

# UC Santa Cruz

## Agricultural History

### Title

Helen Hosmer: A Radical Critic of California Agribusiness in the 1930s

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## INTRODUCTION

*Helen Hosmer: A Radical Critic of California Agribusiness in the 1930s* is part of the Regional History Project's series of oral history interviews on California agricultural history. The volume is based on three hours of taped interviews held with Hosmer in her home in Summerland (Santa Barbara County), California, on August 26 and 27, 1977. At that time, due to a lack of funds, the Project was not able to transcribe or process her manuscript. I received word from her son, Hal Hosmer, that she had died on December 21, 1984, at the age of 80. Although Hosmer had signed a release form in 1979, giving the Project permission to publish her manuscript, we were not able to transcribe and edit the volume until recently. Thus the volume is issued posthumously.

Hosmer's knowledge of California's agriculture dated back to the 1930s when as a student at the University of California, Berkeley, she worked at the Poultry Division, College of Agriculture. Later she worked for the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration, which established camps for migrant workers in California. This job took her all over the rural areas of California to investigate conditions and select potential camp sites. At Nipomo, one of the migrant camps she visited, she describes the grim circumstances under which FSA photographer Dorothea Lange came to take her renowned photograph "Migrant Mother."

During this period she came to know Lange, agricultural economist Paul S. Taylor, John Steinbeck, and many important figures in the labor movement in San Francisco. Because of her conviction that labor organizing was essential among agricultural workers, she resigned her government position at Farm Security in 1935 in order to have the freedom to work in behalf of her political beliefs. She immediately co-founded the Simon J. Lubin Society, named after the progressive and public spirited Lubin, who during Governor Hiram Johnson's administration had been active in investigating farm labor issues. This organization promoted unity between family farmers and migrant labor and exposed the anti-progressive political activities of California agribusiness. From 1935-41, she published and edited the Lubin Society's *Rural Observer*, a monthly California newspaper devoted to exposing the political economy of what would later come to be called "agribusiness." The *Rural Observer* also tried to convince family farmers that their best interests lay in making common cause with the labor movement rather than with large-scale agriculture. The Society also issued special publications such as *Who are the Associated Farmers?* and John Steinbeck's *Their Blood is Strong*. Hosmer was one of the earliest, independent investigators of California agribusiness and the pamphlet *Who are the Associated Farmers?* (reproduced in this volume) was a pioneering effort to document the interconnections among banking, railroad, and large-scale agricultural interests which undergirded corporate control of California agriculture.

Hosmer was born in 1904 and her memoirs begin with her commentary on her childhood in a working class Jewish family immersed in radical politics in Los Angeles during the period 1904 to about 1920. The volume includes sections on her undergraduate years at UCLA and later, at UC Berkeley and on her travels in Europe in 1933. Her return to depression-era California found her involved in the 1934 criminal syndicalism trials of agricultural labor organizers, an experience which radicalized her and marked the beginning of her immersion in the complex issues of California's agricultural economy.

Topics discussed in the volume include discussions of Olson's New Deal campaign for governor; the story of how Hosmer researched and wrote the pamphlet on the union-busting Associated Farmers, her involvement and disillusionment with the Communist Party; and the heady days of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee hearings in California in 1939-40.

Hosmer's experiences with blacklisting, red-baiting, and witch-hunting, dating back to her days at UC Berkeley in the 1930s, provide a recurring theme in her narration. She discusses this chronic dark side of modern American political and cultural life in a section entitled "Naming Names." After the War, Hosmer spent more than 25 years living in Mill Valley and San Francisco, where as housewife, mother, pianist, and gardener she temporarily put aside her political activism. In the early 1960s she resumed research and writing; she again turned her attention to California agriculture and wrote articles for *American West* magazine during the period 1966 to 1968, and was director of the research committee for the *California Farm Reporter*. During this period she wrote radio scripts for her weekly radio broadcast on KSFO on early San Francisco history, which derived from her painstaking research into original sources. In the 1970s she conducted another radio program on KPFA in Berkeley on the Vietnam War based on her research into the history of U.S. involvement there. She also wrote for KTIM in Fresno about 70 broadcast "Letters from the Lady on the Hill" in which she shared the lyrical, naturalist side of herself, expressing her delight in weather, native plants, her evolving Japanese garden, and her environmental concerns.

Hosmer donated to UCSC's University Library all of her back issues of the *Rural Observer*, her last precious copy of the pamphlet *Who are the Associated Farmers?*, numerous radio scripts and miscellaneous writings on California history. The Appendix in this volume includes reproductions of several of the above items, as well as a letter she wrote to Carey McWilliams (at his request) outlining her own participation in California agricultural issues. The letter is undated, but was probably written in 1969. It provides additional detailed information on Hosmer's activities and point of view, and not incidentally, is a characteristic example of her singular writing style.

Unfortunately, we did not have the benefit of Hosmer's own editing and corrections in preparing the manuscript for publication. The tape-recordings were transcribed verbatim and edited for continuity and clarity, and a number of brief inaudible passages remain. Hosmer also provided us with the photograph used for the frontispiece in the volume.

Copies of this manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and in Special Collections, McHenry Library, University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project is supported administratively by Marion Taylor, head of Collection Planning, and University Librarian Allan J. Dyson.

Randall Jarrell

February 14, 1992  
Regional History Project  
McHenry Library  
University of California, Santa Cruz

## EARLY LIFE

### Growing Up in Los Angeles

**Jarrell:** It is 9 pm, August 26th, and I'm in Summerland, California, with Helen Hosmer at her home. To start with, would you please give a description of your family, and tell me where you were born and in what year.

**Hosmer:** Well, I was born in Philadelphia on March 31, 1904, and brought to California when I was three. Of course in those days California was the land of milk and honey and the sweet smell of orange blossoms from one end of Los Angeles to the other. It was, of course, before freeways and before smog. Can you imagine how beautiful it was then? I was from a lower-middle-class family; my father and mother were very poor. We had a darling little house, in Highland Park, just ten blocks from where Charles Loomis, the famous California historian, had his beautiful adobe house right on the Arroyo Seco River. My childhood was greatly glamorized by the fact that he met me up in the hills one day when I was 12 years old and said, "You like these flowers?" I said, "Yes, I love my hills. They're mine." He asked my name. I told him and said I had a sister named Sylvia. He said, "That's beautiful, it's like the woods. You know, I give a 'noise' on Sunday nights and I like you and I'm going to invite you to come to my 'noises.' You mustn't bring your mother or your father or anybody else." I said, "Not even my sister?" "Well, because her name is Sylvia, you can bring Sylvia. But you aren't to bring anyone else. I will phone your parents when I have the next 'noise.'"

Charles Loomis's "noises" consisted of the most glorious gatherings of talented people you have ever heard of . . . opera singers, writers, musicians. Will Rogers came and stood there and told story after story chewing his gum. People from the opera companies, violinists; an Indian man came and told a whole story in sign language with an interpreter. Every time he phoned, we wore our same little white organdy dresses which was all we had. Our father would walk us down with the greatest misgivings because for years Charles Loomis in that neighborhood had been considered a mystery man, and nobody really trusted



him . . . Great chauffeur-driven limousines would roll up and these elegant ladies in evening gowns and men in full dress stepped out of the cars. The neighbors would all peer and chatter and wonder what went on in there. And to think that we two little girls were privy to all of this. . . well, that was one of the things that happened to me in Los Angeles . . . my first taste of real top-notch glamour. (Laughter) I never opened my mouth at these parties.

One night Charles Loomis told about how he'd lost his voice; he explained that he jumped because a snake was in his way, and he screamed. And he let out the scream to illustrate the story, shouting, "I can talk! I can talk!" And when he was telling the story, he frightened me so I jumped all the way out of my seat. And he ran over to my side and when he finished the story, he finished it with his arm about me and patting me so I wouldn't be frightened. But I was so shy, as was my sister, that just to sit there . . . as these ladies really smelled good and were good . . . and I just thought it was the most exciting, glamorous, wonderful thing that ever happened to us. I was scared to death, but I wouldn't have been cheated out of it for anything. That's the way my childhood was.

I think the most important things to me were the mustard blossom and the Indian paintbrush and the lupine that grew on these hillsides in back of our house. That was virgin land; nobody had ever burned them back before. The mustard blossom grew way taller than my head . . . you had to part it to go through it. To this day the smell of mustard blossom is one of the most important California smells I know.

**Jarrell:** It's very evocative . . . What did your father do?

**Hosmer:** He was a barber, and he barely made enough for us to live on.

**Jarrell:** Just you and your sister, and you had a brother, later?

**Hosmer:** I had two brothers—I had an older brother and a younger brother and my sister. My sister was the most organized member of our family and always did everything precisely right. She became a children's librarian. She got a scholarship at a school of dramatic arts, married the first man she met, fell in love . . . had a very happy, very successful life; has published two books, one on how

to tell short stories to children, and one on how to use the library. She's an extremely successful woman. Her husband is an extremely successful lawyer who represents people like the TV Actors Guild. He was with the U.S. Department of Labor for 12 years . . . and wrote a book on the history of government strikes . . . strikes in government and several other things. They are very, very intellectual, and very successful, and I think, I *must* say that I have always been considered the black sheep of the family.

**Jarrell:** When you were in high school, what were you like, and what were you interested in?

**Hosmer:** I was interested more than anything else in dancing. But my mother thought there was something absolutely, well, if not obscene, at least immoral about dancing, becoming a dancer. Instead of doing my gymnastics, I used to go off in a corner in the gym class and make up dances. And believe it or not, Myra Kinch and Agnes DeMille took me up and made me perform at the high school auditorium once a week at the assembly . . . anything I could make up on the spur of the moment. They went to my mother together and pleaded with her to let them give me dancing lessons. And I begged my mother but she was absolutely adamant and would not let me study with Myra Kinch and Agnes DeMille . . . my whole life probably would have been quite different. Because that was the one thing I wanted more than anything on earth, and I never really got it.

**Jarrell:** What was your mother like?

**Hosmer:** My mother was strong, very European . . . her mood swings were phenomenal. She could make anything in the world grow. She had to watch things grow. She was a magnificent cook. She had to have chickens and birds and cats and flowers and children around her at all times. When we were grown up and left home, she got children from the county, bad children, delinquent children, sick children, abandoned children, and got them straightened out. Then they'd bring her a fresh batch just as she got to really love them.

And as I say, her mood swings were horrendous. We always had to phone home and say, "What's the temperature?" before we dared come home. She tried to commit suicide three times and finally did on the fourth try, when she was around 70. But at that same time she had every bird in the neighborhood in her garden . . . And the neighborhood children wouldn't dream of going home from school without stopping off for cookies. The very week . . . it was one of her children, the neighborhood children, who found her . . . 'cause everyone, you know, thought of her as loving life. She had a tremendous capacity for enjoyment, and a tremendous capacity for suffering, which I think I've inherited. The Starkman women were all like that, and I'm the last . . .

**Jarrell:** That was her maiden name?

**Hosmer:** Yes. They think I'm the last of the Mohicans.

**Jarrell:** Was she born in this country?

**Hosmer:** She was born in Austria. My father was born in Kiev in Russia, and they met in Philadelphia. My mother's people had been quite wealthy. When my mother's mother and her husband came to this country with five children, they couldn't imagine living without servants . . . my grandmother couldn't. So she turned all of her children into her staff except the youngest, whom she raised as a lady. But the rest were her servant staff. My mother had to bring to my grandmother in bed a cup of chocolate every morning that was half cream and half chocolate. My grandmother never got up before 10 or 11. But my mother, when she wanted to go to night school had to cook, do the dishes, which made her 20 minutes late for school every night and she was running all the way.

### **Education**

**Jarrell:** I'm sorry we're going so quickly over all this. I want to know how you got to go to UC Berkeley and how you dreamed of going to college . . .

**Hosmer:** Well . . . I didn't have any idea I could go. I was a very erratic high school student. I used to cut classes and go and interview people. Like I'd go and interview the chief of police in the Los Angeles police system . . . tell them I was

writing an article for the school paper 'cause I wanted to see what jails were like. I always neglected to get an excuse from the attendance office so that it ended up in order to graduate from high school I had 8 hours to make up. They let me graduate, but they made me sit in the class all day, and just time to go home and get my dress on and come back. And the kids brought me sandwiches.

You see, . . . I didn't have many expectations. But one day about a month before UCLA opened, I received a phone call from the high school principal, Miss Hodgkins, would I please come to see her. And I thought well, they've discovered it. They know that the whole thing was illegitimate, that I never should have graduated because I didn't think I knew anything. And I hadn't even taken a college prep course.

**Jarrell:** What high school was this?

**Hosmer:** Franklin High School. My father had insisted that I take a commercial course, so all I had was typing and shorthand and bookkeeping and a language and I didn't have any college prep subjects at all. Well, I doubted I could have done mathematics. So it was very lucky that I didn't. But when I got there, Mrs. Hodgkins said, "Helen, the EVL Club of Los Angeles gives a scholarship . . . one student from every high school in Los Angeles, and after an enormous amount of deliberation we have decided to recommend you." She said, "Not on your achievement, but strictly on your potential. We *think* you might amount to something someday. We don't know. But we just sort of think you might. Would you like to go to college?" And I said, "Oh, I'd love to." She said, "Well, there are going to be some difficulties because you don't have algebra or geometry . . . you can't get a junior certificate without those . . . so you'll have to go to high school while you're going to college to make these up." So I said, "That's all right." And I came flipping home with the magnificent sum of \$300 a year. But of course we didn't pay tuition in those days. So I came home and I told my parents that I was going to college. And I did.

I went to Piedmont High which was on the way to the old campus of UCLA to take ninth grade algebra. And I was very small for my age and I looked about 14 when I was 18. The kids in my freshman algebra class thought I was the greatest

liar on earth. They simply didn't believe that I was at UCLA. When they saw that I simply couldn't understand algebra, they obviously thought I was lying 'cause they'd send me up to the blackboard . . . I hadn't the vaguest idea what that man was talking about. And I used to just stand there and cry because I didn't understand algebra. But somehow he gave me a passing grade. Then I went on and took first semester, tenth grade geometry.

But at any rate, one thing in the geometry class I will never forget, it was like a curtain parting, was the theorem of Pythagoras . . . and it came through loud and clear, and I thought it was absolutely fabulous. I wanted to stop people on the street and say, "Let me tell you this thing about the theorem of Pythagoras (laughter) because it really is, it's an event the way it works out." But then the curtain closed again. Well, I didn't know what I was going to do about the next semester because he knew it was hopeless. He just passed me so I could go to college. I went into the clerk's office one day and said, "Do you have my credits recorded for the math requirements?" She said, "Why, yes, Helen, we've got a 'one' which means a year in algebra and a 'one' which means a year in geometry." And I said, "A 'one' for a year of geometry?" She said, "yes." So they had made a mistake and they had put down a year instead of a semester, so I never had to take the other semester. So I went into college, where really I wanted journalism. I had won a first prize for a short story contest in high school. It was a *bad* story . . . I think they chose it because it was precisely the right length for the yearbook. (Laughter) I had typed it and thrown it in the wastebasket in my typing class. The teacher said, "What's that?" And I said, "Oh, it's a stupid thing I wrote." She said, "Let me see it." And I did. And she submitted it and it won first prize. And it was on the basis of that sort of thing that they decided I was to be a writer. But there were no journalism courses at UCLA.

So I ended up as an English major which was really ending up nowhere. Because mostly in my lower division work, I just daydreamed right through the whole business. I was terribly disillusioned. After two semesters I went to see the dean of the University. I said, "It's just terrible. College is just simply terrible. I'm not learning anything. They're nothing like I thought they would be. These professors don't tell me *anything* I want to know, and I cannot bear it."

**Jarrell:** This was after a year only?

**Hosmer:** A year. And he said, "You know what I think you ought to do? You ought to take a semester out and just thumb your nose at the stars for a while." So I took a semester out and I was simply sick. I sat on a hill, on the top of the hill, on my rock, and cried . . . I think I was having a nervous breakdown, but in those days, you just didn't . . .

**Jarrell:** You didn't call it that.

### **Graduating from UC Berkeley**

**Hosmer:** So nobody paid the slightest attention to me except that I wasn't going to school or working. I was required to do one or the other. So life was pretty tense for me at that time. Eventually I decided that instead of going back to UCLA, I would go up to UC Berkeley. I went out to UCLA at the beginning of the summer . . . to get a recommendation for a job. They gave me a card and told me to go to some man at a bank. As I stepped off the streetcar, as I was standing in the safety zone, a big cadillac came along and hit me . . . but didn't really hurt me. It knocked me down, but didn't hurt me a bit. The next day this real nice man came from the auto club and gave me \$500. And the lady who hit me, who was from Santa Barbara sent me a big bouquet of flowers. I just took the \$500 and went to Berkeley. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** Why did you want to go to Berkeley?

**Hosmer:** I wanted to get away from home. And that was the way I could break . . . I never went back home again. One semester.

**Jarrell:** And you must have been what . . . eighteen, nineteen?

**Hosmer:** Well something like that.

**Jarrell:** Yes. So you went up to [UC] Berkeley? Was it any better up there?

**Hosmer:** It was pretty good, pretty good. I took a course with George Stewart whom I met years later when he wrote some articles for us in the *American West*. He's the one that wrote *Fire*.

It was a poetry class where you had to submit a poem to get in, and so it was a restricted course. He would take us and sit us down under the trees and we would read our poems. Then he'd have us over for tea at his house. He had a very charming wife. She would write a few poems which were very, very funny . . . I remember one that ended, "I would not mind if my skirts are long, but why have you taken my dolls away?" said this great, tall, lanky creature, you know. But they were very funny.

