

Introduction

In May 1977, Porter Myron Chaffee walked into the offices of the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, then under the direction of the eminent oral historian, Willa K. Baum. Chaffee expressed an interest in participating in an oral history interview which would document his personal experiences before and during the Great Depression, his work during the 1930s as a labor activist and organizer with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU), and as an editor with the Federal Writer's Project in Oakland, California. Due to funding limitations, ROHO was unable to conduct an interview with Chaffee, but Willa Baum referred him to the Regional History Project at UC Santa Cruz, the city where Chaffee had spent significant periods of his life, and where he resided in the late 1970s.

Meanwhile, the Regional History Project had received special funding to conduct a series of interviews documenting the agricultural history of the Central Coast of California from the point of view of growers, farm workers, labor contractors, agricultural advisors, and other groups. Oral historian Randall Jarrell conducted two interviews with Porter Chaffee in the Regional

History office on May 25 and June 7, 1977. Chaffee was then 77 years old.¹ He died on November 5, 1989 near Ukiah, California.

The interviews with Chaffee were transcribed in the Seventies, but due to funding and time limitations it is only now that they have been edited and released for publication. Chaffee's oral history offers valuable primary source documentation on the labor struggles of the 1930s, particularly from the point of view of a Communist labor activist and WPA writer.

Porter Myron Chaffee was born on November 26, 1900 in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. He was one of six children. His father, Grant Chaffee, was a miner and also a cook in mining camps in places such as the Anaconda copper mines. As a man with a strong working class consciousness, Grant Chaffee grew impassioned about the Knights of Labor and later the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Eventually he married and moved to Oakland, California, where he worked in lumber yards. A few years later he inherited a substantial amount of money from his father, the elder Porter Myron Chaffee (for whom the narrator of this oral history is named), who had owned substantial amounts of property in Oakland. This inheritance thrust Porter's father out of the working class and into a crisis of conscience and ideals. He still identified as working class, but his wife (Porter's mother) cherished middle class aspirations. This family conflict

1. Porter Chaffee was also interviewed on April 27, 1978 by Anne Loftis for her book *Witnesses to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement* (University of Nevada Press, 1998). See pages 42-43 for more information on Porter Chaffee.

eventually led to the family's purchase in 1909 of a ranch in Napa County on Monticello Road, where they lived for a few years. But soon they returned to Oakland, where Porter finished grammar school and then attended Oakland Technical High School.

Instead of finishing high school, the restless Chaffee dropped out and joined the Merchant Marines, and spent the next three years at sea. It was there that Chaffee developed a respect for the intelligence of working class people and was exposed to Communist ideas. He recalled:

There was always this knot of older seamen on the ship. And they'd always have these little papers and draw these little maps in little books. They were talking about Russia and what's happening here and there. And they really had a faith in this thing. So I've often used that when I prepared talks for foreign people, to show them that the working man is ahead of the intellectual. I knew things that intellectuals never knew then.

In 1921 Chaffee returned to California, where he harvested prunes and grapes at the Admiral Miller Ranch in Napa County. There he suffered a shoulder injury, developed tuberculosis, and almost died. In search of treatment, Chaffee, who then weighed and alarming 97 pounds, took a bus to Oakland, where he sought care from a chiropractor who may have been engaged in medical quackery. He spent that time fraternizing with Yugoslavian and Russian immigrant patients whose radical ideals further stimulated his interest in the Communist movement.

After his recovery from TB, Chaffee joined the Communist youth group Friends of the Soviet Union. In 1925 he moved to Santa Cruz with his family,

where he attended Santa Cruz High School at age twenty-five. There he was relentlessly teased for his hump (a result of the TB) and after a few months he walked out of Santa Cruz High, and left Santa Cruz for what he called “the hobo part of his life,” journeying across the United States and eventually ending up in New York City in 1926, where he wrote for the leftist *The New Masses* magazine. He wrote an unpublished memoir about this period entitled “The Journal of a Hungry Man,” which is on deposit together with Chaffee’s other papers at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley.²

Unable to work because of his fragile health, Chaffee returned to Santa Cruz County, where his parents provided him with minimal support. There he continued to be active on the Left, and founded a branch of the Communist Party in Santa Cruz in 1929. He shares his recollections of some of the socialists in Santa Cruz County, many of whom were of German heritage. He recalls organizing a hunger march up Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz, past the Santa Cruz County Court House. He also describes fascist reprisals against Santa Cruz socialists.

In 1933, Chaffee returned to Oakland, where he became involved in organizing for the Unemployed Councils. During this period he forged friendships with radical luminaries such as the muckraking journalist and editor, Lincoln Steffens, and the writer Kenneth Rexroth.

2. See material at the Bancroft Library under Federal Writers’ Project on Migratory Labor, District no. 8 [ca 1936-1939], (Oakland, Calif.), collection number BANC MSS C-R 2

It was at this time that Chaffee became an organizer for the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU), whose offices were headquartered at 81 Post Street in San Jose, California.

The CAWIU was a project of the Trade Union Unity League of the Communist Party (TUUL). According to historian Anne Loftis, the TUUL was:

created in 1929 by leaders of the American Communist Party after an international conference in Moscow, aimed to bring unskilled workers into organizations that cut across racial, ethnic, and class lines and were dedicated to Marxist principles. In 1932, TUUL created the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, based in San Jose, near the orchards and canneries of the Santa Clara Valley."³

After a slow start, the CAWIU organized several successful strikes, including a strike in the peach orchards at Tagus Ranch near Tulare, California which resulted in a wage increase for workers. The chief organizer was Pat Chambers. Chaffee worked closely with Chambers and discusses his recollections of him. He also talks about Sam Darcy, who was the California District Organizer for the Communist Party in the early 1930s, and organizer and speaker Caroline Decker [Gladstein], who served as secretary of the CAWIU during that period. Chaffee helped to organize a strike among the apple pickers of Watsonville in 1931 and 1932, and also founded a unit of the Communist Party in Watsonville at that time.

3. Loftis, page 9.

In 1936 Chaffee decided to leave the Communist Party because he was struggling economically. He went on to write a history of the CAWIU for the Oakland office of the Federal Writers Project. According to Don Watson:

The Federal Writer's Project, working out of Oakland, California and led by Porter Chaffee, recorded 78 major strikes in 25 crops on California farms between 1930 and 1936. Strikers were Mexicans, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, Japanese and Blacks, as well as fruit tramps. The Communist Party led or participated in 27 of them."⁴

According to Anne Loftis, Chaffee's history was never authorized by the WPA or published. It is preserved in the Bancroft Library and on microfiche.⁵

This oral history does not cover Chaffee's years with the WPA, but instead focuses on the rich details of his colorful life and his years with the CAWIU.

Historian Kevin Starr has written:

Skilled in organizing as well as being so brave and persistent in the face of a hostile criminal justice system, the CAWIU organizers used the mimeograph machine, the poster, the stump speech to communicate. At night they spoke by bonfires to circles of tired workers or met with similar groups in sheds, shacks, tents, wherever the migrants were gathered. They pushed and pushed, and they never gave up."⁶

Chaffee's oral history is a significant contribution to the historical record on this tumultuous chapter of California labor history. Copies of the manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and

4. From an unpublished paper by Don Watson, "Rise and Decline of Fruit Tramp Unionism in the Western Lettuce Industry."

5. Porter M. Chaffee, *A History of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union* (Federal Writers Project, Oakland, California. 193?).

6. Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 73-74.

in Special Collections at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, head of Special Collections and Archives, and Acting University Librarian, Robert White.

—Irene Reti
Regional History Project
McHenry Library
University of California, Santa Cruz
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Early Life

Jarrell: What year were you born?

Chaffee: I was born on November 26, 1900 in San Francisco, on Stockton Street near Green, which was then, and is now, pretty much the heart of the Tenderloin of San Francisco.

Jarrell: And how many children were in your family?

Chaffee: Well, there were six children in my family. Four of them were boys and two were girls. The girls were senior to me, older than I was.

Jarrell: And what did your father do? Did he work in San Francisco?

Chaffee: My father was an interesting man. He was a hard man to communicate with. I never could love him, but he's the type of man who never should have had children. He was an old pioneer type. He was a short man, rather attractive, and pretty well liked. But often as a child I felt nobody took him very seriously. This happens with so many personality types. Well, my father came across the plains skinning buffalo, and things like this. He worked in mining camps. He was a cook and a miner, worked in the Anaconda copper mines. He became interested kind of early in the labor movement, which would then have been the Knights of Labor or something of this kind. Because the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World], which he later became interested in, wasn't founded until 1905.

So he came West, and his father, for whom I'm named, Porter Myron Chaffee, founded a business corner in Oakland, rather large business corner, so later on in life (he died before I was born), my paternal grandfather, and I want to tell you that there used to be a sign, "The Porter M. Chaffee Corner"—that's at 23rd Avenue and East 14th Street—the building's torn down now. When I was in the depression and starving, I'd pass that building every day and see that sign. The thoughts evoked in me were terrific.

Well, anyway, back to my father . . . well, my father was always following gold rushes. He'd go up prospecting in the gold mines of California. In 1898 he met Jack London on the trail, in 1898 in Alaska. And my father said to him, "Why aren't you fighting for your country, Jack?" (This is according to my father.) Jack London said to him, "Well, I won't fight for a country I can't make a living in." This was civil work and so on. I'll go back . . . My father knew London. I'll tell you about this, too.

Well, my father came to Oakland and he had to go to work. He got married. He tried the real estate business, but all he did was talk socialism. And then he'd work in lumber yards. And I don't know when it happened, but I imagine when I was about eight or ten years old, my father inherited quite a large sum and income from this property, which was divided among my father and his two sisters. This threw my father out of the ranks of what we might call the working class. And this dichotomy with his nature . . . (laughter)

Jarrell: Had a little capital there. (laughter)

Chaffee: Yes. Let's use this for an example. There's a man who owns a barber shop and he's a first-class barber and makes a lot of money, but he's pro-labor. And the dichotomy will cause him to wind up and picket his own barber shop. (laughter)

Jarrell: Yes, yes.

Chaffee: That's about the shape the old man was in. Well, among other things that were left my father—there were four houses in a row besides of his interest in the business corner. He owned these outright. Four houses in a row on East 16th Street in Oakland. And every Sunday he'd go out with the boys and distribute *The Appeal to Reason* which was of course a socialist paper. I think Julius Wayland edited it, but it had various editors. One of [my father's] tenants was named Mrs. Christensen. She was a widow, and her boy lived with her, adult boy. He was a captain or something on these Alaska packer boats that sailed out of the Oakland estuary going up north, see.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: And I can remember every year he'd come back, he'd bring us a little keg of salmon bellies. But when my father would put *The Appeal to Reason* out at Mrs. Christensen's door, she'd go out as though it were cat turd with two sticks and pick it up and take it out. (laughter)

Jarrell: (laughter) Put it in the garbage.

Chaffee: Anyway, I don't think my father was wholeheartedly interested in this movement. He wasn't wholeheartedly interested in his income; he wasn't wholeheartedly interested in anything. The only real good thing I could say about him is that he'd have to fish around a little bit, but he never lied. He never boasted, never pushed himself forward. So my mother and he fought continually, just terrible fights. I remember going into hysterics when I was a kid in the 16th Street. And a man... His boy worked for the city of Oakland. I think the boy's name was Donald. The father's name was Sergeant Walters. He was on the police force. He lived near us and he came home and he saw me hysterical out in the garden. I told him my mother was going to kill my father or vice versa, and he goes inside and quiets them down.

Jarrell: So it was a continual kind of bickering and battling.

Chaffee: Yes, uproar. But I reacted in a characteristic way. I can't ever remember loving my parents. I have good memory. I can never remember loving them or trusting them, to show how interesting children's minds can be. So after a while I would stand around. I'd feel like I was in a circle, although there weren't other people there (laughter), watching these fights that went on.

Jarrell: Spectacle.

Chaffee: Spectacle. And they always repeated themselves. So early in my childhood mind I came to the conclusion that they enjoyed what they were doing, for they'd say these things over and over again.

Jarrell: They derived some satisfaction.

Chaffee: Oh, it's really a knockout.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: So my mother was very beautiful.

Jarrell: Oh, I wanted to ask about your mother.

Chaffee: Okay. My mother was very, very beautiful . . . exceedingly beautiful. Her father was a tinsmith. And he was always working on piecework. He was born in New Jersey and his father came from the Isle of Guernsey in the English Channel. I think he was there when Victor Hugo was exiled. I think he was born in 1812. He came here and was a grand man, huge man, enormous man, handsome, big beard—looked like a prophet. And a huge chain across here with a Masonic symbol on it, you know. And a cane. He must have been about 100 when he died. Well, his boy, we call Little Grandpa. The old man, the great-grandpa was of course Great-Grandpa, Big Grandpa, and then there was Little Grandpa. Well, I think I got the quotient of love, or a part of it, a sample of it, that a child should have from my co-relationship with my great-grandfather who loved me very much. He'd take

me in his room, and I'd sit on his knee, and he'd sing me songs and everything. He liked me very much, and he had a good voice like lots of people from damp areas and half of the British Isles have. (laughter) There were always little men coming to see him and they looked to me like gnomes. He was so big. They'd be there and they'd wiggle around self-consciously. They had on these Masonic aprons. (laughter) It was kind of silly. I'd be sitting on the floor listening to them. And he was given this beautiful language . . . See the Masonic symbol is lodge language, heavy like people used to think cultured Negroes used, big, great statements, lots of colored phraseology.

Jarrell: Rhetoric, flowery.

Chaffee: I'd sit on the floor watching them and these people coming there. So getting back to . . .

Jarrell: We were talking about your mother.

Chaffee: Yes. She was very beautiful. And her father was always a poor tinner. He didn't seem to catch on. But he worked hard, honestly, and he'd go on piecework. He'd do so well that they'd lower the piece rate to where he was just working like a slave, see. One of the things I remember early in life, which is interesting, sort of a Freudian factor, is that they used muriatic acid then, which was cut with zinc. They'd put that on the thing they were going to solder, and wipe it off quickly. His hands would get this on them, and he'd

continually wipe himself at the crotch. And ultimately it must have gone through, and he got an ailment in his penis, and it had to be removed. I can remember hearing this.

