6'2" stature. His reverberating, resonant voice demanded attention. During marches, at rallies, and giving

⁴⁹ Virginia Durr to John Newman Beecher, January 16, 1963, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁵⁰ John Newman Beecher to Walker Percy, February 6, 1965, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

testimony, he was easily recognized and remembered, along with his wife, Barbara, who was physically diminutive in comparison but whose convictions could be just as intensely stated. Together they were victims of a high speed rural car chase, of a fire that destroyed their car as it sat parked in front of a fire hall in Magnolia, Louisiana, of numerous anonymous death threats, and of investigations by the FBI. As their convictions guided them through times of crisis, their companionship sustained them through times of despair.⁵¹

He also visited friends and researched the Black Belt. In September, Virginia Durr wrote civil rights advocate Clark Foreman about Beecher.

Barbara and John Beecher are coming up next week and live in our house up at the Pea Level for a month or so. He is now in NO [New Orleans] doing work for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and wants to do some things on the Black Belt. He and I grew up together in Birmingham, and I like him and think she is very nice, although I think he is best taken in small doses as he stays so wrought up all the time and is so serious but he can express some sense of humor some time, but in any case I am delighted to have them.⁵²

During that period in the South, Beecher wrote several feature articles for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, including “The Two Faces of New Orleans,” “Walking into Trouble: Dixie Cops,” and “The McComb Arrests: Dixie Jailers Bar.”⁵³

After Beecher returned to Santa Clara University in January 1965, it took just a little over a month for him to resign and became embroiled in a public dispute with Father John H. Gray, chair of the English Department. The previous spring, Beecher made a

⁵¹ James Helton, ““Do What the Spirit Say Do”: John Beecher and His Poetry,” (Dissertation, University of North Dakota, 1985), 244.

⁵² Virginia Foster Durr and Patricia Sullivan, *The Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 315.

⁵³ J. N. Beecher, *Resume of My Career as a Writer*, 20.

case to Gray to raise his salary from \$4,800 to \$6,000.⁵⁴ The university did not grant the request at that point. In a letter to Walker Percy on February 6, praising Santa Clara. He wrote:

I have survived [at Santa Clara] so far however and have a real good deal for next year and following ones. I am to teach from January through June (two terms and Writer's Institute) and be off for six months each year (July through Dec.) to write, etc. for a better salary than I got for teaching a whole year during 1963-64! All my life I have dreamed of such an arrangement. It's probably too good to last, but while it does I intend to make the most of it.⁵⁵

A conflict evidently arose soon after he wrote that letter, and he submitted his resignation on February 23 when he “encountered difficulties with the administration.”⁵⁶ The *National Catholic Reporter* reported on the resignation in an article sympathetic to Beecher and quoted Gray as saying, “Mr. Beecher is an exhibitionist. He will never do anything the way others do it. In his English classes he feels what the students write about is more important than how they write.” Thomas Merton praised Beecher’s social poetry as “tremendously moving, very convincing and persuasive,” but Gray derided it as “90 percent worthless.”⁵⁷ Never one to sit out a verbal fight, Beecher fired back publicly and accused Gray of attacking him in the Catholic newspaper. Gray responded, again in the *National Catholic Reporter*, and explained his perspective on what happened.

⁵⁴ John Newman Beecher to Rev. John H. Gray, March 9, 1964, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

⁵⁵ J. N. Beecher to W. Percy, February 6, 1965, John Beecher Collection.

⁵⁶ John Newman Beecher, “Written Statement from JB and His Difficulties at Santa Clara University, 1965,” John Beecher Collection.

⁵⁷ A. V. Krebs, “Harried Beecher Stowed by Santa Clara University,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, March 24, 1965.

John Beecher was hired as a part-time lecturer by letter of appointment and without contract in Sept. 1963. He was hired to teach freshman composition and creative writing courses.

Mr. Beecher did not want to teach freshman English because he considered his time too precious to spend on that subject.

The university did not force Mr. Beecher to resign. In fact, his resignation came as a surprise to me personally. Mr. Beecher had, however, threatened to resign several times previously, usually in the middle of a term when he knew I could not afford to accept his resignation. I would have been only too willing to divide his large class in American Literature had he requested it or indicated he could not handle it. Actually, he indicated the contrary, informing me that his teaching load in the winter term was insufficient.

Two of the students came to my office late one night to speak to me of the possibility of Mr. Beecher's re-instatement. I explained to them that this was impossible because of the tone of Mr. Beecher's letter of resignation and because I had found him too difficult to deal with in general. When requested to specify why, I explained in confidence, and with the understanding that this was to go no further, how on several occasions Mr. Beecher had caused me embarrassment; one of these incidents concerned another member of the faculty.

Certainly, it is true that I do not consider Mr. Beecher an important poet, although when your reporter asked my opinion I requested specifically that he not quote me. I saw no reason to hurt Mr. Beecher's feelings, and I deeply regret being quoted out of context and especially when I am speaking under the assumption that I am not going to be quoted.⁵⁸

As Beecher aged, he became more set in his ways and even more difficult to work with.

