

Ross Winn

Digging Up a Tennessee Anarchist

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A couple of years back, at a conference in Ohio, an acquaintance of ours described to us how he had, in some research, happened upon an anarchist publisher who had lived and died in our neck of the woods: central Tennessee. Did we, he asked, know where Mount Juliet was? This tiny Southern town was only twenty minutes from our front door, and we were surprised when he explained how this man published radical literature from there a century ago. Would we be interested in tracking him down, maybe finding his grave and doing a rubbing? Sure, we thought, it sounded like fun at the time, and genealogical research was something we were new at, but willing to put our heads together on.

A year later, we knocked on farmhouse doors, scavenged for clues in the files of the Mount Juliet library, and eventually found ourselves standing in the room of the home the man had died in, talking about quilts with one of the last descendents of his wife's family. Sparing all of the details of our continuing journey, this article attempts to piece together what we know, so far, about a man who dedicated his life to publishing radical ideas in the form of self-published and individually printed magazines ... the ancestors of today's 'zines. As far as we know, this is the first time anyone—anarchists, historians, and publishers included—has taken an active interest in pursuing his work and memory and compiling it into any sort of concrete history.

From the woods of rural central Tennessee, in the early part of the last century, a man named Ross Winn toiled under the burdens of continual poverty, harsh conservative religious surroundings, and the later terminal grip of tuberculosis to dedicate his life to the print-



Ross Winn, circa 1901

ing of anarchist literature and ideals. The setting sounds a bit overly romantic, but then, so did most of the man's printed prose. Ross was a poet at heart, and his drive to supply the American anarchist movement with an "organ of radical thought" never got in the way of his lyrical embellishments and individual ability to rip open his targets with the printed page.

Born in Dallas in 1871, Ross Winn picked up typesetting as the trade that would later lead him to print and edit several anarchist magazines throughout his life. He clearly understood the value of the free press at an early age and sought to learn the intricacies of maintaining it from the ground up, in order to control the medium and aim it in a radical direction. In the late 1800's, every small newspaper was DIY, and printing required a proficiency in the time-consuming task of layout and typesetting that readers in this day can easily take for granted. Ross worked as a field hand (he was the son of farmers) picking cotton until he made enough to purchase his first printing outfit, a small hand-operated press.

The earliest published writing we have by Winn is in the magazine *Twentieth Century*, from January 1894. Ross was 23 when he wrote this piece, a reflection on a future based on voluntary cooperation.

Entitled "Let Us Unite", it makes clear that even as a young man, Ross saw the need for the radical elements of society to come together under a common cause. Putting differences aside, he proclaims that "we have had coercion enough. For ages man has ruled with sword and bayonet, with bars and chains...and now are we not civilized enough to dispense with it forever?" (*Twentieth Century*, Jan. 18, 1894)

A later piece, appearing in *Free Society* in December of 1900, makes mention of his becoming a "young 'convert'" in realizing his own radical political notions twelve years earlier, when he was only 17 years old.

Ross continued to write and send his contributions to other radical papers, most notably *Free Society* and also *The Firebrand*, a weekly paper out of Sellwood near Portland, Oregon, which saw a short but renowned run from 1895-97. Sometime in 1894, Ross began his first paper, known as *Cooperative Commonwealth*. He then edited and published *Coming Era* for a brief time in 1898 and *Winn's Freelance* in 1899.

These are his first known forays into the realm of self-publishing radical journals, and he garnered subscriptions through announcements in other papers of similar content. Unfortunately, as soon as November of 1899, the intrepid young publisher had to succumb to the troubles that would continue to burden him his entire life: how to offer and maintain a good quality and good-content paper, each page hand printed, for a modest and affordable subscription rate without going into debt. He ceased publication and called on his subscribers to turn their support, financial and otherwise, towards *Free Society*.



