

## GEORGE BROOKS: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

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After George Brooks received his master's degree from Brown University in 1932, he went to Washington to join Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. When the Wagner Act was passed in 1935, George joined the staff of the National Labor Relations Board's economic research division. While he was at the Board, he met another member of the staff, Sara Gamm, who became his lifetime friend and collaborator. In 1939, Congressman Howard Smith began an investigation of the operations of the NLRB, focusing on the alleged infiltration of the Board by communists and left wingers, that eventually led to Congress cutting off the funding of the Division of Economic Research — a story that Jim Gross tells in *The Reshaping of the National Labor Relations Board*, his excellent history of the National Labor Relations Board during the 1937–47 period. Consequently, both George and Sara were forced to leave the Board. In later years they were reluctant to talk about this episode in their lives.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt established the War Production Board and appointed Sidney Hillman to be its head. Hillman asked George to become one of his top aides. So, ironically, George went from being an NLRB outcast to a White House insider. When World War II ended, George left government service to become the research director of the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Paper Mill Workers. Undoubtedly, the sixteen years he spent with the Paperworkers had lasting influence on his passionate opinions about unionism and collective bargaining. George was an ardent believer in unionism, but he was also one of the union movement's most persistent critics.

In 1961, George joined the faculty of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) at Cornell and Sara was appointed to a position in the School's extension division. George hadn't done much college-level teaching when he joined the ILR School faculty. He quickly established himself as one of the School's most popular and influential instructors. George was certainly an engaging and entertaining lecturer, but it was not only his platform skills that made him so popular with students. Cornell students — especially those who were part of the 1960s generation — were drawn to

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George's unorthodox views on unions and labor relations. George challenged the conventional wisdom on unionism and bargaining and many students inclined to regard established authority with skepticism identified with this classroom maverick. Students who thought other ILR faculty members relied too heavily on pie-in-the-sky textbook knowledge, liked George's ready reliance on twenty-five years of experience in the trenches of government and union service to support his unique opinions.

I first met George shortly after I joined the ILR School faculty in 1969. George was certainly one of the most gracious and charming people I have ever met. He was unfailingly thoughtful and considerate, and in the course of our long friendship he never raised his voice or lost his temper in my presence. He was capable of expressing visible annoyance when he encountered views he thought were unfounded and ill-supported. But he had the nearly unique ability to argue strenuously in support of his opinions without offending those with different views. My wife Sandy and I had not been in Ithaca very long when George and Sara invited us to have dinner at their adjoining apartments near the campus. That evening marked the start of a friendship that endured for nearly three decades.

A social evening with George and Sara was a memorable experience — one that seemed to follow the same script no matter how often it was repeated. Sandy and I later discovered that dozens of their friends had shared the same experience. The evening began at an early hour in George's apartment. There was never any alcohol but George made sure his guests had an enjoyable time. He had a large supply of stories and anecdotes about his days at Yale and Brown, about afternoons spent at Fenway Park rooting for the Red Sox, about Hillman and other labor leaders, and about numerous other matters. But George was even better at encouraging his guests to tell their own stories. He was the kind of person who made you believe he was intensely interested in everything you had to say. In George's presence my rather humdrum life seemed much more compelling than it really was. I believe George was able to transfer this skill to the classroom, where he made students believe that their views were profound and valuable.

Sara, in the meantime, would be moving between George's apartment and her own, joining in the conversation for a few moments and then scurrying back to prepare dinner. Although Sara in many ways was a strong and independent woman, her relationship with George remained quaintly old fashioned. In those days, the dinner was always the same — Sara's famous soup plus a salad or some healthy side dishes. No alcohol, no tea, no coffee, and no stimulants of any kind. Promptly at 10:00 p.m. George and Sara politely conveyed the message that it was time for the evening to end and their guests to depart. George and Sara were early to bed and early to rise, generally arriving at their ILR School offices by 7:00 a.m.

From time to time I would have lunch with George at Cornell's faculty club. Sometimes colleagues — Don Cullen, Jim Gross, Bob Doherty, or Ron Donovan — would join us. Usually, particularly if Don Cullen was at the table, we would end up debating George's views about unions and labor relations. I have a vivid recollection of those friendly luncheon conversations. On those occasions, as he had so often in other forums, George expressed his paramount faith in union democracy. To understand George's views you had to understand that, above all other values, he believed in union

democracy. He was an indefatigable champion of the rights of union members. If it came to a choice between individual rights and collective rights, George preferred the individual every time. Any measure that served to transfer power and authority from the rank and file to the union leadership was an anathema to George.

