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Spring 2008

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Recommended Citation
Dreier, Peter and Jim Vrabel. "Banned in Red Scare Boston." Dissent. Spring 2008.

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Banned in Red Scare Boston

The Forgotten Story of Charlie and the "M.T.A."

Peter Dreier and Jim Vrabel

On a clear, chilly day in November 2004, then-Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney stood inside a large white tent set up on the brick plaza outside Boston City Hall. Romney wasn't there to deliver a speech or cut a ribbon. He was there to sing a song—something he did with gusto as he joined the Kingston Trio in a rousing rendition of "M.T.A.," the well-known ballad about a "*man named Charlie*" doomed to "*ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston*" and become "*the man who never returned*."

The purpose of this unusual concert was to launch the "Charlie Card," an electronic fare card that has now replaced tokens on the Boston subway system. "I've always wanted to do that, since about the fifth grade," said Romney, after singing the song that has become not only part of American folklore, but a proud part of Boston history.

History is a complicated business, though. Sometimes places, like people with selective memories, omit parts of their history to avoid inconvenient truths. There were signs of Boston's historical amnesia at work that day.

One sign was that the ceremony was held outside a subway station now called Government Center, an assemblage of sterile city, state, federal, and private office buildings. In the "M.T.A." song, the station was called by its original name, Scollay Square, a place teeming with burlesque houses, barrooms, tattoo parlors, and pawnshops. But after Boston secured federal urban renewal funds in the early 1960s to "clean up" its downtown, the entire area was razed and renamed.

A more telling sign was that the Kingston Trio was invited to perform. It's true that the West Coast group had popularized "M.T.A." in 1959, but it was a local Boston group, most of whose members are still alive, that wrote and first performed it ten years earlier. Why weren't *they* on the stage that afternoon?

But the most revealing sign that Boston was forgetting its past was that the version of the song sung that day omitted the name of the Boston mayoral candidate for whom it was written—Walter A. O'Brien, Jr.

Romney and the mass-transit bureaucrats who organized the event were, no doubt, unwitting accomplices to this collective memory loss, and like most of those in the audience, unaware that O'Brien's name was missing from the lyrics sung at the ceremony. But its absence reflected the fact that a chapter of Boston history has been torn out of the city's collective memory. Few today remember a period of time barely sixty years ago when Boston was less like the "Cradle of Liberty" or "Athens of America" and more like nearby Salem during the time of the witchcraft trials.

Walter A. O'Brien, Jr., was a good-looking, broad-shouldered, charming Irishman. He combined a gift of gab with a passion for progressive politics. Born in 1914, O'Brien was raised in Portland, Maine, where his ancestors had fled from the potato famine in their native County Tipperary. At age twenty, he graduated from the Gorham Normal School (now part of the University of Southern Maine), but immediately shipped out to sea as a deckhand because, he later explained, "They were paying teachers $12 a week." It was at sea that O'Brien discovered a taste and a talent for politics, and he became a union organizer. He married the former Laura Manchester, also from Portland, in 1939, then served as a radio operator in the Merchant Marine in the Second World War. After the war, Walter and Laura moved to Boston, partly for the opportunities offered by a bigger city

Walter A. O'Brien, Jr. Photo courtesy of Julia O'Brien-Merrill

and partly to escape the conservative politics of Maine and of Walter's parents, who were not happy with the increasingly liberal views of their son and his wife.

Their first apartment was on Myrtle Street, which straddled the line between the Beacon Hill of Boston's bluebloods and its polyglot, working-class West End. The pair immediately plunged into politics. Walter got a job as port agent of the American Communications Association, a union affiliated with the left-leaning Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Laura did secretarial work for the various political organizations in which they became involved. Both joined the Massachusetts chapter of the Progressive Party, which held its founding convention when three thousand delegates crowded into the Hotel Bradford in Boston in April 1948.

THE NATIONAL Progressive Party had been formed a year earlier by a fragile coalition of independent radicals, communists, and left-wing Democrats who were unhappy with the Truman administration. On domestic issues, they criticized Truman's unwillingness to challenge Southern Democrats' support for Jim Crow and his tepid support for labor unions. They advocated an end to segregation, full voting rights for blacks, and universal health insurance.

On foreign policy, they attacked Truman's get-tough policy with the Soviet Union and his support for loyalty oaths to root out communists and radicals from government jobs, unions, and teaching positions in schools and universities. They opposed the Truman Doctrine, which aimed to contain communism through military intervention if necessary. They even refused to support the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, which they considered an instrument of the cold war. They preferred a multilateral aid program that would be administrated through the United Nations.

The party was formed primarily to support the 1948 presidential bid of Henry Wallace, an Iowa farmer, inventor, and crusading publisher who had served as Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture, vice president, and secretary of commerce. As a candidate for president, Wallace was denounced by some as naïve, a dreamer, and worse, while lauded by others as a champion of the New Deal and a visionary. Some early polls showed that Wallace had the support of more than 20 percent of the voters. Democratic Party officials, as well as some left-leaning union leaders, feared that even if he couldn't win the election, Wallace might attract enough Democratic voters so that the White House would fall into the hands of the Republicans.

O'Brien was a delegate to the Progressive Party national convention in Philadelphia in July 1948 that nominated Wallace for president and Senator Glen Taylor of Idaho for vice president. O'Brien campaigned energetically for the ticket, and even became a candidate himself. Running for Congress in Massachusetts's Tenth Congressional District, O'Brien lost by a two-to-one margin to the Republican incumbent (and future Massachusetts governor and U.S. secretary of state) Christian Herter. Although he received fifty thousand votes, pundits attributed O'Brien's showing less to his stands on the issues and more to his Irish surname and the fact that he also ran on the Democratic ticket when that party declined to field a candidate. Wallace, whose campaign had begun with such high hopes, received fewer than 40,000 votes in all of Massachusetts and just 1.1 million (2.4 percent) nationally.

Wallace's poor showing had little to do with his stand on domestic issues. It was the Progressive Party's foreign policy positions that many found troubling, in particular its uncritical support for the Soviet Union and the Stalin regime. That support, and its failure to bar Communist Party members from its ranks—as the newly formed Americans for Democratic Action did—led to charges that the Progressive Party was infiltrated, some said controlled, by the Communist Party.