**Jarrell:** What did you graduate in when you finally graduated . . . in English?

**Hosmer:** I finally graduated with two majors, English and philosophy.

**Jarrell:** How did you get into philosophy?

**Hosmer:** I just did. I don't remember . . . I just signed up.

**Jarrell:** You weren't in history or economics?

**Hosmer:** No. Nothing.

**Jarrell:** Of all the issues that engaged you later on, you were not at all . . .

**Hosmer:** None of them. I wasn't trained for anything but philosophy. And I did lots and lots and lots of piano. And very early on I met this girl, Marjorie Petray. And she began to give me ear training, some harmony, and piano lessons.

**Jarrell:** Had you ever taken piano before?

**Hosmer:** When I was a child. This lady came to the door. . . I remember she had a diamond for a filling in her front tooth, and she charged 50 cents a lesson. She came once a week to teach me. She would count 1 & 2 & . . . long after I'd finish the piece and sitting there with my hands folded, she was still counting. (Laughter) I think she was dreaming about her diamond mine or something, I

don't know. She taught me horrible songs like, "Just a little love, a little kiss." Whatever anybody wanted, she taught me . . . I didn't know one note from another, but somewhere along the line, then, they took me to a teacher, Mr. Julian Pascal, and he taught me some high-falutin' music with a stop watch. (Laughter) 'Cause it wasn't how you played, it was how fast you could go. He made me learn some Chopin Nocturnes and the Black Key Étude of Chopin's. Like the wind . . . with my foot on the pedal that never came off, it stayed on through the whole piece. (Laughter) And the Rachmaninoff Prelude . . . and then whenever my left-wing parents had big parties, or mass meetings or anything else, they trotted me out and forced me to perform. My foot would shake so badly on the pedal.

When I danced, I loved it and I was never self-conscious. I didn't care how many people were around. But when I played the piano, it was total, one hundred percent agony. I became so self-conscious that I couldn't perform. I used to suffer the agonies of the damned when I had to do those things. Once I performed at a piano, and it was an old square piano, and middle C was one note over . . . I had to get up in the middle and walk off the stage. I couldn't understand the keyboard. And I never got over it. . . and a woman afterwards came up to my mother and said, "You've made a terrible mistake. You should have taught her the how to play the violin." (Laughter) Well, those were awfully funny days.

### **Family Background**

**Jarrell:** Now you mentioned your parents were left-wing.

**Hosmer:** They certainly were.

**Jarrell:** Would you define "left-wing?"

**Hosmer:** Well . . . they were atheists. They believed in Karl Marx. They had been socialists at the very point where the Socialist Party was split . . . half going communist and half staying socialist. So there were arguments at my house, bitter arguments with their friends all the time about this political split. A lot of the arguments were in Yiddish and I didn't understand them. I think it was from



then on that I got the feeling that Yiddish was a very guttural, spitty language, because there was so much shouting and guttural shouting, you know. And I *hated* all of this. I *despised* these left-wing thoughts and people. Because it cut me off from my peer group.

We were the only Jews in an all-Gentile neighborhood. Our name was Goldberg, which was a comic-book name, which to me was somehow a subject for laughter. My father was not only poor, but a barber, which was a non-status job.

**Jarrell:** And you felt that keenly?

**Hosmer:** To me Goldberg equals Marx, equals poverty, equals Jew, equals the dark, the dirty, and the inferior. And all of it equaled Karl Marx. It was all his fault. I wanted to go to Sunday School. I wanted to be able to pray to God. I wanted to have little thin jelly sandwiches for luncheons . . . my mother used to take rye bread and glorious chopped liver and the most elegant, nourishing food, and make a sandwich about an inch and a half thick, and I was so ashamed of those sandwiches that I got so I would eat in an empty classroom because I would rather *die* than let my friends see those big, thick, nourishing sandwiches. . . (laughter) My mother would take nuts, and raisins and chop them all up fine and put something yummy in between, you know.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter) To hold it together.

**Hosmer:** . . . and I would have given anything to have that now. But Hazel Ellis, a girl in my class, had these dainty, little, thin butter things that looked so *goy* you know . . .

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** Well, I thought it was simply terrible, absolutely terrible. It was painful. And I hated . . . you see, they would take us to Spring Street to these big [political] meetings they were having. All I can remember is the faded crêpe paper decorations on the ceilings and these kind of skitty floors where we would slide up and down as kids on our behinds when they weren't looking and our white stockings would get all dirty. (Laughter) And we didn't understand . . .

Eugene B. Debbs . . . we were dragged to listen to him and I couldn't have cared less. Emma Goldman . . . my mother was always talking about Emma Goldman and Eugene B. Debbs.

I just thought it was terrible, so finally I announced, " I am going to go to Sunday School. I had this little chum in the 7th grade; her father was a Seventh Day Adventist, or something, and they ran the ostrich farm in Los Angeles. She invited me to dinner one night, and just before dinner she said, "Helen, you're going to have to say a verse out of the Bible at dinner. Do you know any verses from the Bible? And I said, "No." She said, "Well , I'll teach you one." It was, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." So we went around . . . and oh, how I admired that table . . . snow-white mashed potatoes and elegant gravy without a single lump in it.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** Everything was perfect, you know. We sat around this table and he said blessing; then we went around and each said a verse, and I said my verse . . . and then he said, "Who said that Helen?" And I just looked at him in absolute agony and the first thing I could think of was Saul. And it was 20 minutes before I could touch those white potatoes.

So everytime I had dinner there I said the same verse. Well, one night I took her aside, and I said, "Thelma, I have something to tell you. My father is an atheist". She cried. I cried. She promised to pray for me. We had one of those big scenes. Then one day the attendance clerk stopped me and she said, "Why are you in school today?" And I said, "Well, you know, it's Tuesday." She said, "Don't you know what day this is?" And I said, "No, I don't." "Don't you know that it's an important Jewish holiday?" I said, "No, I don't." "What kind of people are your people anyway?" And I said, "My father is an atheist." And if I'd said my father is a leper, I couldn't have felt *more* horrible than to make this confession to this woman.

**Jarrell:** How old were you?

**Hosmer:** I was in the seventh grade. Then I decided no more of this nonsense. I'm going to Sunday School. So I started going, getting all dressed up, and going with Hazel [inaudible]. I went to seven different kinds of denominations in seven weeks. And I'd come home with these beautiful little pictures, cards and things and my father would sit me down . . . he was a really darling man and very learned, and I just didn't have the sense to know it; he read everything . . . he used to sit in that shop and just read and read and read and read; he was brilliant. And he'd say, "All right, Helen, what" . . . "Hindela" he called me . . . see, we all had names that were translated.

My sister was really "Sima" translated to "Sylvia"; I was "Hindela" translated to Helen; my baby brother was "Gerchon" translated to "Garreth." When he was in grammar school, the teacher said, "Oh, and we have Sir Garreth, the Knight." And he said, "No mam. My name is Gershon Gershuny . . . I'm named after a Russian revolutionary."

So my father would ask [about my visits to these Christian churches], "What did the Presbyterian God have to tell you, Hindela?" Then the next week, "Now, tell me the difference between what the Presbyterian God says and what the Baptist God says." He was a devil. And after a while, I just gave up, because I couldn't figure out, you know, why all these different denominations, the Catholics, the Baptists—why they all claimed theirs was the only God.

Then because we were the only Jews in the neighborhood, all the Gentile people wanted us to be converted because that would be such a feather in their caps. So they used to come up our stairs every week and proselytize my mother. My mother always said the same thing. She said, "Sweetheart," . . . she called everybody "sweetheart" . . . "I'll be happy to read your book if you'll read mine." . . . which was Karl Marx. (Laughter) You know it's funny because my mother ended up with three books. Shakespeare, the Bible . . . gosh, maybe just two, Shakespeare and the Bible, was about all she read for the last years of her life. She wouldn't read anything else. She said nothing else mattered. I know her Bible was worn out. And so was her Shakespeare. I still have her Shakespeare around here . . . but my mother was terribly funny . . . she'd quote Shakespeare for anything. Shakespeare says you've got to eat two eggs every morning, you

know. (Laughter) She used Shakespeare as her guide when anything came up she'd quote Shakespeare (Laughter)

My mother had intellectual pretensions and my father was intellectual. (Laughter) He read constantly. He didn't talk much; he was a very modest little man, and very sweet and dear and private. But when he died we were simply astounded at the people who turned up at the house to pay their last respects. Men arrived with chauffeurs in limousines . . . bankers, lawyers, doctors . . . that he had served in his barbershop who adored him. He had never told us a single word about all these people. They were his real friends, and he saw them at work. He had been carrying on for years a completely other world life with these illustrious people who thought he was just a wonderful man. And I think it's very interesting how little we know sometimes about our own families.

**Jarrell:** You only found it out when he died.

**Hosmer:** I only found out about it they day before his funeral. I flew down from San Francisco [inaudible] He died of heart trouble at age 50. I had taken him to a heart specialist just four weeks before, and they told me there was absolutely nothing wrong with his heart. He was in the last stages of arteriolosclerosis when he died, and they hadn't diagnosed it. But he was so private that when he'd say "goodbye" to me, he would always take me in another room and kiss me on the top of my head and say "goodbye." He wouldn't even kiss me in the presence of other people. But I was his favorite and he called me the *kleineschwartz*, "the little black one." Or *fagala* which means dove. Or *hindela* which was "the too many." He never called me "Helen," I don't think in his life. But I really was the special one to him, the *kleineschwartz*. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** Well, let's go back to Berkeley. So you graduated from Berkeley?

**Hosmer:** Finally, yes.

**Jarrell:** In what year?

**Hosmer:** In 1929. Because I had a year or two out of school during those years. Things happened in my personal life. I was briefly married and whisked off to

Europe and came back a year later and studied philosophy and aesthetics and threw myself into aesthetic and philosophical theory like you can't believe.

**Jarrell:** Were you interested at all in Marxist aesthetics?

**Hosmer:** No, no.

**Jarrell:** Or was this totally devoid of political interests?

**Hosmer:** I didn't want any part of politics. It was still, to me, stigmatic. It was still, to me, like if you had been forced to be a fanatic Catholic or a Mormon. Years later, when I worked in San Francisco at Langley Porter [Neuropsychiatric Institute] I met many kids, patients, who had had these heavy, heavy religious backgrounds who'd gotten mentally ill as a result of it. I think I became almost borderline on the subject of politics, I hated it so.

**Jarrell:** Why were you drawn into aesthetics? What particularly interested you?

**Hosmer:** I would have loved to know about astronomy but that would have required math. And I would have loved to know about chemistry, but that would have required math.

Actually, if I had it to do over, I would have studied anthropology I think, 'cause that was my biggest interest. But I was free-floating . . . I really never thought that I would use college in any practical way when I got out. It didn't occur to me that I could ever learn a living with what I'd learned in school.

I wanted meaning and philosophy. I took Plato terribly emotionally, seriously. I thought these theories were real. I mean . . . someone said, "You don't think with your brain; you feel with your brain." Well I was working out *all* my emotional life via philosophy. But I mean I took it to heart . . . I really did. We would argue about what was reality by the hour . . . and it was not until much later in graduate school . . . I was sitting in an aesthetics seminar with Dr. Steven Popper . . . I had done this big study on Walter Pater and he was urging me to have it published in the *Yale Review* . . . thought it was the best thing anybody had ever done in any of his classes. I was so shy at that time . . . in class he had me read it

for three seminars . . . and I couldn't, I couldn't get through reading because my voice would tremble so and shake so.

But there were five men students and myself. Right in the middle of it, it just hit me, just between the eyes . . . what in God's name are we talking about. This is an ivory tower, and we're playing the craziest game with words I have ever heard . . . grownups playing. We are talking about far-out theories of reality, of beauty, and ugliness. And the men that wrote these books that we're talking about never looked or smelled or tasted or heard anything in their lives, I'll betcha. Bernard Bosanquet's theories of beauty . . . if you ever want to read a dry as bones . . . I said, "I've got to get out of here and see the world." . . . and I did.

### **Traveling in Europe, 1933**

**Hosmer:** I went off to Europe and lived on \$40 a month for a whole year. I sold a piano to finance myself, which I had gotten via my marriage. I got a scholarship to study in Germany. And I arrived in England the week Hitler took power. I shipped all my music, which were all annotated Peters editions, in a trunk. It went to Germany, then went back to the San Francisco waterfront. I ended up losing the trunk full of music.

Now Marjorie Petray had introduced me to a pianist. . . I'm sorry I can't remember his name at the moment, but I worked with him in L.A. He taught me Bach and Brahms, and he was the one who got in touch with this guy in Germany, for me to study with him. The guy in Germany had fled to China.

I ended up in Paris working with a dancing troupe . . . with a girl named Dorita Brown who had fled the Mary Wigman School of Dancing in Germany because Wigman became a Nazi; put the big Nazi flag up in front of the Wigman School of Dance. So Dorita Brown came to Paris and we had this class—four hours every day. Then we took a billet in Brittany for three months and worked out on the beach. Then I came back to the United States a year later with \$5 in my pocket and no job.

## Settling in San Francisco, 1934

**Jarrell:** You arrived back where? In San Francisco?

**Hosmer:** San Francisco in 1934 right smack dab in the middle of the waterfront strike.

**Jarrell:** Well, that's a good place to start.

**Hosmer:** Yes. Right smack in the middle of the Great Strike. And I got a little tiny flat in Telegraph Hill. Every ship in the world was in that harbor, tied up, and the most beautiful sight you've ever seen in your life. All these ships lit up at night. It was gorgeous. I remember saying to some friend who came over, "That, looking at that, means more to me than all this stuff you're doing."

**Jarrell:** Who were your friends when you came back to San Francisco in the middle of this great event?

**Hosmer:** They were all radicals; I had met them in some other capacities. I don't know. They were *new* friends, because I'd been gone a whole year. When I left, it was '33 . . . when I arrived in England, the banks had just closed. People were in terrible, dire straits. These new friends were Writers' Project, Artists' Project people. They were WPA kids working on these makeworks that Roosevelt had started. They were just beginning to put two and two together. But I still didn't want to.

In London, when I had been in London, someone took me to a Marxist club, a marvelous, marvelous girl that I met there named Vera Suchinsky. She was Rachmaninoff's niece. Her father was a White Russian and she hated him. She was earning a living doing 16th century translations of Russian religious manuscripts in order to go back and study law at the Sorbonne, so she could go back and help the people in the Soviet Union. Her father would send her money in a letter, and she would tear the letter up and stick it in an envelope and send it back to him in Russia and cash the check. She introduced me to Rachmaninoff and to Stravinsky who was a dear friend of the family. She said, "He's a horrid old man, and he's got a cold. It's going to be a wretched afternoon; and we're

going to have to stop and have tea with him. He's mean and insolent to his help, but we have to go." She introduced me to T.S. Eliot and to Virginia Woolf. And one day she said, Helen, I have a little errand to do." She said, "I have to get quinine and some leather boots." She called it "quenine." A whole list of stuff for a guy that was going off to the Soviet Union. She was a Marxist and she always had some lame ducks around.

Then there were the Fascists, who had one corner in London where they were proselytizing. She would stop every morning on her way to buy her *Manchester Guardian*, to give them a horrible lecture on how bad they were to be doing this terrible stuff. You see, things were very tense in 1933. As I said, Hitler was in power in Germany. When I got to Paris it was the week of the Reichstag fire in Germany. And Leo, he was a lawyer; I later worked for him; he was there to defend the people on trial for supposedly setting the Reichstag fires. The *International Herald Tribune* was full of the trial. Paris was choked with anti-fascist refugees from Germany. Anti-fascists. People were trying to escape. I couldn't have cared less. I was an idiot. I lived through one of the most historic, dramatic periods in human history, without ever facing what was going on. I was so much on my own thing. Locked in my own thing. It was my childhood prejudice saying, "No, no, no! I don't want to get involved."

Finally I met this darling girl. She was an artist, an etcher, and she was making passports for some of these people [anti-Fascists] to get to Spain. She said, "Look, they need someone with a good American address to receive literature and to deliver it. Would you consider doing it, if they considered you?" And I said, "Oh, sure. That'll be a lot of fun," just as flippantly as that.

So she took me to meet this guy whose name was Bondy . . . he took me to dinner, to a movie. With him at the movie was a guy who became one of the biggest figures in the Communist Party of France, whose name I can't recall, who offered me American chewing gum because he thought that was what an American might like. (Laughter) But they were casing me out to see if I could be trusted. After I'd had about three interviews I was accepted to do this job. I could use an American Express address, I could use where I was living as an address, and I could use Thomas Cook as an address. So this stuff came by hand to the



German border. Then it went by mail to innocuous people in Paris. Then I met him everyday at a café and he wrote down on a piece of paper where to take it. As a result I saw lots of different parts of Paris. I would sit at a café with him and he'd say, "You see that man at the end table," he says, "taking my picture?" because the French police were in cahoots with the German Gestapo right from the start. He later escaped to Spain.

They didn't discriminate between German Jews and ordinary Germans. The French just despised the Germans from World War I, and there were street fights constantly. These poor people who couldn't speak a word of French, you'd see them at the post offices trying to get identity cards. They had to use these scratchy post office pens. They were given forms and they couldn't read a word of them. They had no passports, proper passports, no proper identification. And they'd somehow gotten across the border. They didn't know where they were going to go or what they were going to do.

