

Red Diaper Baby?

Chapter One

from

RED DIRT: GROWING UP OKIE

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few who make up the employing class have all the good things in life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on, until all the toilers come together on the political as well as on the industrial field, and take and hold that which they produce by their labor.

– From the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1905

I was born Roxie Amanda Dunbar. ‘Dust Bowl baby’ they called me and my nickname was ‘Baby.’ I was a surely unwanted last child with my two brothers – Laurence, eleven, and Hank, two – and a sister, Vera, nine. I would ask Daddy if they had wanted me when he told me about those hard times, and he would say, ‘Sure, else I wouldn’t have paid a doctor ten dollars to come and birth you.’ Once I understood how really destitute they had been I realized he meant what he said. Yet on my birth certificate Daddy listed as his occupation as ‘proprietor of feed store’ and Mama’s as ‘housewife,’ sounding so secure.



My life began on a hot late summer Saturday, September 10, 1938, in San Antonio, Texas. I was born in the one-room shack where the five of them lived behind my uncle’s house. For the first three days my name was Marvel, named after Mama’s best friend, a failed opera singer who sang in honky-tonks. But Mama had a fight with Marvel and decided not to name me after her. Daddy came up with the name Roxie. He always told me he saw that name on a marquee in New Orleans’ French Quarter when he went there with some other

cowboys as a teenager. He said that the Roxie club was named after a beautiful stripper. Mama always said he was making all that up.

My mother never talked about that time in San Antonio when she was pregnant with me. But I can imagine how she suffered. I know the facts because Vera has told me many times. She was nine and remembers it well. In June of that year my grandmother sold the feed store Daddy was running and they were evicted from the house they rented. During those last three months before I was born they were homeless, and it was a scorcher of a summer as always in south Texas - humid, unbearable. They took refuge with Daddy's oldest brother, a veterinarian in San Antonio. My uncle was bankrupt himself but let my family live in a one-room storage space behind his house, windowless, an oven. All that summer Mama and Daddy and the three children were stuffed in that hot, windowless room.

My father's name is Moyer Haywood Pettibone Scarberry Dunbar. When I was growing up he would read to me from the framed 1905 IWW Constitution, and tell me: 'I was born two years after the IWW, and Papa named me after the founders: William Moyer, Big Bill Haywood, and George Pettibone. They were on trial, framed up for murder in Boise, Idaho, during that summer of 1907 when I was



born, same year Oklahoma got statehood. Clarence Darrow got them off. One Big Union, that's what your grandfather fought for.' Then Daddy would rail against the current trade unions.

Hanging on the bedroom wall beside the IWW Constitution was a framed photograph from 1912 of my father's entire family, my grandfather and grandmother sitting on the wide front porch of their spacious two-story house. All ten children were dressed in their Sunday best. Daddy was five years old in that picture.

Next to the photograph was Grandpa Dunbar's diploma in veterinarian medicine from St. Joseph, Missouri, dated 1910. He had moved his family from Missouri to Piedmont, Oklahoma in 1907, just after Daddy was born, and returned alone to Kansas and then Missouri for three years to study medicine. During those years, Grandma was practically a single mother caring for five little children in Piedmont, where her entire extended family had settled. Grandpa had joined the Socialist Party when it was founded in 1901 - eastern Kansas and western Missouri formed the southwest center of the Socialist Party - but was attracted to the

more radical IWW once it was founded. Already a committed Wobbly when Daddy was born, Grandpa continued his involvement while in medical school and returned to Piedmont an organizer as well as a highly respected professional. Daddy said Grandpa rotated three teams of horses to make his doctoring calls around a fifty-mile area – cattle and horses were his specialty.

Beside the veterinarian diploma and the picture, a worn, thin red book - my grandfather's IWW union book – hung from a string, 'Emmett Victor Dunbar' scrawled inside

'Why did Grandpa take you all to Texas?' I'd ask.

'Danged Klan ran us off, some of them same folks you see in church on Sunday. They're pretty brave when they got sheets over their heads. Nothing but cowards. Papa had to sell out lock, stock and barrel.'

Daddy was fourteen when the family moved to the border town of McAllen in the Texas Rio Grande Valley. Grandfather Emmett died in 1934, kicked by a horse he was doctoring. But my father held the KKK responsible because a dozen years before they had beat my grandfather half to death and left him with brain damage.

Daddy told me over and over about those years before the First World War when the Wobblies controlled the town and the county where I grew up, and practically all of the mines and fields and woods of western North America: the glory days. My father liked to tell stories about them while he cleaned his hunting rifle; the smell of gun oil went with the story.