As John Culver and John Hyde write in their 2000 biography of Wallace, *American Dreamer*, "Only the most rabid Red-baiters thought Wallace himself a Communist. But millions came to believe he was a 'dupe' or a 'fellow traveler' or a 'pink' or the naive captive of leftist radicals." Wallace would resign from the party two years later over its failure to support the U.S. intervention in Korea, and subsequently say, "You know, I didn't actually

realize how strong the Communists were in the Progressive Party."

After Wallace's poor showing in the 1948 campaign, most of the state chapters of the Progressive Party disbanded. However, thanks largely to O'Brien, who was named its executive director, the Massachusetts Progressive Party kept going. "He was a wonderful person to work for," recalled Anne Alach, now eighty-four but then the office secretary, "although knowing Wally, he would have said 'to work *with*.'" O'Brien, she said, "was committed to all of the causes and serious about the work, but he always had a smile on his face, and an accepting approach to everybody."

With O'Brien at the helm, the Massachusetts Progressive Party headquarters attracted idealistic volunteers from different backgrounds—college students, factory workers, professors, longshoremen, and housewives—who agitated for better housing conditions, supported labor unions, and crusaded for civil rights. They put in long hours in an atmosphere that Alach described as "hectic and joyful." "We worked late and we worked hard," she recalls, "but thanks to Wally we weren't all going around with dour faces . . . even though the odds were against us."

Lawrence Shubow had just graduated from Harvard and was active in the Progressive Party at the time. Now eighty-five, he describes how O'Brien helped "heal a big political breach." Many of the Progressive Party's members were college-educated and Jewish, he explains, and O'Brien helped attract recruits from Boston's largely working-class and Irish-Catholic population. "Wally was a solid, tough-minded individual who was asking his own questions when Irish Catholics were not supposed to challenge authority or rock the boat."

O'Brien was described as the Progressive Party's "Mr. Outside," for the role he played as the public face of the organization, speaking at rallies, leading demonstrations, and testifying before committees. Shubow, who despite his Ivy League education, once said he "got my ideology from soap-box orators," was described as "Mr. Inside," filing legislation, writing speeches, and preparing issue papers.

But O'Brien and his fellow activists understood that the best way to energize a party and promote issues is through an election campaign, so in 1949 he became a candidate again—this time for mayor of Boston. O'Brien's opponents included the incumbent, James Michael Curley, a legendary figure in Boston politics who had already been elected mayor four times in four different decades; City Clerk John B. Hynes, who had served as acting mayor for five months in 1947 when Curley was serving time in federal prison for mail fraud; Democratic ward-heeler Patrick J. (Sonny) McDonough; and Republican real estate developer George F. Oakes.

O'Brien ran a spirited, if low-budget, campaign. He and Shubow, his campaign manager, spent much of their time riding around the city in a boxy old sound truck, draped with banners, stopping to speak, according to a newspaper account, "to whatever audience he can find." When even a handful of people could be coaxed to gather, the truck would stop and the two men would hop out and scramble up to a platform mounted on the roof. Shubow would introduce the candidate, and O'Brien would launch into one or another of his stump speeches.

O'Brien called for the creation of public works jobs to reduce unemployment and for a city rent control law and a metropolitan housing authority to end the shortage of affordable housing. He deplored "police brutality against strikers and members of minority groups" and urged people to speak out against "jingoists, war mongers, and enemies of world peace and international cooperation." O'Brien didn't vary his message depending on the audience. Speaking at the Harvard Club of Boston, he called for a government jobs program more ambitious than the New Deal. Before members of the Suffolk County Republican Club, he condemned the "money interests [for] owning and maintaining the city's slums for their own profit."

But O'Brien was much more in his element among Boston's working people. On one occasion, he led a picket line of tenant housewives and children outside a meeting of the National Association of Apartment House Owners and charged that the landlords "lie through their teeth" when they say there is no longer an acute housing shortage. On another, he warned long-

shoremen at Commonwealth Pier, "Unless you take an active part in city, state, and national elections through political action . . . you too will find a city rife with unemployment as it was during the thirties."

O'Brien's biggest issue, though, was his call for a rollback of the recent subway-fare increase.

In 1897 when Boston opened the nation's first subway line, one hundred thousand people had lined up to pay the five-cent fare for a half-mile ride inside the tunnel that ran under the edge of Boston Common. Over the years, a chaotic web of individually owned, privately run subway and streetcar lines had sprung up all over the city. In 1922, the Massachusetts legislature allowed one company, the Boston Elevated Railway Company, to take over the others. But in 1947, when that company faced bankruptcy, the legislature stepped in to create the Metropolitan Transit Authority (M.T.A.) to take over the system—and, O'Brien charged, to bail out the stockholders of the privately owned "El" with taxpayers' money.

In August 1949, despite howls of protests from the mostly working-class riders and a last-minute lawsuit by O'Brien and the Progressive Party, the M.T.A. raised fares by as much as 50 percent on some lines. O'Brien seized on the issue in his mayoral campaign. He circulated a petition to reverse the fare increase. More than 20,000 people signed it in just a few weeks.

But O'Brien was looking for something else to generate excitement around his campaign, and he thought some folk songs might do the trick.

In the 1930s and '40s, American leftists regularly used folk songs to energize picket lines, enliven rallies, and galvanize labor unions and political campaigns. During the Great Depression, the struggle by mineworkers in Harlan County, Kentucky, inspired Florence Reese to write the labor classic "Which Side Are You On?" In 1940, Woody Guthrie wrote both "Union Maid" and "This Land Is Your Land." Although it didn't catapult him into the White House, Henry Wallace relied heavily on folk music in his presidential campaign. Folk singer Pete Seeger traveled with Wallace; Alan Lomax, son of the famed folk song collector John Lomax, was the campaign's "music director," and he made sure that song sheets were passed out at every meeting or rally so that singalongs could alternate with speeches. It was not surprising, then, that O'Brien asked Lomax's sister, Bess Lomax Hawes, who lived in the Boston area, if she could come up with some songs to help boost his mayoral campaign.

As a teenager, Bess had worked with her father and brother on the groundbreaking collection of American folk music *Our Singing Country,* published in 1941. Later, she and her husband, Butch Hawes, had been members of the Almanac Singers, along with Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lee Hayes, and others. Not only did Bess *know* more folk songs than anyone else, but when the Almanacs needed songs for union rallies, to dramatize particular issues, or to plug political candidates, she could *write* new songs on short notice—"sometimes on the spot," Hawes, now eighty-seven, recalls. These "new" songs were essentially parodies of old ones, lyrics written for the specific occasion modeled after and set to traditional tunes.