It was a fantastic time to be in Paris. You didn't know whether it was your own turmoil or the turmoil all around you, but 1933 in Europe, it was just critical. And I met lots of Germans, and one would say, "See that man selling papers over there? That's my chemistry prof. That's my history prof," you know . . . it was like that. They were all shoplifting to get something to eat. Then we didn't see this one boy for about six weeks. And we finally saw him. We said, "Where have you been?" He said, "Oh, I have been a gigolo for six weeks. It was marvelous, I have eat, I have drink, I have drink, I have eat." "What happened?" He said, "Well, she had a cat and I threw it out the window, so she kicked me out." (Laughter) But that's the way it was. So I got back. But I wasn't suffering. I didn't have any pain because I was married to a guy who was rich enough to take me to Europe during the height of the Depression.

**Jarrell:** So all of this was real painless and it kind of went right by you?

**Hosmer:** Entirely. I was doing my music before I went to Europe. [In Berkeley] I was working part-time in the poultry division of the college of agriculture because my roommate was an English girl. And she knew a guy named Dr.

Walter Holst who was the Acting Chief of the Poultry Division of the Department of Agriculture at UC.<sup>1</sup>

### **Learning about California Agriculture**

**Hosmer:** So she got me this part-time job; I only had to work from 8:30 to noon, and I got \$75 a month, and then that was big money in those days. That was like \$300 a month now. I was only paying \$20 a month for my rent; for a whole house at the top of the Berkeley Hills. Well, that was my introduction to California agriculture.

**Jarrell:** I was reading an undated letter you'd written to Carey McWilliams—in the late 1960s, I think—and you said at the time that you got a background there working at UC.<sup>2</sup> You were talking about the chicken-feed lobby, in effect. And that you kind of started your understanding the mechanics of varying lobby groups, and . . .

**Hosmer:** I began to realize what was *really* going on in the policies of California agriculture, and to be shocked and revolted by it.

**Jarrell:** Specify.

**Hosmer:** Well . . . I could never answer routinely the questions, the letters that came in from the farmers.

**Jarrell:** That was your responsibility to answer correspondence . . .

**Hosmer:** I was really hired as a confidential secretary because he needed one because Dr. Holst had so many wheelings and dealings with so many big shots

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Walter Holst was an Assistant Professor of Agriculture at UC Berkeley until 1933.—Editor.

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix for xerox of undated letter written by Hosmer to Carey McWilliams in approximately 1969 (exact date unknown) outlining her history as an activist involved in California agricultural issues. McWilliams, author of *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (1939), was also chief, Division of Immigration and Housing, in the New Deal administration of California Governor Culbert L. Olson. —Editor.

in California agriculture. He was in the pay of so many big people that I had to keep private files for him. The rest of the people, staff, knew it. In fact the chairman, Giannini, of the College of Agriculture, had a "breakdown" and went away for three weeks he was so horrified at having to appoint Walter Holst permanent chief of the division . . . he knew what a disgrace he was.

**Jarrell:** You're saying then that Holst was taking money?

**Hosmer:** For all kinds of things.

**Jarrell:** From interests in egg and poultry . . .

**Hosmer:** In agriculture.

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Hosmer:** But . . . and that's what I was hired for. I was hired also because I knew stenography. My father had made me learn it in high school. That was to be the pattern in my life. I had to revert always to steno jobs because I wasn't trained in anything. But at any rate they would say, "What shall I feed my chickens, meat scrap or fishmeal?" And I'd have to go in and say, "What's it this week, Dr. Holst?" And he would say, "Booth-Sardine over in the city has this tremendous surplus of sardine oil; you better say fishmeal, or fishmeals . . . say fishmeals." The next week, he'd say, "Well, A.B. Miller . . . A.B." . . . that was A.B. Miller, who owned everything in Fontana, California; A.B. Miller was Fontana . . . he'd say, "A.B's got all this meat scrap; you'd better say meat scrap."

**Jarrell:** And this was what was nutritionally best for the chickens?

**Hosmer:** It had nothing to do with it.

**Jarrell:** I mean . . . but ostensibly that was the reason?

**Hosmer:** Precisely. Then . . . Booth-Sardine . . . Booth-Sardine had sardine oil as a by product. What was the oil company's name? In Washington State . . . National Oil Products had cod liver oil for chickens. So National Oil Products hired a man named Professor Carver. And Booth Sardine hired Holst. Carver to prove that

cod liver oil was better for chickens; this ipso facto in advance of proof . . . a priori . . . I don't know what you'd call that when you, when your answers come before your research.

**Jarrell:** Cheating. (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** Holst was to prove that sardine oil was recommendable. And since he was sort of courting my roommate, Eleanor, and she was a physiology major . . . he got her the job of feeding rats every day in the Life Science building, sardine oil . . . they paid her, mind you in those days, \$400 a month, for one hour a day to go up to the life sciences building and put a little sardine oil into the rat food, rat's diet. Well . . . Carver said when it was all over that cod liver oil was the best and Holst didn't do a bit of the work . . . all the slavies in the lab did the work, but his name was on it . . . which is always par for the course in science . . . said sardine oil was the thing. And that was my real glimpse into how these things work. Well, it was during prohibition, you know. Let's see, I had worked for him before I went to Europe that last time, during 1932.

**Jarrell:** 1932, right.

**Hosmer:** He used to bring us, all through the war, great gunny sacks right off the ships.

**Jarrell:** Filled with booze?

**Hosmer:** Filled with only the finest . . . only the very *finest* imported scotches, you know, the Pinch bottle kind.

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Hosmer:** He would lay ten bottles of pinch bottle scotch on my doorstep, and I didn't drink at all. I used to hand it out to all the boys that came (laughter) . . . well, you know I was pretty popular. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** (Laughter) So then you worked for . . . Holst . . .

**Hosmer:** And I saw lots of little goodies.

**Jarrell:** You kind of filed them away.

**Hosmer:** The Poultry Producers of Central California were a powerful force in the University of California's agriculture school. Believe me, they were a powerful force.

**Jarrell:** Where was the center of the poultry industry in the state at that time?

**Hosmer:** San Francisco.

**Jarrell:** Petaluma?

**Hosmer:** Petaluma, yes. But I mean the organization of the poultry industry was in San Francisco's Wall street which was California Street and Montgomery Street. I didn't really know too much about it. But I knew something was going on. I knew where the phone calls came from.

**Jarrell:** But this was an isolated bunch of phenomena. And you weren't connecting it up to anything else because you really didn't have that much background in agriculture and economics even then.

**Hosmer:** No, I wasn't connecting it up . . . I didn't care . . . I was interested in music. See, I would leave there at noon and go home and practice all afternoon. I had a Steinway. I sat on the top of this hill facing the Golden Gate, with the sun just setting and practiced five hours a day. I was having a ball . . . and that's where *my* head was at.

**Jarrell:** Now we left off, and you said you came back from Europe.

**Hosmer:** I had sold my Steinway for passage money.

**Jarrell:** Okay.

**Hosmer:** So I didn't have a piano; I'd lost my music, and I . . .

**Jarrell:** And you came back to San Francisco . . .

**Hosmer:** And I had five dollars, and I had to get a job.

**Jarrell:** Right. And that was right smack in the middle of the 1934 strike.

**Hosmer:** Three things happened.

**Jarrell:** Okay.

### **Blacklisting at UC Berkeley**

**Hosmer:** My first job was at the University of California as a floating stenographer. Wherever there was overflow work, they sent me around from office to office.

Well, I was this one-man steno pool . . . cleaning up professor's offices, doing the last of their dictation, or . . . so I didn't know whether one day I was going to be doing life science stuff, or English Department . . . but I ended up one week being sent to the UC Alumni Association. This girl said, "Look, would you go on with this? I want to go for a coffee break so badly. Would you transcribe this letter for a while?" Sibley, the writer of this letter, was the chairman of the Alumni Association. I don't remember his first name. Gordon Sproul was the President of the University of California at that time. This letter was personal, confidential; so the first thing that comes out of the dictaphone . . . it was addressed to Gordon Sproul on the subject of "red" professors on the campus. So I pulled out the paper I was doing, and stuck an extra carbon in . . . (laughter) I wanted to know.

**Jarrell:** You weren't too ethical, were you?

**Hosmer:** No, I wasn't. But it just seemed to me that this was scandalous. By then I had begun to think. My family, political background was coming back; you know, it was getting to me. Don't forget all the kids I was meeting were WPA kids and they were struggling. So I made a carbon. It was a complete list of every professor on the University of California campus that had to be watched.

**Jarrell:** Was suspect?

**Hosmer:** Who was suspected of being a red. He also, in the same memo asked if they couldn't reinstitute saluting the flag in each class.

Yes. Well, I threw the carbon into my purse and started all over again. She came back in the middle of it. When she saw what I was typing, she simply almost fainted right dead away on the floor and said, you know, "You've just simply got to promise. I had no idea this was going to happen." And I said, "Well, I'm just typing away here." So that day I rushed over to the city with my carbon copy. I had a couple of names of people that I knew were active in left-wing stuff, and I said, "I don't know who to give this to, but you'd better get it to somebody who can do something about it, 'cause this is terribly important"

Well . . . that next day, I went into a Berkeley bookshop and bought a local paper about the strike, and started reading for the first time. I brought it back to my room. I had a little place on Durant Avenue. And . . . my landlady who was a very huffy, awful woman. I was just so shocked by this that I told her what I'd seen at the University of California. I said, "This great campus . . . this sort of thing is going on, and I think it's awful." 'Cause I wasn't afraid of being penalized. She immediately called the [UC] employment office, apparently, because the next thing I knew, when I went in for my next assignment, there was note saying, "Do not employ." They wouldn't give me a single other job on campus. I was blacklisted at the University of California.

**Jarrell:** Do you know this for a fact? Did you ever confirm it for certain?

**Hosmer:** Oh yes. She told me.

**Jarrell:** She tol you?

**Hosmer:** She told me. She kicked me out. She said I was a red. She kicked me out, and she said she'd reported me. I had also bought a copy of Engels. (laughter) . . . At the same time I bought that local paper. I don't know . . . I suddenly, apparently wanted to find out. I didn't know where to turn. So she had mentioned the book, the paper she found on my desk, and the fact that she said she kicked me out. Oddly enough, I ended up working for the Fidelity Guarantee Building and Loan who knew nothing about me, I just didn't tell them anything. On the board of directors were both Sproul and Sibley, and all I did was type foreclosures of people's houses all day long.

## 1934 San Francisco Strike

**Hosmer:** Then I moved to San Francisco. I got a job at the Sperry Flour Company answering fan mail for Martha Mead.

**Jarrell:** Now Martha Mead was their equivalent to Betty Crocker?

**Hosmer:** Yes, a fictional character. Four of us, among us, made a living wage. Drifted Snow, Home-Perfected Flour. And there was another aspect of California agriculture, or California farm products which I learned first-hand—it was one company, Sperry Flour Company. We in the advertising department, had to push and promote Drifted Snow All-Purpose Flour. Down the hall was the office pushing their cake flour. We were placed in deadly competition with the cake flour. You couldn't get a decent cake unless you used cake flour which was made by Sperry. But we had to say all day long that Drifted Snow All-Purpose would give you just as good a cake. We were a subsidiary of Gold Medal. We would get letters every day saying, "I've used Gold Medal for years. But I just threw away a 50-pound sack because I tried your Drifted Snow, and it was so much better." (Sigh) That was my third introduction to California politics . . . to the whole subject of food and industry.

And during the 1934 strike . . . our building was down on Third and Townsend at the Terminal. There were gunny-sack barricades all set up. And behind the barricades were these little soldier boys, these 17, 18-year-old National Guardsmen with their guns . . . scared to death. The heads of our department were saying, "Our boys are going to get through." They were talking about the teamsters and everybody to get this stuff to the waterfront. And cursing the strikers as the trucks were trying to get to the waterfront . . . at what point that switch took place in my mind, I don't know. Suddenly I was aware of the strike, of what was going on.

My friend Marjorie Petray, whose husband was an officer in the National Guard . . . she met him in the city because he had to stay all night in the city. Then she came and stayed all night with me. But they spent some time in a hotel together.



And she said, "I can't tell you about it. All I can say is that I found Brook sobbing as if his heart would break at whatever he learned today from the National Guard. I don't know what's happened, but it must be something pretty terrible for Brook to be crying." And she said, "That's all I can tell you. Something is terribly, terribly wrong." And then I began to suddenly see the strike.

**Jarrell:** But how did you in your kind of foggy way, how did you interpret in your own mind what you thought was happening or what the issues were?

**Hosmer:** It became so clear because the people who were against the strikers were saying such untrue, terrible things, for one thing . . .

**Jarrell:** Did you know any of the strikers?

**Hosmer:** No. Not at that point. I didn't know who Harry Bridges was; I didn't know anything. All I knew was that I met one guy named Howard Hill at a cocktail party. He had never had a political thought in his head. He had witnessed the shooting of those two waterfront workers. And he had rushed to the phone booth and phoned in his story to the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*. When his news story appeared the following morning, it was precisely the reverse of what he'd seen and what he'd reported. And he quit his job even though he had a wife and kids. And he was drunk at the cocktail party, and he was telling us what he'd seen. Some years afterwards we hired that man [Hill] in the Farm Security Administration. He worked in my office in the Information Division—Howard Hill. But that was his waterbath, his baptism of fire. And I learned about it from him.

### **California Criminal Syndicalism Trials**

**Hosmer:** At the same time these other big dramatic things were taking place such as the Criminal Syndicalism trial.<sup>3</sup> That was one of the most shocking things

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<sup>3</sup>On July 20, 1934 seventeen Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) members, including Carolyn Decker and Pat Chambers, were arrested in Sacramento and charged with multiple violations of the California criminal syndicalism law. The trial began in January, 1935; on April 1, eight of the seventeen defendants were found guilty. In 1937 the

that ever took place in California. It was all because the farm workers wanted a little more money for picking cotton. And, you know, in the middle of that syndicalism trial, the reporter from the Hearst papers, stood right up one day and said, "This is too goddamned much for me. It turns my stomach. I'm getting out." And he quit right in the middle of the trial, but he said it out loud so the whole courtroom could hear him.

**Jarrell:** Who was he?

**Hosmer:** I don't remember his name. But I have described the whole thing in the pamphlet I got out later.

**Jarrell:** Which pamphlet?

**Hosmer:** It's called *Who are the Associated Farmers?*<sup>4</sup> and it is an exposition of the political and economic interests who organized against the unionization of farm labor and against small-scale farmers in California.

**Jarrell:** If you'd like to read a little bit from the pamphlet into the text right now you can, but we're going to Xerox the whole pamphlet if you'll allow us to.

**Hosmer:** Oh, are you.

**Jarrell:** But if you'd like to read a little portion or paraphrase it, you're welcome to.

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State Court of Appeals reversed the guilty verdicts and CAWIU members were released from prison. See Cletus E. Daniel's *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) for a detailed discussion of the California criminal syndicalism trials.—Editor.

<sup>4</sup>The pamphlet, *Who are the Associated Farmers?* was published in 1938 and is reproduced in the Appendix in this volume. The Associated Farmers of California, Inc. was established in March, 1934, in an effort to combat the labor organizing activities of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). The Associated Farmers was financed by the state's utilities, railroads, oil companies and other industries committed to the defeat of farm unionism. They initiated a statewide anti-communist propaganda effort; engaged in massive political lobbying to enact anti-labor legislation; and sought to activate the criminal syndicalism law to defeat labor organizing. The criminal syndicalism trials would probably never have taken place without the financial and political efforts of this group.—Editor.

**Hosmer:** I'll just read this one thing.

Let's see who was behind the criminal syndicalism convictions. Parker Frissel, first chairman of the Associated Farmers, was the lead man in the case. He named his fellow prosecutors as the California Farm Bureau Federation, the State Board of Agriculture, and the Chamber of Commerce. These organizations, you'll remember, are controlled or owned by big business as represented by such men as McIntosh. The union-smashing drive in San Francisco was in the hands of the Industrial Association and the Waterfront Employers Association. A lot of dirty work went into both attacks. The criminal syndicalism trial took place in Sacramento. There the Country Prosecutor, Neal MacAllister, was ousted from office shortly before the trial began. The new District Attorney was reluctant to prosecute the case. The big fellows told Attorney General Webb to appoint MacAllister as his special prosecutor and the trial went on." Would you like to know who a few of those large interests were? Well, there were men from Pacific Gas and Electric, and the California Packing Corporation . . . who were named on the committee to collect funds for the prosecution.

Then to put the heat on Webb, the following entered the fray. Alden Anderson, President of the Sacramento Capitol National Bank, B.F. Vandenberg, Vice-President Bank of America, George Peltie, Vice President and Manager of the Sacramento Bank of America, Arthur S. Dudley, Secretary-Manager of Sacramento Chamber of Commerce, August F. Brinkham, Manager Consumer Ice Company, and J.H. Stevenson, President, Merchants National Bank, and a few other dirt farmers like them. The real prosecutors were not Neal MacAllister or Parker Frissel, but Libbey-McNeil and Libby, Merritt-Tiggets Ranch, Balfour Guthrie Company, and its farm manager, Charles B. Weeks. Also prosecuting the from behind the curtain were the Bank of America and the California

Packing Corporation. It was done in the name of the Associated Farmers. And Gilbert Parker . . . oh, it was Gilbert Parker, not the newspaper man who did the publicity for them who couldn't stomach the job after three weeks. It was a pretty raw frame-up, as Gilbert Parker knew very well from the inside. Finally he said, "This is too damn much for me," and got out. "I'm going to get myself an honest job." he said.