'Your Grandpa organized all the sharecroppers and tenants and cotton pickers and wheat thrashers, all of them migrants from here to you. Papa got himself elected to the school board, that same school you go to. One time a bunch of landlords tried to take the school with guns, waving their red white and blue flags. Papa and all us brothers held up there five days shooting it out with them, and we whipped them good.'

'How old were you then, Daddy?'

'About your age, ten, eleven, but I was a good shot. Papa always chose me to ride shotgun on his wagon when he made his rounds



doctoring.'

'What did the Wobblies want?' I asked. No matter how many times he told me, I loved to hear his agenda of Wobbly dreams: abolition of interest and profits, public ownership of everything, no military draft, no military, no police, the equality of women and all races. 'The O-B-U, One Big Union,' he would say and smile to himself, lost in memory.

The Wobblies were mostly anarchists and suspicious of the electoral system, but many of them like my grandfather voted for Eugene Debs and the Socialist Party all five times he ran. Daddy explained: 'It was different here in Oklahoma than some places. Why by nineteen and fourteen Oklahoma had more dues-paying members of the Socialist Party than any other state in the Union – twelve thousand. That year they elected over a hundred Socialists to office.'

'So what happened that the Klan drove you all out?' I asked.

'That son-of-a-gun Woodrow Wilson, him and that gangster Palmer and his goon J. Edgar Hoover wiped out the IWW, put them all in jail or kicked them out of the country. The dadgummed rich wheat farmers bankrolled the Klan. They swelled up like a tick – night riding, killing stock, burning barns and crops, lynching, burning crosses. Good Christians they were.'

Daddy, like his father, was a free-thinker. I would lower my head whenever he talked about Christians because I was a devout Baptist. Mama was a hard-shell Baptist convert, and I never missed a church service once we moved to town: Sunday morning and night, Wednesday night prayer meeting, and summer Bible School, camp and tent revivals. My parents tried not to fight about it, and Daddy would even give me a dime to put in the collection plate. But he would break out singing 'Pie in the sky bye and bye,' from Wobbly troubadour Joe Hill's 'Preacher and the Slave,' to the tune of the hymn 'The Sweet Bye and Bye,' and Mama would steam.

Next to the Klan and Christian hypocrites Daddy scorned any kind of law enforcement authorities. The Wobbly Constitution said that any worker who joined the army, a militia or even a police force would be denied membership forever.

Despite my grandfather's former affluence, when my parents married in 1927 they returned to Piedmont as sharecroppers.

'Why are we so poor if Grandpa was rich,' I asked.

My father would shift his eyes away from the IWW Constitution and stare at his gnarled hands. He didn't like being reminded that we were poor. Down the street lived two of his mother's sisters, among the wealthiest families in town, meaning they had two-story houses with running water and bathrooms. The big family house where my father grew up still stood, one of the seven big houses in town, but it no longer belonged to our family.

'I did all right until the Dust Bowl and the danged Depression. Why even rich bankers were jumping out of windows back then. Danged Roosevelt dumped our crops in the ocean and got the bankers back on their feet, then tried to drive us all off the land. I wasn't about to be run off to no California.'

Oscar Ameringer became the Socialist Party organizer in Oklahoma in 1907. He was doubtful about organizing farmers. In his 1940 autobiography, *If You Don't Weaken*, Ameringer wrote that he had once regarded farmers as capitalists, not exploited wage laborers, as the owners of the means of production with a great deal to lose from socialism. But after a meeting in Harrah, the town where my mother grew up, he was astonished to discover an America he did not know existed, starving farmers poorer than the white and black workers he had been organizing in New Orleans.

Between 1906 and 1917, the Wobblies and the Socialist Party won converts on a mass scale in Oklahoma. My grandfather was one of the first. They adopted the religious evangelists' technique of holding huge week-long encampments with charismatic speakers, male and female, usually near small towns (indeed, many evangelists were themselves converts to socialism). Socialists were elected as local officials and the lampposts of many towns were hung with red flags. In 1915 alone 205 mass encampments were held. The Socialists never won a statewide race in Oklahoma, but their percentage of the vote increased from 6 percent in 1907 to 16 percent in 1916 voting for Socialist Party candidate Eugene Debs. In 1914 the Socialist candidate for governor won 21 percent of the vote and they won six seats in the Oklahoma legislature, along with a majority of local offices in many counties. But it was not a peaceful process.

'There was a lot of shooting?' I asked Daddy.

'You can say that again and not just shooting. Wobblies cut telephone wires and dynamited pipelines, water mains and sewers. It was all around here but mainly over in the eastern part of the state. Them Seminole Indians in it, Negroes too. Down in San Antone and the Valley

them Magon brothers from Old Mexico. Boy, the Wobblies sure put up a fight.'

