

100 Years of Solicitude – a Slice of History of Public Administration
by Kenneth Ashworth

Editor's Note: This paper is a recollection of Louis Brownlow written by ASPA member Kenneth Ashworth

Gabriel Garcia Marquez opens his book 100 Years of Solitude with this remarkable sentence: "Many years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."

I write to recall for fellow public administrators a few personal memories of one of the founders of ASPA. And while I may not take you to see ice, I will take you to the battle of Waterloo before I'm done.

Over fifty years ago, just a couple of months after I arrived in Washington with my fresh MPA degree from Syracuse University, I offered to help an elderly, nearly blind man across 15th Street where Pennsylvania Avenue abuts the Treasury building. It turned out we were going to the same place; we were headed for the Occidental Restaurant for the monthly ASPA luncheon. Thereafter, every month I would go by his office and escort Louis Brownlow to those luncheons.

On those perambulations around the downtown Brownie would give me lessons on the history of our national capital. One day we detoured through a hotel and he said, "This room is where the Democrats decided they had stuck with William Jennings Bryan long enough and it was time to find a new candidate. They decided on New Jersey's Governor, Woodrow Wilson."

I asked him how he knew that. He said, "I was there."

On another walk he explained to me how the mall between Constitution and Independence Avenues had been built over during World War I with wooden offices to accommodate the surge of government expansion. He told me how President Wilson had appointed him to be one of the three Commissioners in charge of running the city. Almost immediately the other two got shipped off to the war in Europe and he was left solely in charge of running the city government.

As he looked out over the mall, Brownie said, "The biggest worry I had in 1918 during the Spanish influenza pandemic was that we would have a fire with all the city so crowded together with wooden buildings. The city would have burned up. Over half of my fire department was sick or dead from the flu."

We rarely took our monthly tour without him complaining bitterly the destruction of one building or another. He would tick off the names of judges and senators and congressmen who lived in each of the apartment building being demolished for new growth. Often he had dined in their apartments.

Brownie would fill me in on the history behind every person for whom a statue had been erected. At General Meade's, he commented, "That man could have ended the Civil War after Gettysburg. And McClellan could have ended it even earlier after Antietam. Neither of them had the follow-through after a victory that Grant had. If he'd been in the place of either of them he would have beat Lee and saved thousands of lives."

As we stood before another statue, he said, "It is appropriate he has his hands behind his back, considering how much graft occurred under him."

One morning at Scott's Circle he stopped and asked me if I noticed anything peculiar about the General's statue. He said he had been out very early one morning for a brisk walk with President Harry Truman and at just this spot one of the reporters tagging along behind them asked the President to tell him something interesting he might make into a story.

Harry Truman had said, "You see that horse the General is sitting on? Well, when this statue was unveiled he had been long dead, but the General's widow was present and she had a fit. She said the General had never in his life ridden a mare. He only rode stallions. Now, if you look closely you will see that the sculptor went back and welded on the necessary accoutrements."

One day Brownie explained to me that Constitution Avenue used to be a canal connecting the B&O Canal in Georgetown with Canal Street to the Anacostia River. It had been used for barges to bring in the stones to build the capitol. Then he said, "Right down there is where there used to be an inlet from the Potomac. That's where I taught Senator Bankhead's skinny teenage daughter to swim. You may have heard of her. Her name was Tallulah."

Brownlow was one of the principal founders in Chicago of ASPA and a number of other so-called "1313" professional associations such as the International City Managers Association and the National Association for Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO). When an assistant director position opened up at NAHRO and the director, John Lange, mentioned the vacancy to Brownie, he said he knew a young man working at the Urban Renewal Administration Lange should talk to. From that I learned from Brownie about networking. With that single comment Brownie moved me from a fourth level job in a federal agency to a position where I was dealing with the heads of agencies and meeting with Congressional staffers.