He understood this about himself. Several years earlier, in a letter to Alexander

Meiklejohn, Beecher observed, "I find that that I am a loner. Still can't go along 100%

with any group or 'line.'"⁵⁹ This clash with Gray ended Beecher's relationship with Santa

⁵⁸ Letter to the Editor, Beecher Resignation Story Rebutted.

⁵⁹ John Newman Beecher to Alexander Meiklejohn, August 4, 1961, John Beecher Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Clara on a sour note, and he and Barbara headed back to New Orleans, where they lived from the spring of 1965 until the fall of 1966.

Back in New Orleans, Beecher continued reporting on the civil rights movement and began writing his autobiography. He traveled to Alabama for the Selma to Montgomery marches in the spring of 1965 and visited Virginia Durr. The third—the only one that was not interrupted by violence—ended in Montgomery on March 25. That evening Beecher was present at a gathering at Durr's house, which she described in her autobiography.

After the Selma march was over, after everyone had gone, we got the aftermath. Telephone calls started. It seems that John Beecher was regarded as the biggest hippy who had come. He arrived in a flowing cape with a beret and he rented a red Mustang, so he was rather outstanding.

The day the march ended, we were sitting in our living room. With us were Lou Pollak, C. Vann Woodward, Carl Braden, who had been a labor agitator for I don't know how many years, an Episcopal preacher whom Braden had brought with him, and the members of the Brotherhood, who took up with us. We never did get all their names straight. Some of them were German and they were very religious and prayed a great deal. And we had a young couple--the boy had just gotten out of jail on a hunger strike and he was in very bad shape. They sort of clung together. He couldn't even drink milk, kept throwing it up because he'd been on this hunger strike so long. All these people were at our house the night that Mrs. Viola Liuzzo was killed. John Beecher got a call from someone on the San Francisco Chronicle who told him a white woman had been killed over near Lowndesboro. John got in his little red Mustang with a young English boy who was staying with us named Nicholas and drove lickety-split. Nicholas said they never went below ninety miles an hour. They got to Highway 80 in Lowndesboro, where she'd been killed. She had been ferrying back some of the marchers, and she was coming to get another load when she was killed. A carload of people pulled up beside the car she was driving and fired into the car and shot her.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Virginia Foster Durr and Hollinger F. Barnard, *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 326.

Liuzzo had participated in civil rights protests at Wayne State University in Detroit, where she was a part-time student, and had come to Alabama to participate in the march. On the evening of March 25, she left Montgomery and was nearing Selma when she was killed; Beecher quickly left Durr's home in Montgomery to cover the story.

Mary Stanton's book, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo*, came out in 2000. Stanton quotes from Durr's autobiography, but mistakenly writes that "John Brandon" got a call from the *San Francisco Chronicle* with the information that Liuzzo had been killed.⁶¹ Apparently, thirty-five years later, neither Stanton nor her editors at the University of Georgia Press knew that a radical poet named John Beecher, who grew up in Birmingham, covered the march for the *Chronicle* and was singled out by Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace as one of the "left-wingers" associated with the march.

On March 26, 1965, the day after the march ended, Wallace appeared on the "Today" show on NBC and made accusations against Beecher, associate editor of what Wallace called the "pro-Communist" *Ramparts* magazine. The Associated Press reported Wallace's remarks, and that story was the basis of accounts in newspapers across the nation on March 27.⁶² Among those newspapers were Beecher's former employer, the *Birmingham Post-Herald*, as well as the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for whom he was reporting on the scene in Alabama.

Governor George Wallace renewed today his earlier charge that some of the civil rights marchers are members of Communist and Communist-front organizations. He challenged all three television networks to have FBI

⁶¹ Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 22.

⁶² John Beecher Vs. George C. Wallace, (Superior Court of the State of California in and for the County of Santa Clara 1965).

Director J. Edgar Hoover appear and give the background on some of the leaders of the march. Wallace named among these leaders the Rev. C.T. Vivian, John Lewis, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Braden and John Beecher.⁶³

Beecher immediately contacted an attorney to serve notice to Wallace, as well as the Associated Press and the newspapers that printed the story, to correct or retract the allegations that pertained to him. However, he was one of many journalists who were regularly slurred by citizens of the communities they covered as well as by the FBI and federal and state politicians. There would never be enough space in the media to correct even a few of the charges, and most publishers had no inclination to make it right.

Scholars agree that the national press was a key factor in the success of the civil rights movement.⁶⁴ From their living rooms, Americans saw television images from Birmingham that showed fire hoses aiming powerful jets of water at blacks, including children, and knocking them down while white policemen stood nearby holding back dogs ready to attack. Coverage of these events in May 1963 brought the plight of blacks in segregated areas into the nation's consciousness. Newspapers from both inside and outside the South reported on key events, and by 1964, the major newspapers had

⁶³ John E. Thorne to Birmingham News, April 6, 1965, Personal Collection of Barbara Beecher, Burnsville, NC.