Jarrell: Really. You think there was a connection between the muriatic acid and . . .

Chaffee: Oh yes, without doubt.

Jarrell: He just probably rubbed himself without thinking.

Chaffee: Yes, that's right. Men will often do it, especially if they're busy. They'll reach down here. And I imagine that this developed ultimately an itch. See, this travels through anything. That's what medical authorities said. Well, he was an interesting man, too. Back to the beauty of my mother. She was a fantastically beautiful woman. And pictures . . .

Jarrell: Where had she grown up?

Chaffee: She was born in San Francisco early. As she got to be teen-aged, her father, my Little Grandpa, moved to Berkeley. She worked in the candy store there. There was a great family in Berkeley called—everything is named after them up there—Joseph Le Conte. I think it was astronomy from the South; he'd been an officer in the Civil War. He had these beautiful, interesting daughters. They were older, I imagine early twenties, and they went into this candy store to get some candy and they saw my mother and she was so

beautiful that they wanted to paint her. They came and got her in a carriage and drove around this big circular driveway along this enormous home in Berkeley, fantastic, you know, with a built-on nursery and the atrium and this darn deer on the lawn. (laughter) The iron chairs, the whole bit, and a fountain or two. That just made my mother flip. She'd go back to be painted there. She had such pretty shoulders, so they told her, see. She lived in this aristocratic world. This is where she belonged. This is where she thought she ought to be, see. My mother married my poor father because he was poor when they were married and he was never affluent, but he got a good income to buy plenty of things. And there was always the hassle between my mother wanting furniture, and conflict continually. And he, being a little wholesomer than she was, and closer to reality, would say, "Well, apple boxes are good enough at a table if you have fellowship." There must have been something to him. She always wanted expensive chairs and so on and so forth. And every once in a while she'd sneak out and buy a fancy chair or something. I remember one in particular (laughter) . . . he didn't observe things much see . . .

Jarrell: (laughter)

Chaffee: One day he'd been drinking a little bit. He didn't drink much but he came home, but just getting into bed he saw this new chair. Then he hit the ceiling. Well, this is good background on my mother. This was about 1909, and my father was participating in strikes around the Bay Area and around

East Oakland. And my aunt, who was the administrator of this estate, she was very businesslike, very capable. My father was easily dominated. She ran his family. So my mother and my Aunt Jessie were talking. Her name was Hogle. She had married a beautifully effeminate-type gambler with a little hidden pistol and frock coat. We had pictures of them, waxed mustache and all this stuff, and she'd get so jealous of him, she'd kick the chandeliers out when they had gas. She'd just go crazy over jealousy. So finally they split up or something. This is a little side anecdote, see.

Jarrell: Right.

Chaffee: But one time it was in the paper . . . they had a gambling den around 23rd Avenue and East 14th Street, which is quite a neighborhood. Full of color . . . can't imagine the color that's there, especially now (laughter) since there's been a population shift. But anyway, the local color there was great. And so he was in there one time and some fellow accused him of cheating or something, which he probably did, this fancy man of my Aunt Jessie's, and so he tells him to step out in the alley, says, "Sir, I'd like to fight you." So they go out in the street, 23rd Avenue, which is on pavement, and they fought. And this young gambler just cleaned him up, just made a dishrag out of him. He was skilled in self defense you see. And this was always told with great awe in our family. Well, Aunt Jessie, because my father was getting interested in these radical movements, he was putting out

. . . the last thing I can remember was the handbill for the Hodgins-Collins Lumber Company strike.

Jarrell: I'm not clear on how your father got so influenced or interested in the labor movement.

Chaffee: Wandering around the country. You see, in the old early logging camps and cookhouses and things of this kind, it was in the air. Out of this atmosphere developed the soil for the IWW. So he was in this and he used to read all these . . . of course Marx was circulated throughout the country then. My father was interested and the men talked this way. He picked it up because he was a proletarian, down and outer. He ran away from home when he was fourteen and was named Grant because his father was an abolitionist and worshipped General Grant. Well, my Aunt Jessie and my mother had a conference. My mother . . . Naturally it's terrible to have a husband who is interested in the labor movement when you aspire to get into society. (laughter) It just isn't very nice, you know.

Jarrell: A little contradiction there.

Chaffee: It's not a black sheep, it's a red one. (laughter) So anyway they sit down and they decided . . . My mother and father had been mildly getting interested in a ranch in the mountains in Napa County, see, so my Aunt Jessie, I can hear her yet say, "Oh well, it would be good if he did get a ranch

up there, get away from all this working-class movement." "Oh yes," my mother said, "That'd be wonderful." So then we moved to Napa County.

Jarrell: I see. And that was about 1908?

Chaffee: 1909. Then I had a ranch life, which influenced me greatly. We had 162 acres.

Jarrell: It was a working ranch?

Chaffee: In a sense it was. I was always looking . . . Because they had done some things to me, I was always looking for deceptions in everything they did and I always found them. Now my father told me, I didn't know he had inherited this money, and my father told me we're going up there and everybody will have to work, work, work, because we've got to make a go of it. So I read a book or two by Horatio Alger. I could understand what poverty is and how everybody should help, get to the top crap, and everything like that. I later knew that he had inherited this money because you couldn't actually make a living on the ranch. But he made a beautiful thing of it. It was fantastic. Cherry trees . . . loved the grounds.

Jarrell: Where in Napa County was it?

Chaffee: On the Monticello Road. It's a famous road, and there's a stone image there. I used to think of Hawthorne's story about the Great Stone Face. That was almost the corner of our property. If you go up the Monticello

Road, you'll see this stone face there. Somebody went to great expense and had a steel pipe put in its mouth. It's very interesting.

Jarrell: So you spent the rest of your adolescence there?

Chaffee: Well, about when I graduated from grammar school we moved back again to Oakland because of my mother and father's continual fighting. She was going to solve their problem by moving around. Or postpone the battles anyway. I went to Oakland Technical High School and I left there after about a year, six months. Then I left home. Then later when I was seventeen or eighteen I started going to sea. I went pretty much all around the world in ships.

Jarrell: So you graduated from Oakland Technical . . .

Chaffee: Didn't graduate, no.

Jarrell: You didn't graduate. All right.

Chaffee: I was there six months.

Jarrell: So you just quit school?

Chaffee: Just quit.

Jarrell: And then what did you do? Did you continue living at home? You must have been what, fifteen years old?

Chaffee: Well, I was about seventeen.

Jarrell: Seventeen?

Chaffee: Yes. See we didn't graduate from grammar school as early as they do now. I was sixteen when I graduated from grammar school, seventeen by the time I left Oakland Technical High School.

Jarrell: So then you left home.

Chaffee: Yes ma'am. I'd wander around a little bit and come back, which didn't seem to make much difference to them. There was no guidance.

Jarrell: Or care?

Chaffee: None at all, none. Funny, isn't it? It was really funny. But I think my father was . . . he can explain everything you know. Great poet says, "You have to climb the ladder of many birthdays before you can see into the face of your father." It's very good.

Jarrell: Yes.

Going to Sea

Chaffee: So anyway, why I went to sea. There's no problem. I just went.

Jarrell: In what kind of ships? And where?

Chaffee: Well, they were merchant ships. I wanted to go to the army in the war, and I was too young and I was too scrawny.

Jarrell: (laughter)

Chaffee: So I got into what they called the United States Shipping Board which trained also a merchant marine in uniform, which trained people on a training ship, the Iris. I left Army Street in San Francisco, made two trips to Anchorage, and we learned seamanship and stuff like that. So I joined that, and we had uniforms like the navy, except that we'd have two stripes on the collar instead of three. And our ratings, like I got a quartermaster rating and it's a wheel, a ship's wheel. You know what they are?

Jarrell: Right.

Chaffee: And instead of just being white it's red, and we gave ourselves these ratings, although I was a quartermaster. (laughter)

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: Things were out of control. Well, first I went from San Francisco to Eureka to get a load.

Jarrell: On a lumber ship?

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am. And of course the Humboldt Bar, to get a load of ties to take to Belgium, because the railroads had been blasted out. The war was

over, see. I was just getting ready to go and the war was over. So then from there we took them to Antwerp, and we took them to Rotterdam. We had something for Amsterdam too. And then we went to England.

Jarrell: Who would own this ship, what company? It was an American company?

Chaffee: I don't know. The ship was a wooden ship.

Jarrell: Wooden hull.

Chaffee: Wooden all over. And it looked horrible. We were going to sell it to the British government. The sale was completed. After we got to Belgium and Holland and got cargo all unloaded, we were going to take it to India. And then we were going to have our passage paid back because, according to maritime law, they have to pay our passage back. But when we got to England, the ship had sprung and all sides of it were like a broken umbrella, and these bargemen, oh, these wonderful bargemen on these rivers in there, they're full of wit. They are great people, Cockneys, and: "Look at that. Looks like Noah's bleeding ark," you know. "Looks like a busted umbrella." (laughter). So when it got around that the British government was thinking of buying, "Oh, the government's gone if it buys anything like that," they'd say. So the government wouldn't accept it. We had to come back to America. It was horrible. It was a horrible trip. If I wasn't young... When you're young, you don't be afraid. You're not frightened.

Jarrell: That's right.

Chaffee: It would just roll so much. We had no cargo and we just threw in some old stones and things.

Jarrell: Ballast.

Chaffee: Ballast, yes. Just roll like this, and I was always at the wheel. That was my job as quartermaster. You're two hours on the lookout. If you're near danger or anything like floating ice you get up in the crow's nest. Otherwise you stand on the bridge two hours there, two hours at the wheel, then eight off, you see, and so on.

Jarrell: Right.

Chaffee: And that's the way it went. Well, we got back to Norfolk, Virginia, and that's where we discharged. They paid our way back to San Francisco. That's trip number one. I made several trips. I made another trip to England in a ship called the Imlay, which was a Shell oil tanker. It's named for some sort of Persian title of Prince or something. And there's a city, Imlay, Nevada. Anyway, we went to Holland with oil. And we put up [at a] petroleum harbor in Holland—and we went again to England. Then we came back to San Francisco through the Panama Canal. Then I went twice to the Orient—Asia—on Robert Dollar boats.

Jarrell: Dollar Line.

Chaffee: Yes, that's right.

Jarrell: What were your wages like in those days, a month?

Chaffee: Well, they were pretty good. As a quartermaster I think I got ninety dollars a month.

Jarrell: And this would be in 1918 to 1920?

Chaffee: Yes, in that period. And we usually had quite a bit when we got home.

Jarrell: What were your quarters like in the forecandle?

Chaffee: Very good. Except on the first ship, the wooden ship, the Brompton. It was really, really bad. I'll tell you a little sidelight about the Brompton. Now I've got to check this, but I remember once when I was on the bum. I bummed a lot, you know. I just like to go, see, I can't explain it. It kept me alive, kept me healthy, kept me strong. Anyway, I went into a library. I forget where it was. I think it was in Cleveland. I pulled down a book of William Beebe with his bathysphere. [He] had just written a book and it was a picture of the Brompton and that's the boat he used so I wanted to dig . . .

Jarrell: Where they suspended the bathysphere, you mean? They go down for depth.

Chaffee: Yes, from that ship, yes.

Jarrell: You never knew that when you were on the ship, though.

Chaffee: No, because it was years later that they bought this ship, see. I want to check on that because I think that's kind of a colorful thing.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: All my life this happens to me. There's some things I can't tell because people won't believe me . . . little things. One time I was on a streetcar in Oakland. You see, Charlie Chaplin made his first film in Niles, California, S & A Company. Wallace Beery started there. I was on a streetcar once. We lived in East Oakland. My mother used to go to these matinees, ladies days at the matinee theater, and see all this corny stuff. I saw *East Lynn* with her on the stage (laughter) and I saw *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the stage, was a great thing. And a very great and Shakespearean actor, Garrick, I think it was, on the stage in the *Merchant of Venice*. This further kindled my interest in poetry. You don't have to understand poetry to be interested in it.

Jarrell: Oh, I know.

Chaffee: You just have to get a reaction from it. That's a poet's job, to make you feel. Not to present you with a bunch of words. Well anyway, on this streetcar I wandered around like kids do, and there was this man sitting there with a cane and a moustache. He talked to me. He said he worked in motion pictures at Niles. It was Charlie Chaplin. Now how am I gonna tell that to . . . See what I mean.

Jarrell: But that's amazing, that really is.

Chaffee: Yes, this is true. It's absolutely true. I've got a good imagination, but couldn't cook up these things. Now I have given a series of talks at Notre Dame University on creative writing at which I told them [students], "Frankly, you can't teach it. Let's just have fun. Let's talk and see what we can do." You can't teach it.

Jarrell: That's right. It's the loneliest sport in the world.

Chaffee: You bet your life it is. So anyway they asked me who was the most important man I ever met. "Well, it depends on how you look at it." I said, "The most important man I ever met," and it still fills me with wonder, "was Buffalo Bill." Then they laughed at me.

Jarrell: (laughter)

Chaffee: (laughter) "There's a Yankee come across the water. They come across the border to give us some of his fancy talk." So I reached up (you know, you have one here) reached up and got this here fact book. He never died till 1917, see. My father and I were crossing the bay. It was one of my nicest experiences I had, memories I have of my father. We were crossing the bay to San Francisco. And there was a man standing out there in a beautiful buckskin. Fringes and the big hat and the slender cigar, you know, and a white moustache. I could never wear a moustache and that's why I failed. Anyway, my father just jumped, knew who it was, and he says, "Mr. Cody,

this is my son Porter." And he says, "Porter, this is Buffalo Bill." And I remember that.

Jarrell: My grandmother used to live near him in Nebraska when she was growing up.

Chaffee: Isn't that fascinating?

Jarrell: In the 1880s.

Chaffee: Yes, yes. You see, he was in San Francisco in conjunction with some business on this road show he had. He had this great . . .

Jarrell: He probably traveled six, eight months a year.

Chaffee: Yes. You can't tell people that.

Jarrell: That's wonderful.

Chaffee: Too many of them . . . amazing.

