

OBITUARY

Charles Christopher Bratt

December 11, 1930 - April 8, 2019

BY LARRY FRANCIS

Folk singer, carpenter, activist, writer, poet, teacher, folk artist and collector, red diaper baby, family man, woodsman, builder, volunteer, investor, philanthropist, environmentalist, humanist

Christopher Bratt (“Chris,” “Papa Chrissy”) was born at home on December 11, 1930, to Wiltrud Hildner Bratt and George Cleveland Bratt at the Columbus Apartments, 1492 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco. Chris passed away at his home in Applegate on April 8, 2019, surrounded by family and friends.

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.

It sounds an echo in my soul; how can I keep from singing!

—An old Quaker hymn, as adapted and sung by Pete Seeger

Chris loved to sing, knew hundreds if not thousands of songs, and sang them in his impassioned, clear tenor—in living rooms and kitchens, on picket lines and stages, at potlucks—wherever and whenever the spirit moved him. He sang lead for a semiprofessional folk group, the Albion Trio, which played around the San Francisco Bay Area in the early ’60s. Chris had wide-ranging, eclectic tastes in music and was influenced by Pete Seeger and the Weavers as well as international folk dance (Chris loved all line dancing, especially the Kopachka Folk Dancers of Mill Valley), Puccini (especially *La Bohème*), Miriam Makeba, and Paul Robeson. He picked up songs and sang them his whole life long—everything and anything from YMCA camp songs to Ezio Pinza, Tom Paxton, and Woody Guthrie. It’s only right to punctuate this story with lines from some of his favorites.

If I had a hammer, I’d hammer in the morning,

I’d hammer in the evening, all over this land...

—“If I Had a Hammer,” by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays

Chris had a hammer and knew how to use it. His dad was a carpenter, and Chris helped him on odd jobs during the Depression. During World War II, Chris went to work in a boatyard. Later, while a member of the carpenters union, Chris helped build the tract homes in South San Francisco that Malvina Reynolds immortalized in her song “Little Boxes.” Later he became a general contractor, founding Little Gem Construction (“a jewel of a job”) with partners Molly Malouf and Jim Holland. In the early 1960s, when the Ku Klux Klan was burning churches in Mississippi, Chris and Molly went there with the American Friends Service Committee to help congregations rebuild. In the late ’60s, Chris and his partners in Little Gem went to Delano, California, to build the Rodrigo Terrónez Memorial Clinic for the United Farm Workers (UFW). Chris’s politics and music were strongly influenced by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, UFW, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, American Friends Service Committee, and the Peace and Freedom Party.

Back in the Bay Area in the early ’70s, the Little Gem partners got tired of building ever fancier homes. A remodel calling for a fifth bathroom was the last straw; Little Gem dissolved. Chris got his teaching credential from San Francisco State University and started teaching



woodshop at Tomales High School in Tomales, California, where he met Joan Peterson, who was teaching English there. In 1976 Chris and Joan moved their blended family to 160 acres on Thompson Creek Road in Applegate.

All must work, for work is good, and in work man finds brotherhood.

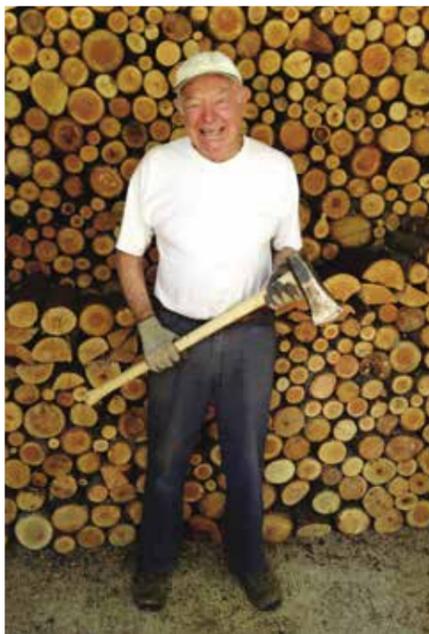
—“Hey Zhankoye,” Jewish folksong as sung by the Weavers

In Oregon, more carpentry jobs beckoned—large and small, volunteer and not—including countless hours building stages and a portable burrito booth and a remodel of the Headwaters Building on 4th Street in Ashland. Chris was a tireless builder, figuratively and literally. He built forts and the famous and dangerous “rocking boat” for his kids, homes and remodels for family and friends, tract homes like the “Little Boxes,” jungle gyms, and innumerable smaller projects.