For example, George fervently opposed the union shop and all other forms of strict union security. He believed that using the union shop to help ensure the union's existence and flow of revenues only served to undercut union democracy. George did not want union leaders to be "secure" or to have a guaranteed stream of revenue. He wanted them to be insecure — to be constantly sensitive to the needs of their members and constantly striving to retain their support. He did not like the idea of having union leaders stay in office too long. He wanted frequent and competitive union leadership elections.

George's views were remarkably consistent, once you understood his faith in union democracy. George preferred shorter rather than long-term contracts, smaller rather than industrywide or multiplant bargaining units, direct ratification of agreements by the rank and file rather than indirect ratification by union officials, and direct election of union officers by union members rather than indirect election by representative union bodies. In George's view the smaller the bargaining unit the better. He intensely disliked the NLRB's policy of allowing the bargaining unit to be a permissible subject of bargaining. He liked the Taft-Hartley Act's presumption that the plant was the appropriate bargaining unit. He also liked craft units and policies favoring craft severance. He did not think union and management negotiators should be allowed to consolidate these smaller units. It was his observation that allowing union leaders and managers to negotiate ever larger bargaining units undermined rank-and-file control of their union's bargaining strategies and diminished the significance of the local union.

Often George's opponents in these debates would maintain that the policies and practices he preferred would undercut the union's bargaining power, increase union militancy, and lead to instability in labor relations. George relished the chance to challenge his opponents' views on these matters. He considered the notion that "stability" in labor relations was a virtue to be profoundly mistaken. In fact, he thought a little instability in labor relations was probably a good thing. It would help to keep union leaders on their toes, ever vigilant and responsive to their members' wishes. He did not favor the idea of having union leaders mediate between the views of their members and the views of managers. He did not really trust union leaders — especially those who were too secure and too comfortable — to represent the views of their members faithfully. He liked democracy pure and simple and had more in common with Tom Paine than Thomas Jefferson. He was perfectly willing to "pull up the tree of liberty" from time to time to examine its roots. His opponents in these debates would argue that doing so would certainly result in more frequent strikes and more labor-management turbulence, but George was not overly concerned about that. A little turbulence in labor relations was a small price to pay to obtain the benefits of union democracy.

George had especially controversial views regarding the negotiation of collective bargaining agreements. He adamantly maintained that in most collective bargaining

relationships very little authentic negotiation occurred “at the table.” Especially in situations where the two principal negotiators had been dealing with each other for a long time, George believed they would usually be able to work out a sidebar deal away from the table. He thought it was a common practice for negotiators to make these deals privately, without informing their constituents and in advance of formal negotiations. Formal negotiations would be a form of theater, George maintained, with the script written and the production stage managed by the chief negotiators. In formal negotiations the two nominal adversaries would engage in the usual rituals of bargaining, protesting every demand made by the other side, reluctantly yielding concessions, and even angrily denouncing each other. But George thought this was typically just acting, a performance by the negotiators calculated to impress their constituents and disguise the fact that they had already reached an agreement.

If secret sidebar deals were a common feature of collective bargaining, the cause of this phenomenon was once again too little democracy. In George’s view, union leaders who were never challenged in authentically contested elections and became too secure in their positions would invariably develop closer ties to their management counterparts than to their own members. George had observed that many union leaders and managers, after working together for a long time, had become close friends and in his view these cozy relationships tended to subvert the collective bargaining process. George’s “conspiracy theory” of negotiations appealed to the natural cynicism of many undergraduate students, who are often more than ready to believe the worst about the adult world they are about to enter.

At the faculty club we especially liked to debate the merits of George’s view of negotiations. As a matter of empirical fact, we would ask, could it be demonstrated that George’s view was correct? George would respond that the secret nature of these deals made it impossible to verify his theory. We would then ask, if secret sidebar deals were so common, why wasn’t there more confirmation of them in the biographies and memoirs of labor and management leaders? Of course, George would point out, a few accounts of these deals had been committed to writing, but one could hardly expect most union and management leaders to confess to such deceptive practices. When I noted that I had served as a mediator in dozens of contract disputes and never observed the behavior George described, he would patiently tolerate my naivete. “Wouldn’t the mediator be the last person to know of such deals?” he would ask.