Bess and Butch had moved to the Boston area in 1946. Butch worked as a book illustrator and Bess raised their three small children, while also teaching a course called "How to Play the Guitar." They kept in touch with the local folk music scene by hosting an informal Sunday night get-together at their house on Shepard Street in Cambridge, where people gathered to sing; play guitars, banjos, and fiddles; swap songs; and, inevitably, talk politics. After O'Brien approached her to write some songs for his campaign, Bess turned for help to some of the people who came by on Sunday nights.

One of them was Jackie Steiner, a Vassar graduate who had just dropped out of graduate school at Radcliffe and was working for the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, which raised money to help refugees from the Spanish Civil War. Although Steiner had a background in classical music, as she became more interested in politics she found her way to Hawes's folk-song gatherings. At one she heard Bess sing the "Kentucky Moonshine Song." "That converted me," recalls Steiner, now eighty-two and living in Connecticut. "I'd been

a snob about folk music before that."

Steiner merged her interest in politics with her newfound love of folk music, and soon discovered that, like Hawes, she had a knack for making up songs "on the spot" on picket lines, at union rallies, and at demonstrations.

Brothers Sam and Arnold Berman and Al Katz were the other members of the group that joined forces to help O'Brien. All three grew up in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, then a largely working-class Jewish enclave. Sam and Al had been high school classmates who knew Lawrence Shubow from the American Student Union, a national popular front organization for high school students.

Sam Berman, now eighty-five, is a small, wiry man. Sitting in the living room of his summer cottage on the rock-rimmed coast of Gloucester, Berman's voice is often little more than a whisper. "We sucked Larry into more left-wing organizations," Sam recalls with a chuckle. Sam had served in the Army Air Corps in Europe during World War II, graduated from the University of Wisconsin, and, once back in Boston, met Bess Hawes when he took her guitar course. His brother Arnold, a year younger, had served in the Army Infantry in the Pacific during the war and was attending Harvard College on the G.I. Bill. Al Katz already had an undergraduate degree in engineering from Northeastern University and had returned there to earn his master's degree.

In addition to working up some songs for O'Brien, these four (all but Hawes, who was too busy with her family responsibilities) formed a group called Boston Peoples Artists. They sang and played at square dances and other venues around the city, passing the hat for contributions at the end of the evening. They would turn over the night's proceeds to whichever one of them was most in need at the time.

The idea for "M.T.A." came one day when Sam and Arnold Berman were joking about one of the peculiar aspects of the recent fare increase. Although riders of the Boston system were still only charged ten cents to enter underground subway stations, they were now being charged an additional five cents to get off trolleys at aboveground stops. "Arnold and I were saying that if you didn't have a nickel, then you could never get off the subway and you'd never get home," Sam Berman recalls. Hawes and Steiner were intrigued at the possibilities that this predicament presented.

Rather than compose a new melody, Hawes recalled a song that the Almanac Singers had written and performed in 1941 for a Transport Workers Union rally that filled Madison Square Garden, which they called "The Train That Never Returned."

That song was based on two older songs. One was "The Ship That Never Returned," written in 1865 by Henry Clay Work and popular in the late nineteenth century, which told the story of a young man who goes off to sea and leaves his worried mother behind. The chorus asks and then answers the key question about the vessel:

Did she never return?
She never returned,
Her fate, it is yet unlearned.
Though for years and years
There were fond ones watching,
Yet the ship she never returned.

Work's tune was resurrected in the 1920s with new lyrics, based on a true story about the wreck in 1903 of a Southern Railroad mail train. In 1924, Vernon Dalhart, a popular "hillbilly" singer, recorded "The Wreck of the Old 97." This version became America's first million-selling record. In telling the story of the engineer's effort to reach his destination on time and the eventual crash, the chorus explains

Did she ever pull in? No, she never pulled in.

In the Almanac Singers' 1941 version, a group of crooked politicians who were trying to crush the transit workers union board a "*yellow scab train*." The Almanacs distributed the lyrics to the 20,000 people at the rally, many of whom joined them in singing the chorus:

Did they ever return? No, they never returned.
And their fate is still unlearned.

The Almanacs never recorded the song, but eight years later, Hawes remembered it and suggested reworking it for the O'Brien campaign. "I knew that it was a good song that groups of people could sing together," Hawes recalls.

Steiner agreed to give it a try. She wrote most of what would become "M.T.A." When she brought her draft back to the group, everyone liked it, but they objected to the name of the protagonist, which was "Angus." They thought it suggested the stereotype of a skinflint Scotsman and smacked of "national chauvinism"—the phrase in 1940s left-wing circles for being "politically incorrect." Angus quickly became the more ethnically neutral Charlie.

Bess Hawes also added what proved to be the song's most memorable verse, the one in which Charlie's wife brings him a sandwich every day, handing it to him through an open window "*while the train goes rumbling through*." To this day, people can't resist asking why Charlie's wife couldn't just hand her husband a nickel instead. As Steiner explains "Without that verse, the song wouldn't have been so popular."

In reminiscing today about the song and its origins, the surviving members of Boston Peoples Artists make one thing clear: Charlie was never meant to represent a luckless fool doomed to "*ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston*" for want of some spare change. He was meant to symbolize the working Everyman, caught in a system that was rigged against him and did not care if "*he never returned*."

Hawes and Steiner ended the song by making sure voters knew which candidate was on Charlie's side—and theirs:

Vote for Walter A. O'Brien
and fight the fare increase
Get poor Charlie off that M.T.A.!

The group wrote seven songs in all for the O'Brien campaign. Only "M.T.A." and "The People's Choice," written by Al Katz, made it onto a record that was made entirely for campaign—not commercial—purposes. The recording session took place in late September or early October 1949 at ACE Recording Studio on Boylston Place, an alley across from Boston Common that is home today to a number of upscale singles clubs. Sam Berman sang the lead on "M.T.A." and played guitar; Jackie Steiner sang backup; Bess Hawes played mandolin, Al Katz guitar, and Arnold Berman ukulele. Everyone chipped in on vocals for the chorus. For reasons that none of the Boston Peoples Artists can recall today, one verse was left off the record, the one Steiner says was meant to reflect the conductor's working-class "solidarity" with Charlie:

"I can't help," said the conductor,
"I'm just working for a living, but I sure agree with you/
For the nickels and dimes you'll be spending in Boston/
You'd be better off in Timbuktu."

