

# Among the Barlows

by Victor Bobb

**W**e called them barlows. The term was both condescending and unjust, for most of them were not really barlows. But there was enough generic similarity that the label was too useful to be abandoned.

In the beginning a *barlow* was an itinerant wino who hired on as a farm laborer and worked just long enough to save the money necessary for a good long binge. We gave them the name in recognition of their origins: Barlow's was a combination employment agency and tavern near the tracks in Spokane, and while barlows were waiting for the employment agency side of Barlow's to place them, they were generally letting the bar side of Barlow's please them.

We non-barlow farmworkers—summering college students, unambitious post-high school rural kids, and weathered old lifers—were content to refer to most of the itinerants as barlows, even when the implications of drunkenness and unreliability were unfair.

I worked with dozens of them. They were generally taciturn men, but they were willing to answer my questions, and I learned a lot about them. They were glacier-speed drifters, for the most part, men who began in the midwest and found themselves twenty or thirty or forty years later in eastern Washington. Walt was from Wisconsin, quit school at 14 to work in a pulp

mill in Green Bay, spent twenty minutes in the water off Okinawa after his ship was kamikazied, and lived when I knew him in a battered and stuffy old company-supplied travel trailer moored under a line of lombardy poplars on the edge of a pasture. Jack began in Nebraska; he had a sister living in Spokane (not sixty miles away) but in the three years he had been working here he had never made it those last five dozen miles to see her. Al was originally from a wheat farm near Pierre (pronounced peer), South Dakota; a hardworking man with a family, he was several cuts above most of the others. Ernest was a pathetic one, a tall pallid man with thick brown hair brushed straight back from his forehead. He looked like a fallen Bulgarian aristocrat, and he swore that he had been a concert violinist until he had been ruined by drinking. Surely he had astonishingly long white fingers (with which he now drove a clattering Cat D-6 over twelve thousand acres of marginal scabland wheatfields). Ross was a big-bellied Missourian who couldn't figger any reason for us to be mad at them Chinamen; they 'uz just people like anybody elst. Larry was barely my senior, an ignorant veteran with a gimpy eye and an inexhaustible supply of lies and fascinating nonfacts (he was in the street-legendary car stopped going four miles per hour on the freeway while its stoned driver thought he was doing a hundred; the U.S. Air Force has captured and disassembled several flying saucers but is keeping the fact covered

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up); he drank scotch at lunch one day and fell off a ladder. To cover up he claimed a dizzy spell from a war wound and as a result I was given a work assignment which I had coveted but which my juniority had denied me. Thanks, Larry, or thanks, Glenlivet: I used the free time in that job to rough out my dissertation and to read all of Melville and Faulkner.

These men were genuinely interesting to me. I liked them, and I enjoyed working with them, talking to them, responding to their elaborately obscene pantomimes, reflecting on their experiences and their futures. As a Certified Good American and Nice Guy I recognized their contributions to the general weal: we eat because uneducated men sling hay and truck wheat and herd cattle and repair plows. It took me a while to break training and to realize something beyond the Certified Wholesome Opinion, though. But then I realized it: I was not simply more lucky than these men. I and mine were, in stark fact, more competent people.

We wince. It sounds coarse, arrogant, smug. But even though the wince springs from a laudable source, it's time to stop wincing and look with something like objectivity and unsentimentality at the things which distinguish college professors from winos.

God bless Jeffersonian democracy and its ideals. They are in large measure the springs of our cultural, economic, and political strengths and successes. But we have become conditioned by the softer edge of twentieth-century egalitarianism to forget that the Jeffersonian ideal of equality (not to mention the nobility of the yeoman barlow) is an ideal of equal beginnings, not necessarily of equal endings. And we have been beaten, culturally, into forgetting that the second part of the Jeffersonian model sees—and celebrates—the rising to the top of an aristocracy of merit and talent and energy. We need to recall some of the forgotten ideas, to recapture some of the principles which have been discarded in favor of mushy dreams, unrealistic pretenses, and wishful thinking which ignore the concrete facts of existence.

Walt was pushing sixty and had lived for forty-five years in variations on the theme of that grease-spattered and airless little cell in which I knew him fifteen years ago. I was living then in a hotel room which cost eight dollars a week; it was a clean little hole in a dying farm town. Now I'm living in a five-bedroom house which was elegant before the Kaiser abdicated; it's not in the best neighborhood in town, but the taxes are reasonable and

we like the old woodwork and the oak floors and the big trees. Walt, if he is still alive, is certainly living in some place very similar to that stuffy old trailer.