Ross was by no means discouraged, however, and in 1902 was at it again. In a June issue of *Free Society*, he made the announcement of the upcoming publication of his new paper: *Winn's Firebrand*. It's likely he fancied the name

of the then-defunct weekly, and the name accurately describes the devotion and abject zeal that he put into his new endeavor. His vision was for a paper that would “occupy an entirely new field. It will appeal to the cultured, the thoughtful, and the progressive of all classes. It will be just the kind of literature for missionary work among the masses” (*Free Society*, June 15, 1902). Clearly, Ross saw the printed magazine as the most effective tool for social awakening, but he also saw the spread of anti-authoritarian ideals as his distinct calling, a work that he passionately viewed as a personal duty. And Tennessee became his base of operation: “In establishing the magazine (in Mount Juliet), as an independent publication, the flag of revolutionary thought is planted on Southern soil, and a residence of a lifetime in this section convinces me that it will be a fruitful field for libertarian ideas, if the right methods are used to present them.”

In 1901, Ross met Emma Goldman in Chicago and found in her a lasting ally. As she wrote in his obituary in *Mother Earth* in 1912, Emma “was deeply impressed with his fervor and complete abandonment to the cause, so unlike most American revolutionists, who love their ease and comfort too well to risk them for their ideals.” Winn kept up a correspondence with Goldman throughout his life, as he did with other prominent anarchist writers at the time. Joseph Labadie, a prominent writer and organizer in Michigan, was another friend to Ross, and made several contributions to *Winn’s Firebrand* in its later years.

In the same year, Ross married Augusta Gertrude Smith (known affectionately as “Gussie”), and she soon gave birth to their first and only son, Ross Jr. In Gussie, Ross found a strong and willing partner, who worked with him until his death and through a life of poverty, often aiding in the publication of his papers. The three moved into her family’s home in Mount Juliet, an old house originally built in the 1790s and later purchased by Gussie’s father, who ran a general store and a mill nearby. The region Mount Juliet is nestled in was also known as Silver Springs and sits about a twenty minute drive on the interstate from what is downtown Nashville today.

Moderation in Nashville?

For a brief period in 1905, Ross took up residence in Nashville, in an area in what is now close to Fisk University in the northern part of the city. There, he briefly published a paper entitled *To-Day: a Journal of Politics*. This paper put forth a confusingly more moderate approach, and in fact, does not assert itself as an anarchist publication at all. Instead, Ross more vaguely proclaims *To-Day* “a journal of radical truth and advance thought”. This was a brief incarnation of *Winn’s Firebrand* (he in fact indicates that the name itself has been changed), and it seems that he reverted back to publication of the initial paper after, possibly, only one issue of *To-Day*.

Ross found himself back in Mount Juliet soon enough, occupying an upstairs room of the Smith home with Gussie and their son. He continued to work on completing issues of *Firebrand* as regularly as possible, still using a small upright hand and pedal operated printing press. Curiously, the living descendants of the Smiths, those whose ancestors shared the home as Gussie’s relatives, seem to believe that the family had little to no idea what Ross was up to. Either that, or they refused to acknowledge any memory of him in an attempt to eradicate his unwelcome presence from their collective memory. Whatever the truth may be, Ross was clearly a black sheep in the town and in the family. One particular story that was related to us (and unfortunately passed through the generations) concerned a time when Ross was particularly agitated and nervous about a “meeting” he was to attend somewhere outside Tennessee. This was in 1901, in the months before Leon Czolgosz shot and killed President McKinley, later claiming to have been influenced by Emma Goldman and the anarchist movement (although, by most accounts, the young man had succeeded only in making his new acquaintances nervous with his discussions of plans for murder). The story was that Ross had attended a sort of straw-drawing, wherein the one who drew the shortest straw was charged with the task of assassination. Ross, of course, was notably relieved when he returned home from his “meeting.” It seems absurd to us now, but rumors of this sort only surround the misunderstood and make it clear that Gussie’s family had little trust in her lover and husband.