"M.T.A." made its debut on October 24, 1949, according to a story in the *Boston Globe* (which incorrectly described the song as being "to the tune of 'Casey Jones' "), when O'Brien campaigned outside factory gates in South Boston and Roxbury. The song was used throughout the campaign. Sometimes the Boston Peoples Artists squeezed together with their instruments on the platform on top of the sound truck and sang at campaign stops. When they weren't available, the recording was played. Either way, the crowds liked the song. "There was just something about it," Sam Berman recalls. "When people heard the song, they were taken by it." That was true both on and off the campaign trail. Wherever the Boston Peoples Artists played—at events for O'Brien or at neighborhood dances in and around Boston—people invariably asked the group to sing "M.T.A."

Despite the popularity of the song, Walter O'Brien never stood a chance in the Boston mayor's race. His campaign had always been more about educating voters to challenge Boston's political and business establishment. Three weeks before the election, O'Brien acknowledged as much, by saying: "I'm not an evangelist, but I believe I am doing a teaching job which will some day bear fruit." Two days before election day, he reminded his campaign workers that they were "building a movement . . . rooted among the people . . . devoted to the furtherance of progressive ideals," which would outlast his campaign.

In his closing statement, which appeared in newspapers on election eve, O'Brien vowed, "Whether in office or out, on Jan. 1, I am determined, as my organization is determined, to continue to carry on in union halls, at shop

gates, in ward headquarters and on the streets, our battle for a new political party of the working people, small businessmen, housewives and members of victimized minorities who will once and for all end the phoniness, corruption and unholy devotion to the needs of big business that has captured the major parties."

O'Brien would not be in office on January 1. Instead, Boston voters elected John B. Hynes mayor. Hynes received 138,000 votes, compared to 126,000 for Curley, 22,360 for McDonough, and 7,133 for Oakes. O'Brien finished last with only 3,563 votes, barely 1 percent of the number cast. As the years went by, the 1949 mayoral campaign would be remembered in Boston as the "Last Hurrah" for the colorful Curley. Although the "M.T.A." went on to become a popular folk standard, hardly anyone today remembers the candidate whose campaign gave birth to the song.

After the election, the Boston Peoples Artists split up. A few years later, after lasting longer than most of its counterparts in other states, the Massachusetts Progressive Party disbanded as well. Many of its members had been young people, including veterans recently returned from the war. As they got married and started families and careers, they found it hard to sustain their previous level of political activism. Nevertheless, many of them remained active in the social justice, peace, civil rights, and women's movements.

Walter and Laura O'Brien had also started a family, but they continued to agitate for social change in Boston with the same level of intensity. In June 1950, Walter was arrested on Kneeland Street in Downtown Boston while demonstrating for an end to the cold war. At the same time, Laura was pushing their daughter Kathleen in a baby carriage on a picket line just a few blocks away on Tremont Street, protesting the extension of the draft. In the fall of 1951, Laura took her turn as a Progressive Party candidate. Campaigning on the slogan "As Boston's housewives and mothers we can win this program for a Better Boston and a peaceful world," she received 11,500 votes in an unsuccessful bid for a seat on the Boston City Council.

By 1955, the national Progressive Party and its Massachusetts chapter were dead. The party fell victim to the Red Scare, which made many Americans reluctant to associate with political groups labeled left-wing or communist.

For most people, mention of the "Red Scare" of the 1940s and 1950s (an earlier one occurred after World War I) brings to mind images of the grave-looking members of the House Un-American Activities Committee holding hearings: the badgering of witnesses by the senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy; the trial of Alger Hiss and the execution of the Rosenbergs for being Soviet spies; and the blacklisting of the screenwriters and directors known as the "Hollywood Ten"—events that took place in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles.

If Boston is mentioned at all in connection with this turbulent era, it is because of the day in June 1954 when Joseph Welch, an attorney with the prestigious Boston law firm of Hale and Dorr, stood up to McCarthy's bullying during hearings held in Washington, D.C., to investigate alleged subversive activities within the Army, asking, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" It was a moment that many historians consider the beginning of the end of McCarthy's influence and political career.

Boston enjoys being remembered for Welch's defense of civil liberties and his attack on McCarthy's guilt-by-association tactics, just as it enjoys being remembered as a center of abolitionism and headquarters of the movement's most vigorous champion before the Civil War, William Lloyd Garrison. References to both Garrison and Welch are easy to find in any search of Boston history. One has to look much harder, though, for references to the 1830s period when Garrison was nearly lynched in Boston by what a newspaper of the time described as "an assemblage of fifteen hundred or two thousand highly respectable gentlemen." It is all but impossible to find references to the period when many of Boston's leading citizens during the 1950s followed McCarthy's lead and made reckless accusations that questioned the loyalty and patriotism of the city's radical activists, unionists, professors, teachers, and clergy.

Recent decades have seen a renewed interest in the McCarthy era. The Red Scare has

been put under a spotlight in books and articles by historians and journalists, and movies by Hollywood studios and independent documentarians. But Boston's role in the frenzy has remained in the shadows. It seems hard to believe that Boston, today seen as a bastion of liberalism and the capital city of the bluest of blue states, was once a center of cold war hysteria.

But fifty years ago, it was a much different place. It was a city controlled economically by conservative Brahmin and Yankee Republican businessmen and politically by conservative Irish-Catholic Democratic politicians. It was a city where books were banned, unions were not welcome, and protesters demonstrating for jobs, justice, or peace feared not only hostile mobs but also the police who were supposed to protect them.

Indeed, Boston and Massachusetts enlisted early in the war against communists and "fellow travelers." In 1948, the Boston public schools began to require every teacher to sign a "loyalty oath" as a condition of employment. In 1949, speaking at a campaign rally just days before the mayoral election, President Harry Truman informed his Boston audience, "I hate communism" and vowed that he would never surrender to the "godless creed it teaches." In 1951 Massachusetts became one of the first states in the country to outlaw the Communist Party—three years before Congress and President Eisenhower took such a step. Not long after that, the Boston Bar Association sent out ballots to its members containing various proposals to expel and disbar any members involved with "Communist or subversive organizations."