Jarrell: Right. Well, if we could continue about your going to sea. So you continued going to sea . . . what year, say from 1918 on until when? When was your last trip?

Chaffee: I went for three years to sea. Now that doesn't seem long. But what I saw in three years. I could match memories with men who had been fifteen years at sea. Because I liked it so well, I'd go on instead of lay over and get

drunk. I liked to drink a little bit, but I was always a loner, always went ashore alone, always made friends, talked to people. I liked this. I'd ship in and out. Now when we come back into the Golden Gate, there'd be lots of boys on our ships that were interested in being home, and I envied them standing there, "Oh, you can see the Golden Gate yet. Can you see past Port Mendocino?" something like that, and to me I didn't give a goddamn whether I went home or not. But these things were quite interesting. I knew many people in the countries where I visited, and I wrote to some. We went to Japan, what they call the great circle, without touching at the Hawaiian Islands. We were on one of the first freighters, I think I'm right about this, that had a turbine engine. It just creates a whrr-rrrr-rrr, whining sound. You can't get used to it, and after a while you negatively accept it, and if it goes off, it wakes you up. It's weird how the mind works. Well, we went up and something went wrong with this turbine. We had to stay in Japan and wait for parts, you see. They had no airplanes then and we had a wireless, we could wireless to the States. We got a patched-up job there. The Japanese engineers kind of patched up the boat. Then we went to Shanghai. We went to other ports later, too. But we stayed in Shanghai for quite a while.

Jarrell: A month or so?

Chaffee: I would say about six weeks. And while I was there, I met young Chinese revolutionaries who spoke perfect English, good English. They'd come and talk to us young people. So we'd ask them, "Well, how did you

come to know English so well?" They laughed and said, "You know, we had a people's struggle here in 1900, the Black Boxer Revolution."

Jarrell: The Boxer Rebellion, right.

Chaffee: Rebellion. "You people came over to put it down, and you felt a little sorry for this, and you thought you'd buy us back again. And you created the Boxer Indemnity Fund for Students, and we went to the States and we studied Karl Marx." Yes, it's fascinating.

Jarrell: Subsidized.

Chaffee: Yes, yes. (laughter)

Jarrell: Well, that's fascinating.

Chaffee: I've got something else to tell you about ships. It was among ships... See, I was a worker really, although I had a lot of bourgeois ideology from my mother's wrangling.

Jarrell: You were an AB on these ships?

Chaffee: Well, I was a quartermaster. That's about the same deal. That means all you do is steer and watch. It was a nice boat. Of course I've been on deck too. But there's such a thing as a proletarian consciousness. I don't care who the college boy is, he can't go among the workers and be wholly accepted. They know he's a college boy. They know instinctively that he comes from

something else. I was always able to blend with the workers, see. Just background and everything. And we come to a very interesting part of my life, where I studied. I'll tell you how this came about. One day in China, there was a boy running and jumping and he had a whole bundle of leaflets and he threw them up in the air like that, looked like a big cloud of birds suddenly released. And he was running and these terrible people they call Sikhs, they're great big massive . . .

Jarrell: Oh, the Sikhs. They're the military. Yes, they're huge.

Chaffee: Yes. Everyone of them over six feet, and they carry a pick handle with a thing in here, and they just beat people with it. They're immaculate, and they're beautiful. They look . . . well, I was pretty young then and I used to think of the advertisements for Hills Brothers coffee where they had this Arab standing there . . .

Jarrell: Weren't they recruited by the British? They were a Marshall caste as well.

Chaffee: That's right. They were recruited by the British. Well, they were chasing someone and this boy comes tearing down the ship, jumping over bales and everything else and high-piled, stacked cargo. Now before (this should have gone first), the Russian Revolution created a great stir among us, see, and the ship was divided on this subject, you see anti-radicalism and so forth. There were the older ones that'd get together in groups and have their

little maps, and they were the fascinating ones. So anyway, this kid comes aboard this ship. He says, "I'm being chased. I'm a (something)." He says, "They're after me because . . ." and he showed us a pamphlet or something like that. And the guy says, "Well, good God! Get below. We'll take care of you." But he was one of the guys that was anti-Russian, anti-radical and everything else. And all the other people took care of that poor bastard. Nobody said anything, and we took him all the way to the Philippine Islands. We stowed him away, and the captain never knew he was on the ship until we let him out there. Then the Sikhs come aboard the ship. "Did you see so and so?" "Yes, yes, I saw the son of a bitch." one of the guys named Chips London said. "Yes, he went over there. He went behind that warehouse. I wish to Christ we had more time, we'd catch him for you. Don't want anything like that running around." See? Fantastic. And so (laughter) these were experiences and we got a little taste of the future. Now I have always found in my life . . . I'll be very honest about this. I have always found that the working class where social studies is concerned, is way ahead of the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia.

Jarrell: In terms of analysis?

Chaffee: Yes. And looking and feeling. For instance Marx had groups of . . . but he talked to Lenin and the intellectuals in England would go to listen, talk to him. And he had these groups where he'd talk to workers in the lower parts of England . . . see what I mean? Well, it's maybe their business to be

that way. I think they have intelligent feelings, see. Anyway, that was the story of my trips to sea.

Jarrell: So you stopped going to sea about 1921, 1922?

Coming Back to California

Chaffee: Yes, I stopped going to sea say . . . 1921. I came back from sea, and I boarded at a place. When I was there, there was a very beautiful German girl, and she fell in love with me. I'd met her brother before he went to sea, before I went to sea. So she talked me out of going to sea—it was an evil life, it was a terrible life—she was a Christian Scientist. And her mother was too, frigid woman. Her mother was terribly frigid. Her mother grew to know me real well. She said, "My husband made advances to me, and I just stayed there like a log. I hate him." This old evil thinking. So these two children were . . .

Jarrell: Born out of this mis-union. (laughter)

Chaffee: Yes. I've got to tell you this though. I stayed there with them and of course this developed quite a bit. And this young boy was a brilliant boy. He couldn't complete high school because his mother lived alone. She had a rooming house, and I'd been to sea. And one day she says, "I can't understand, Porter, why all these men keep knocking at the door and asking for girls who don't live here. 'Could I see Stella? Could I see May?'" They were looking for a whorehouse.

Jarrell: Yes, right.

Chaffee: "I can't understand it," she said. "Well," I said, "Mrs. Bossell, when you take that parrot off your front porch, there won't be any more men coming in."

Jarrell: (laughter)

Chaffee: She'd somehow or other got from one of her tenants this parrot. Anyway, this boy was brilliant. He went to work during the war as a shipbuilder, riveter, hard work. He was powerful physically. He studied law at night. And when he and I came back from sea, he longed for me to be with him because we were good friends, studied law at night. This is an American story. He took a LaSalle Extension course. It's in magazines.

Jarrell: I've heard of that.

Chaffee: He passed the bar examination. And when he passed the bar examination, working as a riveter all the time, and a Fuller Brush man, when he passed the bar examination, the judge there in charge spoke about how this fellow passed. Well, Hardley goes home. The first thing he does is write a letter to the LaSalle Extension course for what he called a rescision of contract because nobody could learn law by taking their course. He said, "I did it by supplementary reading, and I want my money back." Next mail came, it was his check . . . rescision of contract, whatever it was, \$200.

Jarrell: Really?

Chaffee: That's true, yes. Anyway . . . well, the girl and I don't get along too well together. She's kind of cold and I'm not. You know, I wasn't bad or anything, but you're amatory when you're at least that age, it seems to me (laughter) most people are. So I went to work on a ranch in Napa County, because my folks still lived up there. I got working on the Admiral Miller Ranch. I would help with the harvest of prunes. I worked there for forty dollars a month, fifty dollars a month. I'd drive the horses because I was expert with horses. I loved horses, and on our ranch I got that experience. First we'd harvest the prunes, we'd put them in these large trays.

Jarrell: Fruit dryers, yes.

Chaffee: And dip them in lye first, then take them out in the field to dry, and so on. Then I would haul the grapes. When the grapes came up, I would haul with the four horse team. I hauled the grapes from the Admiral Miller Ranch where I worked, into the wineries in Napa County. And one time, one of the wagons upset. There's a flat rock in the road, and I went to turn in what you call a wheeler . . . fell down this way, and the tension on the tongue of the wagon knocked the wagon over and a box of grapes fell off and grazed my shoulder. I swear, just grazed it. Hurt a little bit, and I just shook it like this.

Tuberculosis

But after I got home, I couldn't go to work any more. My arm hurt me. I'd been to a dance, and I came home from a dance at Wooden Valley in Napa County. I was in this Union Hotel in . . . see, I always had a tendency to get

away from home if I got a little money, and stay in a hotel. I was fixing off my tie like this, and when I dropped down I could hardly stand the pain, see. We lived in this mountain home there, buggy shed. The house had burned down while I was away and we lived in a buggy shed. My father had plenty of money and they argued whether they'd have a two-bedroom or three-bedroom house . . . and they lived for three years in this filthy shed. Anyway, I came home and I had a bone disease, see. And they gave me no medical attention at all, never had any medical attention; didn't pay any attention to it. They had a horse doctor there. His name was McCurdy. He came down. He looked at me, he said, "Ah, there is nothing wrong. He's just got a little rheumatism; he can't stand pain," you know. And then I broke down, I couldn't move. I'd have these visions. I could walk on the ceilings. I used to think I could walk between two layers of paint. It was this pathogenic thing that the disease was producing in me, you see. It was a tubercular osteomyelitis. So they stayed there. And one day my brother George, we never hear from him, but he's a world-famous authority on the ballet.

Jarrell: Your brother is?

Chaffee: Yes. Oh yes. He's terrific. And we don't hear from him. All I do is read what I read.

Jarrell: George Chaffee? Does he live in the United States?

Chaffee: He lives in New York. And he's one of the few Americans that was ever made an officer of the Academie Française for culture.

Jarrell: Interesting little footnote.

Chaffee: Yes. These sort of things are kind of interesting. So this McCurdy came down. I was dying, literally dying. I can remember one time my mother came in and slapped me on the face because I was dying. And I often puzzled in my mind . . . the vague things you get . . . you know, it's like being in an alcoholic stupor or something. What did she do that for? I felt so good, see. I kept raising off my pillow.

Jarrell: You had TB?

Chaffee: Yes. In the bone. So I kept raising off the pillow and this huge thing, it was literally as big as a football, was on my back, a swelling, see. It was the serum that this chronic condition had created. They paid no attention to it. And then pretty soon it blew away out down here . . . it worked a fissure . . .

Jarrell: Under your arm.

Chaffee: Under here. Right down here. Oh, when that came out it was just like a whistle, shrill whistle and it came out with such force. My mother literally took these pieces of bone particles and everything away in a basin, two or three loads of . . .

Jarrell: Was it lanced?

Chaffee: Just broke itself. If it'd been lanced it would have been lanced at the lowest place, which'd be down at the bottom of the scapula. The scapula shaped like Africa or something. So they never paid any attention to it. And one day my brother got some childhood disease, wasn't bad at all, and they sent into Napa for a doctor. Doctor Bolson came out and he says, "I thought you wanted me to see *him*." "No, just this other boy. He has chicken fever," some minor thing," see. "Why," he says, "What's the matter with you? That man is dying."

Jarrell: You?

Chaffee: Yes.

Jarrell: Oh my God.

Chaffee: So that shook them up a little bit and I remember . . . I still continued on there like that. And one day a very clean-cut insurance man came through selling insurance . . . wonderful guy and he sat down to talk and said, "This boy's apparently dying," he says, "Don't you know that?" "No."

Jarrell: Well, what had the doctor done?

Chaffee: Well he just told them that I had . . .

Jarrell: He just told them and then he left.

Chaffee: He just said . . . he looked at my shoulder and he says, "This fellow has one of the most dread diseases there are," which was terrible then. Before penicillin and sulfa drugs and so on.

Jarrell: But he didn't do anything?

Chaffee: No, he didn't do anything. And I kept getting weaker and weaker and so finally he took me in to see Doctor Bolson but it was an ordeal. I could see that it was cutting into his time. He's a funny man. He was generous to everyone but his own people. He grew all these things, and gave them away . . . all his crop and just give them away. He liked to peddle from a wagon. But my mother didn't like that. It wasn't leisure class. My mother had no background, no education at all. I don't believe she ever opened a book in her life. She just had the appearance of Ethel Barrymore, you know, just these grandiose people. If she could have seen "Upstairs, Downstairs" (laughter) she would have flipped.

Jarrell: (laughter)

Chaffee: This is it. Anyway, why that was it. Well, I finally cut loose, and I got on a bus. I landed in Oakland without a penny in my pocket.

Jarrell: Well, you were still sick.

Chaffee: Yes, still sick.

Jarrell: And weak.

Chaffee: I was going to Oakland to see if I couldn't get some help. I weighed 97 pounds.

Jarrell: Oh my God.

Chaffee: I hitchhiked down the road that night. And someone came along after I'd gone about a mile and picked me up. Got into Oakland on San Pablo Avenue. The bus station ever since the time of Jesus Christ has been on San Pablo Avenue because they always pick out the dirtiest places they can find for the bus stations. And that's where it was then.

Jarrell: And who rides the buses, right.

Chaffee: Yes. I got off there. I told them [my parents], "Look, I have to have something. I cannot live. You got to send me some money." I guess something in him was finally touched and he did. I got into the hands of a medical faker. His name was Doctor Monheit and he had made some kind of miraculous water. I swear there was nothing in it but . . .

Jarrell: God knows.

Chaffee: . . . little soda, baking soda. He sold this stuff for five dollars a gallon. You couldn't buy less than five gallons. You drank that and you were on a milk diet. That's all you had.

Jarrell: But if you have TB, aren't you supposed to have a very rich, high protein diet?

Chaffee: Probably. But all I had was milk.

Jarrell: And you were living in a boarding house?

Chaffee: Furnished room. I had milk. Just milk, nothing but milk. At least he did know that you had to have some organic acid with it to coagulate the milk. Otherwise, if milk doesn't coagulate in your system it isn't very good. And in order to have bulk, the proper bowel movements, he gave us agar, a Japanese seaweed.

Jarrell: Oh yes, I know what that is. Well, how long were you on this regimen?

