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# AMERICAN DREAMS

LOST AND FOUND

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Studs Terkel

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## To Nelson Algren

Some of the names in this book, including that of Emma Knight, have been changed.

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Amazing grace, how sweet thy sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now am found  
Was blind but now I see.

—An American Hymn

All people dream: but not equally.  
Those who dream by night  
in the dusty recesses of their minds  
wake in the day to find it was vanity.  
But the dreamers of the day  
are dangerous people,  
for they may act their dream with open eyes  
to make it possible.

—T. E. Lawrence

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For the fifth time around, Cathy Zmuda transcribed hundreds of thousands of words—in this instance, a cool million, I suspect—onto pages that sprang to life. As the pressure grew, there was gallant assistance by Valentine Regan, Dru Cass, Florence McNaughton, and Kathy Cowan.

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Finally, a salute to my extraordinarily selfless scouts: Sandy McCall, who drove me hundreds of miles over southern California cement; Tony Judge, who drove me through New England country, wholly unfamiliar; John Platt and Elizabeth Furse, who drove me toward the timberlands of the Northwest; Gary Voghtman, who drove me from the bluegrass country to eastern Kentucky; Otho Day and Henry Osborne, who drove me from Tougaloo College, across expressways and dirt roads, to a Mississippi farm; Ed McConville, who guided me through the Carolinas; Bill and Dorothy Ojala, who were my hosts and cicerones in northern Minnesota; and Mary Cygan,

who led me to a Chicago neighborhood I didn't know as well as I thought I did.

To those friends, acquaintances, and wayfaring strangers who so generously offered me tips and God knows how much time they spent on the telephone calling others: "I know someone who knows someone who knows exactly the person you're looking for . . .": Randy Harvey, Eloise Jones, Sid Blumenthal, Bella Stumbo, Jerry Ward, Bennett Snyder, Norman Ross, Elma Griesel, Pat Powers, Ellen Frank, Carey McWilliams, Ann Banks, Bill McClory, Judith Wax, Vivian Cadbury, Gerry Temaner, Barbara Burton, Moe Foner, Bill Newman, James Graham, Jack Scott, Esther Ohr, Dick Simpson, Paul Terkel, Pastora Cafferty, Bill Spraggins, Quentin Young, Ron Schiffman, Deedee Halkin, Pat Lyons, Beatrice Neiburger, Chuck Gardenier, George Ballis, Will D. Campbell, Myles Horton, Barbara Knuckles, Henry de Zutter, Don Klimovich, and Marvin Miller.

It is no hyperbole to suggest that this book is a result of a collective intelligence and curiosity.

Not included in this book are about two hundred people whom I visited. Each, I discovered, was a singular person, imaginative in his/her own way. Each graciously offered me time, in many instances discommoding himself/herself. Each was generous in recounting a personal life and reflecting on a public dream. Their noninclusion is due to others covering a similar terrain and to my zig-zagging without compass through uncharted country. As a sportscaster would put it, mine were judgment calls. To these two hundred, my apologies and profound gratitude. In a deeper sense, they are in these pages.

—Studs Terkel  
Chicago  
February 1980

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## INTRODUCTION

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At the end of the most extraordinary period of transformation in human affairs, old landmarks have disappeared, new ones are not yet recognized as such, and intellectual navigation across the suddenly estranged landscapes of human society becomes unusually puzzling for everybody.

—Eric Hobsbawm

For the nine-year-old boy, in 1921, traveling on that day coach from New York to Chicago, it was simple. And exhilarating. Though he wasn't the proper British butler Ruggles, whose mind was boggled by images of a Wild West and equally wild Indians in multifeathered headgear, the boy envisioned a midwest that, too, was frontier country.

It was a twenty-four-hour journey, clickety-clacketing through the outskirts of large and middle-sized Pennsylvania cities, through the main streets of small Ohio towns, of sudden appearances in the aisles of hawkers bawling out their wares, of steaming hot coffee and homemade sandwiches, of local newspapers called *The Globe*, *The Sun*, *The Star*, *The Planet*. Yes, *The Herald*, too, for something terribly exciting was being heralded. It was a momentous adventure, uniquely American. Out there was more: a reservoir of untapped power and new astonishments.