Herbert Philbrick was a Boston advertising salesman whose work as a double agent for the FBI inspired the film and television show *I Led Three Lives*. A star witness before various congressional investigative committees, Philbrick identified between seventy and eighty individuals in Boston businesses, colleges, schools, and even churches who he claimed were either communists or "the weak and the jelly fish who crawl before the Communist Party and those who do its dirty work without ever admitting they are sympathizers or party members." To show the state's appreciation, Massachusetts governor Paul Dever, a Democrat, declared November 27, 1951 "Herbert Philbrick Day," and more than eight hundred people turned out for a testimonial dinner in Philbrick's honor at Boston's Hotel Bradford—where the Massachusetts Progressive Party had held its founding convention just three years before.

Senator Joe McCarthy had a large following in Boston. Joseph P. Kennedy, patriarch of the Kennedy clan, was a generous contributor to McCarthy's reelection campaign. In 1952, only eighteen months out of law school, Robert Kennedy went to work for McCarthy as assistant counsel of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Two years later, John F. Kennedy was the only Senate Democrat who did not vote to censure McCarthy. "Hell," JFK later explained, "half my voters in Massachusetts look on McCarthy as a hero."

Like a Broadway producer, McCarthy used Boston as a kind of tryout town, bringing his Permanent Investigating Committee on the road for what the *Boston Globe* called "the most tumultuous congressional sessions ever held in Boston." The hearings were held at the Federal building in Boston's Post Office Square and televised live by two local stations. Three people were ejected during the proceedings (including a man who shouted, "You're a menace!" at McCarthy). At one point, McCarthy engaged in a shouting match with Lawrence Shubow, one of the few lawyers willing to defend those called before his committee.

"Mr. Lawyer," McCarthy bellowed, "I have told you about ten times you will not make speeches into the microphone." He then demanded that Shubow take the stand. "I am here as an attorney, and I refuse to be sworn in," Shubow responded. "You will leave the room," McCarthy ordered. Court officers moved in to escort Shubow out of the hearing room, but before they got to him, the clock struck twelve, signaling the end of the session. "I'll be back," McCarthy warned. In fact, he didn't bring his committee back to Boston, but others came, including the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee and the House Un-American Activities Committee.

For some of those called before the various committees, the pressure was unbearable. Noted literary scholar F. O. Matthiessen was

one of five Harvard faculty members accused of belonging to "Communist front" organizations. In March 1951 he committed suicide by jumping from the twelfth floor of Boston's Hotel Manger. "How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know," Matthiessen said in a note that he left behind. "But as a Christian and a socialist believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions."

"People don't realize how frightening it was," Sam Berman recalls. "If you had subscriptions to certain magazines . . . if you had certain books . . . you hid them." One of the main reasons that Bess and Butch Hawes left Boston was that FBI agents had come to their children's nursery school to ask both the children and parents about the Hawes's political activities and ideas.

Massachusetts even had its own version of HUAC. Created in 1938, it was originally called the State Special Commission to Investigate the Activities within the Commonwealth of Communist, Fascist, Nazi and Other Subversive Organizations, So Called, but "Fascist" and "Nazi" were dropped from its title when the commission was reestablished in 1953. The Massachusetts Commission on Communism, as it was more popularly known, worked so closely with McCarthy that when he came to Boston he invited its chairman (state senator Philip Bowker, a Republican from suburban Brookline) and vice chairman (state senator John E. Powers, a Democrat from South Boston) to sit in on his committee's hearings.

For the next two years, the Massachusetts Commission on Communism held more than fifty public hearings and executive sessions and called scores of witnesses to testify. Like McCarthy's committee and others that were operating at the time, it did not confine itself to calling Communist Party members to testify. (By then, there were only an estimated eight hundred of those in all of New England.)

"Being in the Progressive Party was tantamount to being in the Communist Party in the eyes of most people," remembers Arnold Berman, who now lives in New York's Hudson Valley.

Ever since his tour in the Merchant Marine, Walter O'Brien had been suspected of being a communist. "On my first ship I was tagged a Red troublemaker," he once said, "when I complained because I was poisoned by a bug." Both Walter and Laura O'Brien were called to testify before the Massachusetts Commission on Communism. Both refused to answer questions. In his statement, Walter denounced the commission as "inquisitorial." In hers, Laura called the members "little McCarthys."

On June 9, 1955—a year to the day after Joseph Welch had denounced McCarthy in Washington and six months after McCarthy's censure by the U.S. Senate—the Massachusetts Commission on Communism stubbornly completed its mission and issued a two-volume report with the names, addresses, and biographical sketches of eighty-five people it identified as "present or former Communists or followers of the Communist party line." Walter and Laura O'Brien were among those named.

Some of the people identified undoubtedly were Communist Party members. Probably all of them were far too sympathetic and uncritical of the Stalin regime. "We had all wanted a socialist system to work, and we didn't look at what was happening with cold enough eyes, and it was terrible to see our ideal so distorted," Anne Alach admits. "Sure, we should have known," Lawrence Shubow agrees. "There was too much talk to be ignored. But in all that time and with all the people I met, I don't know anybody who ever placed the interests of the Soviet Union over that of the United States."

After the Massachusetts Commission on Communism released its report, Walter O'Brien, like many of those named, could no longer find work. For a while, he tried to use his winning personality and gift of gab as a car salesman. But each time he got a job, FBI agents would show up at the automobile dealership and speak to his employer, and O'Brien would be out of work again.

"To think that people actually thought of my father and mother as a threat to this country is frightening," their daughter Julia O'Brien-Merrill says today. Vivacious and earnest, she is fifty-seven and lives in Brunswick, Maine, but readily agreed to take time out of a visit to Boston to talk about her parents. Spreading out newspaper clippings, she explains that the ma-

terial came from the boxes of documents her parents never talked about when their children were young, but refused to throw out.

Days after the Massachusetts Commission on Communism issued its report, the eighty-five people who had been named "Communists or followers of the Communist party line" issued a statement in which they complained of being blacklisted by a legislative body which had made a "mockery of justice" and engaged in a "witch hunt." They also vowed "to continue to fight for the rights of labor, for the civil liberties guaranteed by our Constitution, for equality of rights for all Americans, for the needs of youth, and for a peaceful world." The truth was, though, that few of them were in a position to do so.

