

## Christopher Sellers's Remarks at Symposium on "Uncle Charlie"

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What am I doing up here? I was volunteered by my wife (unbeknownst to me) as a kind of bridge between the two constituencies here: academics (especially historians) and family. As I thought about it, it made a lot of sense. As the only other historian in the family, Charlie Sellers bespeaks his influence on me. And as I reflected on it, I realized that his influence goes way back, in a long evolution. But good historian that I am, let me do some periodizing. I remember three Uncle Charlies, each of them corresponding to different stages in my own life.

The first Uncle Charlie was that of family legend. I can't really say I knew Uncle Charlie very well early on. As my brother, Jeff Sellers, said earlier, he was way out here in California, and we were way over there in North Carolina, but that didn't mean Uncle Charlie didn't have a kind of presence in our household. We'd hear snippets now and then of what was going on with him. And if Berkeley itself made the news, as it did a lot over the 1960's, my uncle would get some speculative mentions: wonder what Uncle Charlie thinks about that; or more provocatively, guess UC's been at it again. What did stand out for me also, at an early age, and I remember talking about this with Jeff: he was the only person we knew whose name was in the World Book Encyclopedia. Now it's been a while since those encyclopedias meant anything to anyone, what with the internet and all. But back then, in the little town of Hendersonville out in western NC, that encyclopedia really was, for our household, the biggest window we had on the rest of the world beyond. And to be prominent enough to have your name written in there, that was a pretty big deal. And you could just look up James K. Polk, and down the column there was the name of someone we knew, were related to: Charles Sellers, author of Polk's definitive biography.

We did get to see Uncle Charlie and his family occasionally, both when they travelled across the country for family gatherings, but most memorably, when the Phil and Julia Sellers family took a month long trip out West in the late 1960's, and drove in for a visit to the Bay Area. That visit was to a house which Uncle Charlie and his family shared with some others—what we called a "commune." —and I remember some debates from that time that got, shall we say, pretty lively. I'd still place those encounters more in the family legend of UC period. That Berkeley visit joined in my memory with other exotic tourist sights we were seeing for the first time, along with Yellowstone and Disneyland.

My second period of encounters came what seemed to me much later—though it was a little over ten years on. It was after I had graduated from college and just come back from over a year studying in Germany in the early 1980s. Now I had already been contemplating an academic career at this time, but just wasn't sure I wanted to keep on studying philosophy, as I had in Germany. It seemed so abstract, kind of ethereal, and also, I'd become increasingly interested in political activism. That dated back to my days at Dartmouth doing support work for the protest against the Seabrook nuclear power plant, an interest further nourished by my time in Germany, where I wound up being in the exact time and place, Freiberg, where the Green Party was just being born. As someone who now supposedly knew so much more about the world, I felt really uncomfortable coming back to stay in little H'ville NC as I was trying to decide about graduate school. So I headed to Berkeley, and wound up staying there for nearly a year. I was hoping in part to check out what kind of agitation was afoot in a place that over the previous decade and a half, had established such a strong reputation in the activism department. Aiding that decision was that I knew family there—Uncle Charlie, also my cousins.

By this time, as a young person still not settled on any particular career, Uncle Charlie meant something different to me than before: the Southerner outside the South. As I remember putting it to myself, while the rest of our aunts and uncles as well as my own parents made lives within the Carolinas or Virginia, Uncle Charlie was the only family member I knew who had been successful outside the region where we grew up. Having gone to college in the northeast, and now contemplating grad school, I felt myself to be headed as well outside the south, and I guess I was curious to see what that kind of Sellers and his life looked like. And of course, also what the south now looked like to him, peering back.

He and my aunt to be Carolyn were very kind to the youthful me back then—I'm much appreciative today of the time they took. I'd have lunch with Uncle Charlie—I don't remember exactly where, but I remember being a little bit surprised at his totally un-exotic taste for cheeseburgers and fries. I remember playing cards with him and Steen on that boat—the game was "hearts," what I had also played a lot with my brothers and dad. I also remember going over for dinner with him and Carolyn at her house. As I got involved in a series of protests at the Lawrence Livermore Lab, and wound up among the 1400 thrown in jail for civil disobedience, I'm not sure my parents were all that comforted to have Uncle Charlie be the nearest family member. But for me it was reassuring to have an elder around who was not all that disturbed about what I'd gotten myself into.