Chaffee: Eleven months. I had just nothing but milk. But a funny thing happened (laughter) on the way to the . . . It was the doctor. He wasn't a doctor. He was a chiropractor. And he always hired broken-down doctors to okay... He'd hold their hand like this, so he could sign. Then it was medically approved, the treatment he gave you.

Jarrell: I see what you mean.

Chaffee: Well, Monheit worked among the Yugoslav emigrants and Russian emigrants from Europe. Lots of them were peasant stock. They were all alive, interesting people, and he was treating them with this water. One of them was a man named Anthony Sutich. You'll hear about him. In fact there's a professor who teaches his system of psychology in this college. Sutich was

one of the men he was taking care of. I used to visit Anthony Sutich. He developed an ankletis around his entire body, couldn't move anything but his eyelids, nothing but his eyelids. His fingers were so disfigured that he had to wear socks.

Jarrell: This was Sutich?

Chaffee: Yes, Sutich. So one day I came home. I began to read, read, read. And *Hamlet*, I can remember thrilled me . . . first books I ever read . . . and just thrilled me. I came home from the library with a book called *Psychic Phenomena* by a man named Hudson, old-fashioned, pre-Freudian psychology related to the time of Messmer you know, and later the Messmerists and hypnotists that Freud was interested in, in France. He just read comic books; there was nothing to him at all. Just laid there like a lump, this poor kid did. All the time. So I gave him this book. I said, "Here, read something like this, Tony." And the kid did. He said, "Will you bring me another? Will you bring me another? And another? And another?"

So pretty soon he became a professor. He became a doctor in this field through his great skill. He practices in Palo Alto now. But anyway, his mother was in the radical movement, see. Through the interest of Yugoslavs and these Russians I grew interested in the Russian Revolution. And from there it was an easy step to . . .

Jarrell: An analysis of what's going on here.

Chaffee: . . . things at home here, see. Now, Monheit aped an interest in... Doctor Monheit, he used to look like Peter Lorre, you know, and he was just a little man.

Jarrell: (laughter)

Friends of the Soviet Union

Chaffee: Anyway, he showed me a picture that he took of Lenin. And there was this picture. There it was. What he did, he took a slow exposure in a motion picture that the young Communist movement was given in those countries—the Friends of the Soviet Union is what they called it.

I read Ella Winter some time ago, her autobiography. It's pretty good. But she has no mention of Ann Porter, who was a wealthy woman who lived in San Jose. I could tell you great things about Ann Porter.

Jarrell: Ann Porter. I have not heard of her.

Chaffee: She lived on St. James Square. Had a beautiful house there.

Jarrell: In San Jose?

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am. And of course there was Anita Whitney, Caroline Decker . . .

Jarrell: I know. Now Caroline Decker has been interviewed.

Chaffee: Yes. Anita Whitney was incorrigible. Just a dedicated person. So was Ann Porter. And I think in a way Caroline Decker was the beginning of a new trend among organizers.

Jarrell: In what way?

Chaffee: Well, she was one who knew her subjects so thoroughly. She knew what they were paying for picking peas in any part of the country. She knew what the costs of living would be. She knew all these things. And she was quite a fearless person. When I first saw her . . . I'd seen her before . . . but when I first saw her with a guest she was speaking in Oakland, a place at 22nd and Grove Street.

Jarrell: What year would this have been, roughly?

Chaffee: About 1934. I said, "That young lady there is Caroline Decker." And he said, "You're kidding." She was a clever girl. She was a brilliant girl, and a fearless girl. And she stressed [her] femininity. She looked just like a baby doll. She wasn't pretty at all but she had a fair figure and she was slight, and small-boned and everything like that . . . blonde hair and real high-heeled shoes, see. (laughter) You expected to see some flat-footed peasant, I guess. But she was really dynamite. You see we never continued anything for very long. Men like Pat Chambers were usually one strike and then they appeared in something else.

Jarrell: Well, I thought that the policy of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers was to keep an eye out on the horizon for any signs of discontent, and then to move in and to catalyze .

Chaffee: That's right. But you must realize too . . . it's very important. I was an insider, you know. And it wasn't quite as organized as people would think. We were getting new organizers. We were getting men like Pat Chambers and Caroline Decker and of course people who could organize were needed in other places . . . well, organization was needed. But Caroline Decker was of the new order.

Jarrell: Well, maybe we could backtrack . . .

Chaffee: You ask the questions.

Jarrell: So you were part of a group called the Friends of the Soviet Union. You told me [in a pre-interview conversation] about how you'd go all the way down to Salinas and Watsonville and all over by putting up posters. And I think you got to about 1925.

Chaffee: It was a little bit later than that. I'd say about 1929.

Jarrell: All right. This was when you had recovered from the tuberculosis? You were recovered.

Chaffee: Yes. I had it all through the movement, don't you see, and this made me probably more fearful than I would have been, or braver than I would have been. It hung over me like a ghost.

Jarrell: So you'd come down here and this was about in 1929. You said your parents were living down here. And you were here off and on in Santa Cruz County?

Santa Cruz County

Chaffee: That's right. I was a teamster hauling grapes out of the Napa Valley from the Admiral Miller place to the winery. And I got hurt. So we came to Santa Cruz. I was in Santa Cruz High School in 1925 and I'd recovered from about three operations then. I went to high school when I was twenty-five here. I remember saying to a girl in the hall . . . she'd liked me, and I thought I was an old man, you know. (laughter) She asked me how old I was and I said, "Have to be single. Twenty-five." I could tell she was only a few years younger than I was. I met a woman there [at Santa Cruz High School], a teacher; she was a beautiful person inside. Her name was Vera Thomas. I was very much interested in creativity . . . a very creative person by nature and a promise of dominant trait. However she helped me with English and so on. I was only there a couple of months. I had this huge bandage on my back and the kids called me the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Jarrell: Oh.

Chaffee: Well, I didn't mind that. But one day this little girl that I was talking to, a lovely girl, beautiful head and carriage, I told her I was twenty-five, *viente y cinco*, and she came along with another fellow down the hall and he says, "Here comes the Hunchback of Notre Dame." I didn't mind that at all, really I didn't, because the kids would cluster around me and ask me questions. In those days there wasn't as much liberal literature regarding sex as we have now. And there the kids would just ask these questions just continually about sex, during the noon hour.

Jarrell: Because you were an older person?

Chaffee: Because I was an older person and I was versed in the subject, you know. (laughter) I've got a predilection like this. Anyway, why as this fellow passed me, he turned to this girl, and he said, "Did you get a whiff of that?" And it was the smell of this peculiar ailment plus all the medicinal junk they put on you. And so I just walked, kept walking, walked right out of the high school, never went back, naturally. I was a radical sort, I think, a little bit by birth. Not by birth, but by early environment.

Jarrell: So when you came to Santa Cruz and you walked out of that high school what were you doing for a living?

Chaffee: I couldn't work because I was too weak.

The Labor Movement

Jarrell: So how do we get you from living here, into the movement? What was the connection? Who were the people? What were your interests?

Chaffee: Well, let's see, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927. I'd written some verses that were fundamentally a revolution, natural things, you know, not studied. I sent them to *The Nation* and they said, "Sorry we can't handle this, but why don't you try *The New Masses*?" (laughter)

Jarrell: (laughter) Well, that was kind of them.

Chaffee: Yes. (laughter) So I went back East. I began hitchhiking and going around the country . . . don't know how I lived. I did do some newspaper work there and I did do some things . . . maybe even living by your wits, you know. I don't know how I lived. It was a hobo period of my life. I got to New York about a year after the episode in the hallway, I got to New York about 1926. So I began buzzing around these radical things. I had some work published in *New Masses* and they also put me on what we call the editorial staff, the real editorial staff, the inner group that controls policy in regard to what is acceptable and so on. I met many people there because *The New Masses* was a prestigious magazine, not as great as the old *The Masses*, which was edited by Max Eastman. But they did have wit and everything. It was all right. And I contributed to them. What brought me to their attention long before I got to New York City was an old character who lived in the hills here. His name was Brown, and he had a dog. He was a hermit. And he was

kind of a radical, you know. He used to talk about Russia a little bit. And there was a professor someplace, I believe his name was White, and he told me about this article by this professor he had. And he had heard the professor deliver this article [as a speech]. The professor said he'd give Mr. Brown a copy of his lecture. I saw it. It was pretty good. So I wrote to *New Masses* and told them I thought I could get this for publication in their magazine. So we did. We got that for publication. Just thought it was good stuff, you know. It was a good, original piece of research. It was published, received wide acclaim, you know.

Jarrell: And what was the subject? It was about Russia, but specifically?

Chaffee: Russia, his visit to Russia, and what he saw in it and everything.

Jarrell: Oh, I see. It was first-hand observation.

Chaffee: First-hand . . . very good. Very good article. And it was published. Then they wanted to know me, and so on. So I went back there. Let me see, I was in and out of hospitals all the time. Couldn't work.

Jarrell: What did you do for money?

Chaffee: Well, my folks lived here.

Jarrell: So they helped you.

Chaffee: Well, they never gave me any money, but they grudgingly let me eat there. It was very horrendous.

Jarrell: So you must have had hard times.

Chaffee: Psychologically, very hard, very, very hard—to be among people who'd wish you were dead. "He can't live anyway," and so and so . . . I've got a very famous kind of anger which is terrific. It's really beautiful. Click, opens the floodgates of adrenaline. I think I saved my life. Once they were all talking against me and everything. So I went in there and I said, "Listen to me, you lousy sons of bitches. I'll outlive every one of you, and I'll attend your funeral and I'll have more goddamned money or influence than any of you ever had. Don't you forget that. And one by one you'll see me there and I'll be checking you off in a little book. I'll outlive every one of you." Jeez, a kind of a pall fell over them.

Jarrell: Pretty heavy.

Chaffee: Yes. So it began to get better a little bit, you know. The real thing that brought me into contact with the movement while I was in Santa Cruz... was a girl named Yetta Stromberg who had a young children's camp, for young pioneers.⁷

7. For the crime of flying a red flag, Yetta Stromberg was sentenced to one to ten years in San Quentin State Prison in 1929. She became the center of a case that went to the U.S. Supreme court. *Stromberg v. California*, decided in 1931, became one of the nation's first successful free speech cases.

Jarrell: Now this would have been during the depression?

Chaffee: No, this was even before I went to New York. I did things. I have tremendous energy, see. Tremendous. It's really a gift. I've got enough energy for a dozen men. Anyway, I'd get better and I'd do something, you know. So she was put in jail, arrested under the Criminal Seditious Act.

After her, I opened the first children's camp. They had me open the children's camp in the woods of Santa Cruz County.

Jarrell: I see. Now where was that in the mountains?

Chaffee: It was up on the road to Felton. It was below Felton.

Jarrell: And who owned the land?

Chaffee: Well, we rented the place, the ground, the campgrounds. It had toilets and things like that.

Jarrell: And this was for what children?

Chaffee: The children of the unemployed, young Communist leaders' children, young Communist workers' children, union children. The International Workers Order was the sponsoring agent for this children's camp. So I conducted that successfully.

Jarrell: And was this just in the summer?

Chaffee: Summer. I think it was two weeks or a month. The next year I had another camp for them. They wanted me to have another camp. That ended my career.

Jarrell: So this would have been around 1927 to 1928?

Chaffee: Yes, somewhere in there.

Jarrell: Before you went to New York?

Chaffee: Yes. I remember we had lots of time left in the year and I really moved it.

Jarrell: That's right. And what were you doing around here?

Chaffee: I couldn't work. I couldn't get work. I was going to the hospital and I had drainage.

Socialists in Santa Cruz County

Jarrell: Did you know a lot of different people around in Santa Cruz?

Chaffee: Oh yes, ma'am.

Jarrell: Was there a contingent, or a group of people whom you could characterize as radical or left-wing?

Chaffee: Yes, a very high percentage.

Jarrell: Really.

Chaffee: In Santa Cruz County. I'll tell you how that originated.

Jarrell: I would certainly like to know.

Chaffee: A great wave of socialists following upheavals in Germany who came to this country. They were Germans. They settled in the mountains here, a large number of them. Names like Hanzer, Bowers, Baumgartner, and Applestein. There was always this base here. Before I organized the first Communist cell in the country, we used to go to them to raise funds. We'd ask them for donations and so on.

Jarrell: And they had come here in approximately what years?

Chaffee: Oh, I think some of them as early as 1860. They kept coming and they had strong bonds.

Jarrell: Right. Because I know in the late 19th century you have a constant influx . . .

Chaffee: That's part of what these were.

Jarrell: A very important characteristic of the Socialist Party in this country was the German immigrants.

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am. And this here was a large part of it. There was a Dreisen, Greisen . . . all these people. I often hesitate to use their names

because families can be penalized. I don't give a goddamn about myself, you know, but families can be penalized.

Jarrell: But you would say that there was group of people, because it's very hard to determine quantitatively that sort of political grouping.

Chaffee: I could almost now name sixty.

Jarrell: Sixty people whom you knew in this county.

Chaffee: That I knew were from Germany in this group.

Jarrell: I'm not talking about Communist Party members or Socialists, but people sympathetic to those sorts of ideas. That's all I'm talking about.

Chaffee: That's right. They may have been that way younger in their life. They subscribed to books . . .

Jarrell: And what kinds of trades did these people follow?

Chaffee: Well, one for instance, named Grossman, was a retired laundryman. He had owned a laundry in the Santa Clara Valley. Another one, Ed Dreiss, was wealthy, a millionaire. And he knew the three generations of the Dreiss family. He invented this . . . you've probably heard people refer to the brake that bends sheet metal.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: Tremendous invention. Then during World War I he was commissioned to produce these for the army and he had to build a big factory in Chicago. Then there was Ed Junior who was his son, and he had lots of money inherited, the father's wealth.

Jarrell: How is that named spelled?