Well . . .

**Jarrell:** Now this that you just quoted from was written a few years after . . .

**Hosmer:** It was written in 1938. But the trial took place way back in '35.

But you know they were acquitted of every count within the criminal syndicalism act. They were convicted of attempting to conspire to commit . . . they were convicted of the act itself, but not of the contents of the act if you can imagine such a semantic idiocy as that. Some of them served as long as three years. And a couple of them got terribly bitter in prison. Carolyn Decker became a kind of a big heroine to Hollywood.

**Jarrell:** Really?

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** Because she's been interviewed. I have not read the interviews, but she's been interviewed on this period.

**Hosmer:** Really. Is that so? But a friend I'd met on Telegraph Hill came up to the house and said, "Look . . ." Leo Gallagher was the defense attorney for the kids in this trial, and he didn't have a stenographer, and he was desperate . . . 'cause he was trying to work on their appeals, their briefs without steno help. They needed transcripts; they needed letters, so I was asked if I would I consider going over to his apartment after work and taking some dictation, transcribing it, and bringing it back the next day? And I didn't want to . . . I didn't see how I could do it and a full-time job, but I said I would. So I started working for Leo. And that's

when my eyes got really opened. Because the kids were already in prison . . . the girls were in Tehachapi. Carolyn Decker; I forget the other name. I don't remember their names. Isn't that funny. I've blanked out on all of them, except Carolyn.

But when we would go over to San Quentin, the defense lawyer would have to sit and wait. They'd make him wait one hour routinely. But they would send me up to the warden each week as though he'd never seen me; he would interview me as if he'd never met me before. Ten times, I was . . . I forget . . . the names are gone. I think that when things got terribly bad [during the witch hunt days], I trained myself never to remember any names. I would never be able to give you the names of people I worked with because I blanked them out. Almost deliberately, unconsciously, but nobody, no FBI could ever get me to talk . . . Because I really, honestly, don't remember them. But anyway, he would say, "What is your name? Where do you live? And who do you want to see?" And I'd say, "Oh, come on. You know my name and you know who I want to see and these are the questions you asked me last week." He'd say, "Never mind. Just answer the questions, please." Then after this long harangue, he would okay us. I'd try to see a different person each week . . . they would be brought out. Other visitors would have a whole hour; they would give us five minutes with a guard standing at our backs to listen to every word we said. And that was the kind of stuff that went on. Leo would fight for a chance to talk to his own clients up there. They wouldn't let him talk to them.

Well, anyway, it was hard work. I'd go out there to his place. He'd have milk and cheese or crackers or something for me instead of dinner. And I would take dictation till about 9:00 in the evening—from 5:30 til 9:00. Then I'd come home and transcribe till way after midnight. Then I'd put it in my locker at work, which was risky. Then I would deliver it for signature the next night. I kept doing this. I did this for four and a half months. And it was hard. But at the end of that time, I had my debts.

I continued to work for the Sperry Flour Company for one year. I started out a job there just stuffing envelopes at \$3.50 a day, I guess . . . And one night I just took the whole incoming basket of fan mail home and answered a lot of mail.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** And got the job answering the mail. And finally the great day arrived when he called me in and said, "We're going to make you a member of the Sperry family. At a \$100 a month. Now this is going to entail all this, you know, loyalty," and on and on and on. We used to call him "Father" behind his back. He used to lecture us. He would say there was something wrong with my letters . . . they were either too friendly or not friendly enough. And I didn't seem to know how to strike a happy medium. (Laughter) Well, I would encourage the people who wrote in, who were just so funny, and so delicious that I couldn't get enough of them, you know. The girl who did the recipes over the air . . . she was a movie actress, a tired, broken-down, lovely movie actress. Then there was the woman who dreamed up the recipes. She was a big, fat, blonde, Swede. Then there was the girl who actually tried them out in the kitchen. Now mind you we had to think of another way every single day of our lives.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter) To use that flour.

**Hosmer:** To use that flour . . . because the recipe went on the air at 11:00 o'clock in the morning. . . it had to be all mimeographed and ready to send out. We had to have nice things to say. I wasn't allowed to smoke on the job, and I was a smoker. And I would be sitting in the can with this cigarette and a pad thinking what in God's name am I going to say about green, upside-down cake. I had twenty minutes to come up with something. And I went through the agonies of the damned thinking up those blurbs for Drifted Snow. And I'd never baked a cake or a pie in my life.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter) That makes it even better.

**Hosmer:** I was so uninterested in the whole performance except some of those letters. I mean some of those letters—these women in six western states, this was their only contact with the world. Martha Mead got presents you wouldn't believe. Pearls and embroidered cushions and cakes that arrived. And the head woman got them, Miss Mason go to take everything home. She got it all.

**Jarrell:** And you were one quarter of Martha Mead. (Laughter)

## FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

**Hosmer:** And I was only one quarter of Martha Mead.

But anyway then, one day somebody told me the Farm Security Administration was opening western offices . . . I think my brother-in-law wrote me from Washington, D.C. and said they were coming to the West Coast.

He said, "Go and see a man named Jonathan Garst and you might just possibly get a job." Because you see I had everything they were looking for. I had advertising . . . I mean this was all on paper . . . it looked so great. I had experience in agriculture because I had worked in the College of Agriculture at UC. I had experience as a stenographer and I had experience in advertising, which would fit in beautifully in the FSA information division. So I was a natural over hundreds of applicants. The offices had just moved to Berkeley then, but here I had just moved to San Francisco. So I had to commute in reverse.

I had this appointment to meet the personnel manager, who turned out to be the man who had given me the first job I ever had on earth . . . wrapping packages for Bullock's Department Store in Los Angeles when I was 16. He was the man who was interviewing me. He'd gotten this big-shot government job as a personnel manager.

I told him that he'd given me my first job. So he sent me to be interviewed by the man I would work for, who was Fred Soule. Afterwards . . . well Soule looked like Abe Lincoln's ghost . . . scrawny, tall, crude . . . he used to clean his fingernails with a big paring knife and suck his teeth . . . (slurp, slurp) with a big toothpick, kept his feet up on the desk, and he was slow, lazy, intolerably slow sometimes. But the most knowing, the most observant, the happiest newspaper man I ever met in my life. He knew California backwards and forwards and sideways.

"Look," he said, "what have you been doing?" I said, "I have been whoring for the Sperry Flour Company" (Laughter) He had one foot on *The Nation* and the other foot on *The New Republic* on his desk . . . I knew I was going to be all right.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** It was twilight, and I could hear the Southern Pacific trains going by. He said, "I'm not going to ask you if you're a good stenographer. You wouldn't be here if you weren't, would you?" I said, "I don't think so." He said, "Well, I know about whoring." He says, "I worked for Hearst for years, and then I had a nervous breakdown. I used to just lie on my bed and dream about dropping a bomb on San Simeon." (Laughter) "And so," he said, "you know, for years we've been doing this to the land, and now the chickens are home to roost. And we've got to do something; I don't know what. But," he said, "you know I will try," he says, "Let's decide we're going to work together. You're going to have to try to make me look like a boss, and I'm going to try to make you look like a stenographer. And we'll protect one another and see if we can get some work done around here which ain't going to be easy. It ain't gonna be easy."

**Jarrell:** What was his working title ?

**Hosmer:** He was chief information division officer, and he'd gotten the job through the newspaper guild, because he had a little pull with the Gradys at the Democratic Central Committee. They had gotten him the job. It was totally disorganized. They had just moved in about 1935, and they just didn't know whether they were coming or going.

Well, I used to say Soule should write the autobiography of an unimportant American and it would have been a gorgeous book. He was a Jeffersonian democrat. He said, "Come to work tomorrow, and we'll swing from the rafters because," he says, "I don't know what else we're going to do around here." He says, "In Washington, D.C. they're doing the most insane, ridiculous things. They're talking about mule and plow farming, which sure ain't California. I've just gotten a notice from Washington that I'm supposed to get 2,000 huge posters with a mule and a plow on them and put them up in every public post office in the six western states. And that don't make sense." He said, "This ain't mule and plow farming." And that was my introduction. He talked till it was dark. He forgot that I was there. He was thinking out loud what was he gonna, we were gonna do . . . that was when I started to work for Farm Security . . .



**Jarrell:** What was your working title?

**Hosmer:** First I was just secretary. Then they wanted to give me a raise. But there was no appropriate category. So in order to give me a raise, they called me a junior information specialist and I got all the way up to \$150 a month, which was *big money* . . . oh, it really was. That was what I put on my letters. (Laughter) Of all the funny things to call me.

I hadn't been working there four months, five months, when a man came rushing into my office one day. Am I talking too much?

**Jarrell:** No. You're going just great.

**Hosmer:** . . . he came in and he said, "Would you mind taking a letter for me? I'm here from Washington, D.C. and I just can't find a steno."

### **Witch-Hunting at the Farm Security Administration**

**Hosmer:** So I said, "Well I'll be glad to," So he starts dictating, and the next thing I notice is that tucked away in his hand is a stop watch. He's testing my speed. I said, "What's the watch for?" He said, "Oh, nothing." I said, "No, what's the watch for? You weren't looking at the time; you're testing me." He said, "Well, I sort of was." I said, "Who are you?" Well he was one of their sleuths or whatever you call them.

They'd gotten word that I was a red . . . that I'd worked for Leo Gallagher. I went immediately to Garst, and I said, "This thing's just happened, and I want to know what's coming off." He said, "Helen, they're out to get you. Now it's not going to help when you and that other sidekick of yours come running around here with your hair loose, and a copy of *New Masses* sticking out of your purse. I can't protect you if you do things like that. You have to be better." He was the Regional Director of FSA, Jonathan Garst, and he was a pretty good guy. Remember when Nikita Krushchev came in the 1960s, he visited Garst's father or his uncle to see the wheat farm they had in the East, see the kind of quality of stuff, they were growing. I don't know . . . it was something like that.

**Jarrell:** Who was your sidekick?

**Hosmer:** Another steno. But we were both . . . I was left-wing by then, giving that impression. But we were on their list all right. So he said, "Look, I can only protect you if you're absolutely perfect at your job. And if you try to wear gloves and slick up a bit . . ." And he said, "That feller you hang around with, that picks you up at night, don't you think you'd better marry him? Don't you think it would help?"

**Jarrell:** Really?

**Hosmer:** He said, "If you want to stay here, you've got to think of a lot of things, 'cause," he said, "I'll be sunk. If they can get you on inefficiency, that's what you'll go down as." And he said, "That's what he was doing here."

**Jarrell:** Now, how did you take to this? Did you get on your high horse?

**Hosmer:** No. I took his advice to the letter. I even got married.

**Jarrell:** You really wanted to stay working there? Was that why?

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** Who was the fellow?

**Hosmer:** The guy I was married to for 21 years. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** Harry Hosmer?

**Hosmer:** Yes. But . . . that was 1935, my dear. They talk now about the witch hunts of the McCarthy era but in 1934, '35, and '36 in San Francisco it was a reign of terror. Worse than anything I've ever known since. Even during the House Un-American Activities Committee, or whatever they called themselves.

**Jarrell:** And the Dies Committee.

**Hosmer:** The Dies Committee . . . any of them . . . none of them was as terrifying as 1934, '35, '36.

**Jarrell:** Did you have friends to whom this was happening as well?

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** And did you discuss it among yourselves?

**Hosmer:** Yes. And we knew what we were up against. And it was incredible, because it didn't hardly matter what we said or did.

### **Setting Up Migrant Camps**

**Jarrell:** In your letter to Carey McWilliams,<sup>5</sup> from which I got a lot of this outline . . . You were with the Farm Security Administration from '35 to '37.

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** Tell me about your time there. What you did, and what you discovered and learned.

**Hosmer:** Well, of course you realize that the Farm Security Administration was probably the most unpopular organization that Washington could have possibly sent out here. They were fought every inch of the way by the [large] agricultural interests who felt them to be a tremendous threat . . . both from the implications of potential organized labor. . . the fact that they [farm workers] would be very, very safe from any kind of assault on government property. The FSA was like the opening gun of a new era for the farmworker and the agricultural interests didn't like that gun. So they were out to fight it, and they did everything possible to stop the construction of the [migrant] camp program. We were scheduled to set up during the first six months, 25 farm-labor camps. We actually got two built. And we had to fight for the land; we had to fight every inch of the way.

**Jarrell:** There was tremendous local opposition in the counties . . .

**Hosmer:** Tremendous. At one point in Imperial Valley they fought back and said, "We do not need or want a camp in Imperial Valley."

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<sup>5</sup>See footnote #2, page 20.

**Jarrell:** Now these camps were for migrant laborers . . .

**Hosmer:** Yes, for migrant labor. And they were government property. They had showers, toilets, flush toilets . . . Laundries, recreation rooms . . . beautiful, clean facilities. As a matter of fact, once they had acceptance in the counties, the local farmers would come to the dances. They loved them. They became sort of club houses for all the local people. As far as the agricultural workers were concerned, the camps just became little havens of safety. They had their own governing bodies . . . Tom Collins was the one who set the pattern for all of them, and he was this fabulous character whom we all got to love so much. He thought nothing of tearing up his own underpants to make diapers for the new babies and things like that, you know, when he ran out of materials. He set up the pattern of democratic rule, majority rule, the committee system in the camps. It stemmed from his work; he had done something like that in some remote islands, almost like missionary work, and when he came to California, he started it . . . and all of the camp managers went through his hands for training before they took on a camp of their own later. But he was marvelous. At any rate, all of a sudden tremendous pressure was brought to bear on the state political parties to renege on camps for Imperial Valley on the grounds that they weren't needed. They got in touch with the bigshots like [William Gibbs] MacAdoo, was it? He must have been functioning at that time. Well, Jonathan Garst, the Regional Director, sent Omer Mills down there to check it out and see whether or not a camp was or was not needed. I had been down just two months before, and I had seen about 150 farm families squatting near one of the open canals . . . they were paying ten cents for a bucket of water. They had to go three miles to get that bucket of water and use up their precious gasoline to get it . They were trying to cook, bathe, wash their clothing with that water. They had no place to sleep, no camps at all in some districts. It was the most terrible thing I've ever seen. And they were getting impetigo for the first time in their lives. They didn't even know what hit them. They showed me the sores appearing on their faces and asked what it was. They didn't know.

Omer Mills went down there, and I think that Jonathan Garst was getting ready to knuckle under to the pressure against the camps. What he fully expected from

Omer was a report that indeed they were right, that they didn't need a camp. So Omer went down there, looked it over, and then called back to San Francisco, and he said, "I want my stenographer," and got me on the line, and Fred Soule. He named three other people . . . "before I will talk to Jonathan Garst." Then he said, "I want the girls to have their steno notebooks out." So we did. We were all alerted with our hands on the phones . . . then he said, "There's every reason in the world for building that camp, and no reason in the world for not building the camp." And Jonathan said, . . . he was sputtering and fuming . . . Mills said, "This is my last word on the subject. I am now coming back." Which was a pretty brave and wonderful thing to do. And the camp was built down there. But of course they've been torn down since. At any rate, Fred Soule said, "How would you like to take a trip through the state and see what you've been talking about?"

### **Touring California Migrant Camps**

**Hosmer:** I hadn't seen a thing. I'd gone back and forth from Berkeley to school to my family home in Los Angeles thousands of times, but I didn't know anything about California. We either went by boat which was a heavenly way to travel in those days . . . the *Harvard*, and the *Yale*, and the *S.S. Alexander* up and down the coast. Oh, how I loved that. They should reinstate that. Or by train, or by broken-down jalopy. But I had never seen the state. You can travel now and never see the state. You've got to go into the backwoods, into the interior valleys. So we . . . I started out to have a look. After going all the way down to Imperial Valley and starting back via the coast . . . and I remember I hit the county of San Luis Obispo and ran out to the camp at Nipomo Beach where the peas were growing. There were two camps adjacent to one another. One camp had about a hundred Mexican families in it, and right next to it was a camp with about 150 brand new Okies and Arkies in it. They had just arrived. Impetigo had broken out. Their tents were pitched in muddy water and mud. They had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours. In one tent there was a mother, a father, a grandmother, a grandfather, three children, and a little baby dying of pneumonia, clutching a wilted cabbage leaf. The father was in the corner crying .

. . he had gone into the town with his last drop of gas to the health department and they'd given him a ten cent bottle of camphorated oil to rub on the baby's chest. The baby was dying of pneumonia. The man was sobbing.

And as I said . . . they had no food. And I walked out, and walked across to the other camp where the Mexican workers were, and they had built a little fire. Two workers were standing there as I approached and came up to me, and one of them started to talk. They realized I was government. And the next thing I looked up, there were four more, and then eight more, and then ten more . . . and suddenly there was a sea of these dark brown, intent eyes staring at me and asking what shall we do. The peas weren't ready. And all those people in Imperial Valley were packing up to come to the peas. No . . . I saw the Imperial Valley people after. And I had tried to tell the Imperial Valley . . .

**Jarrell:** Not to come up till the peas were ready?

**Hosmer:** . . . not to come. And they said, "We were told there was work and we're going."

**Jarrell:** They had those circulars advertising picking jobs . . .

**Hosmer:** Yes. Anyway, the Mexican workers showed me a bag of almonds and a little paper bag of raisins that they had been given from the Surplus Commodities Corporation and three cans of condensed milk. They had about sixty babies in that camp. And that's all the milk there was. And that's all the food there was. Then I remembered that coming across my desk had been this announcement from the Surplus Commodities of a glut of almonds and raisins on the market. So it had finally bled down to these farm workers in the form of these two sacks.