Walter and Laura O'Brien certainly were not. They had two daughters to raise and had to find work. During his mayoral campaign, Walter had said that he had detected a "standoffishness" among his neighbors and dreaded how his "little daughter might be treated in a couple of years by other children." He also said that he would like to find "an apartment in some section of the city where you can be just a little bit left of a capitalist without fear of the consequences." In 1956, convinced that could not happen in Boston, the O'Briens moved back to Maine. They first moved to the small town of Gray, but after being confronted several times by FBI agents, they moved back to Portland, hoping that a bigger city might provide them—and their children—with a chance at anonymity and a new life.

Walter became a librarian, Laura an elementary school teacher. They put their political lives behind them. (Even the FBI noticed the O'Briens' withdrawal. An entry in Walter's FBI file stated "In view of the absence of reported activity on the part of the subject since 3/15/58, it does not appear that he meets the current requirements for inclusion on the Security Index and, accordingly, it is recommended that he be deleted.")

The O'Briens kept in touch with their former Progressive Party friends, driving down from Maine for periodic visits and exchanging cards at holidays. They remained particularly close to Florence Luscomb, the Party's candidate for governor in 1952, who had also been named by the Massachusetts Commission on Communism, and whom Walter considered his political mentor.

A few years passed. Walter thought his past in Boston was behind him—until one day in the summer of 1959, that past came calling in an unexpected way.

Sam Berman remembers getting the phone call from O'Brien. "He'd just heard 'M.T.A.' on the radio, and he was very excited, very happy," Berman recalls, sitting in his home in Lexington, Massachusetts, decorated with prints by his wife and other artists. " 'We're famous!' Wally said." Although it was typical of O'Brien that he would use the plural pronoun, in this case he had an additional reason. The song he had just heard on the radio was almost identical to the one written and performed for his campaign by the Boston Peoples Artists—except that it did not include his name.

The story of how "M.T.A." became a hit song—minus any mention of Walter O'Brien—illustrates that the reach of the Red Scare extended into culture as well as politics.

It begins with Richard "Specs" Simmons. Now seventy-eight and living in San Francisco, where he owns a popular bar, Simmons grew up in Roxbury and had been a member of the Progressive Party's youth group and a low-level volunteer in O'Brien's mayoral campaign. In 1955, Simmons, a sometime folk singer himself, had taken to performing "M.T.A." in his occasional gigs. One day, while working as a waiter at New York's Purple Onion nightclub, Simmons performed the song for folk singer Will Holt, who was appearing at the club. "I thought 'this is very funny,' " recalls Holt, now seventy-eight and living in New York City. "It just hit."

Holt added "M.T.A." to his repertoire, changed the tune a little, and recorded it, as a single and as part of an album, for Coral Records in 1957. The song quickly began to receive airplay on radio stations and seemed well on its way to becoming a hit. *LIFE* magazine even sent a reporter/photographer team to Boston to do a feature story on Holt, taking pictures of him at the various subway stops mentioned in the song.

But a funny thing happened as "M.T.A." began to climb the music charts. Radio stations suddenly stopped playing the song. Stores stopped selling the record. *LIFE* magazine abruptly pulled the story on Holt before that issue of the magazine hit the newsstands. Holt says that the reason for the sudden turnaround was that radio stations—particularly those in Boston—had begun to receive complaints that the song "glorified" a communist, because it mentioned Walter O'Brien. *Sing Out!*, the national folk song magazine, corroborated Holt's account, noting at the time that "the record company was astounded by a deluge of protests from Boston because the song made a hero out of a local 'radical.' " To this day, Holt doesn't know if the attack was part of an orchestrated campaign or just a handful of people complaining. "It was still the McCarthy era," Holt says. "It was nuts."

In a desperate move to salvage the song, Coral Records removed the line about O'Brien from the song. They literally cut it out—without replacing it—so a careful listener can notice a gap in the subsequent version. Coral rereleased the song without that line, but the damage had been done. Holt's new version of "M.T.A." went nowhere. He proudly insists that he continued using Walter O'Brien's name when performing the song in clubs and concerts.

Although Holt went on to become an accomplished performer and songwriter (including the popular folk song "Lemon Tree"), he never became as successful as the group that went on to record "M.T.A." That group was the Kingston Trio, which learned the song and a lesson from Holt. The trio was formed in 1957 by three recent California college graduates—Dave Guard, Bob Shane, and Nick Reynolds. Although purists often deride the group for watering down folk songs in order to make them commercially popular, the group deserves credit for helping to launch the folk-music boom that brought recognition to more authentic folk practitioners like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger and newcomers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Phil Ochs.

Reynolds recalls learning "M.T.A." from Holt, whom the Kingston Trio had met through San Francisco folk-music circles. "We sang Will Holt's version," Reynolds says today. "We didn't even know who the writers were." But in the version they recorded on February 16, 1959, at the Capitol Recording Studios in New York, the group dropped the real-life *Walter A.* O'Brien and replaced him with a fictional namesake, *George*.

Today, Shane and Reynolds offer different explanations for why they made the change. (Guard died in 1991.) Shane says he isn't sure, but *thinks* it had more to do with not wanting to mention a real person. Reynolds says he *knows* why they did it. "We changed the name so we wouldn't get into political trouble. This was the McCarthy era," he recalls. "Who knows who would come knocking on your door?" Reynolds explains that the Kingston Trio were "big fans of the Weavers," the folk group that included two former Almanac Singers (Pete Seeger and Lee Hayes) and had a number one hit in 1950 with "Goodnight Irene," but were blacklisted and forced to break up in 1953.

"We decided that if we wanted to have our songs played on the airwaves, we'd better stay in the middle of the road politically," Reynolds says. "We'd just gotten out of school. We didn't want to get blacklisted like the Weavers." Asked if the Weavers had warned the Kingston Trio not to be controversial, Reynolds replies, "They didn't have to."

"M.T.A." was released on the Kingston Trio's second album on June 1, 1959, and as a single a week later. Without Walter O'Brien's name holding it back, the single of "M.T.A." made it to #15 on the *Billboard* chart, and the album reached #1 on the pop charts. *LIFE* magazine, which had abruptly abandoned Will Holt two years earlier, ran a cover story on the Kingston Trio in August 1959. The group went on to be voted Best Group of the Year and won a Grammy as best folk performers of the year.