Chris knew that working together on a project builds community. In the 1980s, putting his boundless energy, teaching experience, and carpentry skills to work, Chris organized a carpentry and woodworking co-op, the Billy Mountain Builders, which evolved over the years into Cottage Green Construction, a contracting partnership he formed with Richard Goodnough. Even through the last year of his life, Chris was in charge of maintaining, improving, and repairing Bratt Family Trust properties in San Francisco and Grass Valley, California.

Chris’s passion for work was the prime ingredient in bringing people together, along with his rough and wry sense of humor, exemplified by a favorite phrase of his, “What do you think this is—a country club?”

On their property in the Applegate, Chris and Joan had a big garden, pasture for goats and horses, and sustainable forestry for timber and firewood. The



picture of Chris in their big garden brings to mind another piece of a favorite song that Chris and Joan often sang:

Going to Oregon, where everything is green,

Gonna have the best ol’ farm that you have ever seen.”

—“Times A Gettin’ Hard,” by Lee Hays as sung by the Weavers and amended from “California” to “Oregon” by Chris and Joan

When Chris, Joan, and their children moved to their place on Thompson Creek (“Forest Farm,” they called it), they also brought Chris’s parents, George and Wiltrud (Beb). One night at dinnertime, a young woman they didn’t know came to the door and told them that the Bureau of Land Management was planning to spray large areas of the forest abutting their property. Beb overheard the conversation and said, “Christopher, you should do something about it.” He did do something about it—and with a passion one Boise Cascade vice president described as “relentless pressure, relentlessly applied.”

Besides organizing the Homestead Valley Improvement Club back in his Mill Valley days, in Oregon Chris helped found and/or served on boards of numerous organizations, among them ACOTS (Applegate Citizens Opposed to Toxic Sprays), Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, TREE (Thompson Creek Residents for Ecological Education), Headwaters/Geos Institute, Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council, *Applegater* newsmagazine, and Applegate Neighborhood Network.

In the office he built onto the main house, Chris kept extensive files on forest management, herbicide- and pesticide-spraying, clear-cutting, small woodlands management, small-diameter

timber products, and sustainable forest management.

Chris was predeceased by his parents, George and Wiltrud Bratt, and brothers Jonathan, George, Tom, and Peter. He is survived by Joan Peterson, his wife and partner since they met at Tomales High School some 50 years ago, and by his first wife, Nancy Wilkins, the mother of his three children.

Survivors also include his children Toni Winter (Terry), Josh Bratt (Wendie), and Nick Bratt (Beth); stepchildren Gordon Smith (Malie) and Jenell Smith; sister Susanna; cousins Michael and Mandy; countless nieces and nephews, including Greg, Nadya, Peter, James, Kevin, Georgia, Karen, and Alexis; and many grandchildren, grandnieces, grandnephews, and great-grandchildren as near as California and as far away as Norway.

When I’m on my journey, don’t you weep after me...

I don’t want you to weep after me.”

—“When I’m on My Journey,” as sung by the Weavers

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Tributes to Chris from friends and associates

Diana Coogle

Loss

When Chris Bratt died Applegate forests lost a staunch defender. Applegate gatherings lost a fine folk musician.

The *Applegater* lost a huge supporter and the board

its longest-serving member and “Behind the Green Door” columnist.

The Grayback Salon lost a reader whose unique perspective connected the poems with carpentry

(his lifelong craft)

and raised memories of a

San Francisco childhood

with socialist-minded parents.

Joan lost

a wonderful husband.

And I lost

a friend I loved.

☘

Richard Goodnough

From the moment I heard of the passing of Chris Bratt, a song he loved came to mind: “When I am gone,” by Phil Ochs. This song contains phrases like *I won’t know the right from the wrong and you won’t find me singin’ on this song when I am gone, so I guess I’ll have to do it while I’m here.* Chris had a very strong sense of right and wrong and loved to sing about workers’ rights, other cultures, harmony in the world, and many kinds of love.

Won’t be asked do my share when I’m gone, so I guess I’ll have to do it while I’m here. Doing his share was what he tried doing every day, whether in his work, with his family, or in his community.

Can’t be singing louder than the guns when I’m gone, so I guess I’ll have to do it while I’m here. Peace on a national level or a community level was something that was very close to his heart. His bumper stickers read, “I am already against the next war” and “Think globally, act locally.” During the time of the civil rights movement, he left paying work at home and went to Mississippi to help rebuild a burnt-out church.

See **CHRIS BRATT TRIBUTES**, page 17.