In speaking of blacks and poor whites and Seminole Indians rising up together in eastern Oklahoma, I know now that Daddy was referring to a spontaneous event, separate from IWW or Socialist Party organizing, the 'Green Corn Rebellion' during the summer of 1917.

In December 1994, when I was poking around in southeastern Oklahoma trying to understand that rebellion, I met an elderly Seminole Muskogee Indian woman who said that she had been only nine years old at the time, but she remembered it, and that her uncle, who she said had been a leader of the rebellion and was imprisoned afterwards, had told the heroic story over and over.

'The full moon of late July, early August it was, the Moon of the Green Corn. It was not easy to persuade our poor white and black brothers and sisters to rise up. We told them that rising up, standing up, whatever the consequences, would inspire future generations. Our courage, our bravery would be remembered and copied. That has been the Indian way for centuries, since the invasions. Fight and tell the story so that those who come after or their descendants will rise up once again. It may take a thousand years but that is how we continue and eventually prevail.'

I asked her to explain the significance of the Green Corn ceremony to the Muskogeese: 'That is our most sacred ceremony, and you could call it our new year, the time of new beginnings. It occurs whenever the green corn comes, sometimes as early as late June, or as late as early August. During that year, 1917, the green corn came late, during the last week of July and early August. It was on August 3, 1917, at the end of our four-day Green Corn ceremony that we rose up.'

My father portrayed the Green Corn Rebellion as a great moment of heroism, a moment of unity, betrayed by the 'electric-light city' Socialists, who scorned it. Of course nothing about Wobblies and Socialists appeared in my US or Oklahoma history textbooks (and very little appears in Oklahoma textbooks even now), so I began to doubt my father's stories, especially about the Green Corn Rebellion.

When I moved to California and was swept up in the sixties as a student, I gained a new pride in my Wobbly/Socialist heritage, but nearly forgot the Green Corn Rebellion until it reappeared in my field of vision in the mid-1970s while I was working on the book *The Great Sioux Nation*, which grew out of the 1973 Lakota uprising at Wounded Knee. A Muskogee medicine man from Oklahoma, the late Philip Deere, told me a story in 1974 that sounded familiar. At first he did not name the event

but described his memory of it and what he was told growing up. He would have been about the same age as my father in 1917, ten or eleven years old. Philip recalled the rebellion as Indian-conceived and led.

I searched for published information, trying to verify Philip's version, but found very little indeed that even mentioned the Green Corn Rebellion. Finally, I found the typescript of a 1959 undergraduate Harvard University history thesis by John Womack, Jr., himself from Oklahoma, the biographer of Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, and now a senior professor of history at Harvard.

By 1890, before the Native American republics of Indian Territory were dissolved by the 1898 Curtis Act that violated treaties with the Native nations and forced their communal holdings into individual allotments, white tenants had already come to outnumber the Indians two to one in Indian Territory. Breaking the law, violence and corruption were thus the rule, not the exception, in that region, setting the stage for an agrarian rebellion.

And times were hard. Over 60 percent of mortgaged farms were lost to foreclosure during the two years before the Green Corn Rebellion. More than half the farms were worked by tenants. The rates were even higher in the Southeastern counties where the rebellion took place (Pottawatomie, Seminole, Hughes and Pontotoc counties). Only a fifth of the farms in that region were worked by their owners, and half of those were under heavy mortgages that carried usurious interest rates of 20 to 200 percent.

Farming in Oklahoma was commercial, with tenants as wage laborers and cotton the king; cotton production doubled between 1909 and 1919, making Oklahoma the fourth-largest cotton producer among the states and firmly establishing a cash-and-credit economy. The other major industries were oil production and coal mining, which spawned boom towns and attracted large populations of transient workers.

When the government began to draft soldiers for the First World War, the white, black and red farmers in southeastern Oklahoma decided to resist conscription. Their strategy was to come together and seal off an area from outside interference, persuade their neighbors to join, and then march all the way to Washington D.C., picking up recruits along the way. There they would overthrow President Wilson, stop the war, and reform the domestic economy to 'restore to the working classes the full product of their labor.' In preparation for the great march they burned bridges across the Canadian River to keep their liberated area isolated. They cut telephone and telegraph wires so the besieged could not call for help. They planned to confiscate property in the towns and on the surrounding

farms. Anyone who opposed them was to be conscripted in the same way that the federal government conscripted its troops. They agreed that any local authorities who tried to stop them would be met with gunfire, and poisoned food and well water. They believed they would be joined by the working people's armies of other states and that the IWW and the four Railroad Brotherhoods would support them for a victorious march on Washington, where they would then take control (since most of the US military would already be in Europe or fighting Pancho Villa in Mexico).