They asked me what to do; again I was government. And never in my life have I felt so helpless and so utterly impotent and so really sickened by my helplessness. But I got in the car and drove into San Luis Obispo and phoned my boss, Fred Soule. And told him to get in touch with Dorothea Lange [Lange, the FSA photographer] if she wanted pictures. That's where the famous picture was taken with the children—"Migrant Mother."

Soule got in touch with everybody, told them what the conditions were. He got donations, trucks were volunteered, and they filled two trucks with food from churches and club women and everybody and rushed it down to about 400 families. By the time the food had arrived, three days later when the Imperial Valley came and the peas were ready, the wages had dropped half again as much because they now had at least four times as many workers as jobs. And believe it or not, these desperate, starving people, rugged individualists every one of them, with no outside [labor] agitators, no help, no, nobody . . . said, "We won't do it. We will simply not work for those wages. Not after what you've promised on these billfolds." But the point is, that they actually went out on strike . . . these desperate people, although later they broke the strike.

There were women sitting there with their little photograph albums that were done in velvet, you know, that they had brought out with them from their farmhouses . . . their little Bibles, and their little precious things . . . they'd never seen such a thing as this before. They weren't striking long hairs. They were individualists they . . .

I'm sorry to say this, but I'm sure those very people, after World War II came along, and they got jobs in defense industries, and they bought tract houses and TV sets and cars . . . they became the backbone of the support, I'm positive, which elected Ronald Reagan governor [of California]. Those people . . . they didn't like unions. They would squat on their knees and sift the dirt in their hands and say, "All we want is a little bit of this land; that's all we ask is a little bit of this. A little bit of this good dirt." They'd never seen such soil; they'd never seen such fruit; they'd never seen such magnificent abundance *pouring* out of the land. And they couldn't touch a drop of it except to harvest it. Well . . . Dorothea Lange became famous because of that little group sitting around that fire. Her picture became immortal.

Well I came back from the trip quivering and shaking; sickened by what I had seen in one of the richest states in the United States. In fact, after all I'd read and all I'd heard, and all the government reports, you simply had to see these conditions with your own eyes to believe it. It was exactly the way it felt the first time I went to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1961 and to Savannah, Georgia. Until I saw

the countryside of Georgia I couldn't possibly have believed that such dire, desperate poverty existed in the United States. I couldn't possibly have believed what it was like for a black in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1961. To ride in the elevator where you couldn't get them to look at you or smile at you or say good morning to you. You couldn't walk in a black street because they weren't used to seeing a white person on the black street. Well that's the way it felt the first time I saw glorious California, opulent agriculture . . . I just was sick.

I also was in a government camp the day a migrant lady had just arrived . . . this family had just come in, and she took eight showers. She stood under the shower all afternoon, crying, drying herself, and going back into the shower again. She couldn't believe it. The first time they saw flush toilets, these children didn't know what they were for. They couldn't understand whether you were supposed to wash your feet in them or your head in them or drink it . . . they didn't know. This was the United States of America, and half these people didn't know what flush toilets meant; we were so proud of our plumbing, you know, but they didn't know.

And California growers weren't about to let them find out . . . then they'd want it for keeps. Then where would they be with their cheap farm labor. The growers began to hate the Okies and the Arkies and long for their dear, dear Mexican workers, their wetbacks, and they began to say the white man was . . . lazy, and didn't want to work . . . give us a Mexican any old day, you know. They know their place. They told me in Imperial Valley that the only trouble with them is "they want to learn all about the farm machinery and you know you can't really trust them to touch that stuff." They were always having to shoo them away from the machinery 'cause they wanted to learn. "We don't want them to know that stuff. They might break it." Well that was some of what I experienced in the Farm Security Administration.

At another point the landowners were charging triple, quadruple, for every piece of land they sold to the government for a farm camp. They were selling it at choice grower prices . . . the lousiest crumbum piece of land . . . they were getting *top* prime prices. At the same time though, the Farm Security Administration bureaucracy did some of the most asinine things you can



possibly imagine. We would get notices from Washington that we had to get bids for a clipping service before we could get a clipping service. We would write letters back and say, "Look, there is only one clipping service in California, and that's Allen's Clipping Service. We can't get bids because there's only one." They would not even answer our letters. They would simply say, "Your requisition is denied because you did not submit bids." And then we would write again and say, "We did not submit bids because . . ."

**Jarrell:** Because you can't submit bids.

**Hosmer:** And they would say, "Your requisition is denied." So finally Fred and I sat down in the office and we invented the name of a company, and we invented a bid, and we sent it in, and they finally let us get Allen's Clipping Service. But for a month we paid for Allen's Clipping out of our own pockets because we couldn't get clips any other way. Their posters were another insane thing. The office boy every night . . . he lived in the East Bay . . . would load his car up with these posters as fast as they arrived and dump them in the bay. What else were we to do with them?

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** We kept getting these directives from Rexford Guy Tugwell's office [at the U.S. Department of Agriculture] that we had to put them up. Now most of the post offices in California were Republican strongholds. They weren't going to put up a Roosevelt poster anyway, even if it was applicable. Secondly, they didn't have wall space for those big posters. They had to put their most-wanted things up and all the other notices; there wasn't any room. It was so unrealistic. We got crazy directives. We got folders, manuals, and all the office boys were all day long bringing in replacements, corrections, and changes. At first I used to take them home and study them so conscientiously. But after awhile, I didn't even look at them; I just let them pile up dust in the corner.

When the program would bog down and they would scream at Fred [Soule] for not getting out enough information . . . well, he couldn't put out news releases about a program that wasn't going anywhere. He was so damn busy on the

phone trying to keep the reporters from writing us up and telling of what a bunch of failures we were that we couldn't get off the ground with these camps. But after a while it did get going over everybody's dead bodies. We found we had at least five big shot employees in our FSA outfit who were working for our enemies, who had infiltrated and were doing everything to sabotage our program. But he said to me one day, "Helen, why don't you go on down and see . . ." I get Brady and Grady mixed up . . . the man who was the central big shot Democrat . . . Lucretia Grady of the Gradys . . . "go down and see her. Tell her what we're doing." She was a big, big Democrat, sat on the Democratic Central Committee. . . a wonderful person, you know, a real powerhouse. "Just go down there and tell her what we're doing." By then I had caught the drift pretty well. So I'd go down there and say , "Fred thought you might want to know what we're up to these days." "Oh," she says, " I'm very interested." So I would just give her the old one, two, three, you see. He taught me early on . . . he said, "Now I'm going to let you sit in on this interview, but you must be as wise as a serpent and guileless as a dove."

"Now remember it's not what they say during the interview, it's what they say after you put you notebook away. Now you just listen *hard*." So he taught me by letting me sit in on how to get the information. He was a whiz bang kid on it.

He would open the morning paper, and he'd open the society page, and he'd say, "What do you see on this page?" And I'd say, "I don't know. So-and-so's marrying so-and-so . . ." And he says, "Read it again." He says, "Look . . . cement's married steel and steel's just married . . . (laughter) and that means there's going to be a you know . . ." He could interpret the society page exactly as if he would be reading the financial page. He was really a whiz. And when they tried to get his job and dump him because California agriculture [interests] put the pressure on . . . and Garst was getting it and a man named Peterson or somebody from Washington replaced Soule . . . who didn't know anything about California. Soule never took his big feet off the desk where they were always. He laid down the paring knife with which he peeled his fingernails long enough to pick up the telephone and call Washington. [inaudible] he called the Newspaper Guild in Washington, right into the White House . . . pipeline . . . and

four minutes later Garst was in Fred's offices . . . sweat just pouring down his face . . . saying, "Where did you ever get the idea we were going to replace you? We couldn't possibly get along without you."

(Laughter) Because Fred had built big strong bridges to Washington and they couldn't just about dump him. He knew how to operate; he was a really smart man. He got me my raise. Another thing he did . . . he would sit down and dictate these long, long letters, pouring his heart out on what was wrong with Washington, what a bunch of idiocy they were handing us. How it couldn't work the way they were trying to work it. The letters would go on page after page . . . and I would dutifully transcribe it and type it up. And I'd say, "Now I'm going to read it out loud to you and then we're going to put it away, aren't we." (Laughter) He'd say, "Yes." So I'd read it, and we'd both get a tremendous amount of satisfaction out of having done it. But we'd never mail them.

**Jarrell:** Could you sum up and give the essence of what his complaints were—how the FSA was ineffective?

**Hosmer:** There were just so many foolish things.

**Jarrell:** Well, what did they boil down to?

**Hosmer:** Well they boiled down to the fact that we had to fight. And if we didn't fight, we weren't going to get anywhere . . . that we were being sabotaged from within and from without. We had a 99.9% hostile press; we were building bridges with churches and club groups and the League of Women Voters and the Grange . . . we couldn't get the Farm Bureau and we couldn't get the Farmers Union because they were totally controlled. The *Pacific Press* was totally controlled.

**Jarrell:** What about the state agencies? What were your relationships with them?

**Hosmer:** We couldn't . . . only the church groups, the Grange, maybe a few members of the Grange . . . but outside of that, there was no way we could crack through unless we just went ahead and did it with a frontal attack. And to stop

sending all these foolish, non-productive, irrelevant, PR stunts because that's not where the action was. The action was in building these camps and filling them full of agricultural workers so that they could organize [into unions].

**Jarrell:** That was implicit. It was never a policy statement.

**Hosmer:** It was implicit, but not using . . . we could never, never use the word "organize." Soule finally started using me to go out and make speeches, and I spoke to many Granges and church groups all over the state, to explain the [FSA] program . . . when they asked me what they could do, or what could be done, I always had to stop short at the word "organize," which was the reason I quit [the FSA] to go out and do it on my own. Because I could no longer stop short without using the word. And I meant for the [family] farmers to organize and for the farmworkers to organize. And unless they got together, they were doomed in the state of California . . . both groups. They couldn't be enemies; they had to be friends, or they were lost. And. . .

**Jarrell:** Or, if not friends, accommodating.

**Hosmer:** Accommodating each other's needs.

**Jarrell:** Was there some particular incident that catalyzed . . .

**Hosmer:** Me?

**Jarrell:** You.

**Hosmer:** Into action. No, I don't believe so. I just believe the time had come for me finally to leave the FSA, though I really didn't want to, I wanted to go back to my music . . . I couldn't leave it mid-air, I just couldn't. And I couldn't go on with what I was doing because it was stupid. Because the camps were step one only and the camps were no good unless there were unions.

**Jarrell:** They were for remedying immediate misery?

**Hosmer:** Immediate misery. But they were a stepping stone, and had to be used as such. But the Farm Security couldn't say that. The Agricultural Adjustment

Administration was [doing] tremendous things. And Mr. Sweat, I think his name was, was in charge. And they were doing some fine things in saving farms from foreclosure, Farmers Home Loan or something like that. I can't remember the title. But they were all working together. We tried to set up two farm cooperatives, the Mineral King Ranch and another one. And they were almost immediately sabotaged. They were doing so well. But they couldn't get shelf space in the marketplace, you see. That was the way they were being sabotaged. The big interests did everything to stop the Mineral King Ranch co-operative. And things like that were underway. At any rate . . . oh, it was terribly, terribly interesting.

### **Anna Louise Strong**

**Hosmer:** When Anna Louise Strong came back from the Soviet Union, and came out to the West Coast . . . she announced that she wanted to see California agriculture . . . She was this brilliant, famous, newspaper woman and writer. She had lived in the Soviet Union and wanted to compare California farming with farming in the Soviet Union. She asked if I would be her guide and take her around California. Neither of us drove a car at that time. But she claimed she drove a car, but when somebody loaned her a car, and we got on the freeway down there somewhere, and she was going 20 miles an hour and screaming, "They're going to kill me and I'm going to kill you, and I can't go any faster; I'm not used to this; we don't drive like that in Russia." And I just sat there dying because she said, "We're going to get killed, that's all there is . . . there is no possible way we can avoid these drivers, this country." (Laughter) "Oh, dear God." She would make me get off and stop at about five or ten motels before she could choose . . . she could not make a decision on small things.

**Jarrell:** As her guide, were you still in FSA?

**Hosmer:** I'm trying to remember whether I had become part of the Simon J. Lubin Society then. I think I had already left FSA because I wouldn't have been able as Farm Security Administration staff to take her around.

**Jarrell:** I would think not. I think it would be pretty risky because of her left-wing associations.

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** And you would not be following those directives to keep a low profile.

**Hosmer:** No, no.

**Jarrell:** How would you characterize her?

**Hosmer:** Well, I'd say I think she was going through menopause. She would go to a restaurant and look at the menu for about 40 minutes and not be able to make up her mind . . . and finally make up her mind . . . and when the food arrived she'd say, "That isn't what I wanted at all." Then she would walk out of the restaurant and go next door and buy some milk and cookies and sit on the curb and eat them. She got up in the middle of the night after the fifth choice where she decided she wouldn't stay . . . and I'd see she was gone, and I'd have to hunt through one motel after another to find her. And she had gone somewhere else in the middle of the night. And she would sob and cry and carry on and then say, "I don't know what makes me act like this."

But when we went into Tecos Ranch without permission . . . we just sneaked in . . . It was the most terrifying place I've ever seen in my life. Every tree was perfection; every road was perfection . . . there was not one stray leaf on the ground. And there were these company houses with guards walking up and down. When the worker moved out, they took the light bulb out; the handles off the faucets. They had their company store in the place. They sold hamburger which sat out in the open on a wooden board, and the flies just covered over the top of this mound of meat. These workers couldn't leave the compound so they had to buy provisions from the company. When they finished the season, they always owed money. And they were charged for the light bulbs and they were charged for the water they used. Well Strong managed to find a foreman and sat down and interviewed him for one hour. Without taking her pencil out . . . she was able to go back to the motel and sit down to the typewriter and type out every one of her questions and his answers from memory.

**Jarrell:** So that's how you know this.

**Hosmer:** Yes I watched it happen. I couldn't believe her accuracy and her skill both in her questions and the answers she elicited. And the fantastic brilliance of her memory. Yet she could turn around and act like a little child of two and make life so difficult that you wouldn't be able to believe how difficult. We stopped on the way home at Los Gatos and visited John Steinbeck on that trip. And at that point the last thing in the world he wanted was to be reminded of his *Grapes of Wrath* days. He was going up in the world. And his wife had painted their piano shocking pink and was doing all sorts of things to their house . . . his first wife . . .

**Jarrell:** Where was their house?

**Hosmer:** It was in Los Gatos somewhere on the hill. And he was very, very nervous about talking to Louise. And we left and came back to San Francisco. And my husband met us. And I said, "Let me please get away from this woman because I am utterly devastated. You've got to find a hotel for her." And he said she began to give him the same run around and he said, "Anna, wait in the car." He went in and he found a beautiful room in a hotel. He said, "Where's your bag? Give me your hand; get out of the car." He walked her up the steps; he walked her to the elevator; he says, "This is your room. Goodnight." She didn't say "boo". She accepted it. She wanted someone to make a decision for her. To tell her what to do. But . . . for a newspaper reporter, I have never met her like, never. What she elicited from that trip, the amount of data she collected . .

**Jarrell:** Were these put into articles? And if so, where were they published?

**Hosmer:** I don't remember. I think they were in a book in which there was one chapter on California agriculture. But I saw her notes, and they were magnificent. Yes, it must have been way long after I left Farm Security. But . . .

**Jarrell:** You left Farm Security in '37 . . . and you don't know exactly when . . .

**Hosmer:** Early on, early on. Yes. It's all sort of a big blur. (Laughter) You know, the times. . .

**Jarrell:** The times . . . Well a lot of these events are simultaneous.

**Hosmer:** It seems to me I was in this whole FSA thing for about five years. But it doesn't add up . . . from 1935 through 1939 is how many years? I don't know how many years that is. '35—four years. I thought it was five years, but it couldn't be then. My son was born March 27, 1940.

### **La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, 1940**

**Jarrell:** I would really like to hear about your attendance at the La Follette Committee hearings<sup>6</sup> . . . when you were high pregnant . . .

**Hosmer:** Yes. I covered the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee hearings in Los Angeles. It was three weeks before my son's birth when I finally threw in the towel and said, you know, "Somebody come and get me. I can't do this anymore." 'Cause I was filing a story every night after sitting all day at the hearings for *Federated Press* in New York. I was getting out special bulletins for the Lubin Society, and I was covering the hearings. And I was pretty pregnant. (Laughter) And it was very difficult to sit at that press table for eight hours a day. Then of course we [the Lubin Society] had fought and worked and we got the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, a congressional committee, to come out to California.

**Jarrell:** Now when you say that, whom did you try to influence to get them to come here?

**Hosmer:** We just needed them out here. We had to justify their coming by giving them data and material which I kept sending them, to plead with them to come.

**Jarrell:** Whom did you deal with?

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<sup>6</sup>The subcommittee on Senate Resolution 266, widely known as the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee conducted extensive hearings in California during 1939-40, investigating employer violations in industry and agriculture, of labor rights and civil liberties under the National Industrial Recovery Act and the National Labor Relations Act.—Editor.



**Hosmer:** With a man named Ben Allen of the La Follette Committee. I kept sending my stuff to him, until I really whetted his appetite, I think. (Laughter) Anyway they finally came, and came to our office as a matter of fact. Several people turned up . . . Ben Allen, he was the real sleuth of the operation. He was a very sharp man.