Chaffee: D-R-E-I-S-S. You still see it on brakes. They had a real good patent. Then Ed Dreiss, he was sympathetic, he'd give us money and things like that. And then his other son just died recently, the grandson of the original Ed Dreiss. He was a very interesting man. He was of strongly socialistic . . . He was involved in international episodes in other countries, not in an espionage way, but because he was Left and he had built a boat and sailed to India and left the boat in Singapore and had lots of money. He died just recently. I was to see him about six months ago. He said he had a little pain or something, they think it was wrong with his prostate gland, it's something common in older men. I said, "Well, I'll be back in a week to see you." Went back and he was dead. He had a tremendous amount of money. He left thousands and thousands of dollars to the American Civil Liberties Union here. Oh, they always had that going. They never met. But all those old timers, and quite a few people who weren't German but were also related to the old American Socialist Party, followers of Eugene V. Debs, and IWW sympathizers and things of this kind. There's never been the want of a

working-class movement in America, only at certain ages it was more clearly formulated than at other times.

Others were small farmers. And they had good hearts. I know that they were a little annoyed when I began to press them, "Let's do something a little more radical." (laughter) Because they were quite comfortable. They sent in their money and they felt secure in this. They were fundamentally radical and I think they felt they should do more. It kind of embarrassed them. So we never drew any party members from that group at all. We just drew from people I knew, got acquainted with and so on.

Jarrell: In this area though?

Chaffee: Oh yes.

Jarrell: Now you said yourself that you established a Communist group here in this county. About what year was that?

Chaffee: Let's say, 1929.

Jarrell: This is before you went to New York?

Chaffee: I'd been back there and come back here. Twice.

Labor Organizing in New York City

Jarrell: I see. Well, let's talk about when you went to New York.

Chaffee: That should be interesting. Well, when I went to New York, I went there as a poet. And the first trip I was just mildly interested in it. And then secondly I gave a reading at some place. Incidentally, on a program with Langston Hughes in New York City, at the studio of a woman who had painted these beautiful paleontological murals in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She used to have a studio upstairs on 14th Street off 5th Avenue. I was reading there one night and some smart Jew . . . I love Jewish people, I can't help it; they're chosen . . . anyway, why, coming downstairs and (chuckle) this fellow says to me... His partner and him were both Jewish boys. He said, "You know, your imagery is great, as good as any there is in poetry, but why the hell don't you say anything about people?" So I got thinking about it and then I did more and more of that. Then on the second trip back I wrote some full-fledged left-wing poems. So I started that way. And then I worked on the *Daily Worker* for a while, pretty near a year. I did Unemployed Council work there and . . .

Jarrell: Which meant what? You were acting as an organizer of the unemployed?

Chaffee: Kind of an organizer for the Unemployed Council, something like that.

Jarrell: In New York City?

Chaffee: Yes. In Manhattan. I went to this old tenement house, just walking through it. And I met an old Italian in the hall . . . saddest thing I ever saw. His daughter was pregnant, she was a girl thirteen years old, and they were breaking up the furniture for fuel. They had an eviction notice served them. They were going to really be evicted. She was just a child. She didn't even know what she did. Probably the first time she ever knew there was such an act. Anyway, they were really up against it. So I went up to *Freiheit*, that's a Jewish newspaper. And I got out a petition that we the undersigned refused to pay our rent if this Italian family is to be evicted. (laughter) It was really bold. It was a huge tenement house. I got it in English, which of course I wrote, and then the *Freiheit*, the Jewish liberal paper, translated it into Yiddish. (laughter) Then I got the Italian . . . we had an Italian paper going there in New York City and they translated it into Italian. So we got really stirred up. We circulated this. Everybody in the tenement, in the building signed it. Everybody. And then I got another fellow to go with me. We went to all the cheap little meat stands, and I don't know what happened, the way we addressed them or something, they'd end up giving us food. They gave us food and meat and everything. We took it up to these people. Well, finally it got so hot that . . . this was the thing that the police kind of kept their hands off. They were watching us, because if it started, be just like a fire, it could start, see.

Jarrell: That's right.

Chaffee: So . . . and the Catholic Church . . . You're not Catholic? I hope you're not religious? Oh. That's good, okay.

Jarrell: No, I'm not at all.

Chaffee: The Catholic Church worked very closely with the police in keeping the people down. And they took this off our hands. And it satisfied the poor old Italian. But we had a good thing going. And we were going to stay in there and fight the police and everything to keep from throwing these people out. So, now Mary Heaton Vorse was an American novelist, who wrote a classic book on the American working class.⁸ And she had me take her around the tenements and show her the new impoverishment of the people. She knew it in the old days. And so she went around with me. They contacted her through *The New Masses* office and I don't know if she ever put out anything about it.

Jarrell: You were a reporter when you were working for the *Daily Worker*. Now what did you do? Among other things?

Chaffee: Well, the first investigations of left-wing activities were conducted under the auspices of a man named Hamilton Fish, a big name in American history. He had this in the FBI building in New York. It was a hearing, and so I was on the . . . this is just one of the things I did. I wanted to get into the

8. Mary Heaton Vorse (1874-1966) was a journalist, novelist, suffragist, and labor activist who wrote sixteen books, two plays, and hundreds of newspaper, magazine and journal articles between 1910 and her death.

hearing, so there was a Negro guard downstairs of the FBI building (laughter) and he was quite a guy, he was a real government man, and everything but he was just a watchman. So I said, "I want to go up to the hearing," and he says, "Who are you with?" I says, "I'm with the American Anthropological Society." (laughter) He just busted down laughing. He says, "Okay, comrade, go up."

Jarrell: Really.

Chaffee: Underneath it all, there was a little sympathy. So I would sit it on these and I would report on them for the *Daily Worker*. William Z. Foster⁹ was in prison then on Harte Island, I think it was in the Manhattan area. I think it's Harte Island. And they used to smuggle out these little papers when somebody would come. The dramatic side of everything appeals to everybody. You know we're all human, a little bit. My job would be to (laughter) write these for the paper. And the sentences were interminable.

Jarrell: You mean you had to transcribe Foster's messages written in these crimped up . . .

Chaffee: Yes. Yes. (laughter) And they were oh, whole huge masses, so until they got to know me, they began to think I was suspect, because I was changing the language of this great leader. And I said, "My God, take a look at it. I know what he means, and you know what he means."

9. William Z. Foster was the Communist candidate for president in 1932.

Jarrell: But who can understand?

Chaffee: Yes. (laughter) And little things like that. I went out and covered various strikes and things. I participated in lots of strikes when I was there.

Jarrell: We've talked about your early sympathy with radical analysis. But we haven't really talked about what you felt when you first got interested in the American Communist Party. We've talked about general sympathy. But when did you get interested in Communism? In California?

Chaffee: (pause) You see I hoboed around an awful lot. That's all I could do, see.

Jarrell: And you picked up all kinds of things.

Chaffee: Oh, I talked to Wobblies, and unemployed, and people that were house robbers and things like that, who would actually tell you about their experiences. "I'm a son-of-a-bitch. I'm not going to starve to death in this goddamned land of plenty. I'll get mine, don't you worry." This is just the way . . .

Jarrell: Those kinds of comments.

Chaffee: And they'd always discuss this thing called Communism, but way back in the background, when I was a sailor, going to sea, I didn't get to go to sea until after the war was over. The war was just over.

Jarrell: Right. The unions had been effectively broken. The seamen's union.

Chaffee: No, we had no seaman's union. We had a feeling for it. There was no labor movement at all. I joined the American Merchant Marine, known also as the USS Shipping Board. They had an organization where they trained us so we'd be seamen. We had a ship, the *Iris*, used to be a mother ship to Dewey's Fleet when it went to Spain and so on. We had about 2,000, 1500 kids on it, and we'd make two or three cruises. Then we'd be shipped out. And I think the secret dream of the big boys, Charlie Schwab and all those, was to get this real American element, see, wouldn't strike, see. Because you must realize that it was a myth that it was only the foreigners who would strike.

Jarrell: That's right. That's always been a paranoid characterization.

Chaffee: Yes, that's right. So when we were there, there was always this knot of older seamen on the ship. And they'd always have these little papers and draw these little maps in little books. They were talking about Russia and what's happening here and there. And they really had a faith in this thing. So I've often used that when I prepared talks for foreign people, to show them that the working man is ahead of the intellectual. I knew things that intellectuals never knew then. And also Karl Marx used to give his lectures for working people in London and nobody ever came to them. No one from the intellectual class.

So, anyway, why they'd talk about this. So I got these ideas there. When you're up [against] it, it's easier to be radical than anything else. Now when I was England, I was in a YMCA in London, this big YMCA there, all sandbagged there and everything. And all of a sudden this young soldier comes through. He must have joined the army. He wasn't more than sixteen. His suit didn't fit; he was loaded down with watches, broaches and rings and everything. He came in and he says, "The cops are after me." And he had a handful of watches. He showed them. This is true, absolutely true. And the secretary warned, "Get under the counter here! Get under the counter here!" They put him under the counter, and the cops come in, the English Bobbies come in: "Did you see so and so?" The secretary said, "No." "Did you see so and so." "Nope. Must have been some other building." I loved this feeling, fraternity and everything. So after a while they let the kid out. That was beautiful, see. It was an education. I observed this. And I early formulated the idea . . . of course I never had any trouble with the working men, no reflection on you college students, very few of them can ever make it. It's just like they come from a foreign land. They'll talk to people of "their own kidney" as the saying goes, and they'll talk to them but somehow or other they distrust the college-trained or highly educated person. But I had this dual existence, and I studied, I think I told you, correspondence courses from the University of California by mail, and I've got to know some instructors there, so on.

Labor Organizing in Santa Cruz County

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: But I had the two phases, and I had no trouble making it, hacking it as a worker. Now I think what you should know about that I'm surprised hasn't been revived was the Unemployed Councils. This existed all over America.

Jarrell: They were a very powerful force.

Chaffee: Oh very, yes. And we had a hunger march from Santa Cruz. I organized a hunger march in Santa Cruz up the mall. That was no mall then.

Jarrell: No mall then, just Pacific Avenue.

Chaffee: Past the Court House, which is the Cooper House now.

Jarrell: What year would this have been?

Chaffee: That was in 1931, I think. '30 or '31.

Jarrell: Do you think it was in the newspaper? Do you remember?

Chaffee: Oh, you bet it was, yes. And we started out, we had only about thirty-five marching. We started out way at the end of . . . my organizer was a pretty good organizer, organized it so we'd have something to eat down there. We had a few delegates, the bravest, hardest ones come in because we were always threatened . . . from Watsonville. And we'd have something to

eat down there when we got through. And two months ahead of the march I rented a hall so they wouldn't have any suspicions. The hall I rented belonged to the German Society here, and they were very friendly towards this, so it was much easier to get. So I went down there and I felt kind of broken. We swung around here by the Court House.

Jarrell: This is on Cooper Street.

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am, yes. That used to be the Court House. Right on the corner. but off that, down this way towards the river, Cooper Street continued.

Jarrell: That's right. And that was the Chinatown there.

Chaffee: And that was a whorehouse district too.

Jarrell: That's right.

Chaffee: So when I came to the corner, the crowd was immense. Choked up the streets. It was overpowering. So we went up to the Court House with our demands. We got a little attention up there, but it was all new to them. And we had a big meeting then. Then we started out our Unemployed Councils here which got some membership. Then they had a thing called the ILD—the International Labor Defense.

Unemployed Councils

I want to tell you what an Unemployed Council was like. You would have your people organized in a block. There'd be a block committee. This was the ideal thing.

Jarrell: In a residential block, a neighborhood block.

Chaffee: That's right. And they would go into another group in the Central Committee . . . worked pretty well. But in the meantime I moved to Oakland, got married in 1933, worked out of the old hall we had on Grove Street. I just went by it for nostalgic reasons when I went up to Bancroft Library to learn about these monographs. I never heard of them. This is all new to me. And that's only less than two months ago. And now it's the Society for the Hard of Hearing. (laughter)

Jarrell: Really, that's what's on Grove Street?

Chaffee: Yes. (laughter) Well anyway, I functioned out of there and we did Unemployed Council work.

Jarrell: Now, who's "we?"

Chaffee: Comrades would be in there, see. You understand even today, I don't know what goes on in there and I don't give a damn. But in Russia, there's 6.4 percent of the population are Communists, that's all. And these Communist groups act as a poor many supported mini-organization.

Jarrell: So there were often several Communists in a group like this.

Chaffee: That's right.

Jarrell: To make the best of a certain situation according to their lights, right?

Chaffee: That's righteous. And very working class. Anyway, these are some of the secret things we did. There was a comrade who had an old chicken ranch out in Castro Valley, near Hayward. We'd go out there and we get some people to tell us they were going to have their water shut off. We would go out and we'd steal whole bunches of this tar from building sites, thick tar that they melt with these tremendous fires to put on roofs and hold them now. We would melt that up. It keeps its heat for a long while. And we'd have about half a drum of it, you know. We'd have cheap wine. We'd each put in a nickel, and we'd have a ball, really was a lot of fun. My wife was sort of dazed then. She doesn't remember any of it. It's weird, isn't it?

Jarrell: Well, what would you do with this tar?

Chaffee: This tar, it's boiling hot, isn't it? So we run around to these places where they're going to shut off water, and we fill the meter boxes with it. And then by morning, it's hard as stone. And they can't get at the meter box to shut off the water. See. You know what a cubic foot is?

Jarrell: Yes, yes.

Chaffee: And it's at least a cubic foot. And they just can't do it. To cut it with a pick is almost impossible. You injure the . . .

Jarrell: Right. So they couldn't actually turn the water off.

Chaffee: They couldn't turn the water off. (laughter) And then some brilliant guy come up . . . See, we were drawing on their resources at work. He said, don't mind my language, "I'm a shit," he says, "I'm a cement man and we don't need to go to all that trouble." And he told us how to make that quick-setting cement. (laughter)

Jarrell: Cement. Much easier and less trouble.

Chaffee: Yes. And then the boys with the East Bay Mud, as we used to call it, East Bay Municipal Utilities District, were on the verge of striking too. It'd take them three or four days, pretty soon the government, the city government, they couldn't shut anybody's water off, you know. We did lots of things like that. I was always able to see the humor in these things. (laughter)

Jarrell: Did you help in the formation of these Unemployed Councils? Did you ever participate in cooperative ventures?

