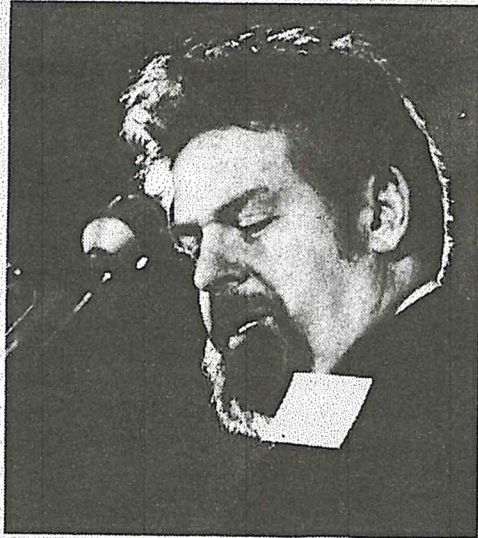


Clay's Crawfishes



photo/Stephen Kulik

Clay Cochran, our leader since the beginning, resigned last month as executive director of Rural America, and David Raphael, who has served as Clay's gifted deputy all these years, is acting in his stead.

No man is indispensable, but for a long time Clay came close enough. He made our particular dream — that of achieving equity for rural citizens — an extension of his own fine intellect and a summation of his eloquence. If we are able now to go forward without him, it is because he taught us well: we learned to be obstinate in the face of oppression and to insist on the primacy of heart in a society grown increasingly heartless.

Looking back on those twelve eventful years of Clay's tenure, we are filled with wonder, and we are grateful. The miracle that he presided over got officially underway in 1966 with the founding of a flimsy, one-typewriter advocacy group called the International Self-Help Housing Association (ISHHA). With a few dollars and a lot of nerve, Clay and his skeletal crew of Davids set out to battle Goliath, eventually persuading a skeptical Johnson administration that the self-help housing technique — if skillfully managed and humanely subsidized — could help poor people come in out of the rain. Thousands of rural families are still benefiting from the consequences of that early crusade.

Thus emboldened, Clay and the board of directors decided, as Clay phrased it, to "escalate the conflict:" they turned ISHHA into the Rural Housing Alliance, a group that continued to fish in the same waters that ISHHA had, but

Richard J. Margolis

Beneath the Harrow

This is the first try at a monthly column by Richard J. Margolis. The title comes from Clay Cochran's favorite Kipling quatrain: "The toad beneath the harrow knows/Exactly where each sharp tooth goes;/The butterfly upon the road/Preaches contentment to that toad."

As of this writing, the farmers are still in Washington, snarling traffic with their lumbering tractors and being snarled at in turn by commuters, federal officials and the press.

USDA Secretary Bob Bergland says some of the farmers were propelled here "by old-fashioned greed," while others "are just publicity seekers;" the *Washington Post* accuses these flannel-shirted visitors of staging "a tractor tantrum" in front of the White House; and a frustrated commuter, having idled two hours behind a "tractorcade" on Memorial Bridge, growls to a reporter, "If those guys are wheat farmers, I'll never buy another loaf of bread."

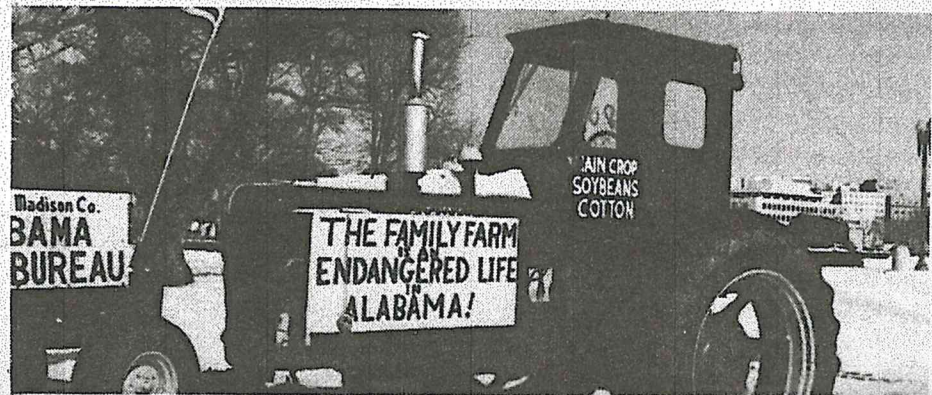
Washingtonians do not suffer demonstrators lightly. As keepers of the

citizenry. People might get the wrong impression.