**Jarrell:** This was the first time the committee had dealt with agricultural labor?

**Hosmer:** I think so.

**Jarrell:** I mean 'cause they were investigating both industrial and agricultural labor in California.

**Hosmer:** Oh, were they?

**Jarrell:** Yes, they were investigating violations of the right of labor to organize, among all sorts of workers.

**Hosmer:** Well they overlapped, I would think.

**Jarrell:** Yes. Well you were trying to make that point, very cogently.

**Hosmer:** The beautiful part of the La Follette Committee was that they had subpoena power, which we had never had.

**Jarrell:** Why was that significant?

**Hosmer:** Because they could get data which we could never get. I must say at times during the hearings, it was very funny to hear a man like Leonard Wood of Cal-Pak calmly announce that he didn't know what his own salary was, that he didn't know what the yearly income of Cal-pak was, that he didn't know anything about the organization which he headed. And that was not, I would say, the most dramatic form of cooperation I've ever seen in my life. (laughter) The tear gas salesmen who didn't remember who they sold what to; the sawed-off shotgun people, the stool pigeons, the undercover men . . . that just were there, you know, in great number. There were some very, very ugly things that were uncovered.

**Jarrell:** They were in your office getting raw data.

**Hosmer:** They started to and the pressures apparently were so strong that they folded and went back East . . . they were recalled or it was just too hot. I think I attended the hearings up in San Francisco and the other one in Los Angeles. Then we had to roll up our sleeves and start all over again and get more petitions and more demands and roll out bigger guns and go back . . . Lucretia M. Grady . . . she was the lady I was trying to remember. Lucretia M. Grady of the Democratic Party, who was a beautiful and gracious lady, and very potent in the Democratic Committee. We went to see her again. We went to see everyone and we got churches. And the churches were very, very important to us then.

I remember one of the men, one of the witnesses they queried . . . and it's all in the published hearing transcripts, was Stewart Strathman, one of the Associated Farmers' field men. He had been forced to tell some of his activities. I went up to him and I said, "Stewart, how can you bear to look yourself in the mirror when you go home at night? Or when you wake up in the morning, how can you stand it?" And he said, (while laughing), "Oh, Helen, I never looked beyond a paycheck in my life." He just couldn't have cared less.

But to me what was impressive was the dignity, the objectivity, and the restraint of the people who were running the La Follette Committee hearings. Someone should do a study contrasting the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, the raucous, mad things that happened in those hearings, and the unfairness of them . . . contrast them with the leaning-over backwards, dignified quality of these La Follette hearings. They were dealing with really horrible stuff. I mean when they were quizzing one of these vigilantes on how come the fire hoses, which they turned on the strikers, just managed to drown a baby in a striker's car, and I don't know whether it was Hugh Osborne or whoever, who just said, "People die and are born everyday. What of it?" You know, it was really eerie. And I was writing it up for the *Rural Observer*. We got a special bulletin out almost every week.

**Jarrell:** Now you also mentioned to me once before that you were writing for the *Federated Press*.

**Hosmer:** Yes, I was filing a story every night.

**Jarrell:** How did *Federated Press* get in touch with you?

**Hosmer:** I don't remember, dear, but they called and asked me if I was covering the hearings. And I said, "Yes, of course." And they said, "Would you," you know, "give us whatever you've got."

**Jarrell:** Would you say something about *Federated Press*?

**Hosmer:** It was a kind of progressive press service that rivaled the wire services . . . that carried stories to *all* of the progressive newspapers in the country but which the wire services didn't furnish them. Or maybe they couldn't afford the wire services, or they wouldn't have gotten it straight . . . because some of the reportage that went on during those La Follette hearings especially in the Hearst papers, you wouldn't have believed how slanted it was.

**Jarrell:** I've read some of the accounts.

**Hosmer:** Oh, have you?

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Hosmer:** So you know the distortions that took place.

**Jarrell:** Some of the news accounts were just very hysterical.

**Hosmer:** Just completely hysterical accounts.

**Jarrell:** Do you think that the research staff, of the La Follette Committee were out to get the growers?

**Hosmer:** Oh no. I don't think so. Their purpose, wherever they went all over the country was to simply open the door wide enough to break the terrible repression in some parts of the country, in these steel towns, auto towns, and farm towns . . . where union organizing was almost impossible because of the repression.

**Jarrell:** Despite NIRA.

**Hosmer:** Despite everything. To bring out enough facts in the open to let in enough fresh air so that they could go ahead and organize. That was their only purpose.

**Jarrell:** Well we've just ended up with you and the Lubin Society . . .

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** And so we've just skipped four years. We'll have to go back. So you quit Farm Security . . .

### THE SIMON J. LUBIN SOCIETY 1937-1941

**Hosmer:** I went to Jonathan Garst, and to Fred Soule, and I went to Omer Mills and told them what I was going to do, that I was going to work on these issues independently. I told them I would sure as hell like to have a little contribution from their luscious salaries. And they said, "Okay. We'll help you; help you get underway, anyway." So they pledged about \$25 a month which gave me \$75 which enabled me to at least rent an office space and a typewriter and settle down. I sat down in this room all alone, wrote to the Simon J. Lubin family and asked for permission to use the name.

**Jarrell:** And why did you want to use his name?

**Hosmer:** Because he was a champion of the underdog of California agriculture,<sup>7</sup> and we thought . . . it was a very poor stunt because almost everybody, east coast, west coast, assumed we were a foundation, and started pestering me, writing me for all kinds of data and information for free, gratis. I answered letters from all kinds of people and gave them tons of data, and they never even sent me a postage stamp because they thought it was all being paid for.

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<sup>7</sup>During the progressive administration of Governor Hiram W. Johnson (1911-17) Simon J. Lubin, an eminent public figure, investigated farm labor issues and recommended the establishment of the Division of Immigration and Housing.—Editor.

And I must say right now, people have plagiarized my stuff, stolen it, worked out of my office, used my files, written a series of articles and lifted my manuscripts, some didn't even put quotation marks around my sentences—Marquis Childs of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* came out, sat in my office, used my files . . . they did a whole Sunday supplement, was the most popular issue of the day, three-page solid spread on California. No quotes. No acknowledgments.

**Jarrell:** No attributions at all?

**Hosmer:** None whatsoever. And not even a postage stamp. They didn't even pay for the paper they used in my office. It was that way all the time. They just came and took and took. And George West sent his ace . . . he was the editor of what was then *The San Francisco News*, now defunct. He sent his reporters to my office also to use my files. Hell, I even got letters from Nazi Germany.

### ***Their Blood is Strong***

**Hosmer:** Steinbeck gave us permission to use all these articles of his that had appeared in *The San Francisco News*. So I rushed to the printer and got them printed up and called them *Their Blood Is Strong*.<sup>8</sup> These people in Germany wrote, thinking it was something to do with the purity of blood or something and ordered five copies. The tragic, bitter thing about that pamphlet was . . . Steinbeck gave me all the proceeds, didn't ask for a dime. Well, as soon as they came back from the printer, I peeled off the first twenty copies and handed them to anybody who came in; I was so glad to get something published. The whole first hundred copies. A month later I got a letter from a big publishing house in the East saying, "Do you have any in mint condition? We'll pay you \$100 a piece." We were selling them for 25 cents. I forget which publishing house, but we got requests from at least three after that. I didn't have one. I'd given them all away.

I didn't know this was going to be such a famous thing. I don't remember which publisher it was. But in 1967 I had one copy left, and for some reason I was real broke. I took it to a bookshop and he immediately gave me \$90 and turned

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<sup>8</sup>*Their Blood is Strong*, by John Steinbeck, San Francisco, California: Simon J. Lubin Society of California, 1938.

around and sold it for \$500 in San Francisco. I was that naive about publishing things, you know. But I made up *Their Blood is Strong*: with photographs by Dorothea Lange . . . six original articles by Steinbeck. (Laughter)

We got sponsors to publish it. It sold like hotcakes. I don't know how many times we went back to the printer for reruns. But he didn't ask for a dime. He gave us every penny of it. I doubt if he even had a copy for himself. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** You said earlier that Steinbeck was rather reticent to get involved?

**Hosmer:** He was going on to bigger and better things. Look, he was maybe contemplating a divorce . . . I don't know. He was scared to death of all these left-wingers swarming around. He had used my files for background data. I had learned how to build a data bank from working at Farm Security.

**Jarrell:** A data bank. Did you take your files with you from the Farm Security? Some of them?

**Hosmer:** No.

**Jarrell:** No?

**Hosmer:** They needed them. I built my own. I knew where to get the duplicates. And then I could just expand and do whatever I wanted. I was always behind in my filing cause it was . . . such a chore .

**Jarrell:** Well, I want to get back to the beginning of the Simon J. Lubin Society. You wrote the family, Mrs. Lubin, and then you asked permission to use his name.

**Hosmer:** And they said okay. After a while the son came and looked us over and thought we were very dubious. He didn't like our looks at all. He was a very peculiar fellow. Very suspicious.

**Jarrell:** Now who were "we?"

**Hosmer:** Well . . . there was me and maybe two or three others who volunteered to help me. I don't remember their names. I'm sorry. I just think I will say that I don't remember their names.

**Jarrell:** Well, I want it in the record. I want that in the record.

**Hosmer:** I do not wish to use any names at all. I'll be willing to tell you anything about my own actions, or my husband's, but I don't want to involve any one else.

### **Naming Names: Commentary on the Witch-Hunt Mentality**

**Jarrell:** During the course of our interview you have sometimes been very free in naming names of people whom you've worked with, and then sometimes you have expressed a great reticence to name people whom you were involved with, say in the Lubin Society or other places . . . why don't you want to name the names of these people?

**Hosmer:** Because though we call ourselves a democracy and though this is supposed to be a country in which human rights are respected, I think it is a country which has had blatant, incredible violations of human rights, and unfortunately continues to have them. In my time, since the '30s, and the last time was about six months ago, the FBI has from time to time persuaded me personally that the most discreet wisdom I could practice lay on the side of total reticence both in speech and in deed. (Laughter) (Pause) . . . Well at any rate, that's what I did.

[inaudible] and the printer called and said the FBI had trailed me from North Hollywood to New York to Berkeley to San Francisco to Summerland. I have heard from them at least once a year and I have always been very sure when it is the FBI and when it is an innocuous phone call. About five times during these periods they have identified themselves as FBI. I am perfectly willing to talk about myself. But I am certainly never going to, if I can possibly help it, involve anyone else who might be hurt by them. After all my husband was on the blacklist for ten whole years . . . trained as a tool designer by Lockheed during

the war, kicked out of Lockheed along with 21 other people, because of my Associated Farmers pamphlet. When two men who called themselves plant security, and who turned out to be from the FBI, quizzed him in their office at Lockheed, there on top of their desk was a copy of my Associated Farmers pamphlet which my husband tried and failed to reach, to grab. After that, when he was let out, they sued Lockheed and won a settlement out of court.

**Jarrell:** Who sued Lockheed?

**Hosmer:** The 21 fired people. They were told to leave . . . to get their things and leave. . . and if they communicated with their fellow workers, they would be provided with a police escort. They didn't even know one another. Each one was told separately and didn't know there were 20 others until . . . my husband went to the men's room and got some toilet paper and put them on the desks of everyone in his department before he left. That night they phoned him at home. The next day in aircraft they, the workers put this note in stating what had happened to my husband. As a result of the note, all the other 20 people got in touch with him. Then they sued Lockheed, and won a settlement out of court. But when Hoz, who, as I say had been trained as a tool designer by Lockheed, would line up another job, we would just sit and wait because two or three days later, inevitably, the phone would ring and say don't bother. He never again got a job as a tool designer; in fact he gave up and went into his own business and started designing lamps and ashtrays and other things. He couldn't get a job in industry anymore. And mind you, this was during the Roosevelt Administration, in the . . .

**Jarrell:** This was not after World War II?

**Hosmer:** No. It was in the middle of World War II, and he was considered a premature anti-fascist, I suppose. But that's one reason that I'm not interested in naming names, because I know what can happen to people in this country.

**Jarrell:** Now some of the readers of this interview, would maybe think that you're being paranoid. Here it is over 40 years later, and you are afraid or reticent or whatever to give me the names which I have innocently asked you to



give me about people who worked with you in the Lubin Society. Or people who were interested in agricultural labor and the conditions under which that labor force worked. I'm asking it innocently in the sense that I was hoping that some of the names that you would give me I could go and pursue those names and arrange other interviews.

**Hosmer:** No. Not from me. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** All right. I just want to make that very clear for anyone who reads this.

**Hosmer:** Yes. Yes. Not from me. Because it's only been six months since the last time I was harassed by the FBI. Simply, simply because of some . . . I don't know whether it was an article . . . oh, I did some radio programs for a station near the Fresno area entitled "Letters from a Lady on the Top of the Hill." And I couldn't have been more innocuous, but I did discuss the mechanical tomato. And the station got seven . . .

**Jarrell:** Mechanical tomato harvester?

**Hosmer:** Yes. And they got seven phone calls objecting to that little, tiny comment.

**Jarrell:** Well, I just wanted this for the record so that people who might be curious or puzzled . . .

**Hosmer:** Yes. So long as I open my mouth, they are going to pursue me. And as long as they pursue me, never from me are they going to get the names of anyone. They can do what they like with me. As you say, I'm 73. There's not very much they can do to me to hurt me.

**Jarrell:** I just find it rather remarkable. Thank you for explaining this.

**Hosmer:** You're welcome.

But there was a tiny committee; we had a meeting at my house. I called a few friends in, left-wing friends, and said, "I'm going to start this society, will you help?" And they said, "Well, like what?" And so I got out a little newsletter and

raised a little bit of money and went to the printer with it. My first subscribers, I had three bonafide farmers on my subscription list, and about 20 middle-class liberals from San Francisco who said they would subscribe, 50 cents an issue. I ended up with 3,000 paid subscribers from the farm belt, which was really something.

**Jarrell:** Subscribers from all over rural counties, from all over the state.

**Hosmer:** Subscribers from all over the state. But in addition to the 3,000 farmers and rural people, I had a lot of city people who subscribed, and I don't know what the total was.

**Jarrell:** You were careful about trying to estimate or be aware of how many farmers you actually had. That was your audience?

**Hosmer:** Farmers, yes, . . . yes, because that was what I was set up for. And if I couldn't get farmer subscribers, there wasn't any point really except to build out support for the migrants. But that wasn't basically my point. My point was trying to make the relationship between the small farmer and the farmworkers. I was not only interested in migrant labor, I was more interested in the farmer, the dirt farmer.

**Jarrell:** You were interested in helping the farmers, the small farmers to recognize the interest that they had with migrant labor as opposed to the large-scale farmers.

**Hosmer:** Yes. And I wasn't really concentrating on the agricultural labor force as much.

**Jarrell:** As on the kind of community of interests that they shared.

**Hosmer:** Between them. So . . . I began to make a lot of speeches. It took an awful lot out of me. I really didn't like it. And I used to come home with terrible, splitting headaches because I didn't like it. There was a tremendous effort for me to get up on the stage and talk to all these people. It was a long, long time before I felt really on top of my subject. The first time I was at a huge meeting, there

must have been three thousand people. And Roy Pike was speaking; he was the manager of El Soyo Ranch . . . and he was just telling one lie after another. His facts were wrong. And it was evil for him to say the things he did. I felt . . . the injustice of his point of view. Suddenly, when he finished, I found myself on my feet and it felt like my voice was coming from clear across the room because I'd never addressed a public crowd like that before. I was just talking my head off, A, B, C, D, E, wrong, wrong, wrong . . . this is this, this is this . . . just as though I'd been doing it all my life. And when I sat down and heard applause, I just couldn't believe that I had had the guts to stand on my own two feet and talk as I never had before.

**Jarrell:** To such a large crowd.

**Hosmer:** Previously I'd only addressed little, tiny church groups of twenty . . . thirty people. Hell, I would go clear over to Novato and lose the way and look for this little schoolhouse or this little church and there'd be six people there. I'd be exhausted and I'd get home at midnight. I'd think why . . . why do I bother going all that distance in the cold at night, being miserable and losing my way and getting the wrong road because I have no sense of direction.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** Another time I had to participate in a debate against Harold Pomeroy who was then with the Associated Farmers.

**Jarrell:** What year would this be about?

**Hosmer:** In '37. And at the dinner which preceded the debate, we tossed coins to see who would go first or second. I was lucky 'cause I was second. So he gave his spiel . . . all the problems of agribusiness, you know. And the labor problems and their demands and the outside agitators, and . . . the whole bit.

Then I said, when my time came, "Well, I am so short, I can't even reach this blackboard and I want to ask Mr. Pomeroy to do it for me 'cause he's tall. You're such a tall, handsome man, I know you can reach."

**Jarrell:** Oh, Helen.

**Hosmer:** So I made him get up there and put my reputation on a blackboard.

**Jarrell:** Himself?

**Hosmer:** Himself. Figures—2% owns such and such and such and such and such and such. And who they are, and what . . . you know. And the audience, it just broke them up. Then I gave my speech. That was the night that lovely lady, Claire Strauss . . . she was there with her husband, and they were very rich, and prominent San Franciscans, who were sympathetic to what I was doing.