⁶⁴ The most complete study of the press during the civil rights movement is *The Race Beat* by Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. There are several dissertations that look at the press during the period, but none with the scope and thoroughness of the *The Race Beat*. Catherine Lee Armstrong, "Coverage of the Civil Rights Movement by a Southern Medium-Sized Metropolitan Daily from 1954 to 1959," (MA Thesis, Troy State University, 2009); David R. Davies, "An Industry in Transition: Major Trends in American Daily Newspapers, 1945-1965," (Dissertation, University of Alabama, 1997); David R. Davies, *The Press and Race : Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

established Southern bureaus to cover the region. Beecher's background had similarities to that of many journalists who covered the American South during the 1960s. He had a history and many connections in the region. In addition, he also had previous journalism experience working at the *Birmingham Age-Herald* and the *New York Post*.

By the time Beecher arrived in New Orleans the first time in the summer of 1964, he had become part of the expanding national newspaper coverage of the movement in the South. Until that point, the *New York Times*, was the only non-Southern newspaper that had provided ongoing coverage of the civil rights movement from the *Brown* decision forward. That was about to change as the *Los Angeles Times* established a Southern bureau and hired Jack Nelson away from the *Atlanta Constitution*.⁶⁵ Since the *San Francisco Chronicle* was the second largest newspaper in the West, it made sense that the editors of the *Chronicle* wanted to expand their coverage of the movement and hired Beecher as their roving Southern reporter. By this time, Beecher had grown into the battle-tested, crotchety, sage elder that many in the civil rights movement came to know, and for the next year his reporting for the *Chronicle* reflected his knowledge of the South—the land, the cities, the people—and his lifelong conviction that he must call attention to racial injustice.

⁶⁵ G. Roberts and H. Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, 379.

The Final Years

When Beecher completed his work for the *Chronicle*, he continued to travel in the South and write. In 1966, he accepted an invitation from Miles College, a historically black school just outside Birmingham, to be its poet in residence for the 1966-67 academic year. That was the first of various teaching posts he held over the next fourteen years —Massachusetts, New Jersey, Florida and more. All the while, he continued to write, give poetry readings and fight on for reinstatement to San Francisco State. During that time, he also had some modest success getting his poetry published. In the fall of 1977, San Francisco State rehired him to teach courses in sociology and literature; however, he was not reinstated with accrued benefits, the outcome for which he had fought. He taught at San Francisco State from 1977 until a few weeks before his death in May 1980, thirty years after his refusal to sign the California loyalty oath had forced him out.

During his year at Miles, Red Mountain Press published his most successful volume of poetry, *To Live and Die in Dixie*. Beecher also continued writing non-fiction about civil rights, publishing in both *The Nation* and *New Republic*. From 1967 until 1971, he was poet in residence and a professor of English at North Shore Community College in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Beecher and his wife returned to the South when he was awarded a visiting scholar grant at Duke University from 1973-75. While in North Carolina, he continued work on a planned three-volume autobiography. In May 1974, McMillan published Beecher's *Collected Poems: 1924-1974*, and poet and novelist Fred Chappell reviewed it favorably in the *Richmond Mercury*. Beecher wrote a long letter to

Chappell, then a professor at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, thanking him and also sharing stories and perspectives on the writing and publishing life. Beecher said it was the microfilm project that pushed McMillan to publish *Collected Poems*, even though he was already under contract to the company for his autobiography.

I offered them *To Live & Die in Dixie*, but they only yawned. (Eight thousand copies my wife and I have disposed of. What could they have done? If they had had a mind to, that is.) But they KNOW poetry won't sell and make no effort at all. ... The sales force, with the possible exception of the Raleigh-based man who is a good Babbist, are without exception yahoos and enemies of poetry in particular and good literature in general. But as I was saying, McMillan decided they wanted to do my collected poems because of the fact that the New York Times had chosen me as the first author to be given the Full Treatment. And that brings us down to date.

So I am becoming respectable at a dizzy pace. Anthologies are publishing things of mine. ... Even English professors, the last to learn what is happening in literature, are becoming aware of my existence. (I have been one myself off and on since 1927 when I went to Dartmouth as an instructor in English.) They are even catching on to the fact that I write the way I do because I choose to and have been sick of their New Critical fallacies ever since Allen Tate, Eliot, et al, enunciated them fifty years ago.