Sometime in 1909, Ross Winn contracted tuberculosis. Known then as “consumption,” the disease has roots in bovine bacterial infections, and was probably originally spread to humans as a result of the domestication of cattle. Typically, only those with compromised immune systems brought upon by malnutrition from poverty are unable to fight the disease off, and it can take years for the infection to finally take its toll on the body.

However, Ross continued his tireless work on *Firebrand*, despite his failing health, and in 1910, moved briefly to Sweden, Texas with Gussie. He left Gussie in Sweden for a couple of months while he went to San Antonio to look for work, but was unfortunately unable to find anything, and, having gotten himself into debt in the process, sold his printing setup in order to fund his return to Sweden and later back to Mount Juliet.

By this time, Ross and Gussie had very little money, and Ross's condition kept him from both earning a living for his family and spending much time on his paper. Although he continued seeking contributions and setting type, the regularity of *Firebrand* was compromised by his failing health. In July of 1911, Gussie wrote a letter, in secret, to Emma Goldman asking for any possible financial assistance from their allies—knowing that her husband “would rather starve than beg”. The word was sent out around the country and, all told, some \$60 was raised, quite a sum for a small family at that time. Those who respected the work Ross had dedicated his life to were not about to let him and his family starve.

Ross had other plans, though, and refused to spend the money that “the comrades” had sent him on himself or his wife and son. Instead, seeing it only as an opportunity to further the publishing of anarchist propaganda, he spent the majority of the money on a new printing setup and began what was to be his last paper, known as *The Advance* (but which still carried the *Firebrand* masthead on the lower half of its cover).

On August 8 of 1912, the degenerative infection of tuberculosis finally took Ross' life. He was still setting type on the August issue of *The Advance* on the day before he died. He was buried in the Smith cemetery, which is situated across the highway from where the old house still stands. His gravestone is unmarked, as are the others, but is curiously set apart from the rest of the stones in that it is a simple, rectangular concrete slab. In the room where he died, there is a scar in the original floorboards where a pan of sulfur was burned upon his death: a common practice at the time that was thought to disinfect the room in which consumption had overtaken someone.

According to a letter written by Ross Jr. to Goldman in 1934, Ross Sr. mysteriously burned most of his writings just before his death. If it is true that Gussie's family knew little of Ross's work and ideas and held only fear and contempt for him, then perhaps he felt it best for his own family that they never knew any more than they already could about the work he had done.

Gussie and Ross Jr. went to Chicago for a brief time immediately after his death, and Gussie went on to later marry a Mr. Cross and move to Oklahoma. Ross Jr. eventually ended up in St. Louis, Missouri and kept up some contact with Emma Goldman and a small handful of his father's friends. He married and had one daughter, Cleo Winn, who died about six years ago.

Emma Goldman's glowing obituary for Ross, published in *Mother Earth*, *The Agitator*, and several other papers soon after his death, is a testament to the influence that this farmer's son turned radical poet/publisher had on the revolutionary movement of the early part of this past century, at a time when the anarchist movement in America was arguably more influential in the mainstream than at any other time. “Never has the power of the Ideal been demonstrated with greater force than in the life and work of this man,” she writes, “for nothing short of a great ideal, a burning, impelling, all-absorbing ideal, could make possible the task that our dead comrade so lovingly performed during a quarter of a century... His were dreams of the world, of humanity, of the struggle for liberty.”

Not much of Ross's work survives him. Most evidence of his writings exist in scattered microfilms, and some of his preserved papers are in the Labadie Collection of radical literature in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Some of his son's letters to Emma Goldman can also be found in the Goldman Papers Collection, which have shed some light on Ross Jr.'s later interest in his father's memory.

There is more out there, and we have continued to pursue clues as they arise in an attempt to put together the life of this rare Tennessee radical and secure the memory of the ideals he dedicated his life to. It's our hope that those who struggle for the same dreams today can draw inspiration from the courageous work of the past.

FE note: See related Wikipedia article at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ross_Winn

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