

MY YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY—A Memoir

In 1951 there was a big stir at Seattle City Hall. The Mayor had decided that the city should honor its most illustrious citizen and national figure, the head of the International Teamsters Union, Dave Beck.

Dave Beck was, indeed, pivotal to much that went on in the city and state. All truck shipments, and all the goods carried in them, depended on there being a driver inside each vehicle, and therein lay the power invested in Mr. Beck's hands. There was also an enormous amount of real estate in the city and environs that was owned by the important man, although it later turned out that the millions of dollars of real estate really belonged to Dorothy, his wife.

In any case, the Mayor and his committee to plan the celebratory dinner for Beck decided that it should include a film biography, and for this they chose the firm for which my husband Curt was the principal writer, director and producer. With much news footage, as much archival family footage as could be found, still photos, interviews with Important People like the Governor, etc., it became a most laudatory account of the Beck history.

The event went off most successfully, and Curt continued on the next project, which was splitting off to form his own film company for more creative freedom. Subsequently he was planning some production in Europe for several clients in England and on the Continent. I was to take a leave from my TV job and be the assistant. But before we left, came a call from Dave Beck.

"I'm interested in your film business. Really liked the picture you made of me. I'd like to talk to you about how you might want to expand," he said. A meeting was arranged, and the upshot was that he invested in the company stock to a considerable amount, which was to be used for expansion or equipment, or as and where needed. Our two partners, a cinematographer and a director who had fled the tyranny of Disney Studios, were delighted.

Off we went for four months of shooting a major car commercial in a 9,000-mile European travel film, along with other commercial contracts to make TV ads for a large chain of European banks. The two of us were writers, directors, stars and cinematographers for all projects, so we were totally occupied with filming the entire time.

When we returned, it developed that without Curt's guidance, the partners had pretty well run the firm into the ground. Some repair work on clients was attained, but it soon became evident that the enterprise was not going to survive without great efforts, and meanwhile we were not able to live on the extant income. So, we decided that we had to look elsewhere for gainful employment.

Two wonderful offers came in from two large advertising agencies, Seattle branches of national firms. Before making a choice, Curt went to Dave Beck to tell him that he was leaving the firm, and would be selling out his own capital stocks back to the company.

The setting for this meeting was Beck's office. He was a short, stout man, with a Napoleonic complex, no doubt. His desk was centered on a raised platform, so that he would always be taller than any visitor. Curt took a chair on the lower level, in front of him.

Mr. Beck asked him who had made the new job offers. Cheerfully, Curt described them: one with a large clientele in banking, one with a diverse manufacturing string of businesses.

"Well, Curt," he said, "if you take the first one, there'll be an immediate withdrawal of millions of dollars of Teamster funds from their main bank client. As for the second, I know they handle the Olympia Brewery advertising. There won't be a truck at the brewery the first Monday after you are hired at the agency." Then he smiled broadly, and added, "I know your wife wanted to quit the TV, but let her go back to work. I don't want you to leave the company. I'd advise you not to try. And I will not pay you for your stock, since you're not leaving."

We were stunned. The head of one of the biggest and most powerful labor organizations in the world had told us that Curt was, in point of fact, a man tied to what was known then as a "yellow dog" contract, something you couldn't get out of. Something you were chained to, like a dog.

Well, what to do? We decided that we would take him to court and sue for our money. But to do that, we needed a lawyer. So we inquired extensively in the law field, and were turned down by all. It seemed nobody had the courage to tackle the powerful teamster. At last one night when we'd repaired to our favorite watering hole, the Press Club, a reporter friend pointed out 'Sam X'. "He's a lawyer," he said.

"But he's always at the bar here," we rejoined. "Is he any good?"

"Kids, take what you can get. You'll be lucky if he's got the courage to take this on."

Upshot was, he took us on as clients, although we were never quite sure how much he'd imbibed en route to meeting with us.

"I think," he offered one day, "that we ought to get Harry Bridges on this."

We both shrieked, "NO!"

Harry Bridges was the head of the biggest Teamsters rival in labor, the Longshore Workers Union, out of San Francisco. Everybody knew that the two men hated each

other with a passion. We at least had the sense to know we didn't want to be any mice caught in a trap between them.

So I looked higher up for advice. I'd worked closely for nearly a year on a project with the Governor and the Secretary of State, so I journeyed to Olympia, the capital, to talk to each of them, and ask their advice. They both listened intently and then said. "Don't even think about fighting Dave Beck. And don't go down any dark alleys, either. Stay in safe places at all hours and be sure nobody follows your car when you go out. And stay away from any truck. All the drivers have rifles in the hoods of their cabs."

The dark alleys were dangerous, it turned out, because Beck was known to have an employee "bodyguard" who had some kind of calcified or possibly artificial arm. This, it was rumored, could fell anyone with one blow to the neck, and there was never any weapon to be found. The truck drivers could always do Beck's bidding and seldom be caught if they attacked anyone as they always simply went on about their business and were invisible from the law.

It was a fine kettle of fish in which we had landed.

The lawyer filed the lawsuit, and we went about with a couple of journalists often in attendance, trying to vary our routes and habitual places. Curt left the firm and couldn't get a job anywhere, as both the big agencies said they didn't dare go against the Beck power. Two very nice doctors we knew decided they wanted a film company, and they hired him to make films for them out of human kindness, I'm sure.

The months went by, very slowly, but nearly at the end of a year of anxiety and nervous waiting, at last the day was set for the case to go to court. Everyone we knew was worried about what might happen, but all our friends in broadcast or print news were sure that we had one card Beck couldn't play. He could not very well present himself as a proud union man and then be found to be wishing to hold an employee in perpetual servitude. And they knew who would be broadcasting the news. The Press Club was on our side!

We had a phone call. Mr. Beck wished to see Curt in his office the next morning. So, back to the throne of the great teamster.

"Curt," he growled, his little porcine face grimacing, "I've decided to give you your money. But there's one condition."

"And what would that be?"

"You don't function in Seattle anymore. I don't want you in any competition here with my company. I'd recommend a move."

"Would Hollywood be far enough?" Curt asked, that being the most logical place to move to, as we were used to processing and editing films in Los Angeles already.

“It might be,” responded Beck. “It might be.”

But as Curt got up to leave, he added what he thought no doubt was a congenial note. “Nothing personal, Curt. Nothing personal.”

And that’s why we left our beloved Seattle, and have spent all the years since in California, and raised our family here, and lived full lives. But one bit of news from the Northwest delighted us: Dave Beck was convicted of income tax fraud and sentenced to state prison, incarcerated on an island off Tacoma. We wanted to send him congratulations, adding “Nothing personal, Dave,” but we didn’t. We were glad that he had to go to jail—until we learned from a friend in the corrections office that the local sheriff was taking him off the prison island on weekends and letting him sojourn in luxury in a grand hotel in town, and that in prison the rest of his sentence, his cell looked like a royal suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

We really didn’t care because at least we had come out alive from the most dangerous year we’d ever endured, and one I would never like to go through again.

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