Chaffee: We never thought of that much. I did collect some apples. See, our children's camps that we had in the mountains . . . I collected apples and things from farmers for them and also money. And Ella Winter's main

function . . . you know who she is of course. Her main function was getting funds and that was one of my side functions. I'd get funds for them and then I'd contact . . . that's how I met so many important people in California.

Jarrell: Well, I don't want to urge you to mention people's names unless you want to, but how did you get to know Ella Winter there?

Chaffee: Well, her name could be mentioned because she mentions it herself. I knew her slightly. I knew her secretary real well.

Jarrell: This is the woman that was typing the Steffens manuscript.

Lincoln Steffens

Chaffee: That's right. Lincoln Steffens, he became very much attached to me, and we were great friends, literally. I'd go see him every time I went there. A very easy man to meet. And he and I toured, lectured together, against the criminal sedition laws.

Jarrell: So when you traveled around, was that just in California?

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am. It was in the agricultural valley south of Santa Clara. We spoke before a great woman's organization in the Santa Clara Valley. And on the way down Lincoln walks up and this little lady comes up and shakes my hand, "Oh," she says, "Mr. Steffens, I'm so glad you spoke to us." (laughter) And we went to all the places we could to talk.

Jarrell: Now I'd just like to fill in the holes here. How did you get to know him and where?

Chaffee: Well, I'll have to be a little egotistical here, if you don't mind.

Jarrell: I don't mind at all.

Chaffee: Okay. There was a meeting in Carmel. This is the first contact with Lincoln Steffens. He was very active there. He had a little column in *The Carmel Pinecone* called "Lincoln Steffens Speaking." I just happened to be here, heard about it and met comrades in that area, so I went to this meeting, and it was all kinds of rich people, all sorts of people, property owners. One woman was very wealthy, had lots of property. Not a jet setter, but one with lots of property. She feared the Communists would take away her little toys. (laughter) So one Communist got up and spoke, and he told her what lousy rats landlords were and everything. He was an ultra-leftist, as so many of them were. That's what probably did a lot to hurt the order, being ultra left. And anyway he got up and told them what lousy people landlords were, and how we needed social change and so on. I just took a flyer; I'd never seen this man before but we became good friends, his name was Robinson. I don't know what became of him. He was an Unemployed Council organizer down there, worked among the field workers. So I took the floor and I said, "You know, we're so eager for a new society that it reminds me of people who plant a tree today and expect to eat the fruit the day after. But our hearts are in the right place. We mean right things. Now a person like yourself, if we

had a real socialist state, would be of tremendous value to our society, because you could organize these great blocks of communal houses with your know-how. And there'd be no move afoot to hurt anyone like yourself." Made quite a . . . of course I was young and charged up. After I got though Lincoln Steffens came up and spoke to me. Certain personal things he said. [It feels] pretty egotistical [to talk about].

Jarrell: But he was fond of you?

Chaffee: Yes. He told me a lot about his intimate life and we got along real well. He also compared what I said to a speech by Lenin. So I was pretty high on his list. We became very good friends, exceptionally good friends. Fact is, I could anytime . . . I read lots of his writings in manuscript form and when he was writing his autobiography. Now there was a man who was a district organizer of the party here. His name was Sam Darcy. And from Lincoln Steffens I learned this . . . I've often wondered... Sam was a peculiar fellow with me.

Jarrell: I've heard of him.

Chaffee: Yes. He was the district organizer.

Jarrell: He's very well known.

Chaffee: Lincoln and he became very close. And Lincoln told me one day that he thought Sam was afraid of me. I was such a moving speaker, see?

And Sam thought he was pretty good. This may have been so, but I have no competitive instinct. If I enter a game I never think of winning. Which is a wonderful way to feel as I grow older. Maybe hurt me financially, but I never think of winning. Didn't make a goddamned bit of difference to me really, but he was pretty good. He and Kenneth Rexroth, knew him.

Kenneth Rexroth

See all the time I'd go down and see Kenneth Rexroth in San Francisco. I knew him in 1922. We lived in the Montgomery Block Building. And Kenneth Rexroth wanted, now this is my own interpretation, you'll find this in no books or anything. I used to go see him; he was living with his first wife, Andrée, then. She later died. She had epilepsy, petit mal, and he wrote a poem about her. Anyway, Kenneth really envied Communists, but his Jesuitical background never permitted him to go that way. He had this huge old room in the Montgomery Block Building fixed up in gray, them arches, and it just looked like a monastery room. And on one wall, on this wall, on the left, on the right hand wall he had a crucifix. A crucifix is beautiful if it's proportioned correctly. It was a beautiful thing. And on the other one he had this famous silhouette of Lenin. I often felt that this was his conflict in character and style.

Jarrell: Really. That's very interesting.

Chaffee: Now, this is really true.

Jarrell: I've never read his book.

Chaffee: Well, he's written a lot, of course. And he was a very fine person to me. He and I were really friends, very intimate friends because we lived on the same floor. I had a part-time job on the waterfront checking cargo for the American Railway Express. I had to get down there early, and I worked for 2 1/2 hours. And then I'd live on that. I was writing and living in the old Montgomery Block Building. But Rex, he was very sympathetic. He liked to talk to me because I never force my ideas on anyone, see. I think I understood the movement about as well as anybody could. And I never would discuss anything with people that were petit bourgeois, see.

Jarrell: Well, what about for instance, thinking of all the sectarianism among the left groups . . . if you think of the arguments between the Communists and the syndicalists, or between Wobblies and Socialists . . .

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am.

Jarrell: Didn't you ever get into disputes or arguments or discussions of that kind?

Chaffee: Not too much, no. But I just want to tell you one thing. Now Rexroth and Darcy met continually, and Rex hated Darcy. Darcy was a real dialectician, a real Marxist, and he could tear poor Rexroth to threads in these discussions and prove that he knew more than Rexroth did. And Rex can't even say his name today. Rex even was so mad, last time I talked to him was

about four years ago, and he said, "Do you remember that Sam Darcy? Well, I trailed him down and I found out what he's doing." "Well, what's he doing now, Rex?" "Oh, he's running a secondhand store in Philadelphia." But it was really interesting these things. But I never argued with these people.

Jarrell: That wasn't your shtick.

Chaffee: No, that wasn't my bit, see. Because I could take a guy like Rex right away. I'll never change his mind.

Jarrell: Well, he was more of an aesthete, wouldn't you say?

Chaffee: That's right. See . . . I can remember, if you don't mind, it's part of this history, the first poem I ever wrote. I had it pretty well in mind. And it was published in *The New Masses*.

The bourgeois genius who can contemplate the speed of light

And weigh the distant stars

Is blind to the brutal structure of the state

And vulture shadows of impending wars

His task to hide, obscure, and confuse, muddle the minds

Of those in honest toil

half-drunk himself upon his phrasy booze

His tent warmed by the musty heat of midnight oil

Topped by the white flag of passivity

Houses a bat that circumnavigates the land.

That's the first one. This is pretty early, understanding things? Because I had this proletarian background, and I get fed up on this literary bullshit, you know. I'm very successful at reading. Because after I get through reading every son-of-a-bitch in the audience knows what I'm talking about. And this is a great thing in poetry, see.

Jarrell: Certainly. It's essential.

Chaffee: Yes, it's very essential.

Jarrell: You either have it or you don't.

Chaffee: That's all. Your namesake had it, and that's all there is to it, see.¹⁰

Jarrell: Yes.

Jarrell: Well, now we have to pick up a few loose ends here. You're in San Francisco now. You moved to Oakland. You got married in 1933.

Chaffee: That's right.

Jarrell: And you were working on the Unemployed Councils.

Chaffee: That's right.

10. Randall Jarrell who conducted this oral history interview is the niece of Randall Jarrell, the poet.—Editor.

Jarrell: And you were active in Communist politics and unemployment.

Chaffee: In, yes, front organizations, you know.

Jarrell: And can you tell me, when did you start getting interested . . . for instance, do you remember the 1934 general strike in San Francisco?

Chaffee: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am.

Jarrell: What were you doing during that year preceding it, in the summer?

Chaffee: Well, I lived in Oakland, and we used to hold meetings to raise money in the Oakland high schools on 12th Street . . . big brick building . . . back of it was this huge, sort of a playing ground. We used to have big meetings there, and I'd raise money for these strikers. But I was not in the ILWU [International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union]. I was later.

Fascist Reprisals in Santa Cruz and Oakland

There was a fascist movement that had its repercussions in Santa Cruz, too. It was timed by the American Legion throughout the entire state. On a certain day they raided homes, went into houses and busted furniture, and here in town, the D & E Store, which was right on Pacific Avenue . . . name of Dave and Ed's store, Dave Applestein and Ed Newman . . . they were staunch members of left-wing groups. They wouldn't go all the way, but they didn't

have to. And they were just beautiful people. One of them, Ed Newman's son, is now a lawyer in Santa Cruz. And his other son . . .

Jarrell: Was the D & E Store a dry goods?

Chaffee: Yes. They sold Levis and . . .

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: Well, you've been here quite a while then?

Jarrell: No, but I have heard of that store before in another context.

Chaffee: Yes. Dave Applestein was a kind of salesman type, very clever, and Ed Newman had been a waterfront worker. And they came together and they decided that they'd get a little store, so they opened that store.

Jarrell: Partners, yes.

Chaffee: And they were wonderful. They did lots of things. They collected money. They lent money to Mexicans. A Mexican would lose their family member, and they'd lend him money so he could have a funeral. And they'd come in religiously and pay it all back. It's interesting.

Jarrell: So what happened to them, the D & E store?

Chaffee: Well, they just dissolved partnerships. They began to not get along, you know (laughter)

Jarrell: No, but were they raided or something?

Chaffee: Well, during this day, the fascists came by and they threw rocks through the big glass windows.

Jarrell: Well, now I haven't heard of this.

Chaffee: No. Well, this is something scandalous. They killed a fellow in Oakland who was holding a meeting behind the square. They thought it was me. They were out to kill me. And they killed a man. The fascist bully beat him to death.

Jarrell: Now what year was this? This is preceding the general strike?

Chaffee: This is during the general strike. This is part of the general strike.

Jarrell: This is reprisal.

Chaffee: Yes, that's right.

Jarrell: I see.

Chaffee: And so this happened. I was away, I think I was speaking at some comrade's funeral someplace that day. But this occurred all over simultaneously. See, they went into people's houses. My wife and I stayed in motion pictures all day long. We thought it was an original place but we'd see other comrades come skulking in. (laughter)

Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union

Jarrell: Well, can you tell me, when did you start getting involved with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, which was made up of many Communists in there?

Chaffee: Yes. I went through that with them. You see, we moved around a lot. We were highly mobile.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: Some guy'd be in Pennsylvania. They've got a hot strike going out in California. I'm going out and see, and so on. So the peach strike in 1933, I was involved in that from its very origin. The center for that was Santa Clara County, and it was directed from the workers' center there at 81 Post Street. That address should go in. Someday it'll be famous. Now that's where Caroline Decker later had her office with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union, see.

Jarrell: Well, the peach strike they had in April of 1933.

Chaffee: That's right.

Jarrell: In Alameda too. Also a peach strike.

Chaffee: We would go down to Alameda; we may get killed. Fascist groups came to life and they published in Alameda County around there. See the farming land then took off from Hayward, it was all farming area.

Jarrell: Yes, yes.

Chaffee: And they published little things—*Run, Red, Run*, which was inciting people for fascist action against these people. See, one of the things that's classic in American working-class history is from the boss's viewpoint, from the bourgeois viewpoint, it's very important to look upon the Latino as an ignorant, no-good, dirty son-of-a-bitch, because then you can pay them real low wages.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: And that was the degradation of the Negro in the South. After all, gee, consider he's just a savage. Christ, he's even abnegated in the Bible, and he's nothing. He's a gorilla. He's damn lucky to have people like us who'll give him something to do, see, for twelve hours a day, no pay. And so on. So it helped a lot. And they used all these things to stir up the people. Mexican and even Portuguese to some extent, and lots of Mexican workers. We'd go out, from 81 Post Street. We'd go out and solicit membership and talk to the workers. They were always ready. We'd hold meetings in canyons at night and we'd have bonfire meetings and everything, and they were all ready to go. Then we printed the leaflets. I wrote the leaflet that we used in the first peach strike. The peach strike was really the origin. That was the genesis of the program.

Jarrell: It prefigured that whole union.

Chaffee: Yes. Originally the Party's plan had been to work through something called the Trade Union Educational League.

Jarrell: The Trade Union Unity League?

Chaffee: Educational, first. Then they traded to the Unity League, see.

Jarrell: Okay.

Chaffee: But this didn't hold. It was kind of an aesthetic front. And one very big point I made in going back to this monograph I wrote, was the fact that the Communist Party at its convention prior . . . Now, one of the first strikes in California was in El Centro . . . is that while the Communist Party there reviewed the whole industrial picture of the United States and the conditions of workers and everything, they never had one word in it about agricultural labor, see. So the blast came when this group down south . . . Emory was the young friend of mine who was in that.

Jarrell: Now who was Emory?

Chaffee: He was a young leader. His last name was Emory. I just knew him casually. So from then on they began to sharpen their interest in the agricultural workers. I had something very important . . . because a little humor is American . . . I think the things that make you laugh (laughter) we didn't have any money to print our strike leaflets for the '32 peach strike. So I was the guy that was always called upon in these situations. So I went out to

this fellow, German printer, and I saw him and I said, now we get our money, and we'd do anything. We'd rob. We were very enthusiastic. We'd lie or anything, because the man who owned a printing press was bourgeois; wasn't working class, so I went to him and said, "We want to get 20,000 leaflets for a strike that's coming up, and we won't be able to pay you until later. And you print say 5,000 of them," (it was 10,000 we needed, something like Woody Allen, see), "You print 5,000 of them and you keep the other, then we'll pay you," (laughter) "Because you got the leaflets always as security." (laughter) We thought 5,000 was all we needed. And these went like hotcakes. (laughter) So we went back to him and I said, "We're trying to do this thing, Mister. We have no money." "Well," he said, "You can't pay for the leaflets?" (laughter) "No." He said, "Take the goddamned things." (laughter)

Jarrell: (laughter)

Chaffee: He was another old German immigrant. Wasn't doing anything anyway. Let me tell you another thing now. We used to collect money. I was kind of like a courier. And we could always get money from the Jewish hock shops, pawn shops . . . practically always. So this is kind of interesting, because they're supposed to be so hard-hearted. And then we can hide out in whorehouses. We had a tremendous feeling among the prostitutes. We'd got into these places. I remember this one we had to hole up in for a while in San Jose, and they liked us so much because we never said anything smart. We never said anything off color, obscene, you know. They were just sisters in a

working-class struggle. They'd give us money too. And some of them, quite a little bit of it.