In two letters to Chappell, the one of November 28 and another February 18, 1975, John Beecher seemed almost to forget the fight of his life against the state of California. In the former, only a single sentence within three single-spaced, typed pages of entertaining anecdotes with smart literary references recalled that period. "For ten years I was out of poetry entirely and only got back into it as a result of getting kicked out of San Francisco State College in 1950 for refusing to sign the California loyalty oath," he wrote. Three months later, he sent another letter to Chappell and never mentioned it. All the while, however, Beecher's lawyers and Beecher himself were flooding the government of

California and the current and former administrators of San Francisco State with demands for reinstatement, back pay, and other benefits.⁶⁶

On December 21, 1967, the California Supreme Court had ruled that the Levering oath was unconstitutional. Beecher quickly applied for reinstatement in a December 27 letter to Dr. John Summerskill, president of San Francisco State, an effort he repeated several times a year to various administrators over the next ten years.⁶⁷ In addition to Beecher's application for employment at San Francisco State, he also began a process for reinstatement and redress that he would not live to see concluded. Just a month after the ruling in *Vogel v. County of Los Angeles*, Norman L. Epstein notified assistant chancellor Mansel Keene that Beecher's claim was without merit. Epstein, who was chief counsel for the trustees of the California State Colleges, said, "It would appear that any causes and that whatever causes of action Mr. Beecher might allege [in a lawsuit], the Statute of Limitations would have long since expired."⁶⁸ Beecher and some of his colleagues who had been dismissed in 1950 inquired about a possible class action suit, but the private attorneys they contacted agreed with Epstein that their claim was not likely to have any merit. One colleague, Dr. Eason Monroe, who had been chairman of the Division of Language Arts in 1950, approached the ACLU; his case was carried forward, although as an individual rather than a class action claim. The California Supreme Court ruled in his

⁶⁶John Newman Beecher to Fred Chappell, November 28, 1974, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

⁶⁷ John Newman Beecher to Dr. John Summerskill, December 27, 1967, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

⁶⁸ Norman Epstein Office of Chief Counsel to Mancil Keene, January 16, 1968, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

favor in 1972 in *Monroe v. Trustees*, which would allow him to be reinstated. Although Monroe and his attorneys wanted their favorable ruling to pave the way for further action by Beecher, Frank Rowe, and Phiz Mezey, that did not happen.⁶⁹ “The effect of my case on your various cases is, I think, very limited,” Monroe wrote to Beecher on January 10, 1972.⁷⁰ A month later, Monroe wrote again. He said he had an appointment February 24 with Don Garrity, academic vice president at San Francisco State.

I will be able to tell from my conference with Garrity how much hanky-panky is likely to be involved in the process of reinstatement. I intend to fight the matter through all the way to the point of getting an agreement for everything the court decision has promised me. I will do the same for you, Frank, and Phiz. . . . When I have talked with Garrity I will be better informed to advise regarding what calls of action may lie open to you.⁷¹

Beecher followed with another pitch for reinstatement to SFSC, and once more, he was rebuffed. On March 27, Garrity wrote to Beecher, “The Monroe case has no applicability under the facts you presented.”⁷² The university repeated the refrain and Beecher challenged it on an almost monthly basis for two more years.

In August 1976, the California Legislature passed two measures that had an impact on Beecher’s case, and as was his practice, Beecher seized upon them. This time, he would reach part of the goal he had held since 1950. One of those provided for the release of records for employees of the state universities, and the other called for reinstatement—

⁶⁹ *Monroe v. Trustees of the California State Colleges* (1971) 6 Cal. 3d 399.

⁷⁰ Eason Monroe to John Newman Beecher, January 10, 1972, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

⁷¹ Eason Monroe to John Newman Beecher, February 24, 1972, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

⁷² Don Garrity to John Newman Beecher, March 27, 1972, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

when requested—of former employees who had been discharged after refusing to sign the Levering oath. On September 14, Beecher appealed to San Francisco State's president, Paul Romberg, for reinstatement under those terms. In a number of letters over the following months, Beecher's papers show that Romberg called on several department heads to scramble and find a job for Beecher. By mid-March of 1977, a schedule of classes was patched together, four courses in four departments. On April 19, Lawrence Ianni, dean of faculty affairs, wrote to Beecher and enclosed personnel documents necessary to add Beecher to the payroll at San Francisco State when the fall term began.

I think they are largely self-explanatory, but I would like to point out a couple of things to save time and possibly trepidation. ... You will notice that there is a loyalty oath. As versions of that unlovely animal go, this one is generally conceded to be innocuous. You may be interested to know that one of your fellow objectors to the Levering Oath, Professor Mezey, has signed this one on previous occasions during the 1960s when she was employed by the university. ... I hope that you do not see the oath as an impediment to your being able to join us.⁷³

In late summer, John and Barbara embarked on another cross-country trip, traveling from their home in Burnsville, North Carolina, to San Francisco where John would return to the classroom at San Francisco State for the 1977-78 academic year. He had been "rehired" to teach, but he had not be "reinstated," a key difference since the latter that might have made him eligible for back pay and retirement benefits accrued from 1950-77. Beecher soon reached out to Mel Levine, who had taken office as a California Assemblyman in 1977 and who would be instrumental in helping move the case forward in the coming years.