*"One of my earliest memories was a trip across the country with my grandfather." A Chicago physician reflects in 1979. He is the grandson of the late General Robert E. Wood, who was, at the glowing time, chairman of the board of Sears, Roebuck and Company. "We were sitting in the engineer's cab. It was the Great Northern. We were*

*going through the mountains. The steam engine was a huge one. I remember thinking how big the country was and how powerful the engine. And being with someone as powerful and confident as my grandfather. It was about 1940. I was seven and optimistic."*

The sprawl of the Chicago stockyards, whose smells on a summer night, with a stiff breeze blowing from the south, overwhelmed the boy. It was not at all unpleasant to him, for there was a sense of things happening, of propitious times ahead. The condition of those who had actually worked in *The Jungle*, revealed some fifteen years earlier by Upton Sinclair, had caused something of a stir, but time, benign neglect, and editorial silences had delimited public indignation.

Warren Gamaliel Harding, handsome, silver-haired, genial, was our president. Hollywood couldn't have done better. He was a cross between Francis X. Bushman and Theodore Roberts. Normalcy was on the wing, and the goose hung high. 1923. Came the first political scandal in the boy's memory: Teapot Dome. It was, the teachers told him, an aberration. Corruption was not endemic to the American scene. Bad apples in every barrel. And our barrels, praise God, have been a fruitful lot.

It was another story the boy heard in the lobby of his mother's hotel. The guests were boomer firemen, journey-men carpenters, and ex-Wobblies, as well as assorted scissorbills\* and loyal company men. The cards were stacked, groused the former, between rounds of solitaire, hearts, and cribbage. If you don't like it, go to Russia, retorted the others. Inevitably, the wild political arguments became highly personal, fueled as most were by bootleg whiskey.

\* A scissorbill was the pejorative ascribed to the working-man who was pro-boss and anti-foreigner. A turn-of-the-century piece of doggerel was perversely dedicated to him.

You're working for an Englishman  
You room with a French Canuck  
You board in a Swedish home  
Where a Dutchman cooks your chuck.  
You buy your clothes from a German Jew  
You buy your shoes from a Russian Pole  
You place your hopes on a dago Pope  
To save your Irish soul.



*"The early part of the century was an exciting period in the life of the United States." The ninety-five-year-old economist taps his memory. "Almost every community had a channel of expression: city clubs, trade union central bodies, forums, Cooper Union. Speakers would go from state to state, town to town, get ten dollars here, fifty dollars there. There were thousands who would come to hear Gene Debs, myself, Clarence Darrow, crowds, crowds, filling Madison Square Garden."*

Ed Sprague and Big Ole were the two most eloquent and hot-tempered lobby performers. The others, usually full of piss and vinegar, were unusually subdued when these two had the floor. Ed was much for words, though little for food. He dined on graveyard stew, bread broken up in a bowl of hot milk. He had no teeth: they had been knocked out by vigilantes in Seattle during the general strike of 1919. In no way did it interfere with his polemics, bellowed through snuff-stained gums. It was mortal combat between himself and the devil: big business. The boy was reminded of Billy Sunday, exorcising the devil: "I'll stomp him, I'll punch him, I'll bite him and, by God, when my teeth are all gone, I'll gum him back to hell!"

Big Ole was Ed's *bête noire*, closest at hand. He defended John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and gloried in Teddy Roosevelt's credo of soft words and the big stick. He was Ed's equal in decibel power. They were wrestling, not so much for the hearts and minds of the others as for the pure hell of it. Theirs was the American yawp. Every man a king. Every man a Demosthenes. It was a fouling, gouging, no-holds-barred match: Hackenschmidt versus Frank Gotch. Along with the others, the boy was enthralled, for it was, behind the wild expletives and runaway metaphors, power they were "discussing." Of the potent few and the impotent many.

*"If you listen to any president of the United States," says Nicholas Von Hoffman, "'power' is a word he never discusses. Senators never use that word either. It gets people thinking. Who knows where your thinking might take you? If you don't talk about power, it's like not lifting the hood of the automobile. You don't know how the damn thing works."*

Ed Sprague and Big Ole had three things in common. Each was singularly skilled with his hands, a craftsman. Each visited Gladys on Sunday mornings. She ran a crib along Orleans Street. It was Ed's defiance of God and Ole's show of reverence, one of the weisenheimers put it. Gladys was fond of both; she favored lively men. She favored quiet men too. Gladys was an egalitarian, and a true entrepreneur. Each wrote letters to the editor with the regularity of a railroad timepiece. When, in the course of human events, the name of one or the other would appear on the editorial page, it was an occasion for celebration. Let the record show that Ole Hanson's name appeared more often than Ed Sprague's.