My Cornell colleagues and I would end up conceding that sidebar *meetings* between the chief negotiators were an everyday occurrence and these meetings occasionally resulted in tentative deals. But were these *secret* deals? A bone of contention revolved around the question of whether a lead negotiator would usually inform the other members of his team that he was meeting with his opposite number. Would he divulge or withhold that information? And, if he did reach a deal in a sidebar meeting, would he tell anyone about it? The ethics of sidebar arrangements hinged largely on the matter of timely disclosure. My colleagues and I tended to believe that most negotiators tried to behave in an ethical fashion, although clearly some did not. An ethical negotiator faces the ongoing dilemma of needing to decide precisely how much information he needs to disclose, when it must be disclosed, and with whom it must be

shared. Honest people will differ on where these lines ought to be drawn, we suggested to George. But George affably disagreed.

Although I never fully agreed with many of George's unorthodox views, by forcing me to defend my more conventional positions he prompted me to think much more deeply about unions and labor relations than I would have otherwise. George didn't cause me to change my mind on major issues, but he had a profound influence on the way I think about labor relations. To this day I continue to ponder George's arguments and views, and to test their validity, at least casually, against whatever evidence I have at my disposal. When an individual has that kind of effect on your thinking, isn't it truly appropriate to call that person a great teacher?

George's support of democratic unionism did not mean that he was anti-capitalist. On the contrary, during the years I knew him he and Sara frequently served as management consultants, particularly in the utilities industry. Moreover, George was a shrewd and successful investor. He especially believed in buying and selling land. He told me that much earlier in his life he had purchased a parcel of land in a sparsely populated section of Virginia not far from Washington. A number of years went by and to George's surprise the land dramatically escalated in value as Washington's suburbs spread westward. He then sold the land at a handsome profit; he continued investing in land for many years thereafter.

After George and Sara settled in Ithaca, they purchased a large tract of undeveloped land in an area of rolling countryside near Ithaca known as Connecticut Hill. For many years George and Sara devoted many happy hours to developing their property — clearing the woods, planting a garden, and landscaping the open spaces. In due time they decided to give up their apartments in Ithaca and build their dream home, which Sara designed, on their Connecticut Hill property. I think the years they spent in their country home must have been the happiest of their lives.

To say they cultivated a "garden" is an understatement. Their garden covered at least an acre of territory and was a little bit like a small farm. They planted all kinds of vegetables, flowers, and trees. They also had a spring-fed pond that they stocked with fish. Every August George and Sara would invite Sandy and me to join them for a special dinner. By that time of year they had an abundance of sweet corn. George and I would pick a couple dozen ears off the rows of stalks in their garden and rush them into the kitchen where Sara had the water boiling. Within minutes the four of us would be devouring the sweetest, freshest corn imaginable. The meal would also consist of an array of fresh veggies, picked that day from their garden, and occasionally a fish that George had caught that morning in his well-stocked pond. Delicious! Promptly at 10:00 p.m., of course, Sandy and I would go home.

Sadly, George and Sara's idyllic country life eventually ended. Around 1990, Sara began to suffer from the early effects of Alzheimer's disease. At the time, I was serving as the dean of the ILR School. One day a call came into the dean's office. Could we locate George and Sara? Were they still at school? Why do you need to reach them? I asked. Their house is on fire, I was told. We tried to track them down but discovered they had already left their offices to head home. When they arrived, they found their dream house had burned to the ground. Sara, especially, never recovered from this

### **Remembrances from Former Colleagues**

blow. Cause and effect, of course, are hard to disentangle, but most of us thought Sara's subsequent rapid deterioration was at least in part a consequence of the devastating fire. George decided the best course of action was to return to the Washington area, where he could be near his family and Sara could live in a first-rate nursing home.

Even after George returned to Washington, when he was well into his eighties, he continued to teach a course for ILR students working as interns in the Washington area. Nominally, George had retired from the ILR faculty at the age of 65, but he continued to teach ILR courses for nearly two decades. I didn't realize until I became the dean of the college that George accepted no compensation whatsoever for teaching these courses. Indeed, he paid for the secretarial services he needed out of his own pocket. George simply loved to teach and he loved ILR students. And they loved him in return. During the years I served as dean, I had a chance to meet with hundreds of ILR alumni. They often recalled, with affection and respect, many of the outstanding faculty who had taught at the School down through the years. But they remembered George Brooks with special fondness. He touched their lives in a unique fashion, as he touched mine and so many others.