Jarrell: So what was your role in the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union? You did a variety of things. Did you travel around the state?

Chaffee: No. I just stayed in the county—Santa Clara County—and splashed over into Alameda County, if you were contiguous. And then I went to help in a strike which was developing among the apple pickers in Watsonville. So that was interesting. I had, see, organized another Communist unit in Watsonville, the first one there.

Jarrell: What was the strike about and like in Watsonville? Would this have been 1932 or 1933?

Chaffee: It was just coming on at the same time of the pea pickers strike.

Jarrell: That was in 1933.

Chaffee: Yes, that's right. These things were going off like firecrackers. I organized the unit there about 1930, 1931, all though there. And it was kind of interesting, because as I remember it was the only thing I can ever think of that offended me with the Party much, because I took up the question. I says, "We got all Slavonians in this unit," see we called it a unit, a unit is the basic organization cell, so I said, "Looks to me like we could have some native-born Americans and then feed the Slavonians into this, because," I said,

“when we bring a native-born American in with all these Slavonians, they feel the foreign nature of our party and they shy away.” You would too, you know, if you were brought into something . . .

Jarrell: Now these Slavonians, were most of them . . .

Chaffee: They were fieldworkers in Watsonville. Pruners, tree pruners, tree pickers, fruit pickers in the great apple orchards in Watsonville.

Jarrell: Because so many of the orchards then and now are still owned by Slavonians.

Chaffee: Well, they climbed up too. [A Slavonian] used to own the Palomar Hotel here. They climbed up and they became real powerful and so they were just as much against their . . .

Jarrell: Would you say that predominantly in the 1930s making up the unskilled labor force in terms of just picking . . . I’m not talking about packing sheds or pruners . . . but just pickings and fieldworkers, what nationality would they have been?

Chaffee: They were pretty much cosmopolitan.

Jarrell: Did you have a lot of Okies and Arkies?

Chaffee: Not yet.

Jarrell: That was a little later, in the middle Thirties.

Chaffee: Yes. Trimming trees is a skilled trade. They'd also pick, call them apple knockers. Some of the Slavonians would pick apples. This is an ethnic thing you probably won't encounter any other place. The Yugoslavs were so highly regarded by merchants that they travelled around from orchard to orchard and they could get credit in Watsonville . . . to be paid next year.

Jarrell: That's remarkable.

Chaffee: They were always paid. There was a fellow who was pretty loose, kind of a Bohemian character, and he left a lot of bills. So the others in Watsonville chipped in and paid the bill. They kept their name alive. They were just wonderful people. They were the finest people I've ever been among, as a group. They would have picnics consisting of wine and roast lamb, fantastic things. Just fantastic. They were all men, almost all men without women. As far as I know, I only saw one Slavonian family that there was a woman in.

Jarrell: That's remarkable because the Slavonians we've talked to in our Regional History Project are mostly some of the big growers and shippers now. I was not aware that so much of the actual agricultural labor force was Slavonian.

Chaffee: The Slavonians are very tough people, I mean really tough. For instance, we'd have these parties in the hills where we'd drink wine (laughter) and a guy'd sit down like that and he'd take them glasses and just

chew the glass. He'd just bite into the glass and throw the tumbler away and make these wild declarations. (laughter)

Jarrell: Yes. And you helped organize these Slavonian men?

Chaffee: I did do that.

Jarrell: You did do that. Into a CAWIU . . . that was that union?

Chaffee: That came later. These things just grew out of every other farm and their salary. They'd just grow.

Jarrell: Well, if you could explain it a little more. Like you'd be down there with other people. Would you be working side-by-side?

Chaffee: I wasn't working in the fields with them. I'd work with their organizations. They all knew me from my activities and such things. I was pretty active and I never suggested they do anything unless I'd do it, was in the leadership. If I didn't believe it, like if it was a parade, I'd be in the parade. I gained their confidence that way.

Jarrell: How many people are we talking about that are sympathetic and actively involved in this organization which is not yet a union?

Chaffee: Not yet. Of course they've just become. This is how it happens: You're an educator, and I don't care whether you're going to listen to this or not, I'll tell you what it is. The whole business of everything. Here's this

town. We'll call it X-ville. Maybe it's a semi-industrial town, and the Communists would divide this up into areas like this, see. There'd be some industries here, maybe a little bicycle factory, maybe . . .

Jarrell: So they'd bisect the town, into little squares.

Chaffee: That's right. This'd be a unit, in this area here. Now one of your functions was to take care of all propaganda within that unit. And to go and see how many people worked in the factories, see.

Jarrell: Trying to do a little demographic survey.

Chaffee: That's right. All the time, yes. And then you would work with all the things that came up in this unit, if there was an eviction, or something, see. Then you would call, say it was in an established city like New York City or San Francisco, you'd call for more Unemployed Council help, or whatever you needed.

Jarrell: What would you do in Watsonville?

Chaffee: In Watsonville? Well, we just had the unit of the agricultural workers, that's all. We just had that. Let's say that's all we had there. So then a strike situation comes up. Then you'd send up people maybe like myself, or Pat Chambers¹¹ or so on, and you also draw new leadership from this group, you activate them.

Jarrell: From the people that you have . . .

Chaffee: From the unit that's in there.

Jarrell: Yes. From your local unit in Watsonville.

Chaffee: Yes. And they help you to build this Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union.

Jarrell: So it emerges from that area.

Chaffee: From this seed then . . . nucleus, see.

Jarrell: I see.

Chaffee: Oh, and the Filipinos played a large role. They came to our meetings, and they contributed, and they believed as we do. In fact, they were ahead of us, I think, because they'd talked about this revolution and movement in the Filipino language. And I remember one time that Darcy had been stationed . . . Sam Darcy was a district organizer stationed in the Philippine Islands. They used to call him, "the fly that disturbs the rump of the wild buffalo." Isn't that an elaborate way to say it? (laughter) Bite the bosses, see.¹²

11. Chambers was a lead organizer with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (CAWIU). He led the biggest field walkouts of the early- and mid-1930s, including the Corcoran cotton strike of 1933. Chambers was convicted in 1934 for violating California's criminal syndicalism law. He was released after serving time in San Quentin, but never returned to organizing, instead becoming a union carpenter in San Pedro.

12. Sam Darcy was the California District Organizer for the Communist Party in the early 1930s and was heavily involved in leading the efforts to organize California farmworkers.

Jarrell: When was this? When did he go to the Philippines?

Chaffee: Before he came to San Francisco. He'd been around. He was a very bright man, very capable. He had something for the Filipinos in there, in *The Western Worker*. They used to read that avidly. He'd have some statement translated from Tagalog. I had a meeting with him. He was pretty sore. I said, "Hey Darcy, you've got a paper here. We call it *The Western Worker*. Look at the goddamned thing. It's no newspaper at all. Here's something by Tagalog up here. That frightens away the American workers. You've got to take things like that out; we can't have it." He says, "You're right." So that disappeared. What they were really trying for was the basic American broad base. But these men in Watsonville were terrific.

Jarrell: You told me last week [off tape] that you had personally encountered some pretty serious kinds of racial incidents having to do with the Filipinos in the Watsonville community.

Chaffee: Well, I think that if I said that, I wasn't exactly correct. What I meant was I'd kept a record, of course they're all lost now, of the clippings of the Filipinos that were hurt by these fascist drives.

Jarrell: In the 1920s.

Chaffee: In Watsonville, yes. And they were beautiful people, the Filipino people. They had the cleanest camps. They would take a little bit of money. Each one would put in so much money, then they'd build these nice

recreation halls on property where they yearly worked. The boss liked to have them around. They'd have a pool table in there, and cards, and everything. Clean as a whistle, bookcases, music.

Jarrell: And they paid for it themselves.

Chaffee: They paid for it themselves, built it themselves out of their wages. Of course all of this was smashed when the strike came. But we named our local of the International Labor Defense here in Santa Cruz the Danny Roxas Local. He was the Filipino who had been sent to San Quentin for organizing field workers.

Jarrell: Under the criminal syndicalism law?

Chaffee: Partly that, yes.

Jarrell: Partly that.

Chaffee: Yes.

Jarrell: What was the International Labor Defense like?

Chaffee: That was one of these front organizations see. (laughter)

Jarrell: Yes. To defend people put in jail for organizing.

Chaffee: Yes. To defend working-class people like Sacco and Vanzetti. So here you have a Communist cell here. Some of its members will be in the

ILD; some of the members will be in the FSU (Friends of the Soviet Union); some will be in the International Workers Order; some will be in the CAWIU . . . they'll be overlapping?

Jarrell: Or Trade Union Unity League.

Chaffee: Yes. (laughter) In other words, they wear quite a few hats at times. This is the way it was. The Trade Union Unity League had no influence at all.

Jarrell: It was a dismal failure.

Chaffee: It was. It was just for the parent organization of a grand idea. The ideal disappeared, but then it was just become a group of workmen.

Jarrell: From a strategic point of view, is it accurate to say that TUUL. [Trade Union Unity League] was formed as a contrary or contradictory organization to the AF of L in the sense of . . . okay, if the AF of L is going to take skilled workers, we're going to work at trying to organize the unskilled workers?

Chaffee: Yes. And it was an educational league—put out leaflets until they could get stronger. Then it was to be a unity league to bring people together. Now the big thing you see in the movement is a revolutionary movement. It's international, so it isn't foreign, it's international. You see the big drive for all the Trade Union Unity League and the Trade Union Educational League and all these things was for the industrial unionism. The AF of L, which

[Samuel] Gompers sold out, became a capitalist organization because the machinists were in the machinist union and . . .

Jarrell: Right. You wanted a vertical . . .

Chaffee: That's right, so everybody belonged to it. A man who swept out the washroom was just as much in the . . .

Jarrell: Yes. Well, the idea of industrial union.

Chaffee: That's right. And the Wobblies had this idea of one big union. But the Wobblies of course, or IWW, they didn't believe political action.

Jarrell: That's right.

Chaffee: But they were a beautiful organization.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: They were a hundred percent American organization. They're right out of our roots. See, that's what I mean by American. The Party wasn't this way. Here's one main criticism of it. It was like an opera.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: Beautiful, but it's not American.

Jarrell: Now in what way? That's interesting. Is this upon reflection, or did you think this at the time?

Chaffee: This was true. Because the movement seemed so foreign to so many workers. Really did, the Communist movement seemed so foreign. I often think as I look back... I used to look for fundamental strategies, and I often think that the major purpose when the war danger against Russia was real—now I'm talking when it was really real, you know about General Grace . . . America's Siberian adventure. We invaded through Murmansk. So we're a constant threat. Now we've got them completely encircled with atomic weapons. One of the biggest ones we've got is pointed only twenty-six miles from Leningrad.

Jarrell: Do you think we could affect internal domestic Soviet politics.

Chaffee: It's affecting external politics. It's made them have a certain severity.

Jarrell: Are you saying that the fact that they're surrounded . . .

Chaffee: ...by the outside world made them want the outside world to come to their defense, working-class citizens of the world defend them. It was more important to them (now this is my own opinion), to have support in what they feared would be the imperialist war than it would be to have good, regular applications of Communist principles here and there. And I really think this was so because everything they did was so heavily predicated with this impending war against them sooner or later.

Jarrell: I want to ask you a couple more finishing questions about this Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union. Now I know that the CAWIU concentrated almost exclusively on field workers, right?

Chaffee: That's right.

Jarrell: I know that the Young Communist League people tried in some instances to organize packing-shed workers or cannery workers. Do you think this had anything to do with the ultimate failure of the CAWIU in 1934?

Chaffee: No, not at all. You see the Young Communist League participated in fieldworkers. And we didn't differentiate fieldworkers from the packing-shed workers, because we were doing propaganda work among them for the union and cannery and agricultural workers. So the two are together in this one kind of thing.

Jarrell: But even though it says that, it seems that the success of the CAWIU were mostly with fieldworkers, and even though you did try to organize them the successes weren't there.

Chaffee: Ha? No . . .

Jarrell: Maybe I'm incorrect in that. I would like to know why you think . . .

Chaffee: Well, they weren't. We had some successes. But it was a failure of the whole organization in one aspect. In this I'm absolutely right. The

Communist Party used to call itself the vanguard of the working class. They took the most devoted (laughter) but Jesus, they were learning. And they could be like a country that could capture power, but they couldn't hold it. They'd seize power, but they couldn't hold it, see. Now I did participate in some parts of the later struggles in the longshoremen, warehousemen's union. I'll tell you a pretty slick deal. You can't beat the Catholics for taking over organizations. We know that. After the cotton strike was over the office had just dwindled. Just one guy lazily sitting in the office. It was rather sad. An old C & AW slogan up there and everything. Even the bosses didn't worry, you see. We provided the best fighters, but we didn't have the organization. We were learning. It was school. This is what Marx and Lenin used to say—you go to school this way.

But I'll give you an example of the cleverness, organizational cleverness. I was very much interested in this. When I belonged to the ship clerk's union, which is affiliated with the International Longshoremen's Union, Warehousemen's Union, we had a nice tight union. And the radical elements in it, left-wing elements within it, were fought by the majority of the membership which wasn't leftist, Marxist. Particularly the Catholic element. They called it the Catholic Action Group.

Jarrell: Right wing.

Chaffee: Sure.

Jarrell: Like the CIO. In the CIO you have the Catholic.

Chaffee: That's right. And that was the Catholic Action Group. Here's how it worked. The ship clerk in the stevedores union is the dispatcher. Now they were able to take over. I wasn't actually loading and unloading because of my arm which is always forked that way. I would have liked to but . . . Your dispatcher, well, he was here. He was always re-elected. Everybody loved him. He was really nice. "You Communists have really got something to say," you know, almost with tears in his eyes, and so on and so forth. Everything else . . . he never said much. But the priest would send people down to go into the ILWU with a little paper form. He'd favor them. Until gradually they filled up the union.