⁷³ Lawrence Ianni to John Newman Beecher, April 19, 1977, Barbara Beecher Personal Collection, Burnsville, NC.

“This is a most intricate story which I shall try to reduce to its essentials,” Beecher wrote to Levine in January 1978. Once more Beecher told the story, from day he refused to sign the oath in 1950 to the day he was writing the letter.

During the entire period I had sought reinstatement from the administrators of the CUSC through application, entreaty, and even legal action without a particle of success although at the same time I was teaching and lecturing at colleges and universities all over the United States, publishing a number of books including my *Collected Poems* (Macmillan, New York 1974). ... Finally under the legislative mandate of ACR-171 which was passed in 1976 and which directed the re-employment of all non-signers of the Levering oath desiring it, I received an appointment for one year only as a Lecturer in Creative Writing, English, Humanities and Sociology at San Francisco State University.⁷⁴

Beecher continued to teach at San Francisco State, having convinced administrators to allow him to renew his contract year by year as long as he chose to do so. In the spring of 1980, with his health deteriorating from chronic lung disease, he decided to retire at teaching at the end of the term. In a letter to Graham Wilson, chair of the English Department, on April 9, he wrote, “Personal plans cloudy as usual. I may snare a chunk of Foundation money and escape being chained to the rock after ‘retirement’ at close of current academic year. Legislature has just done it again. ... Déjà vu, affreusement. Time will not relent.”

Beecher died May 11, 1980. In his obituary the following day, the *San Francisco Chronicle* quoted him from an interview: “I’ve always been kind of a frontline soldier who stood for what I thought was freedom.” A memorial service was held May 19 at the Newman Center, named for Cardinal John Henry Newman, whose name Beecher once carried.

⁷⁴ J. N. Beecher to M. L. State Representative, January 11, 1978.

Conformity Means Death

For Bertrand Russell

Our time's true saint he is, whose fealty
transcends the bounds of nation, tribe and clan,
embracing all who inhabit earth and their
inheritors. The voice we hear is more
than his. Through him the unborn of our loins
plead that we interpose our bodies now
between them and the Juggernaut we've built.
"Conformity means death!" No rhetoric
but starkest truth he speaks. Throw road blocks up
to Armageddon with your flesh. Besiege
the supine parliaments which veto peace
and cast their purchased votes for war. Let them
not sleep for your outcry. Fast unto death
if need be. Nail your picket signs upon
the doors of churches that usurp the cross
and grossly mock the One they feign to serve.
(He is not mocked but bides His awful time.)
Then rise! "Protest alone gives hope of life!"⁷⁵

⁷⁵ J. Beecher, *Collected Poems, 1924-1974*, 236.

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APPENDIX 1: 10 THOUGHTS AND TIPS FOR PUBLIC HISTORY WEBSITES

The Internet has revolutionized the way we communicate and distribute information, particularly for public historians who have a goal of engaging an audience that reaches beyond the academy. History has proliferated on the web, breaking out of the confines of traditional media—brochures, posters, books in print and scratchy audiotapes and films. Today websites provide immediate access to a wealth of visual, audio, and textual information for historic sites, museums, archives, and events, and to academic perspectives on historical topics and issues as well. For professional public historians, the web is an avenue of communication we in the profession need to learn to use effectively. Whether it is used in a preservation office, a house museum, a National Park Service site, or a classroom, the web can be used to educate, build communities, create identity, share information, and raise funds. Unfortunately, outside of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (CHNM), few public history education programs consistently incorporate courses that teach students the best ways to use the web for public history. The goal of this essay is to share some of the tips and best practices that I have learned over the past decade as I have worked as a designer and a public historian.

The literature on this topic is rather lean. The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason has done a tremendous job of documenting the process of creating history websites and developing free digital tools such as Zotero and Omeka.¹

¹ Zotero, a Firefox plugin, is a note and citation manager created and distributed by CHNM. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/zotero/>; and Omeka is an open source platform for

Historian and digital innovator Roy Rosenzweig led the center since the early 1990s until his death in 2007. He and Dan Cohen, the current director of CHNM, wrote the most comprehensive guide available, *Digital History: A Guide to Preserving and Presenting the Past on the Web*, and it is a great place to start for those who want to delve deep into web projects and are starting from scratch.² However, since the book came out in 2005, some of the information is dated because contemporary technology changes rapidly. For instance, when Rosenzweig and Cohen wrote the book, the open source movement—which has since produced Wordpress and Drupal—had not yet gained momentum. The CHNM also offers current essays, web tools, and tutorials for learning the tools of the web. There are huge numbers of websites, design, and tech books that address web design and development strategies, but few that address history and the web specifically.³

I came to the study of history after spending twenty years as a design professional and producing material in print and on the web. Through the years, I have come to believe that communication that is well planned and designed is a powerful tool for creating community around a wide range of endeavors. Design organizes information, gives emotional cues through imagery, and creates order out of chaos. As designer and teacher Malcolm Grear says in his book, *Inside/Out: From the Basics to the Practice of Design*,

museums and cultural institutions to publish their collections on the web that is created and distributed by CHNM. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/omeka/>.

² Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

³ Lynda.com is an excellent bargain for learning digital tools. For \$25 a month, you can watch an unlimited number of instructional videos on every imaginable software tool. The tech publisher, O'Reilly, has an online library service called Safari available for a reasonable subscription price. <http://safaribooksonline.com/Corporate/Index/>

As with music, design must set a mood, generate tension, surprise, or calm; it can startle or seduce. But all of these emotional states, and many others, are for the designer a kind of information. Music in a movie tells you what to think or feel about what's going on. In a sense, design does the same thing—it tells you how to respond to the rest of the message embodied in the graphics. And, again, like music, or like smell, the visual signals shoot straight to the emotions. That is the power of graphics. Language, although immensely powerful, seems less immediate, less swiftly channeled into the emotional regions of our minds.⁴

The range of objectives in my work has varied from project to project, but a consistent element and effort of good design is the ability of the site to move an audience emotionally. Since beginning my graduate school journey eight years ago, I have designed many websites, videos, and print material for historical endeavors. A key objective that is always present is that I use images that draw the audience in on an emotional level, to try and take them to another time and place; almost universally, archival images engage an audience. With a few Photoshop touchups that enhance but do not alter the integrity of the image, I deepen it and focus the viewer's eye; with the added dimension, those images become a window to a life or event in the past. My experience as a historian and a designer has given me a foundation for strategies that I offer for the practitioner who wants to use the web to connect to a larger public.

⁴ Malcolm Grear, *Inside/Outside: From the Basics to the Practice of Design*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2006).

LIST

1. PLANNING

Do not skimp on planning—it is important to map the course before you begin the journey. Always start with questions that call on you to examine the purpose, goals, and audience of your site. Here is a list of questions designed to help with that process:

- a. List 5 (or more) adjectives that describe your organization or what you hope to communicate with the proposed website.
- b. Why do you need this website?
- c. What is the stated **purpose** of the website?
- d. What are the stated **goals** and **objectives** for the website?
- e. Who is the **target audience**?
- f. What does the target audience care about?
- g. How do people typically learn about your organization?
- h. Why would anyone visit the website?
- i. Who are your competitors and how do they use the web?
- j. What tone do you want to project with the site? Use words that describe how you want users to feel when they visit the site. Use words such as friendly, warm, professional, playful, elegant, or engaged.
- k. If your site will publicize an organization or place, what emotions do customers feel when visiting? What would you like visitors to feel?
- l. What technology platform will it be built with? You may need help from a consultant or designer to answer this question.
- m. Who will design the site? Who will maintain it? Should you hire a professional designer? What is the budget?
- n. Do you need to contract someone to build the site, or is there someone on staff who can do the work?
- o. Who will write the copy and organize the information that you will publish on the site?

- p. What products and services do you want to offer on the site?
- q. What is your time frame to complete the site?⁵
- r. Some questions need to be asked if the site contains scholarship. These questions are part of the evaluation guidelines for reviewing websites for *The Journal of American History*.
 - a. Is the scholarship sound and current? What is the interpretation or point of view?
 - b. Is it directed at a clear audience? Will it serve the needs of that audience?
 - c. Does it do something that could not be done in other media—print, exhibit, or film?⁶

The goal of this exercise is to gain clarity of purpose and nail down the objectives. After finishing this key piece of the work, write a project brief with your goals and objectives stated concisely as bullet points, and follow that with a narrative that describes the project and a timeline for completion.

2. CMS: WORDPRESS

Once you have decided that you are going to build a website and you want to manage the site yourself, then you have to decide which technology to use; one of the best options currently available is a content management system (CMS) called Wordpress.⁷ In recent years the development of many web content management systems have done much to streamline web development. A CMS is a customizable, prebuilt web system that allow for creating, storing, archiving, publishing, and distributing content on the web. Using a CMS means that you do

⁵ Jason Beaird, *The Principles of Beautiful Web Design* (Melbourne, Australia: SitePoint, 2010), 3-4; Clint Eccher, *Professional Web Design: Techniques and Templates*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Course Technology, Cengage Learning, 2010).

⁶ Kelly Shrum, "Web Site Reviews Guidelines for the Journal of American History", Organization of American Historians <http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/submit/websitereviews.html> (accessed April 23 2011).