It has been almost fifty years since the Kingston Trio released its version of "M.T.A." Since then, the song has become part of American folklore. It has been reprinted in myriad songbooks and become a staple around campfires at summer camps. It has been recorded by many different performers, most recently in 2007 by an Irish-American group, the Highland Rovers Band.

Why has the song lasted? "It's a good tune, first of all," Pete Seeger recently explained, "and the whole idea of getting on the subway and not being able to get off . . . it's a great poetic switch."

After leaving Boston, Bess and Butch Hawes moved to California, where she began a career teaching anthropology and folk arts, giving guitar lessons, making documentary films, and occasionally performing at folk festivals and coffeehouses. In 1975, she went to Washington to organize folk-life festivals for the Smithsonian Institution. The following year she accepted an offer from the National Endowment for the Arts to develop its Folk Arts Program, distributing grants to folk musicians and artists. Hawes retired in 1991 and two years later received the National Medal of the Arts at a reception at the White House. In 2000, the National Endowment of the Arts created an award in her name to honor those who make major contributions to folk and traditional arts. She now lives with her daughter and son-in-law in Oregon, and her autobiography will soon be published by the University of Illinois Press.

Jackie Steiner and Arnold Berman got married and moved to New York, so that Arnold could attend graduate school in physics at Columbia University. They later divorced and both remarried. Steiner remained active politically and musically, recording and performing classical and folk songs in concerts and at benefits for political causes around the country. Whenever she performed the "M.T.A." song, she says, she always explained to audiences beforehand that it wouldn't be the version they were probably familiar with, but the original one.

Steiner viewed the song as a "toss off, an occasional song that would soon be forgotten." Likewise, Hawes considered the song a "throw away"—one of many topical songs written for a particular political cause at a particular moment in time. Both find it ironic not only that the song has endured, but that they continue to receive royalty checks for it.

After receiving a Ph.D. in physics, Arnold Berman worked for many years as a research physicist for IBM and other companies. In retirement he has created an elaborate Berman family Web site that features pictures of the Boston Peoples Artists and a recording of their original version of "M.T.A."

Sam Berman remained in the Boston area and took over the family trucking business. He stayed involved in politics and folk music, and in 1952 wrote and performed another campaign song, this one for Vincent Hallinan, the last Progressive Party presidential candidate, at a rally in Symphony Hall. He, too, is retired.

Al Katz earned three PhDs in engineering, did research for several computer companies, and taught at several universities. He remained active in local politics wherever he lived and active musically as well, as a member of an amateur folk group in Connecticut called the Possum Glory String Band. He died in 1997.

Lawrence Shubow completed Harvard Law School and became a defense attorney. His clients included some of his Progressive Party friends investigated for their radical politics. Despite complaints raised about his left-wing past, Shubow was named a municipal court judge by Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis in 1978. Shubow is retired and lives on Cape Cod. He, his wife, and two daughters can often be found at Saturday morning "standouts for peace" outside the Falmouth Post Office.

Anne Alach married a man she met through her Progressive Party involvement. They moved to suburban Canton and raised a family, but continued to participate in civil rights and peace demonstrations. She now lives in Quincy, Massachusetts.

The U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee paid its last visit to Boston in March 1958. After issuing reports identifying twenty-two and thirty-seven more individuals as Communists or communist sympathizers in 1956 and 1958, the Massachusetts Commission on Communism went out of business in 1962, due in part to U.S. Supreme Court rulings in 1956 and 1957 declaring that state inquiries into sedition had to be "justified by a specific legislative need." But as late as May 1959, the Massachusetts legislature voted to keep the commission going after one of its members, a state senator from Boston, made an impassioned plea in which he warned his colleagues that if they did not, "there is a chance that tomorrow—Friday—we could be under domination of Communist agents be-

cause of an A-bomb attack," and called on them to "show the voices in Moscow that we will stand up and fight."

It never bothered Walter O'Brien that his name was removed from the "M.T.A." song. In fact, it helped him protect the anonymity that he sought. After moving to Maine, the O'Briens lived a quiet life. In the 1960s, they occasionally took their daughters (a third child, Amy, was born in 1964) to local civil rights and antiwar demonstrations, but they avoided the spotlight. "They don't know who I am up here," he

"M.T.A."

Lyrics by Bess Lomax Hawes and Jacqueline Steiner; copyright Atlantic Music. Used by permission. Below is the original song written in 1949. The Kingston Trio version, recorded in 1959, is available on several Web sites.

Let me tell you the story of a man named Charlie
On a dark and fateful day
He put ten cents in his pocket and he kissed his loving family
And he went to ride the M.T.A.

CHORUS:
Did he ever return? No, he never returned
And his fate is still unlearned.
He may ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston
He's the man who never returned

Charlie handed in his dime at the Kendall Square station
Then he changed for Jamaica Plain
When he got there the conductor told him, "One more nickel!"
Charlie couldn't get off that train.

[Note: The Kingston Trio did not record this verse]
As his train rolled on through Greater Boston
Charlie looked around and sighed
"Well, I'm sore and disgusted and I'm absolutely busted
I guess this is my last long ride."

Now all night long Charlie rides through the tunnel
Saying, "What will become of me?
And, how can I afford to see my sister in Chelsea
Or my brother in Roxbury?

[Note: Hawes and Steiner wrote this stanza but it was not included in the original recording.]
"I can't help," said the conductor
"I'm just working for a living but I sure agree with you
For the nickels and dimes you'll be spending in Boston
You'd be better off in Timbuktu."

Charlie's wife goes down to the Scollay Square station
Every day at a quarter past two
And through the open window she hands Charlie a sandwich
As his train goes rumbling through

Now, citizens of Boston, don't you think it is a scandal
That the people have to pay and pay?
Vote for Walter A. O'Brien and fight the fare increase
Get poor Charlie off that M.T.A.!

told a friend, "and that's the way I want it." Walter and Laura eventually retired to a cottage at Cundys Harbor, Maine, where they ran a small used-book store described as open only in the summer or "by chance."

When he reached his eighties, O'Brien occasionally let his guard down. He even began to enjoy the attention when someone interested in the "M.T.A." song would track him down.

The original version of the song can now be heard in a ten-CD collection called *Songs For Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs and the American Left 1926-1953*, released in 1997, that includes 296 songs collected by folklorists Ronald Cohen and Dave Samuelson.