Jarrell: Who filled up the union?

Chaffee: The Catholics. Through this friendly spiritual. Now the other side of the coin comes up. When a radical thing, who are we going to have for a strike . . . who's going to lead our strike. "Whalen, rah Whalen. He's a Communist," somebody said. But the loudest ones shouting are the Catholics. (laughter) Because it was Whalen and oh, what the hell, Mike Johnson and Russo, get their heads scratched . . . see what I mean?

Jarrell: What years were you in the Ship Clerks [Union]?

Chaffee: Well . . . the war was on when I went into the Ship Clerks Union. We had a couple of struggles there on the waterfront there. I had a hell of a time making a living. I left the party in 1935 or 1936.

Jarrell: That's pretty early. You left it way before the war.

Leaving the Labor Movement

Chaffee: Yes. I left it before the war. I just left it. I can remember that I had a conversation when I was leaving with Darcy. I went in to see him. I said, "Sam, I'm going to leave the movement. I'm going to leave it. I don't want to be bothered." "Well, what the hell are you going to do?" "I'm going to work. I gotta work. I don't have anything to eat."

Jarrell: What was your wife doing?

Chaffee: Well, we just lived there. We lived on relief and what little things I could steal. Milk . . . she never knows to this day. I used to get up . . . I was pretty small then, I could go into a Goodwill store and pick out a size 36 suit and it fit me like a glove. I got this old cheap suit there for a few bucks, and pretty decent hat and everything. I used to go from door to door. I'd knock on the doors and I had a little satchel there with the bottom cut out, it was something like a briefcase. And half of it I'd cut off, see. This half here I'd cut off. Then I'd go up to the door and I'd knock on the door and if a lady came to the door I'd say, "Does Mrs. O'Grady live here?" And she'd say, "No." "Oh," I'd say, "She must have moved away. I'm an insurance man making a

collection. Do you know where she moved?" "No, I don't know at all." But if I knocked on the door and nobody answered, I'd set this over a quart of milk, give it a little kick, and it'd be in my case.

I think I've undervalued myself in my life generally. I think I was more effective than I thought, more capable than I thought. One time I got a job in Capwell's in Oakland. These guys would come up with their little hats, and the manager come down, "I want to keep you, Chaffee, but you got to quit. I can't tell you. You got to go." I said, "Well, you're supposed to give two . . ." He says, "I can't help it. Here's two weeks pay. Just go." I said, "I'll finish the day. I'll do that little book work." "No, just go, go, git." And so I got pretty well into books. I read an awful lot. The fact is I've coasted along on what I read almost pretty much during this period when I was incapacitated. I have a tremendous memory. In fact, it used to annoy me. I read a play by Shakespeare and I remember things in it that even he wanted . . .

Jarrell: Remember . . . lucky.

Chaffee: (laughter) I learned a lot about books. I left my home when we lived in East Oakland, left my home with fifty cents in my pocket and going from town to town. I'd buy a book here for maybe thirty-five cents. I'd take it to another bookstore and sell it for \$1.50. With that \$1.50 I'd buy more. There used to be a man named Graham Hardy in Oakland. He's now—just found this out a couple of weeks ago—he's now an authority on model trains. He's been playing with toy trains all his life (laughter)

Jarrell: Oh, my goodness.

Chaffee: . . . gone down to this . . . you know, what's the name, Virginia City.

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: So I learned from him that there was quite an interest in wine. Some fellow came in and bought a wine book while I was talking to him. He said, "Jesus." I said, "Did you get twenty dollars for that wine book?" "Yes," he says, "Wine books are real valuable." So I went on a tour and I got a whole corner on wine books. And I sold them to the Wine Institute, it was called then. I think Old California Wine exists?

Jarrell: Oh yes.

Chaffee: Remember Frona Eunice Wait's *Wines and Vines of California*?

Jarrell: Yes.

Chaffee: How's that for a title? *Wines and Vines of California*? And *The Cellar Practice* by a fellow named Bicksberg? And all these rare books. I got pretty good at it. One time I picked up a Gilbert and Sullivan, who were great as a team producing art. I think their stuff is magnificent, but they fought like hell and they broke up. And after they broke up, Sullivan wrote the music, that was it. He tied in to some person who was going to write the words, take the place of Gilbert, and they wrote an operetta called *The Mountebanks*. In it was an old playbill from the Mikado in the Savoy Theater. I think that was where

it first played. I sold this to Audubon Bookshop—I think I got ninety dollars for it.

Jarrell: So you could make a little money on the side doing that because you had a good feel, instinct for it.

Chaffee: I did this, yes ma'am. I collected junk and everything. But then I started building a house. My wife's uncle, German, they were all leftist Germans. We had no political conflict, my wife and I. She can remember your car number. You come to the house, she'll remember your car number as long as she live, but she can't remember any lines. See, I'm just the opposite. Accountings drive me up the wall.

Anyway, why he said, "You've got to do something. Why don't you build a house?" I said, "I don't know how." "Well," he said, "I'll lend you \$550. You don't have to pay me back. Take it easy. You'll pay me. Just I owe you \$550." So in Oakland I built out at Sunkissed Drive. I got a lot for \$250 and I thought I was robbed because I learned the whole hill had been sold for \$250. One day I was there and I just felt terrible. This man came up. He said, "I'm a real estate man." He said, "I'll give you \$2000 for this lot. It's a wonderful view. I can see the Golden Gate bridge and everything and I can see eighteen or twenty houses from it." So I thought, "Well, I'll keep it then if he can sell it." So with the other money . . . it's kind of the story of a struggle, and I'm kind of proud of it, because it's the story of a handicapped man, the successful struggle of a handicapped man. See, I had this fixation on manhood

(laughter) and—it's interesting to make this observation—if anything harms him from his function as a man, he immediately gives it a sexual connotation, see (laughter), that he's fighting, I guess what he thinks is emasculation. Talk about the female mind, (laughter) why you ought to come across this. So anyway I'd go out and I erected a hot house. I learned how to cut glass. I didn't know anything about lumber. I'd just watch these other men at building; experts were building houses around there. I helped a Japanese fellow erect a hot house. Fellow named Iron Joe on the estuary, I asked him if I could rent his rowboat and he said, "I've got no oars." "Why," I said, "I can use sticks of wood." And I whittled out some oars. I'd go out in the Oakland estuary and I'd pick up floating driftwood and he told me to save him hardwood. Oh baby, he had a good market for the hardwood, get hardwood from all over the world floating out there. I'd been to sea and I'd go up behind some of these sailors that were anchored in the Oakland estuary, tied up, anchored there, and I'd say, "Hey, you lousy son of a bitch, I'm a sailor. Why don't you throw down a poor sailor some lumber so he can build a house?" (laughter) This is the way you talk proletarian, it really works. (laughter) So: "Aw, go away, you crummy bastard, you'll never amount to anything. Get the hell out of here." They wouldn't have you on their ship. Then you'd go off and wait a little while. And then pretty soon the lumber comes over the side. They throw it down to you. (laughter) I'd pick it up, and I had a hammer and nails and I'd put a nail in a piece of lumber and put some old wire around it, and another piece and another piece to get rolling

and have about 150 pieces of this stuff dragging behind me. (laughter) We picked up a lot that way. Then I helped a guy wreck a church, got the lumber. And I watched those fellows building. Everything they did, I did. And there again you have the proletarian consciousness. They were craft workers; they were carpenters. One of them said, "What the hell are you? Some goddamned stool pigeon, snuffing around here?" That's the way they talk, see. "Naw," I said, "I'm just around to build a house and I don't know how the hell to do it, see. And I'm just one jump ahead of you guys."

Jarrell: Or one step behind.

Chaffee: Yes. (laughter) Following one step behind, yes. So they said, "Well, where the hell is this? I'll talk to some of the boys and when we get through our work here, we'll come up and give you a hand." So they got up there and . . . there used to be something that annoyed me, I had what they called the bull horrors. Now there's a good word.

Jarrell: The bull horrors?

Chaffee: Yes. The bull horrors is the fear of policemen that radicals get. It's an old IWW term. Bull horrors.

Jarrell: Because bulls are police, right?

Chaffee: Cops. (laughter) This big man would come up and he'd hang over me like he was a cop. He had this great big police dog. Watch me build and everything.

Jarrell: Why would he do that?

Chaffee: Well, I never knew until later. I got the house all done. It had matching oak flooring that thick throughout the entire house. It cost me only sixty-five dollars for it, I bought it from bankruptcy . . . I was fighting, you know. So this guy comes in and says, "I tell you what I'll do, I'll give you \$9500 cash for this place (knock, knock) right now." This was a lieutenant commander. "Well," I said, "Commander, you must be crazy. Those houses are built down there by experts." He says, "I know. But this is the best built house in the neighborhood." "I got no fireplace. I can show you a place down here for \$500 less, got a fireplace." "I don't care." (laughter)

Jarrell: He was sold on your house.

Chaffee: Yes. He watched it being built.

Jarrell: Weren't you planning to live in it?

Chaffee: We wanted to get out in the country.

Jarrell: You were kind of just building it and see how it would go?

Chaffee: Yes. And we could live in it and everything. Of course part of the time I was working on it too later on I got a little more work and then I'd sell some of the lumber. I slept out in my little place in the mountains. I'm full of mosquito bites. So we said, "We'll take it." We went up to Mendocino County. The house cost me about \$2500 to build. See, I did everything myself. We were reduced to supreme poverty. I'd go around where other people were building houses, a contractor. I'd see the boss. I'd say, "Do you mind if I pick up the old nails?" See if a carpenter drops a nail he's not allowed to pick it up. His time is worth more to them than that. So I'd go around, and I'd pick up all these nails. I'd sometimes pick up five to ten pounds of nails and use them all.

This I'll tell you as a friend. One time there was a wino there, a character who liked me real well. He'd been in the movement. He was all burnt out. And so we were downtown drinking in the tavern one day and we saw this fellow. You've heard of what they call knotheads? They're little people with small heads that seem to sit close to their shoulders. They're usually Indians. I've learned this. And this tough little guy, I've forgotten his name, had a carton and he was sitting here. He says, "They have my boy at Highland Hospital and they won't give him any blood. I can't get any donors and I don't know what I'm going to do." I'll never forget the expression on Don's face. I said, "Well, we'll give him some blood. What the hell." Proctor, I think that was the man's name. He'd killed a man with a hammer in a fight about eight months before. We loved his kid. So we went down to the hospital and we

give the blood. Oh, he was tickled to death and we told him we were building a house. He says, "I'll come over and help you." (laughter) I said, "Well, Proctor, you can't do that, but you just come up when we need you. That's all. I can do as much as work as you can. But when I got to cut the rafter for the hip of the roof, why I'll come and get you." He thought we were the grandest people on earth. (laughter) He came up there. It's kind of complicated. You got a building, you got a gable going this way, and you want to put a hip on it, see. I never did learn how to do it. Anyway (laughter) he came up and he cut the first lap, he was so stewed. He threw the square down, he flops it here, he lays it out, he says, "There's your pattern. I says, "Cut all the rest like that and you've got them all. We cut the goddamned rafters and it fit like a glove. It was the most beautiful thing you ever saw. So we just went on cutting. And he came up and helped us other ways and some things like that.

Jarrell: So when did you go and build the house up there? This is in Mendocino, right?

Chaffee: No, no. This is Oakland. We moved from where we used to live. My folks were so set against me. I'll tell you something, this is novel stuff. When I used to go down to the Oakland estuary to get wood to burn in our stove I had to wade in that cruddy water to pick up these little rotten pieces of wood to put in my sack, soaked with fuel oil and everything, see. This was right in the region where Jack London used to be an oyster. Throw it over my back

and walk past this business corner at 23rd Avenue and East 14th. There's a big cannery there and we discovered that we could burn peach pits, fabulous fires. We'd go there and get sacks of peach pits.

Jarrell: Kept you warm.

Chaffee: Oh yes. And we could put them out in the backyard till the little fruit flies got through with them and then we'd burn them. Pretty near burnt up the stove.

During the cotton strike led by the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, where really Caroline Decker gained fame and showed what an organizer she was along with Pat Chambers . . . conditions were so bad among the workers, the field workers, the farmers wouldn't let them have any water. Everything was diseased. One woman was holding a dead baby, and in her hysteria thought it was alive, a Spanish woman. An investigation of it was ordered by Governor [James] Rolph who was a phony and a faker. There was a man named Weinstein who was a rabbi who was on the committee too. And you know how they are; they are so thorough. He made a complete study of all this, and he collected all this material, and he had boxes of it, and he gave it to me. One of the major works I did on that project was collecting material, because I could talk anybody out of what I was interested in getting. And so we had all this material.

Jarrell: Really. Which had been first-hand witnesses and reports that were for testimony.

Chaffee: Yes, that's right. And when they had all the hearings there, Caroline Decker acted as one of the inquisitors and used to cross-examine growers and workers and everything. She knew how to bring out all this material. She's sharp as hell. I wish you could have seen her.

Jarrell: We're definitely going to talk about your work when you were writing these two monographs. We'll cover all that period next time.¹³

Chaffee: Okay. But one thing you want to do in this field is get a chronology. It's the first important thing. I made strike sheets, five copies. I'll tell you about that later. It was really good. We'd file one by strike, one by organization, one by locality . . .

I'll bring you a little book by Kate Garth Crane. She was a pseudo-liberal who ran around, one of those wealthy women who's sympathetic to labor, who was all haywire. Didn't have a Marxist understanding, but her heart was in the right place. And this is how fascism is brought about. It's brought about by people whose hearts are in the right place. It's brought on a great wave of sentimentality. Because when she came back she had all these things about Yetta Stromberg and the red flag case, and how they sentenced the girl

13. This interview was never conducted.

and everything else for having this children's camp. She came back, and then she made another trip to Europe and sang the praises of Mussolini.

Jarrell: My Lord.

Chaffee: You know, one of the people that believed he did something great because he made the trains run on time.