Worse, they might get the *right* impression. For when the tractor dust clears, what emerges is not a band of starving agrarians but a collection of moderately well-fixed agriculturists. True, they have real grievances: their twin nemeses — low grain prices and high production costs — have caused them much worry and more debt. True also that Bob Bergland's response to their pleas was just short of hysterical.

Yet the farmers' demands for federal price supports at 90 percent of parity strike a sad and sour note. Who will benefit most from such supports? Certainly not the small farmer struggling to break even on his limited plot. No, the chief long-range beneficiaries of the tractor crusade will be the already-rich — the big growers and landed corporations who all these years, while preaching the sanctity of free enterprise, have been stuffing their bank accounts with federal loot and using the proceeds so buy up more land. The upshot has been sky-rocketing land prices and vanishing small farmers.

The farmers' plan — if that's what it is — might be said to have redeeming social



We were beginning back then to see a pattern — a malign connection between the many shacks out there and all the other miseries that were plaguing rural people. And we asked ourselves why it was that rural Americans always seemed to be the first neglected and the last assisted, and how it was that the public could be so blind to rural sufferings. Clay cut through the riddle with a single, memorable word — “metropollyanna,” by which he meant “the widespread delusion that sooner or later everyone will move to the city and live happily ever after.”

It may well have been outrage over government-sanctioned metropollyanna that brought more than 2,000 persons, in the spring of 1975, to the First National Conference on Rural America, the get-together that sped us into our present incarnation. We have become a broad-based organization with 2,200 members, and growing fast. The membership in itself constitutes a Clay-style guarantee that we are in nobody's pocket, and that we shall never become another of those bland, foundation-made letterhead organizations with a score of grants and contracts in our vault and not one gutsy idea in our head.

In retrospect, our evolution from ISHHA to RA seems as smooth and natural as a child's breathing; in actuality, there was a fair amount of gasping along the way. Dollars were often short, and aspirations were always long. (Both are still — see pages 5-8.) What saved us as often as not was Clay's resourcefulness, and his cussedness, too. For Clay has always been at his best when leading a pack of underdogs, the mangier the better.

He's a fan of Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* tales, and among his favorites is one called “The Story of the Deluge, and How It Came About.” It seems that some of the bigger animals, like “de Rynoshosses” and “de Elephant,” were squashing the smaller ones, especially the Crawfishes. So the Crawfishes and the Spring Lizzuds and their friends held a meeting, and they decided to go underground. They bored into the ground, deeper and ever deeper, until “dey unloost de fountains er de yeth,” and the water “riz higher and higher,” finally drowning all the creatures on top who had “let on 'monst deyselves dat dey wuz bigger dan de Crawfishes.”

The fable echoes Clay's own generous muse, which imagines a welling-up of protest from folks tired of being stepped on by creatures rich and powerful — an unloosing, in short, of the moral fountains of the earth. We who remain at Rural America will try to live up to Clay's vision. We shall never abandon the Crawfishes.

run the planet in peace and quiet, without benefit of rude kibitzers from the provinces.

Considering this city's distinguished history of hostile receptions, the farmers here should feel lucky they haven't been run out of town at bayonet point. Coxey's Army, a rag-tag band of jobless supplicants, was fired upon point-blank by federal troops in 1894 when it tried to encamp on the Capitol lawn. In 1934 people in the Veterans Bonus March, a much larger but similarly threadbare crowd, got the same treatment. A young general named Douglas MacArthur gave the order to shoot, and a still younger major named Dwight Eisenhower carried it out. (The peacetime military needs to keep in shape.)

Public relationswise, as they say in the trade, this has not been the farmers' most felicitous moment. One shouldn't try to dramatize one's poverty and powerlessness while sitting atop a \$65,000 tractor and using it to squash police cars and scatter the

payers rather than privately by the poor. But it's basically a plan for rigging prices in the supermarket, which means that the low-income consumer will bear the heaviest part of the load. An ugly thing, this parity.

In sum, it appears that the farmers in Washington suffer from the same upside-down vision that has always plagued the unaffluent in America: they tend to identify with their “betters” rather than with those who are worse off but share the same economic fate. Class consciousness in this country is a snare and a delusion. Unions too often imitate the ways of corporations, just as farmers too often try to imitate the ways of agribusiness.

The Americans' reverence for wealth and their indifference to other people's poverty is understandable in a society hooked on upward mobility, but it is not very interesting; and it is not very helpful either, when middle-sized farmers, who ought to know better, volunteer to do the work of the rich, and at no extra charge.

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