Soon after its release, Tony Saletan, a longtime Boston area folk singer, put together a program of political songs that he performed across New England. While touring in Maine, Saletan stopped by O'Brien's home and gave a private concert. By then, O'Brien was in poor health, suffering from emphysema and lung cancer, and forced to use an oxygen mask to help his breathing. "He seemed to enjoy the musical interlude," says Saletan, now seventy-six. "The only problem was that I wanted to ask him about the songs, but all Wally could talk about was the issues behind them."

Those issues were evidently on Walter O'Brien's mind until the end, according to his daughter Julia, who recalls that her father would be asleep, "but in the middle of the night I'd hear him say: 'I've got to get these petitions signed.'" Walter died in 1998 at age eighty-three. Laura died two years later at age seventy-nine.

Before he died, Walter O'Brien led one final campaign. In 1995, the Massachusetts legislature established a commission to recognize "a woman who through her actions has made a major contribution to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." Despite his poor health, O'Brien mounted an effort from his home in Maine, calling all his old friends in Massachusetts and asking them to lobby on behalf of Florence Luscomb. The campaign was successful. Unable to choose just one woman, the commission decided to honor six, including Luscomb.

The ceremony to dedicate a memorial to the six activists took place on October 19, 1999, in the ornate Hall of Flags, an atrium at the center of the Massachusetts State House. Speakers included then-Massachusetts governor A. Paul Cellucci, chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court Margaret Marshall, and historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. Each talked about the need to remedy the "exclusion from history" suffered by the honorees. Seated in the audience were two of Walter and Laura O'Brien's daughters, Julia and Katie, and many of their friends. For them, Walter O'Brien's "exclusion from history" was at least partly remedied after the speeches were over and the last song of the evening was sung by a special group of singers and musicians organized by Saletan that included Jackie Steiner and Sam Berman. With banjo, guitar, and bass strings blazing, the group launched into the original opening lines of the song:

"Let me tell you the story
of a man named Charlie
On a dark and fateful day . . ."

Recognizing the song immediately, the audience burst into applause. Everyone—including Governor Cellucci—joined in on the chorus to sing:

"Did he ever return? No, he never returned
And his fate is still unlearned . . ."

By the end of the song, everyone in the hall was standing and singing. That was when the rightful name was restored to the final verse:

Now, citizens of Boston, don't you think it is a scandal
That the people have to pay and pay?
Vote for Walter A. O'Brien and fight
the fare increase
Get poor Charlie off that M.T.A.!

Julia O'Brien says that she felt that the ceremony "validated my parents' activism and all they went through." Sam Berman admits "there was a pleasure in feeling that something that came out of our left-wing past is now part of Boston history." He also says that he "got a charge out of Governor Cellucci singing along—even though I'm sure he didn't know the background of the song."

It would be nice to think that this ceremony helped to restore Walter O'Brien's place in

Boston history. But that didn't happen—as evidenced by the fact that when the Charlie Card was launched five years later by the next Massachusetts governor, O'Brien and the Boston Peoples Artists were once again ignored.

Journalism is said to be "the first draft of history." During the Red Scare years, Boston newspapers were filled with stories describing the accusations by the investigators and the testimony and protests by those called before them. Front page photographs showed politicians pointing fingers and citizens professing their innocence or demanding their rights. Live television broadcasts showed protesters being hauled from courtrooms. Since then, little has been written to remind people that any of this ever happened in Boston. Many of those who were caught up in the Red Scare, on both sides, prefer that it all be forgotten. But historians have a larger obligation to help us learn from the past—especially from an era, with its struggle between idealism and ideology, civil liberties and national security, that has many parallels with today.

The Fill-a-Buster is a bustling sandwich shop across the street from the Massachusetts State House, where legislators and lobbyists gather to grab a quick bite before rushing back to the now smoke-free rooms of state government. Not long ago, two of Boston's most highly regarded local historians ate lunch together there, taking a break from teaching a summer course on Boston history to elementary and secondary school teachers at the nearby Boston Athenaeum. Each of these men, professors at local colleges, has a long list of books to his credit. Both are "public intellectuals," very involved in civic life, and called on regularly to comment on all aspects of the city's past. But when asked what they knew about Boston's Red Scare period, one admitted that he knew "nothing at all," and the other acknowledged that he was only "vaguely" aware that "something had gone on."

A few miles away from the State House sits Doyle's, a bar and restaurant in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood, and a popular gathering place for those interested in local politics. Photographs of James Michael Curley, JFK's grandfather John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, and other former mayors stare down at patrons from the wood-paneled walls. Every month, Doyle's hosts a meeting of the ROMEO Club (the acronym stands for Retired Opinion Makers Eating Out), whose members are all former politicians, judges, and journalists who covered the Massachusetts State House and Boston City Hall. At a recent meeting, with more than thirty members in attendance, the names of James Michael Curley, John Hynes, "Sonny" McDonough, and even George Oakes—all of the other candidates in the 1949 mayoral race—came up during the usual freewheeling discussion. It was as if these men might walk in the door at any moment and be greeted by their old friends.

After lunch, with no introduction or explanation, the original Boston Peoples Artists' version of "M.T.A." was played for those assembled. Smiles creased the lined faces of the ROMEOs as they immediately recognized the tune and the opening lines. Soon, all of them were heartily singing along. Everyone knew the words to the chorus, and many of them knew the words to all the early verses as well. But there was more head nodding than singing during the last verse. When the song was over, these vintage politicians and reporters were asked to name the Boston mayoral candidate for whom the song had been written—and whose name was mentioned in the last verse of *this* version of the song. None of them could do it.

Like the name of Walter O'Brien, the lessons of Red Scare Boston seem to be, in the words of the song, "still unlearned." ●

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Publication of this article was made possible in part by the Yip Harburg Foundation. In addition to the people quoted in the article, the authors wish to thank the following for their help during our research: Ross Altman, Barbara Brown, Tom Cartwright, Ron Cohen, Ed Cray, Lew Finfer, Dick Flacks, Josh Freeman, David Green, Robert Hannan, Betty Katz, Larry Katz, Gail Malmgreen, Mark Moss, Dave Samuelson, Allan Shaw, Lillian Shubow, Richard "Specs" Simmons, Shira Stark, Gary Stewart, Robert Wechsler, and Jim Whitters.