I don't remember him or Carolyn trying to recruit me for the history field; at this point I probably seemed a hopeless case. I was still pretty smitten by the big theorists of the time, and their theories. But I do remember one thing that UC gave me to read, a book he had edited of history essays, called "the Southerner as American." Of all the essays in that book, the one that

struck me, whose argument these many years later I actually remember, was the one he wrote. It was about the moral dilemmas that slavery posed to Southern whites before the civil war, and it stood out for its conceptual rigor and nuance—something a student of philosophy such as myself could appreciate. And what kept it playing in my head as time went on, I think, was the moral integrity of Uncle Charlie's analysis. He didn't let his historical subjects off the hook—they WERE slaveowners. But neither did he treat them as mere caricatures; he really seemed to be interested in their vulnerable and conflicted humanity.

That gets me to the third Uncle Charlie which I then got to know, as I did go on to graduate school in American Studies, and following through with my own empiricist turn toward the facts, migrated into American history. That is UC the distinguished historian. Now I did consciously stay away from Uncle Charlie's period, and specialty of Southern history for a long time. In fact, the only thing I read by him in graduate school was actually in a political science class; and maybe I shared Jeff's reaction to that encounter, as I decided against political science as a subfield. Actually it's difficult for me to separate out Charlie's intellectual influence on me from that of Carolyn—who is after all Carolyn Merchant, of ecofeminism fame. Just one vignette that captures their mixture of influences. Right before I left Berkeley for the east coast, and graduate school at Yale, Charlie had a suggestion about someone he knew of who was there, and whom I might keep an eye out for. That person was the son of an historian friend of his, by the name of Bill Cronon. Bill was at the time just barely on his way to founding the new field of environmental history, along with Carolyn and some others. He actually became my dissertation advisor—and I his first official graduate student.

Now as some of you know, my hegira toward becoming an historian took more years than for most, and also involved a lengthy trek through medical school. In thinking about just what history projects I've begun or completed, all of them qualify as environmental history, but at least three of the four deal with times and places where the hand of capitalism proved particularly naked and devastating: industrial workplaces of the early twentieth century, the urban edges of America's largest postwar cities, and communities in Texas and Mexico centered around the riskiest of industries. And the fourth, on suburbs, race and environment around later twentieth century Atlanta, also deals with movements not just on behalf of environment but of civil rights, and it goes at some length into religion, subjects that as we've heard have been near and dear to Charlie.

To wrap this up: Part of what made this profession and this set of questions such a compelling fit for me was not just what happened in my second and third phases of knowing Uncle Charlie, but also, more unbeknownst to me at the time, much of what had molded and shaped me in that first phase. At that time of course, the bridge between the life UC seemed to be living out on the west coast seemed worlds apart from what we knew back in the Carolinas. But really,

part of my discovery over these second two phases of knowing Uncle Charlie's was that, seen through the lens of those of us who had traveled between them, these two worlds were not so separate. Not at all. That's what Uncle Charlie was signaling I think by dedicating his *Market Revolution* to Uncle Giles. That orneriness of Charlie's, his nonconformist politics, his sympathy for the resisters, they run back to the South itself, even if some others of us in the family have wound up on the other side of the political coin. That's why the combination of people in this room actually makes such sense, even though many of us—myself included—have wondered what it might add up to.

Let me put it this way, to bring it back to my historian colleagues. 40 years from now, if any historian does take an interest in the intellectual trajectory of the later 20<sup>th</sup> cent American South, their work will remain incomplete without some inkling of what Uncle Charlie has accomplished. As for the *Market Revolution* being a Berkley book, I'm not so sure about that. Any future historian who undertakes to write about the Bay Area's intellectual and political ferment over this same while will miss much if they neglect the Southern roots out of which Uncle Charlie's own journey sprang.