⁷ <http://wordpress.org/>

not have to reinvent the wheel every time you create a website. The most popular CMSs are open source, which means that the code— developed through community collaboration— is published and available without charge to the public. Wordpress is one of the most popular CMS platforms, and it has a huge community of developers contributing new products and continuing to improve the product. Wordpress is easily installed and allows users to set up pre-made or custom themes for a particular look, as well as customizable menus, and plugins that add many options to the functionality of a site. Wordpress requires a host server that runs PHP and MySQL. Many service providers provide low-cost hosting and one-click WP installs.⁸ Don't be afraid to dive right in with Wordpress. There are web tutorials if you get stuck and responsive forums if you have questions.⁹

3. CREATE A CLEAN USER INTERFACE

What is a user interface? It is the way a user interacts with the site, and includes all interaction with the user, such as navigation and menus. Focus on making the interface clear, concise, responsive, consistent, efficient, and familiar. It is essential that the web navigation system be user friendly, which requires consistency throughout the site, Use color effectively and strategically. Don't be afraid of white space. White space is a tool for organizing information on the page. By grouping elements and adding strategic white space, you can direct the user's eye effectively.

4. SIMPLER IS ALWAYS BETTER

I always try to make the layout and navigation as simple as possible. If you have too many categories, work on boiling it down more. You can always provide drop-down submenus that explain menus and navigation elements. Keep the

⁸ I have used two reputable hosting services that I highly recommend, mediatemple.com and eleven2.com. Both offer one-click installations for Wordpress.

⁹ See also Thord Daniel Hedengren, *Smashing Wordpress: Beyond the Blog* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); Nirav Mehta, *Choosing an Open Source CMS Beginner's Guide* (Birmingham, UK: Packt Publishing, 2009).

layout simple and to the point. Information organization is a key part of web design. Do not make the visitor work hard just to move from page to page on the site; don't interrupt their engagement by using disorderly navigation.

5. EMOTIONALLY ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE

Ideally, when creating the site, we want to engage the user on an emotional level. One way to do this is to use photos to meaningfully engage the user. To determine which images would work best, ask some questions. What is the visual story you are trying to share on the website? What images or sounds work best to tell the story? What kinds of archival records are available that can be used to illustrate the story? Is there any music or other audio element that fits? Try to find images that evoke strong feelings. Look for close-up shots and images that allow a user to see someone's eyes. You want the visitor to feel a connection with the image.

6. USE A STORYTELLING APPROACH TO ENGAGE THE VISITOR

One way to engage the audience is to use a storytelling approach. Stories help us make sense of history. Events become narrative that has a distinct beginning, middle, and end, commonly known as a story arc. They help us to relate to historical events in a human way. In the telling of historical "stories," we engage our audience in an emotional experience and pull them into the world of history. Donald Norman, a professor of cognitive science, explains that people experience design in three ways: 1) visceral, an instinctive response from the base brain; 2) behavioral, which is the look, feel and whole experience of using the site; and 3) reflective, how the experience makes us feel and how we incorporate the experience and attach meaning to it. The ultimate goal of a site is to engage all three experiences, culminating in deep reflection and incorporating the material into our mental grid.

We have many options for telling stories on the web. The elements available in a web experience are visual design, headlines, content, navigation, animations, sound, or music. We can write and illustrate, create a film, or use multimedia to tell our story. People care about history; we want to use the web and new media to

expose them to stories they have never heard before. Telling stories is a powerful tool for emotionally engaging visitors and motivating them to act. This is an effective way to use the web to communicate history.¹⁰

7. ACCESSIBILITY AND WEB STANDARDS

Jeffrey Zeldman, the web standards expert, has touted the need for standards for many years in his popular website, A List Apart. In recent years, with the advent of technologies such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), and newer versions of HTML, web standards have become a central tenet for the industry. What are web standards? W3C, the web consortium that makes voluntary recommendations to companies that create web browsers, like Microsoft, Apple, and Mozilla, has advocated standards since 1998, and has made inroads with the help of standards advocates like Zeldman. Until recently, companies, particularly Microsoft, have been reluctant to comply, and that creates difficulty for designers and developers because browsers render code differently. Thus, when a designer designs a website, it sometimes displays differently from browser to browser, so designers have to create several versions. Besides the push for browser standards, Zeldman has also pushed for standards in the design and development community. Standards-compliant code allows for better accessibility for mobile users and for straightforward translation of information to impairment devices. One of the key tenets of standards-based design has been to separate code and content. This means that code and content are not interlaced and makes editing or upgrading your website in the future easier.

Zeldman presents some of the key advantages of creating compliant websites:

- Develop sophisticated behaviors that work across multiple browsers and platforms.
- Comply with accessibility laws and guidelines without sacrificing beauty, performance, or sophistication.

¹⁰ Francisco Inchauste, "Better User Experience with Storytelling," in *Smashing Ebook #1: Professional Web Design*(Freiburg, Germany: Smashing Media GmbH, 2010).

