

Jimmy Herman 1966

“Built like a fireplug,” was an expression I grew up with and it fits Jimmy Herman. Short, squat, square-looking, and self-contained, he was a bottled-up force of power. Always impeccably dressed in the San Francisco style of the 1960s you might have concluded he worked as an attorney in the financial district instead of in his small, sparsely furnished office at the docks. His eyesight was poor and he wore glasses with lenses as thick as Coke bottles to correct it. He always drove a new car, a big Buick as I recall, and he drove it with great speed and authority even as he talked looking straight at you; it was sometimes a harrowing experience for his passenger, and I always look forward to a safe arrival at our destination.

When I first met Jimmy Herman, he was the president of the Ships Clerks (ILWU), and years later when all his political ducks were lined up, he was elected president of the ILWU, taking over from its revered founder, Harry Bridges.

I did not find Jimmy, he found me. He wanted to know what I was going to do about the grapes on the dock. Of course I didn't have the faintest idea what I was going to do or even supposed to do about them. In his slightly harsh and no-nonsense type of voice, he bluntly asked me if we were going to set up a picket line. To tell you the truth, I hadn't even thought of it, but he kept insisting, what we were going to do? I parried by asking what would happen if we did picket the grapes. He didn't bite; all he wanted to know was what action we planned to take. Finally, not knowing what else to say, I said we would be on the docks in the morning to set up a picket line. I looked for some sign of approval or condemnation. Nothing. He said if that's what we were going to do, you never know what's going to happen. He got up and left. He was not unfriendly, just to the point and very business-like. I didn't know what to think and I certainly had no idea what to expect. And that is just the way Jimmy liked it.

I would like to think that Jimmy and I became good friends, but I'm not sure Jimmy had any close friends. When I asked him to come to Delano to be the godfather of our first daughter, Clare, he readily agreed to do so, but that seemed to be the climax of our friendship. I called him on and off in the ensuing years, we chatted, and he always razzed me about something. We made lunch or dinner appointments that he never kept, always canceling at the last minute. I let the connection drop, if indeed there was one.

Looking back now 37 years, I wonder why he was so attracted to the farmworker movement. Part of it, I believe, was that he enjoyed playing the godfather to these young, idealistic, and firmly committed kids who had absolutely no experience with the labor movement but were still willing to take up the cause of the farmworkers. Jimmy always sided with the idealistic underdogs. I also believe he admired Cesar Chavez greatly, especially because of his commitment to live in voluntary poverty and to sacrifice himself for the sake of helping impoverished farmworkers.

Jerry Cohen and I attended his memorial service in 1998, which was held at Delancey Street. We heard stem-winding eulogies about his role as a San Francisco labor leader and about his good works and generosity with groups like Delancey Street, but I never got the sense that anyone who spoke really knew Jimmy. Some people know but they want to be unknown and this is how Jimmy Herman struck me. He knew the farmworkers, but they did not know him.

(written in 2003)