One of the more sober and scholarly guests at the hotel turned the boy on to E. Haldeman-Julius Blue Books. They were small paperbacks, encompassing the writings of all the world's wise men—and an occasional wise woman—from the Year One. Published in Girard, Kansas, twenty such books would come to you in return for one buck plus postage. An especially fat one would go for a dime. Aristotle, Voltaire, Fabre on the life of the mason bee, a nickel apiece. All of Shakespeare's tragedies, a dime. Not a bad buy. These booklets, fitting neatly in the hip pocket, became his Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf.

It was his first acquaintance with the writings of Tom Paine. In school, he had been taught the troublemaker's words about times that try men's souls, but not his words that challenged men's minds. "As America was the only spot in the political world where the principles of human reformation could begin, so also was it the best in the natural world. The scene which that country presents to the spectator has something in it which generates and enlarges great ideas. He sees his species, not with the inhuman eye of a natural enemy, but as kindred. . . ."

*In the woods of northwest Oregon, the embattled logger neglects the breakfast the waitress has laid out before him. His thoughts are elsewhere, and his fervor. "The forest to me is an awesome and beautiful place. The young loggers were not here to see what was there before. If you've never known something, it's difficult to appreciate what's been lost. What happened to all that majestic timber? I believe that only by being in the presence of beauty and great things in the world about us can man*

*eventually get the goddamn hatred of wanting to kill each other out of his system. The beauty is going."*

*The traveling singer from Idaho no longer experiences the ancestral pull toward her hometown. "Boise hardly exists for me any more. All the things I remember with pleasure have been torn down and replaced by bullshit. . . . Downtown Boise, all covered, is like a cattle chute for customers. It used to be like a little cup of trees. Just trees and this river. Old, old houses and a sense of community. None of that's there any more. It's all gone."*

In the mid sixties, while journeying through the farm states on the prowl for depression storytellers, I came upon Marcus, Iowa, along the South Dakota border. Population: 1,263. At the supermarket, the three people I encountered were unaware of the man I was seeking; his father had founded the town. The checker at the counter, seemingly at home, thought "the name's familiar, but I just can't place it." For her, too, it was an estranged landscape.

A few days later, in the town of Le Mars, I was walking toward a hamburger joint. It was at night. It may have been on the outskirts of town; as I recall, there was no sidewalk. A patrol car slowed down beside me. The two policemen were curious, that's all. Nobody else was walking.

"We began pretty well here in America, didn't we?" Jessie Binford, Jane Addams's old colleague, asked herself rhetorically, as she, in 1963, returned to her hometown, Marshalltown. Her father had founded it. "When you think of all the promise in this country . . . I don't see how you could have found much greater promise. Or a greater beginning. Yet the commonest thing I feel in this town is fear of the unknown, of the stranger. Fear, fear. We should have the intelligence and courage to see the many changes that come into the world and will always come. But what are the intrinsic values we should not give up? That's the great challenge that faces us all."

The twenties, the time of the boy's train ride, were neither the best of times nor the worst, though innocence, like booze, brings forth its morning-after hangover. A better world was a-comin', the boy felt. How could it miss? There was so much of it, so many frontiers. And what,

with so much inequity, so much room for improvement.

With Bob LaFollette and George Norris, senators of independent mind, ringing the bell in the night—a warning of power in fewer and fewer hands—Americans, aware of sharp truths and even sharper dangers, would respond. With the certitude of a twelve-year-old, and the roaring eloquence of the hotel guests remembered, the boy was never more certain. What he did not quite understand was that infinitely lesser men were awarded much more attention, much more printer's ink. In later years, the clones of Coolidge, expertly machine-tooled and media-hyped, have done, and are doing, equally well. Ed Sprague's thunder still rolls in the boy's ear: "Who owns these things? Who makes scrambled eggs of our brains? In their stately mansions, they rob us of our stately minds."