- ❑ Redesign in hours instead of days or weeks, reducing costs and eliminating repetitive work.
- ❑ Support multiple browsers with the hassle and expense of creating separate versions, and often with little or no code forking.
- ❑ Support nontraditional and emerging devices, from wireless gadgets and smart phones to Braille output devices and screen readers used by those with disabilities—again without the hassle and expense of creating separate versions.
- ❑ Ensure that sites designed and built this way will work correctly in today’s standards-compliant browsers and perform acceptably in old browsers, even if they do not render pixel-for-pixel the same way they do in newer ones.
- ❑ Ensure that sites so designed will continue to work in tomorrow’s browsers and devices, including devices not yet built or even imagined. ¹¹

This may not be immediately clear if you are not a web designer or if you are using a CMS. It is important to be aware of standards compliance and what it means. Wordpress is a standards-compliant CMS, but there are things that you need to do to make sure your images are compliant, even with a CMS. For example if you do not fully label photos, videos, and audio when importing, those with disability devices will not have full access to your content. It is important to be aware of standards and what they mean; you want your site to be accessible to the widest possible audience.

8. CREATE COMMUNITY

Using the Internet to create active communities to support historical sites and historical endeavors has been untapped. One of the most successful models for community collaboration and community on the web is the open source movement. People willingly donate thousands of hours working toward a

¹¹ Jeffrey Zeldman and Ethan Marcotte, *Designing with Web Standards*, 3 ed. (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2009), 31-32.

common goal of developing a platform together. They create self-sustaining communities and divide tasks to support this endeavor. The success of this model is instructive for those of us in public history. Jono Bacon, an open source community organizer who has written *The Art of Community*, has described this model as a “collaboration-driven ethos.” He explains the power of “what is possible when you get a group of people together who share a common ethos and a commitment to furthering it.”¹² This model has huge potential in the world of public history. It goes beyond simple community support groups. It is about setting up an infrastructure for belonging that exists in both real and virtual spaces. It is about creating a robust system of shared authority. We often talk about shared authority in public history, but the management of historic sites are most often structured as a pyramid. The people near the top of the pyramid have most of the power. Bacon describes an excellent strategy for creating a community.

- ❑ The key to the success of any community is a sense of belonging. It is what keeps people involved. Create a sense of belonging by creating a social economy around your project. This effort encourages belief in the community and a tone of trust and respect.
- ❑ Develop a mission statement.
- ❑ A set of objectives and goals, each with success criteria, implementation plan, and owner details. A list of skills and how those skills map to teams.
- ❑ A list of teams, each with a definition of its scope.
- ❑ A set of To Do List items that we can utilize throughout our community-building activities.
- ❑ Create a specific online communication structure using a CMS or wiki to communicate clearly and coordinate the community.¹³

¹² Jono Bacon, *The Art of Community* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2009), 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

9. OPTIMIZE THE SITE FOR SEARCH ENGINES (SEO)

Search engine optimization (SEO) has become a buzzword in the industry. Everyone wants their website to move to the top of a search list, and there are particular things you can do to help search engines find you. Search engines send out “bots” to prowl the web and record information. These bots gather information about the site, measure the site’s standards compliance, and then plug in that information into a huge database. The key to search engine optimization is to make sure your site is built with standards that allow the bots to log the right information about the site. Google has a list of best practices that help with SEO.

- Create unique, accurate page titles.
- Make use of the “description” meta tag.
- Improve the structure of your URLs.
- Make your site trouble-free to navigate.
- Offer quality content and services.
- Optimize your images. Make sure they are not too large for the web.
- Use heading tags appropriately.
- Prepare two sitemaps: one for users, one for search engines.
- Use mostly text for navigation rather than images.
- Make use of Google’s free webmaster tools and Google analytics to help prepare your site for bots.

10. TEST TEST TEST

Because of competing browsers from different companies and a lack of an agreed upon standard, there are quirks on most websites that designers must address. For this reason, it is important to test your site on different platforms and in different browsers. Make sure and view your site on a Mac and a PC and with several versions of Microsoft Explorer, which is the most problematic of the browsers when it comes to web standards.

CONCLUSION

While living in San Francisco in 1995, I was first introduced to the World Wide Web. I could see then that there was great potential for the medium to change the way we communicate. The web has evolved over the last sixteen years, but groundbreaking possibilities increase with extraordinary frequency. I believe it is time for public historians to harness the innovative nature of the web and use it to create a larger interactive community where stories of the past are told with accuracy and passion; the old can become new to a new generation; public historians create online infrastructures for community and real shared authority; and historical venues find committed supporters who invest their time and energy in the shared goal of preserving the past.

The website I created for this dissertation is

<http://www.newmediahistory.org/johnbeecher/>

REFERENCE WEB SITES:

- Apple's Web page Development: Best Practices
<http://developer.apple.com/internet/webcontent/bestwebdev.html>
- Google's webmaster's tools
<https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/>
- George Mason's Center for History and New Media
<http://chnm.gmu.edu/>
- Jakob Nielsen, the web usability expert, on web usability
<http://www.useit.com/>
- Lynda.com
<http://www.lynda.com/>
- Jeffrey Feldman's A List Apart
<http://www.alistapart.com/>
- Smashing Magazine
<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/>
- w3c
<http://www.w3.org/>
- w3schools-the w3c consortium free training site
<http://www.w3schools.com/>

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