**Jarrell:** Why was this a contradiction?

**Hosmer:** Well, he was on the other side. But you know John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* had affected an awful lot of people. And don't forget the floods that happened and the migrant workers had suffered agonies. We were having an office meeting the next morning because we had to send my assistant editor Dick Hartford to Sacramento to cover the Legislature. He had a hole in his pants and we were having this very serious conference on how to get him a pair of pants to go to Sacramento. It was going to take about 15 bucks to get him outfitted so he would look decent. Then there was a knock on the door, and there was Claire Strauss with a box that big with a Ransohoffs' label on it. And she said, "Helen, I couldn't sleep all night. I just decided that you simply had to look as dramatic as you sounded. So I have brought you this dress." I thanked her profusely and we bowed her out the door. And we took one look. It was black crêpe de chine with a chartreuse velvet belt that went from here to here and décolletage down to here.

**Jarrell:** Down to the belly button.

**Hosmer:** It trailed on the floor, and it was about as inappropriate a dress as I could possibly have worn anywhere. I had to make a speech at the Oakland Auditorium the next night, and I didn't have anything to wear. What I needed was a nice little tailored suit, you know. So we hung up the dress and we went on with our little conference on how to get a pair of \$15 pants. This dress must

have been about \$200, but we couldn't return it, we didn't want to hurt her feelings. We just couldn't do a thing with it. We finally got the \$15 bucks to buy Hartford some pants and gas money so he could go to Sacramento.

But . . . at any rate, the biggest fight in which I participated was the prorated fight. And . . . I think this is a good sort of stopping place.

**Jarrell:** I think so too. I was just going to say, I think we ought to quit for the night.

It's August 27th and this is our second interview. Last night we were talking about the Simon J. Lubin Society. You talked about how it got started. I'd like you to talk a little bit about what kind of organization it was and its purposes.

**Hosmer:** Well, when we first started, we just met at someone's house and what I did was to call a few people up whom I felt might be interested. They were . . . there was Dr. Russell Rypins. He was a very well-known, fair-minded medical doctor in San Francisco, who had been very moved by the plight of the agricultural workers. I got in touch with him, and he came to the meeting. There was a young couple, Leigh and Hope Athern, who were quite new to all of these problems, but they were interested. I really can't remember, but there were about ten people who came to the meeting. We set ourselves up as an organizing committee a) to get permission to use the name, and b) to see about renting an office, and c) to see whether we wanted to publish a bulletin, and d) whether we wanted to elect officers. Dr. Russell Rypins was named the chairman. He conducted the meetings. I think Hope Athern volunteered to take the minutes. Somebody else volunteered to be the treasurer. I was appointed to be the organizer, but I don't know what my title was. But just to get it going. Because I was the only one that was going to have one hundred percent free time. (Laughter)

This was in San Francisco. I did indeed manage to find a little office, at 25 California Street. Later we got two offices, and used one as a center to collect used clothing, blankets, and other things for the migrants. The Valley Express Company had volunteered to take things down whenever we had collected

enough stuff . . . every two weeks they would stop at the office and pick up everything we had and take it down to distribution centers in the valleys where agricultural workers were. Church and civic groups of all kinds contributed every form of clothing and blankets, and . . . some of the things were very hilarious . . . and inappropriate indeed. I mean golden slippers (laughter) and fancy evening gowns and brocades, you know. Blankets or whatever. I don't know. One woman wrote me from the East and she was closing her summer home in Maine and she was sending seven all wool brand new blankets. The most gorgeous blankets you ever saw in your life. I wrote her and thanked her and told her about my work. She sent me a check for \$150. And she said, "I will send you a similar check every month." Her name was Mrs. Thomas Fleming, Jr. . . . I'll never forget her. She had a home in Pasadena, and she was a delightful, darling lady. And she did indeed send me a \$150 a month until I quit the Lubin Society. When I had my first baby, she sent me a paid maid service for four months . . . and said she designated it strictly for that . . . to get household help. She said that she would never forgive me if I used the money for any other reason. So that I did use it for that, to get help in my first few months, which was simply beautiful of her. But as I say this clothing would arrive . . .

**Jarrell:** What about canned goods and things . . .

**Hosmer:** No, we didn't deal with food. It was just supplies. As many diapers as we could get and blankets and shoes and things that patch shirts. We'd be filled, just filled with stuff.

**Jarrell:** Did you send these things to the FSA camps?

**Hosmer:** Later we did when there were some camps, but we also . . . we knew where distributing centers were where people could come. The Valley Express was wonderful about taking them. So . . . that was when we had more money to rent this extra room. But it was a marvelous thing because it also involved and made familiar to people like church members and club groups and farm groups the depth of the problem of the migrant workers, their children and the families. Although the contributors may not have been sympathetic philosophically or politically, and though they might not even have approved of us, they certainly

felt the sentimental urge to help with the plight of the migrant. And beyond that, they didn't want to know. They just wanted to do something. So that's how we got organized.

The Lubin Society's recommendation on who should be chairman of the state Board of Agriculture was quite a feather in our cap. [inaudible] [Governor Olson] said, "We feel that you have the closest, most realistic contact with who should be helping us up here."<sup>9</sup> And I said, "I don't even have to think about it . . . it should be Stewart Meigs of Carpinteria." He was named chairman of the Board of California Agriculture . . . which was such a switch from who had been, you know, in charge of it. That was what happened.

### ***The Rural Observer***

**Jarrell:** Would you talk about—since we have hardly talked about the *Rural Observer*, the publication of the Lubin Society. I have seen some very early copies of it, before they were even printed. They were mimeographed.<sup>10</sup>

**Hosmer:** First they were mimeographed and then they were printed. I got out the first little bulletin, a mimeographed bulletin . . . it was pretty pathetic I must say, in retrospect. We didn't have printing money then, so we just mimeographed these things, and mailed them out. The first list was 25 people and then 50 people and then some of these church people that had come, and it began to gel.

One day a lad named Richard Hartford came in. He was a wonderful boy . . . a red-headed kid. He said, "I went over to try to get a job at the *Oakland Tribune*, and they said they didn't have a thing, but they sure knew a girl who could use

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<sup>9</sup>This portion of the tape-recording is inaudible. Hosmer refers to this subject in her letter to Carey McWilliams (reproduced in the Appendix in this volume), on page 5 of the letter.—Editor.

<sup>10</sup>*The Rural Observer* was published from December 15, 1937 to March 24, 1941. There is a complete set of issues at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Hosmer donated a number of issues to the University Library at UCSC where they are on deposit at Special Collections, McHenry Library.—Editor.

some help." (Laughter) So one of the reporters sent him over to me. And I said, "Well, honey that's lovely, but I can't pay you." (Laughter) We were all working on about \$25-\$30 a month you know . . . all these volunteers. Whatever came in, we divided equally, no matter what our jobs were there, after we paid the rent. But he said he didn't care. He rolled up his sleeves, and he was marvelous, 'cause he really knew newspaper work. I didn't know anything about newspaper work. So that when I was getting out the *Rural Observer*, it was very funny because I didn't even know how to do layouts.

**Jarrell:** You were the editor.

**Hosmer:** I know. I got the stuff in, but I didn't know how to do layout and he showed me. He taught me all that stuff. From the time he came on, it got to be a better and better paper because he really got the stuff. We would go up to Sacramento and we would gather the real material. We saw things that we couldn't believe . . . like State Senator Desmond of the milk lobby would get up and make a speech and then he would turn to the milk lobbyist, you know . . . and say, "Was that all right?" (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Hosmer:** Right in front of everybody. "Was that all right. Was that what you wanted?" It was just incredible.

**Jarrell:** Very up front.

**Hosmer:** All of it was up front and hanging out . . . if you can use the contemporary vernacular. They just didn't care, they were so blatant, you know, before Governor Olson was elected.

**Jarrell:** I haven't seen a complete run of the *Rural Observer*. I know they have one at Bancroft.

**Hosmer:** It came out just once a month. I still have quite a few copies.

**Jarrell:** It did come out regularly?



**Hosmer:** Yes. Regularly. Every month.

**Hosmer:** Yes. That was a lot because we just didn't have the money to do it more than that.

**Jarrell:** You ended up with a paid subscription list of three thousand.

**Hosmer:** Of three thousand . . . sympathetic to everything to do with the migrant worker. For instance, there was a Father Charles Phillips who became my buddy. We used to go to the Legislature in Sacramento together. He used to say, "I know you're a Red and I'm a Catholic, but actually we're both exactly in the same spot and we want the same things, and we're going to get them someday, Helen." He was just darling. We'd go to Sacramento and we'd sit down in the legislature . . . in the sessions . . . and I'd tell him what I wanted him to ask. I knew that a man of the cloth would be recognized and be allowed to speak. So he would get up and ask these really sharp questions, and they didn't dare not let him. Then on the way back we would stop to see all his friends in the vineyards . . . all the small farmers, growers that had grape vineyards. By the time we got back to Oakland, where we had to have a drink at each house we visited, we would be reeling. (Laughter)

All these Italian Catholics who adored him, and who knew that he could be trusted. He would tell them what a bummer it was for them to be members of the Associated Farmers and that they must tear up their cards, that they must never fight the workers. But he and I got along famously. Well, I couldn't have got more help than I got from this Catholic priest. There were all kinds of little ministers who opened their churches for me to come and talk to them and some members of the local Granges. On the other hand, for instance, I was invited to speak to the B'nai B'rith in Stockton, a Jewish organization. I don't know why I thought because they were Jews, they might be sympathetic. I couldn't have been more wrong. They almost crucified me at that meeting. They turned out to be Associated Farmers members and their thinking was almost fascist. It was the strangest thing for me as a Jew to be accosted by hostile Jews who just said, "You simply don't know what you're talking about. We don't want to hear any more from you."

**Jarrell:** Were some of these farmers?

**Hosmer:** Yes, they all were.

**Jarrell:** What crops were they in?

**Hosmer:** I don't remember in Stockton. But . . . all I know is that they were very prosperous. I don't know how it happened that they invited me to come and speak. I really don't.

**Jarrell:** How was their fascist attitude manifested?

**Hosmer:** Well they wanted labor organizers locked up, arrested. They wanted vigilante committees; they wanted the whole thing. They were right up there. So you see it was very hard to make judgments about what you were going to meet. I don't know whether I've answered your question or not.

### **Committee of Forty-Three**

**Jarrell:** Yes, you have. Will you talk about the Committee of Forty-Three . . . you haven't mentioned them yet, what they represented

**Hosmer:** Well, it was a San Francisco waterfront committee that was organized to deal with Harry Bridges who was in the forefront of organizing the longshoremen. And I don't know why forty-three. But . . .

**Jarrell:** Who made the designation of Committee of Forty-Three?

**Hosmer:** I imagine the Industrial Association. I'm not sure. But it was a very potent organization. And during the big fight with the waterfront, the Committee of Forty-Three was supposed to be a farm organization. No, wait a minute, that was a city organization. But Phil Bancroft<sup>11</sup> organized a group to march to San Francisco to meet with the Committee of Forty-Three to help them

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<sup>11</sup>See the oral history of Philip Bancroft, *Politics, Farming and the Progressive Party in California*, Berkeley: Bancroft Library, Regional Oral History Office, 1961.—Editor.

fight the joint battle. Nobody came, they gave a party and nobody came because the farmers had nobody to march with them. It was the same old tired handful . . . it was Colonel Garrison, H. C. Merritt, Phil Bancroft, John Picket. Phil Bancroft went to town and Picket said it was the greatest speech he made since Thomas Jefferson for somebody. And [San Francisco] Mayor Rossi played ball by inviting the farmers to come in and tell their troubles, Hank Stroble, and all these kooks, you know. And I don't remember, I'm sorry, I just don't remember except that I think they were the ones that sponsored the Town Hall meeting with Harry Bridges, head of the Longshoremen's Union. I'm not sure whether they were the sponsors.

**Jarrell:** And what was the Town Hall meeting with Harry Bridges?

**Hosmer:** They had finally come to the conclusion that they would have a sort of debate.

**Jarrell:** The employers versus labor?

**Hosmer:** The employers versus the waterfront. By then the waterfront was pretty well organized. The strike was over. This was in '37. And they were going to have this Town Hall meeting, and . . .

**Jarrell:** Do you remember where it was held?

**Hosmer:** No. I don't. I didn't even go. But I remember that I went up to see Bridges to ask him if he would insert one sentence into the speech that would, after all, be written up and be handed to the press in advance of the meeting. Then he would repeat the speech at the actual meeting. I felt that if he would ask this one question, he would do much to clarify the very muddy issue of city versus rural, farmer versus worker. My main point was to show that the Committee of Forty-Three were identical with the people who were paying for and who had organized the Associated Farmers Incorporated. Well, Harry Bridges said, "Are you trying to tell me we have a farm labor problem? I know that. But I'm very busy. But I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll let you talk to Mike Quinn."

**Jarrell:** Will you identify Mike Quinn?

**Hosmer:** Mike Quinn was his publicity man and usually did a lot of his speech writing for him. Bridges said to me, "You can just talk to Mike about it, 'cause I just really haven't got the time to talk to you." So . . . I knew Mike, and he was a wonderful Irishman, who died very tragically of cancer during that period or shortly later . . . a very few years later . . . a young man. I took him around the corner to . . . I think it was Breen's, where you got these wonderful roast beef and corned beef sandwiches and beer and stuff . . . on Market Street around 3rd. Do you know where that would have been? It's a very famous old restaurant called Breen's. But they had the *real* roast beef and the *real* corn beef and, you know, and cut great slabs of it. And you drank there. A huge, beautiful, old mahogany bar.

I sat Mike down . . . he loved to drink. I just ordered one scotch after another for Mike and I tried to make him understand that he must insert this one sentence into Bridges' speech. He must say that the Committee of Forty-Three was interlocked through their shipping, canning, processing, banking, and land operations into one organization. I wanted it made clear that the forces that were trying to suppress farm labor and small farmers were the same forces that were trying to destroy the unions on the waterfront in the city. After about the eighth drink, he allowed as how he'd do that.

So he tucked in this little sentence . . . it really was a small part of the speech, and lo and behold when the reports came out in the press, practically headlined was that quote where Harry Bridges accused the waterfront of being the same as the Committee of Forty-Three. I had documented it as well as I could . . . it wasn't too easy. But I had taken Wells Fargo, American Trust, and Crocker, and the Bank of America, and Anglo-California, and the Bank of California, and I had hooked them up to the Nacimiento Land Company . . . And Lafferman, Caldwell, and Fireman's Fund Insurance and Fleishacker, and Cal-Pak, and Del Monte, and Calander Sugar, Tyler Island Farms, California Delta Farms, Fresno Land Company—I mean as well as I could, I had locked them up. And that was the Committee of Forty-Three. I had diagrammed it in the Associated Farmers

pamphlet. It was a very important point and it was the first time the point had ever been made *in the press* of San Francisco.

So then I got a phone call from Harry Bridges saying, "Helen, I just wanted to tell you that the next time you knock on my door, I'll open it." (Laughter) Years later when I needed an interview from Harry Bridges, I went to see him, and he gave me an appointment for a month later. Unfortunately when that came around, he was up to his eyebrows in negotiations with the ship owners. I arrived for my appointment with the place clouded with cigar smoke and all these big shots, and his secretary told him I was there, and he remembered the appointment, and he made those gentlemen wait. He came in and gave me an hour of his time, and then went back to his meetings, which I thought was rather nice. (Laughter)

**Jarrell:** I've read about Colonel Sanborn. Did you ever know him?

**Hosmer:** No I didn't. But *American West* magazine commissioned me to do an article on the history of the Imperial Valley and gave me some money to go down and research it on the ground first. So I spent three weeks in Imperial Valley interviewing many, many people. I noticed Colonel Sanborn Boulevard, and my jaw just dropped. Because he may have been a hero to them down there, but he was one of the very worst of the Associated Farmer Incorporated vigilante types, on-the-ground men who had said, "We don't need those criminal syndicalism trials like they have in San Francisco. We've got better ways of handling those things. We're too busy seeing that the laws get enforced our way to bother with the courts." I think I have a footnote somewhere in the pamphlet on Colonel Sanborn. I saw him finally at the La Follette Committee hearings.

### **The Lubin Society and the Communist Party**

**Jarrell:** What was the relationship between the Simon J. Lubin Society and the Communist Party, if any?

**Hosmer:** It was very tenuous. I had contact with them because I knew from Communist Party literature that they had talked farmer-labor cooperation for years. I was willing to get cooperation from anybody who would give it to me.

But when it came to the actual facts they only paid lip service to the problems of agriculture and the rural population. The party was concentrating on the waterfront in San Francisco and on the big cities. They really didn't have any energies for the rural hinterland, so it was the most neglected aspect of their programs.

I had no prejudices of any kind against the party. And as a matter of fact I joined it, along with almost everybody else I knew. But I wasn't very happy because they didn't give a darn, it seemed to me, about what I was trying to do. It would have been comical if it hadn't been so tragic. Because the Associated Farmers were constantly screaming about this Communist front in the whole problem of migrant labor and union organizing, when the point of the matter was that the communists had less to do with the Lubin Society than almost any other group in town or in the state. The party just neglected us. Talk about benign neglect . . . that's what it was. (Laughter)

I finally got so I just ignored them all the time because they were not being helpful. The volunteers that I finally got to help me were kids that would just walk in the door and say, "Hey, we'd like to help; we like what you're doing." And little by little I got a staff of volunteers around me—it was about four or five people. They were just great kids. We used to all eat in Chinatown at about 25 cents a piece because we could order all kinds of food. We were just around the corner from Chinatown. And they would fold and file and stamp letters and do all that stuff. They were great, great kids. So that that's where the volunteers came from.