I learned from Professor Womack's account that a group of African-Americans set off the rebellion. In early August 1917, a sheriff and his deputy were fired on by some thirty black rebels. Hundreds of poor whites and Muskogee Indians were involved. The rebels were well organized. They divided themselves into details, some to recruit all who had not yet joined the rebellion, others to burn barns, another to blow up the Texaco pipeline, several groups to destroy railroad bridges and cut telephone and telegraph wires, and others to tear down fences and free farm animals to trample cotton fields. After a long summer day of destruction the 500 or so rebels congregated in their new liberated zone to feast, celebrate and rest.

However, the reaction of local townspeople against the rebels was fierce. They organized huge posses to hunt them down. When faced with angry, armed citizens, the rebels dispersed, guerilla-style. During the following days, more wires were cut and bridges hit, while more and more rebels were captured. Pitched battles took place, and hundreds were arrested.

US entrance into the European war in 1917 produced a wave of patriotism and a brutal backlash against the antiwar Wobblies and Socialists in Oklahoma. The Socialists blamed the repression in Oklahoma on the Green Corn rebels. Fiery crosses burned all over the state, and the ranks and resources of the Ku Klux Klan burgeoned. The Klan seized political power in Texas and Arkansas and came close in Oklahoma. My grandfather was one of their victims.

When a core group of native white Americans, the very foot soldiers of empire, began turning socialist and anti-imperialist, even inching away from white supremacy, the government and other centers of power acted swiftly, viciously and relentlessly to crush the movement. A wave of propaganda accompanied the repression. The D.W. Griffith film extolling the KKK, *The Birth of a Nation*, had already appeared in 1915. After the victories of the Russian and Mexican revolutions, Red Scare propaganda flooded newspapers and magazines, and formed the main text of sermons. The landless agrarians of Oklahoma were left with a recollection of hard times and hatred for big government and for the rich and powerful, but also with the memory of a failed movement.

And repression: Oklahoma was kept under careful surveillance long before the McCarthy era. As reported by George Milburn in 1946:

It is a criminal offense, for example, in Oklahoma, to have a copy of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* in one's library, and anyone suspected of possessing seditious literature is liable to search, seizure, and arrest. Indeed, certain scholarly citizens have been prosecuted criminally and faced with penitentiary sentences, because sober political treatises, regarded as classics elsewhere, in Oklahoma are even more illicit than a bottle of bootleg booze.

So talk about my grandfather and the Wobblies and the Green Corn Rebellion thinned as the new Red Scare escalated: A Red in the family tree was no longer something to be proud of. The rage about our poverty was covered over with pride for just being white and 'real' Americans.

I myself grew fiercely patriotic. Tears brimmed in my eyes when I heard the 'Star Spangled Banner' or pledged allegiance to the flag. I won first prize in a county speech contest for my original oration, 'America Is Great Because America Is Good.' I spent the summer of 1954 avidly watching the Army-McCarthy hearings on television, rooting for McCarthy, adoring the young Ray Cohn. I doubted my father's stories. And my father no longer told the stories.

During the Korean War I sold Veterans of Foreign Wars crepe paper roses. Several young men in town were drafted and came home wounded. One of the boys who returned sat with my brother and me and our cousins and told us about Korea: 'Why, we're rich here in Oklahoma by comparison. They're lucky to eat a spoonful of rice once a day. We went through this one little village and seen an old man, looked to be a hundred, all dried up and wrinkled, just died in front of us. I stopped to pay my respects and as I was looking at him wondering what his life had been like, out comes this giant white thing from his mouth, a damned tapeworm five foot long.' And we felt lucky to be free Americans fighting communism, proud of our country for helping others.

Today my father says he believes his father regretted having been a Wobbly and Socialist, and that he had been hoodwinked by communists. I don't believe it for a minute; rather, I think he wants to forget his father's, and my, idealism, which could get me into trouble.

Daddy shocked me recently when he told me how brutally his father had beat him as a teenager. I had never before heard him utter a single negative word about his father. 'Boy, it hurt and sometimes put me in bed. He used a horsewhip. After I was about twelve seems like he had it

in for me, and that's why I run off when I turned sixteen. I couldn't take it no more,' he said, tears filling his fading blue eyes.

That would have been 1919 to 1923, when the Wobbly and Socialist movements were being crushed and the Klan was on the rise, and my grandfather and his family were targets of KKK violence. Grandpa Dunbar had taken out his frustration on his most devoted disciple.

From www.reddirtsite.com/bk-red-2-extract.htm

