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Casualty of 'freedom'

The troubling story of Dodger Stadium's construction remains part of Frank Wilkinson's heroic legacy
By Lionel Rolfe

Frank Wilkinson, who just died at 91, wasn't the first person to attempt to stare down Joe McCarthy and the House un-American Activities Committee, but he was the last man to go to jail for trying.

What's more, he had a unique approach to battling the communist witch hunt. He didn't object to answering questions because it might incriminate him, but because of his First Amendment rights to free speech.

By a 5 to 4 vote, the US Supreme Court disagreed. So as he entered prison, he began a 15-year effort to rid the nation of the un-American congressional committee that had terrorized a generation of progressives.

"We will not save free speech if we are not prepared to go to jail in its defense. I am prepared to pay that price," he said as he began his term at federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

About the same time, construction was completed on Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine. It was the early 1960s and by 1975 HUAC was abolished, with congressmen crediting Wilkinson for the campaign to do so. But Dodger Stadium, sad to tell, remains as a symbol of that struggle.

Wilkinson's saga was all tied up with the story of Chavez Ravine, one of the saddest episodes of the tortured history of the City of the Angels. It was retold recently by Ry Cooder, in his song "Don't Call Me Red," about Wilkinson's role in the battle of Chavez Ravine.

A few hundred acres just east of downtown, Chavez Ravine was the soul of the barrio. It was destroyed in a sinister land swindle that used Frank Wilkinson as the fall guy by calling him a communist.

The ravine was a place where some 300 Mexican immigrant families, many of them retired railroad workers, lived in conditions reminiscent of rural Mexico. Goats wandered the dirt road. It was a tight-knit community whose local institutions - churches and the schools - were run by the neighbors.

The late 1940s, when Wilkinson began battling for public housing in Chavez Ravine, was one of the most politically optimistic periods of American life, mainly because it was molded by a generation of Americans who faced down fascism in Europe and weren't about to let it sprout in their own land.

Theirs really was a battle against darkness, not like the

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Daniel Lanois keeping a Tuesday residence this month

increasingly blatant colonial battles that followed in Korea and Vietnam, capped by Bush Jr.'s dirty little oil war in Iraq.

McCarthyism was designed to curb those democratic and progressive tendencies that the war against fascism had engendered. What happened to Wilkinson was an example of this. Wilkinson joined the Los Angeles Housing Authority in 1941, a year before the Zoot Suit Riots. The authority hired the great architect Richard Neutra to design public housing for about 10,000 people: not only for poor immigrant Mexicans, but Asians and blacks and working people of every kind.

"It meant bringing black people and brown people and Asian people out of ghettos of various kinds and have them living with Anglo people in Chavez Ravine," Wilkinson later told the Los Angeles Times.

Instead, the bulldozers were called in to shove the poor Mexicans out and clear the land for a baseball stadium. People cried foul - the land was supposed to have been for public housing.

Those opposing the stadium were tarred as subversive. Ronald Reagan, a B-rate actor just beginning his political career as a right-wing henchman, said people who were against baseball in Chavez Ravine were un-American.

Wilkinson indeed had been a communist, but that was not yet a capital crime in America.

Despite all the sound and fury of McCarthyism, the McCarthyites were really never about communism. They were Republicans who even then wanted to make it a capital crime to be a Democrat.

As an old-fashioned American who took literally the Bill of Rights and once planned on becoming a Methodist minister, Wilkinson said his life was changed by a quote from Alexander Meiklejohn, a famed civil libertarian of his time.

"The First Amendment seems to me to be a very uncompromising statement. It admits no exceptions. It tells us that the Congress and, by implication, all other agencies of the government are denied any authority whatever to limit the political freedom of the citizens of the United States. It declares that with respect to political belief, political discussion, political advocacy, political planning, our citizens are sovereigns, and the Congress is their subordinate agent," Meiklejohn wrote.

"Whatever may be the immediate gains and losses, the dangers to our safety arising from political suppression are always greater than the dangers to that safety arising from political freedom. Suppression is always foolish. Freedom is always wise. That is the faith, the experimental faith, by which we Americans have undertaken to live"

Be all that as it may, Wilkinson could not immediately fight back against the combined power of the city's police and press and real estate lobby. At one point he was reduced to being a night custodian in a Pasadena department store, with the promise not to tell he had been given a job there.

In the end, however, he prevailed for his generation in blocking fascism - at least for a while. ●

Lionel Rolfe is the author of "Literary L.A.," "The Uncommon Friendship of Yaltah Menuhin and Willa Cather," "Fat Man on the Left" and co-author of "Bread & Hyacinths: The Rise and Fall of Utopian Los Angeles."

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