Sitting on a bench in Lafayette Park one day where Brownie told me Justices Holmes and Brandeis used to sit, he looked toward the White House and told me about a conversation he had with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1937 the President was trying to recruit him to join Charles Merriam and Luther Gulick to undertake a study for the reorganization of the Executive Branch. Brownie said he told Roosevelt he had a chronic heart condition that went back to a childhood illness and he really did not feel up to taking on such a difficult and important task. Roosevelt said to him, "Who are you to speak to me of infirmities?"

One day in Brownie's office, which was just down the hall from mine at NAHRO, he was lamenting how he had personally met every president since Teddy Roosevelt and how disappointed he was that he would never have a chance to meet the newly elected John Kennedy. A few weeks later he stopped by my office with his hat and cane in hand to say jauntily he was on his way to the White House; the new President had called and invited him over for a talk.

When my son was born in 1962, Brownie and his wife, Bess, wanted to see him before I moved my family to San Francisco for a new job I had taken there. On the way by taxi to our home that day the Brownlow's sat in back and I sat in front with the driver. Brownie began to tell a story about Tennessee. The driver interrupted to say that he was from Tennessee too. Brownie asked him, "East or West?" When he said Knoxville Brownie asked his name. Then Brownie said, "Yes, I remember; your mother was married on ..." and he gave the date. The man nearly drove off the road as Brownie explained that he knew that because he had been in the wedding. Then the driver acknowledged that he had to be Louis Brownlow; he had heard about him from his mother all his life.

Brownie took the conversation in stride, and it did not appear unusual to either him or Bess. This kind of thing happened to him all the time. As we got out of the cab and were entering our home I asked him how he could have been in the wedding of a taxi driver's mother. He replied, "Oh, his father was attorney general under Wilson and he had a terrible drinking problem. I always wondered what happened to his children. Now I know about one of them."

While we visited, Brownie and his wife gave my son an engraved silver baby's cup along with a letter. Part of that note read:

"Dear Rodney, this note will mean something to you someday. Your father brought Bess and me to visit you and your mother when you were a baby. When you enter the next century I want you to remember that an old man visited you. I would have to be 121 years old to see the new century with you. The oldest man I remember was Patrick Maloney. He was born in 1798. When I was ten and he was dying my father took me to see him. He told me what it was like being in the Battle of Waterloo. Now here is what I want you to remember in 2000. The connection between just three of us, Patrick Maloney and me and you, touches on four centuries. You owe it to Maloney and me to do something meaningful with your life in that fourth century."

Brownlow was always interested in linkages and connections. That is what motivated him to help to found ASPA, the ICMA, NAHRO, and other "1313" professional organizations. When he took his first public job as Commissioner of the District of Columbia in 1915 and later when he became city manager in cities in Virginia, Tennessee, and New Jersey, he had found that there was no forum or organization to

permit the free exchange of experiences and information on best practices or professional standards. There were no journals to exchange ideas about their fields of public endeavor.

Brownie's interest in linkages is why I decided to share these reminiscences with more recent entrants to the field of public administration. In doing this perhaps I might convey something of the human side of one of our ASPA founders. And perhaps I might instill some sense of historical connection for our members through me back to Louis Brownlow to carry on his legacy and our professional heritage.

Margaret Mead said the definition of living history is for a grandmother to repeat to her granddaughter the stories her own grandfather told her. Brownie died at the age of 84 after finishing a talk on the public service in Arlington. Perhaps some of Brownie's stories, passed on now when I am nearly the age Brownie had attained at his death, can provide a touch of the living history of ASPA and remind us of Brownie's and our 100 years of solicitude for the public good.

Author Biography: Kenneth Ashworth is University Affiliated Research Fellow, LBJ School of Public Affairs. He served for 40 years in federal, state, and local government and in higher education. During his career he served for 21 years as Texas Commissioner of Higher Education, and following that he served as adjunct professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at UT Austin and the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. Prior to becoming Commissioner of Higher Education, he was vice chancellor of the University of Texas System and executive vice president at UT San Antonio. His most recent books are *Caught Between the Dog and The Fireplug*, *How to Survive Public Service* and *Horns of a Dilemma: Coping with Politics at the University of Texas*. He may be contacted at k.ashworth@utexas.edu.