**Jarrell:** When you were in the Lubin Society . . . I almost said "when you *were* the Lubin Society" . . . (laughter) Can you elaborate on the issue of small farmers working on a completely different scale, with a different set of interests, than the large farmers. But what about the two directions the *Rural Observer* seemed to be taking? One was stating the whole issue of migrant agricultural labor in California and the problems of organizing unions on the one hand, and on the other hand, articulating the political economics of small farmers whom you considered to be workers vulnerable to monopoly practices in agriculture. However, many of them, I don't think, considered *themselves* workers . . . many

perhaps did. But you were addressing an alliance between small farmers and migrant farm workers. How did you see the relationship between those two groups?

**Hosmer:** Well, there was one man who was a fascinating exception to the Associated Farmers and he was a very big operator . . . now I can't remember his name . . . because he said, "I won't ever have a moment's [labor] trouble. I pay them what they ask for, and I make a wonderful living. I don't believe in your organization of Associated Farmers. And I don't believe in your breaking the strikes. I think you'd be better off, and they'd be better off." And his whole point was . . . who eats the most prunes? If you're not going to give them enough money to buy your prunes, then your prunes are going to rot. And who eats the most prunes on the waterfront . . . the ship owners or the waterfront workers? And if . . .

**Jarrell:** In other words there are more of them than there are of us.

**Hosmer:** There are more of them. And he said . . . I wish I could remember his name . . .

**Jarrell:** Well, you can add it when you think of it.

**Hosmer:** All right. But he was a fine man. And he had enormous acreage and he never had one moment's [labor] trouble, because he paid his workers a union scale; gave them good housing; he never made them buy their food at his company . . . he didn't have company stores. He gave them enough so they could go out and buy food wherever they wanted it.

### **Family Farming Versus Agribusiness**

**Jarrell:** What was a small farmer in those days?

**Hosmer:** Yes. Well I would say that the small farmer category would go up as far as 500 acres. And that can be a pretty efficient unit. I think it's been demonstrated over and over that bigger isn't necessarily better in California agriculture.

**Jarrell:** Where has it been demonstrated?

**Hosmer:** There were two men at the Gianinni Foundation who did a fascinating study . . . I have got it in my notes which I didn't use when I wrote the Imperial Valley story<sup>12</sup>. I went back to visit Imperial Valley in '64. Everyone was terribly, terribly nice to me. Because they were new faces and they didn't know my name. Had they found out who I was, I probably would have been run out of town. But they didn't know. After all I had this posh magazine under my arm, which is very impressive . . .

**Jarrell:** *American West*?

**Hosmer:** Yes, of which I was an editorial assistant and, you know . . . so they really were out to give me everything they could. They assigned an agricultural commissioner to take me everywhere. They drove me from one end of the canal system to the other. They did slides for me on their farming operations. They took me up and showed me the Salton Sea. This guy got quite friendly with me and told me lots of little goodies off the record. Such as the fact that Brock of Brock Farms is practically the exclusive beneficiary of the Agricultural Experiment Station of the state of California.

**Jarrell:** In what way?

**Hosmer:** In Imperial Valley. It's his. Everything they do belongs to him. All of his materials, all of the trees, all of everything belongs to him.

**Jarrell:** What about the land?

**Hosmer:** The land too, is practically his. He is supposed to in exchange give the foods they grow there to the needy. I don't know whether that ever happens or not.

**Jarrell:** The foods that they grow at the agricultural station?

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<sup>12</sup>Helen Hosmer, "Triumph and Failure in the Colorado Desert," *American West*, (Winter, 1966) Vol. III, No. 1, 34-79.



**Hosmer:** As experiments. But it's all Brock's. He told me that. I had his name and I can't reveal that. At any rate, there is this little man, Dr. Ben Yellen, who is the gadfly of Imperial Valley.

**Jarrell:** In the 160-acre limitation battle?

**Hosmer:** Yes. Well, he has lived there for 20 years. He came there in the '20s for his health, for an asthmatic condition. He is not married, so he's not fearful of his family being penalized. He's fearless. He has been treating all of the green-carders from over the border for years, for nothing really. He gets out a little yellow mimeographed sheet, and after he gets it mimeographed . . .

**Jarrell:** I've read it.

**Hosmer:** . . . he puts hundreds into his knapsack and he just goes around the town and distributes them. He has really told it like it is. If you read through one or two years of his file, you will know everything about Imperial Valley agriculture. Who owns what and why and how. He has been fighting to see to it that reclamation laws, the 160-acre-limit clause, which has been violated since 1933, particularly in Imperial Valley as well as in the Central Valley, and in Arizona, must be enforced. For this, they have not only despised him, but they've done everything they could possibly do to shut him up.

Well, I had been spending the afternoon talking to the man who is in charge of their cotton control program . . . very gracious . . . showed me tons of data, beautiful photographs, and couldn't have been nicer. He did say about cotton acreage in Imperial Valley, "The only way you can get any is to marry it or inherit it, 'cause nobody's ever to give up one inch of that cotton acreage 'cause it's so lucrative." Well . . . he said, "You come back tomorrow afternoon again, and I will bring from home some absolutely marvelous pictures to show you that you might want to use, showing the early days of Imperial Valley." So I thanked him, and I went back to my motel. Then I put in a call to Dr. Ben Yellen's office, 'cause I wanted to see him the next day or that afternoon; got an appointment, and hung up. I made the call from my room of the motel. I was to come back to him that afternoon.

I came back. His secretary met me at the door. Said, "Mrs. Hosmer, Mr." I forget his name . . . Miller, I think it was, "won't see you. He has nothing more to say to you. He has nothing more to say to you, nothing more to show you. Goodbye."

**Jarrell:** We lost our thread, but to return to the question of scale, there is a recurring argument that bigger is more efficient.

**Hosmer:** But it's not so. They said, in this study that after a certain point it becomes inefficient, that the margin of efficiency decreases after a certain point. But then a man named Richard Sasuly, a writer, did a study on the family farm<sup>13</sup> . . . and he proved the same point, that it is not necessarily the most efficient. Look, when you have stables and stables full of experts as they have in Imperial Valley, you have hundreds upon hundreds of paid experts working for you . . . which you pay for and I pay for.

**Jarrell:** Who are they?

**Hosmer:** The agricultural commissioners, the farm advisors, the technical advisors . . . they are working full time every day of their lives to try to make this thing work. And we pay for them with our taxes. The farmers aren't paying their salaries. They're the ones that talk about their independence, their rugged individualism, the fact that they do it on their own . . . this is the biggest, saddest joke in the world, because they wouldn't do any of it if they had to do it on their own. These are the experts making it viable, working like dogs to make it viable for the . . .

**Jarrell:** On that scale, you mean?

**Hosmer:** On that scale. And . . .

**Jarrell:** But I know, in my county of Santa Cruz that the agricultural commissioner and the UC farm advisors work for all farmers.

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<sup>13</sup>Hosmer refers here to economist Richard Sasuly's *The Family Farm in California: A Pilot Study*, commissioned by the California Farm Consumer Information Committee, Santa Clara, California, 1963. A copy is on deposit in Special Collections, McHenry Library.—Editor.

**Hosmer:** Oh sure. They work for all farmers.

**Jarrell:** They're accessible to all levels . . .

**Hosmer:** Oh sure they are. But the small, little, independent farmer can't possibly take advantage of the recommendations which they make. You have to have the technical equipment and all that goes with it to do what they advise.

For instance, what madness is it that they're pouring this Colorado River water on the lands of Imperial Valley . . . water which is so saline and so alkaline that if it weren't leached, they couldn't grow a thing . . . and it's getting worse day by day by day. As more and more of the water gets dammed and slowed by the dams, the more alkaline it gets. In order to leach it, they have to lay millions of dollars worth of tiling under the soil, and that gets leached off, which we pay for incidentally. We don't pay for all of it, but we pay for a good part of it. I'm not sure that Imperial Valley is all that damn necessary. Why in heaven's name should we be growing that much cotton down there, and controlling cotton in the central valley? One man, Boswell, I don't know how many, whether he got paid a million dollars or not for not growing cotton in California. I think he got something like a million for not growing cotton in Arizona. Then he was invited by Australia to come down there and grow cotton.

**Jarrell:** When was this?

**Hosmer:** In 1971. That cotton flooded into the United States. When they asked him about it, he said, "Some funny things happen in this world, don't they?" Now where is the sense of that kind of farming?

**Jarrell:** Okay, here's a question. In terms of all the technology that's being used . . . what do you think about it? The more it's mechanized, the more pesticides and herbicides applied, the more imported water there is . . . how do you feel about this? In what direction do you think California agriculture's going?

**Hosmer:** Have you ever tasted the mechanized tomato? Have you ever tasted one?

**Jarrell:** Certainly.

**Hosmer:** Well, you know what the man who practically invented it told me? He wouldn't touch one of those tomatoes with a ten-foot pole.

**Jarrell:** Who was this?

**Hosmer:** I've got his name down, too. I can't remember . . . He was asked how they taste and he said, "Awful." I don't think it's a very pretty sight to see these workers, and I can see them right around here, right down in the Carpinteria area.

**Jarrell:** Why isn't it a pretty sight?

**Hosmer:** Bending and breaking their backs in the fields. And picking this or working in the crops . . . that's literally backbreaking. Why don't we take a chapter or a page from the history books in China . . . what they're doing in agriculture there and how they're doing.

**Jarrell:** It's extremely labor intensive.

**Hosmer:** Is that so?

**Jarrell:** Yes. Very little mechanization.

**Hosmer:** Well, I would rather see backs broken, than guts riddled with cancer from pesticides. I would rather see anything than the poisons we're putting in our systems from the pesticides. I don't know the answers to mechanization in agriculture any more than I know the answers to mechanization in industry. I know there are going to be great machines replacing people in every area. I know that mechanization is going to create disturbing dislocations. I don't . . . they've been talking about this for years. And it's already happened on the waterfront, hasn't it?

**Jarrell:** Yes. And the longshoremen have their mechanization agreement.

**Hosmer:** But you can't have agreements like that in every area, can you? I don't know what's going to happen.

**Jarrell:** From the point of view of the United Farm Workers trying to build a viable organization, a union of farm workers: what do you think of increased mechanization, of tomato harvesters . . . I've read that they're going to have mechanization for other specialized crops soon.

**Hosmer:** Oh sure. I don't know, I think the only answer's going to have to be . . . the only answer I can give you is that there is no answer under the capitalist system. These people have to be organized into cooperative farming ventures. They have to rent the heavy machinery together and use it together and farm it intensively if they have to, but together. They have to devise means other than pesticides which make them sterile or which kill them.

When I was driving through Imperial Valley suddenly some green, sticky stuff hit my car, covered my entire windshield . . . my windows were open, I suddenly was choking to death . . . my eyes were streaming with tears; I couldn't catch my breath. My clothing was covered with this green slime; my car was covered with it. It was coming down from a plane onto the fields and the wind had shifted. I could barely see to get back to my motel. I could have been destroyed, I could have been killed by that much pesticide falling on top of me. How do I know how much of it got into my lungs and what damage it did in just that one episode? All I know that what used to be the healthiest, most wonderful place for asthmatics and other ill people was the desert of Imperial Valley . . . and now allergies abound.

**Jarrell:** You know this for a fact?

**Hosmer:** For a fact. And I got these facts from Dr. Ben Yellen. From the pesticides, from all the stuff, the whole ecology of change from desert to moisture from so much water, you know, irrigation. I don't understand these processes, but I know what they've told me. I wouldn't live down there or work down there for anything on earth if you paid me a million dollars a day. Because I know how dangerous and how lethal the kind of mass spraying is. Thousands

upon thousands of acres being sprayed . . . it's bound to destroy us if they keep it up.

What is the answer . . . that isn't the way we are going to feed the world. If we have such surplus populations that are starving, let them use people . . . why not use people instead of machines if they have no work. When I was down in Imperial in '64, they wouldn't hire white men; they didn't want them; they wanted braceros. In order to make the point for the other counties, even Imperial Valley that didn't need braceros was refusing to hire white men.

**Jarrell:** Do you know that in the public law under which the Bracero Program was instituted that there was a provision that if there were any able-bodied American citizens available . . .

**Hosmer:** Of course.

**Jarrell:** . . . and wanting to work, that they had to be taken over the braceros.

**Hosmer:** That wasn't happening when I was in the employment office. They were simply saying they didn't have jobs. The Department of Labor people in that office were very frank to tell me that this was what was happening. He says, "Look, they're standing and they say they won't work. They're standing in line begging for jobs and they say they won't take them in the fields." And there are thousands of people in California who would willingly do stoop labor in the field if they could be assured of a decent wage right now to support a family and feed them. So that the argument is spurious under our present circumstances. It's irrelevant; it's irrelevant to debate as long as our farming operations are in the hands of people like Dow Chemical who doesn't care whether their product is napalm or nectarines as long as they get a profit. This is the story of the United States and a commodity culture. What else do you expect? We're out to make commodities and profits and nothing else matters—people least of all.

**Jarrell:** In your decades of studying and caring about the human beings in agriculture in California . . . do you think you've made any difference? What do you think about your efforts?

**Hosmer:** Do you really want to know?

**Jarrell:** I really want to know.

**Hosmer:** I hate to tell you this. But I think I may have mentioned it earlier, or did I? That I think the people I've fought so hard for are the people who became the owners that . . .

**Jarrell:** You said that the formerly dispossessed Dustbowl migrants became Reagan's supporters.

**Hosmer:** That's what I think. I don't know for sure. I can't document it. But I have this squeamish feeling that what I did was (laughter) helped put them on their feet for Reagan.

**Jarrell:** Well, I don't quite see the connection.

**Hosmer:** Maybe not. But they . . . I think it was World War II that came along and changed the whole picture. Because these people went into defense industries and made enough money to buy their tract houses and their better cars and raise their . . .

**Jarrell:** To participate.

**Hosmer:** Yes. To become part of the communities in which they lived and to have a small stake in the system. They tried their damndest to forget their dustbowl days. I think. Maybe I'm all wrong. But . . .

### **Other Political Concerns**

**Jarrell:** Well . . . are you still clipping and keeping all your files on these issues?

**Hosmer:** When I see something on Reclamation Law, or on the Colorado River, or when I realize that the project around the Salton Sea where they gypped a whole bunch of people and sold them lots and told them this was going to be a second Palm Springs . . . and just three years ago all these people sued the company who cheated them . . .

**Jarrell:** The people who had bought land?

**Hosmer:** Yes. Then I clipped because it's fascinating these little follow-ups. But you must remember that since my days of agriculture, the only time that I plunged back into the political scene was Vietnam.

There was a long interval when I did nothing politically. Vietnam created a terrible conflict in me because I wanted to lead a personal, subjective, pleasure life of gardening and music . . . very private. In a sense I am a very private person . . . and this set up a terrible conflict. Yet something threw me back into an active scene about Vietnam as it had in agriculture. There's something that wouldn't let me remain silent. I hated going back into it. But I felt I had to. So I did these series . . . well, in the interim, for seven years I had done the story of early San Francisco for KSFO radio which were just to be early stories.

**Jarrell:** Your scripts were about pre-1860 San Francisco history?

**Hosmer:** Yes. Starting with 1839 to 1860. So I got back into the land thing in a funny kind of backdoor way. Because I began reading, really, really early California history again 'cause you can't not relate San Francisco to California. This took me back to the beginnings of Miller and Lux and the land grants and the way we cheated the Mexicans out of their land, the Mexican-American War. And the Indians, the story of the Indians. So many, many different things that came back to tie in with this other picture.

Then, after that, came the war in Vietnam. That's when I did the series of broadcasts on KPFA in Berkeley on Congress and Vietnam, another ongoing historical endeavor. I began to research the *Congressional Record*. In researching the *Congressional Record* over this long period of time from 1965 through 1972, I studied it . . . day after day after day . . . to see what they were doing and saying. The picture began to emerge. But in passing, I would constantly come across articles inserted by the Senators or the Congressmen, like McGovern, like . . . it's amazing how my mind goes blank [inaudible] . . . who brought up the subject of farming in America and what was happening to the agricultural picture in America, how the small farmers were disappearing from the land, and what we



had to do about it, and how they were being thrown into the cities and becoming members of the unemployed, and how we were doing nothing about it.

**Jarrell:** That's been happening on a large scale since the Civil War.

**Hosmer:** But ever increasing as agribusiness consolidates all over the country, not only in California, because after all they are now national or even international in scope. They want to go into Africa and any place else and do the same thing. So that I keep constantly being thrown into the conclusion that what dominates the country is its land patterns. Whatever and whoever controls the land controls the people. And we're moving in directions which I think are quite ominous for the future of the country unless we change. Because the cities can't possibly support these dispossessed rural people. The land and the city people can't possibly continue to live to be healthy under the conditions of producing food set down by agribusiness which doesn't care about anything but profit . . . doesn't care about the land and it doesn't care about the people . . . it cares about the profit. Men like McGovern know this and have said so. But it falls on deaf ears. People go to the supermarkets and they see these lovely packaged things and they reach for them and put them into their baskets and look more and more apprehensive as they go up to the checking counter and watch their money disappear. They don't know what's happening, and they don't know why. When I unpack the food I bring home, and realize that I fill a large bin full of waste paper every day with just the packaging of the food I bring home, I think it's a madness within a madness. We're stripping our forests for the packaging and then we're destroying the packaging and demanding more packaging. And if that is efficiency, give me the mule and the plow.

**Jarrell:** The old FSA motto.

**Hosmer:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** Well I think we should end on that note.

**Hosmer:** All right.

**Jarrell:** Thank you, Helen.

**Hosmer:** You're welcome

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