I do not despise Walt, or scorn him, or resent the fact that his vote and mine are equal. In fact, I think of him with a real affection which is not especially condescending. I hope that he has his health and has stayed out of jail (he had a tendency to fight in bars when he could get to town) and has a nice place to live and can keep finding work for as long as he wants or needs to. But I am tired of pretending that the difference between my house and his company trailer is the result simply of the accidents of my good fortune and his bad breaks. I'm tired of playing at believing that we two are essentially identical and passive tools, that all things are otherwise equal, and but for aimless chance our positions might easily have been reversed. Of course chance was part of it—but what our mainstream post-Jeffersonian culture seems determined to ignore is this fact: I could do Walt's work as well as he could, but the reverse was and is not true. Walt was a truck driver and a hayslinger and a stockhand and a tractor driver. I was a truck driver and a hayslinger and a stockhand and a tractor driver. I learned his trade quickly and (in fact) I was trusted by our common employer with some jobs which would never have been left to the skill of a semi-barlow like Walt. But could Walt do my work as well as I can? I'm sorry, but he couldn't.

I claim no superior merit or virtue or utility inherent in my trade over Walt's. In fact, I am perfectly willing to acknowledge that mankind would eat if it had no professors of English, while it would starve if it had no farmhands. I freely acknowledge that there is a lot of humbuggery in the academy and that in some respects Walt works harder than I, and for (a little) less money. But the fact remains that Walt does what I could do, while I do what Walt could *not* do. I need not be arrogant to recognize and admit that simple equation and its implications. Perhaps we need to reflect, though, on the significance of the fact that in

the America of the 1980s it seems daring and revolutionary (and makes people uneasy) to make so simple a statement as that one—that there are quite simply differences in the native capacities and capabilities of various people . . . and that pretending otherwise does dangerous violence to truth and good sense.



Lentils are harvested by combine, trucked and stored in bulk, and then sacked in burlap for shipment all over the world. Relatively small portions are bagged in plastic for domestic consumption. Bagged lentils conform to specifications of size and wholeness: the smallest lentils and the broken lentils are shunted aside and graded lower.

The lentils are simultaneously sorted and cleaned by an ingenious machine which uses big fans, gravity, and a series of screens to cull the more desirable ones.

A small lentil or a broken lentil is just as nutritious, just as full of protein and food value, just as much a lentil as the big one. But the big lentils go into burlap for shipment to Germany and Venezuela and other destinations spray-painted through crude stencils onto the bags, while the small and broken lentils wind up being shoveled by barlows into troughs for the livestock.

Walt and I—and you, reader—are of the same flesh, even as the large and the small lentils are of the same leguminous protein. But I will lay you odds that Walt is not living where the woodwork and floors are polished and pretty. I am humbly grateful for the luck (and the divine blessing) which has gone into bringing me to this place; the amount is enormous and far beyond anybody's deserving. But I am also tired of being compelled by fuzzy thinking to pretend that luck is the only reason for the difference between my house and Walt's. It is not, and one of the most important tasks facing sensible people in the last part of the twentieth century is the task of making it possible for people to acknowledge their competence without violating propriety. □

# The Affirmative Action Complex

by Mitchell Bard

**R**acism and sexism are serious problems in this country. Ironically, the solution that has been devised for these ills is blatantly racist and sexist. Affirmative action calls for decisions to be made solely on the basis of race and sex—which is the very definition of racism and sexism.

Nevertheless, the government has decided that it is necessary to use this means of discrimination to redress past discrimination, and this procedure has been ratified by the judiciary. The impact of affirmative action, its supporters say, is that it has provided minorities and women with opportunities they otherwise would have been denied. This is the beneficial side of the policy, but there is also a negative side which is being ignored.

The focus of the debate on this issue has been on whether affirmative action is justified given the past discrimination and current biases in our society. There has been little or no attention, however, to the psychological consequences of this palliative. Those consequences, in fact, may be quite grave and involve the erosion of the values of individualism and personal responsibility.

The explicit message of affirmative action is that everyone should have an equal opportunity



to health, education, and employment, but the implicit message is more sinister. That message is that all evils which befall an individual are the fault of society rather than the individual. Affirmative action has ratified the proposition that the historical and cultural prejudices of our society are the cause of problems encountered by individuals. This is something quite different, however, from the premise that affirmative action is needed because of the impact of these prejudices on certain groups.

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