Cannot Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" be subject to transposition: the evil of banality? In 1792, Paine observed: "The mighty objects he beholds act upon the mind by enlarging it, and he partakes of the greatness he contemplates." In 1972, the less fraudulent of our two presidential candidates, on winning the California primary, beamed over all three networks: "I can't believe I won the whole thing." Thus did an Alka-Seltzer commercial enrich our political vocabulary.

Vox populi? Is that all there is to the American Dream, as celebrated in thousands of sixty-second, thirty-second, and ten-second spots each day on all channels? A mercantile language, debased, and nothing else? Is there no other language, no other dream?

*"Some people may think it's childish of me, a poor white, to have faith in the deep yearnings of my people," says a woman from the South. "They're much like the people of Mexico. If a person in their midst is identified as a poet or he can draw or play an instrument, this person has stature." (Remember the surge of pride in Pa Joad's voice as Connie picked up the guitar and sang? "That's my son-in-law.")*

*"It's amazing, even in the backwoods of Alabama, there's a classic tucked away in some country school. It's funny, poetry has a way of molding people. There's a buried beauty—(suddenly) Gray's Elegy changed my life. Who knows who's buried, who could have been what?*

*The men in power should get all the poetry out of schools, anything that touches on real beauty. It's dangerous."*

*The ninety-year-old Pole who came here in 1896 and worked his lifelong life in the mills still hungers. "I used to attend lectures at Hull House. The things that bothered me were so many things I couldn't understand. There was a professor from the university lecturing on relativity, Einstein. The worst of it was I didn't understand half the words he used. I never understood relativity. I guess I got too old and too tired."*

*Kuume* is the Finnish word for fever. It was the American fever. They came early in this century and at the turn. All to the land, by nature and industry blessed. To make it, of course, and to escape, as well, the razor's edge and, in remarkably many instances, the Old Country draft. Their mothers didn't raise their boys to be soldiers, either. The manner in which they came varied with geography and circumstance. In all cases, it was hard travelin'.

A wooden ship across the North Sea, "with sugarloaf waves, so the boat would rock, where you just crawled into bunks," to Liverpool, the *Lucania*, and on to America. Another: from Italy, by way of Marseilles, "all by myself," on the *Sardinia*, hence to El Dorado, which turned out to be a Massachusetts textile mill. A third: from an Eastern European *shitel*, "ten of us," by wagon to Warsaw, by train to Hamburg, by train to Liverpool, and five weeks on a freighter to the land of milk and honey. For most, it was *mal de mer* most of the way. For all, it was *kuume* all the way.

When in 1903—or was it '04?—my mother and father came to the United States from the Old Country, their dream was not unique. Steady work and schooling for the boys, who were born during the following decade. He was a tailor, a quiet man. She was a seamstress, nimble of finger and mind. He was easy, seeking no more than his due. She was feverish, seeking something more. Though skilled in her craft, her spirit was the entrepreneur's. Out there, somewhere, was the brass ring. This was, after all, America.

When my father became ill and was unable to work, she made the big move. Out west, to Chicago. She had tip: a men's hotel up for sale. 1921. It was hard work,

but she toughed it out. She was an *hôtelière*, in business for herself. She was May Robson, Apple Annie, making it. These were no apples she was selling; she was a woman of property. They were pretty good years, the twenties. But something went wrong in '29, something she hadn't counted on. The men she admired, the strong, the powerful ones, the tycoons (she envisioned herself as a small-time Hetty Green), goofed up somewhere. Kerplunk went her American Dream.

Most of her tight-fisted savings were lost with the collapse of Samuel Insull's empire. It was a particularly bitter blow for her. He was the industrialist she had most admired, her Chicago titan. She had previously outjousted a neighborhood banker. R. L. Chisholm insisted on the soundness of his institution, named, by some ironic God, The Reliance State Bank. Despite his oath on his mother's grave and his expressed admiration for my mother's thrift, she withdrew her several thousand. His bank closed the following day. Yet the utilities magnate took her, a fact for which she forgave neither him nor herself.\*

The visit to R. L. Chisholm on that day of reckoning was a memorable one. At my mother's insistence, I accompanied her to the bank. Often, I had strolled there to the deposit window. Now came the time of the big withdrawal. The banker, a dead ringer for Edward Arnold, was astonished and deeply hurt. He had been, after all, her friend, her advisor, the keeper of her flame. Didn't she trust him? Of course she did; her reservations, though, outweighed her trust. It was an epiphanic moment for me as I, embarrassedly, observed the two. The conversation, which had begun with firm handshakes all around, easy talk, a joke or two, and a semblance of graciousness, ended on a somewhat less friendly note. Both, the banker and my mother, were diminished. Something beyond the reach of either one had defeated both. Neither had the power over his own life worth a damn.

My mother's gods had failed her; and she, who had always believed in making it, secretly felt that she, too, had failed. Though the following years didn't treat her too unkindly, her fires were banked. Her dreams dark-

\* *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

ened. She died a bitter, cantankerous old woman, who almost, though never quite, caught the brass ring.

Failure was as unforgivable then as it is now. Perhaps that's why so many of the young were never told about the depression; were, as one indignant girl put it, "denied our own history."

The young mechanic, driving me through the bluegrass country to eastern Kentucky, lets it out, the family skeleton. His father, a fast-talking salesman, was Willy Loman. "I always identified with Willy's son Biff. My father's staying with me and my wife. My brothers' wives don't want him around. They come right out and say so. I think he represents the horror of failure. Both my oldest brothers and my father were steeped one hundred percent in the idea of strength and supremacy, machismo, and success."

During the Christmas bombings of North Vietnam, the St. Louis cabbie, weaving his way through traffic, was offering six-o'clock commentary.

"We gotta do it. We have no choice."

"Why?"

"We can't be a pitiful, helpless giant. We gotta show 'em we're number one."

"Are you number one?"

A pause. "I'm number nothin'." He recounts a litany of personal troubles, grievances, and disasters. His wife left him; his daughter is a roundheel; his boy is hooked on heroin; he loathes his job. For that matter, he's not so crazy about himself. Wearied by this turn of conversation, he addresses the rear-view mirror: "Did you hear Bob Hope last night? He said . . ."

Forfeiting their own life experience, their native intelligence, their personal pride, they allow more celebrated surrogates, whose imaginations may be no larger than theirs, to think for them, to speak for them, to *be* for them in the name of the greater good. Conditioned toward being "nobody," they look toward "somebody" for the answer. It is not what the American town meeting was all about.

Yet, something's happening, as yet unrecorded on the social seismograph. There are signs, unmistakable, of an astonishing increase in the airing of grievances: of private wrongs and public rights. The heralds are from all sorts of precincts: a family farmer, a blue-collar wife, a

whistle-blowing executive. In unexpected quarters, those hitherto quiescent, are finding voice. A long-buried American tradition may be springing back to life. In a society and time with changes so stunning and landscapes so suddenly estranged, the last communiqués are not yet in. The eighties may differ from the seventies by a quantum jump.

The capacity for change is beyond the measure of any statistician or pollster. Among those I've encountered in the making of this book are: an ex-Klan leader who won his state's human relations award; the toughest girl on the block who became an extraordinary social worker; the uneducated Appalachian woman who became the poetic voice of her community; the blue-collar housewife who, after mothering nine, says: "I don't like the word 'dream.' I don't even want to specify it as American. What I'm beginning to understand is there's a human possibility. That's where all the excitement is. If you can be part of that, you're aware and alive. It's not a dream, it's possible. It's everyday stuff."

There are nascent stirrings in the neighborhood and in the field, articulated by non-celebrated people who bespeak the dreams of their fellows. It may be catching. Unfortunately, it is not covered on the six o'clock news.

In *The Uses of the Past*, Herbert Muller writes: "In the incessant din of the mediocre, mean and fraudulent activities of a commercial mass society, we are apt to forget the genuine idealism of democracy, of the long painful struggle for liberty and equality. . . . The modern world is as revolutionary as everybody says it is. Because the paradoxes of our age are so violent, men have been violently oversimplifying them. If we want to save our world, we might better try to keep and use our heads."

In this book are a hundred American voices, captured by hunch, circumstance, and a rough idea. There is no pretense at statistical "truth," nor consensus. There is, in the manner of a jazz work, an attempt, of theme and improvisation, to recount dreams, lost and found, and a recognition of possibility.



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