

The Anarchist School Teacher Anna Falkoff

Anonymous

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Like most anarchist women, we know very little about Anna Falkoff, although we know much more than most. We know she was born Anna Lea Gurewitz in 1880 in Ludza, Latvia, which was part of the Russian Empire at the time. She was Jewish, spoke both Russian and Yiddish, and resided in the eastern part of Latvia known as the *pale of settlement* where the Czar forced most of the Jews to live. Apparently, the mysterious anarchist Anna Falkoff fled the Empire in late 1903 and landed somewhere on the east coast of the United States.

Now, when you look at the time period, most Russian radicals fled to the US after the failed Revolution of 1905. The fact that Anna left in 1903 meant she was already into some heavy business. Being on the run from the Czar, it makes sense we know basically nothing about her life between 1903 and 1907, although most people agree she eventually made it to the anarchist commune of Home, a small village in an obscure inlet of the Salish Sea.

According to a 1910 census record, her first child Emma was born in Chicago in 1905, and the father was one Philip Falkoff, who Anna fled Latvia with. They were married and had a second child, Ernest, born at Home in 1907. The eldest child, Emma, was named after none other than Emma Goldman. There's no mention of any Anna Falkoff in the pages of Emma's newspaper *Mother Earth*, so either Anna admired Emma Goldman, or they'd been friends in Chicago, which is likely. One thing every historian seems to agree on is that she arrived at the anarchist commune of Home and became its school teacher, but no one seems certain when.

We know that one James F. Morton was the school-teacher of Home starting in 1902, but the actual classes were held together by a woman named Nettie Mueller, the other teacher. She took a leave of absence in the summer of 1903, replaced by Grace Allen, daughter of one of Home's founders. Several other teachers came and went, but by October of 1906, the school-teacher was one WD McMillan, of Everett, Washington.

The school year at Home was eight months, with the summer break beginning in June. While the mysterious Mr. McMillan presided over the school-house, in May of 1907, we find mention of Anna Falkoff inside that era's Home newspaper, *The Demonstrator*. According to one entry, *two comrades from Chicago by the names of Litovitz and Baker visited their friends the Folkoffs a few days the past week.*

Prior to this, the only mention of Anna is in the April, 16, 1906 issue where it's explained that *Louis Cohn, Benjamin Alt and Mr and Mrs Falkoff of Chicago have bought the Dickey place across the bay and will introduce themselves to the art of farming.*

It's unclear who the Dickey's are, but according to Radium Levene, his father Nathan Levin *bought a piece of land on the hill (this was later sold to the Falkoffs). There was no house on it so Dad bought \$15.00 worth of lumber and the morning the lumber was delivered, the men of the community gathered at the place with hammers and saws and the women came later with food and coffee—by evening they had built us a frame house. That was the contribution to a young couple who decided to live among them.* It's possible this *young couple* were the Dickey's, who then sold their place to the Falkoffs in 1906, and luckily there's one picture clearly indicating where this house was.

Many questions will be answered when more micro-fiche is scanned and put on the internet, but for now we don't know when she began teaching, but it was sometime after 1907. Historians all agree she left Home in 1910 to go start a Modern School in Seattle, and the first issues of the commune's latest paper, *The Agitator*, contain several articles and ads boosting the Modern School located at 601 Columbia Street. In fact, the slogan in *The Agitator* masthead read *A Semi-Monthly Advocate of the Modern School, Industrial Unionism, Individual Freedom.*

Anna was in deep with this new Modern School, which appears to have only been open on Sundays. She ran this school with her comrade Bruce Rogers, and many historians seem to agree Anna left her husband at this point, perhaps for Mr. Rogers. However, given the Seattle Modern School only ran on Sundays, and given that her son Ernest would later have clear memories of growing up in Home, it seems that Anna commuted between Seattle and Home, letting the commune raise her kids while she was away.

All of the articles about the Modern School that ran in *The Agitator* were written by Rogers, and Anna was likely concentrating on teaching and raising her two children. That first year went well enough, the Modern School remained afloat, but then a massive heat-wave descended on the Salish Sea that summer of 1911 and Anna decided to go swimming at Home with the rest of her anarchist village.

Following local custom, Anna bathed in the nude with other residents, adult and child alike. They were allegedly seen by scandalized outsiders, triggering a long legal battle known as *The Nudes and the Prudes*, a story told multiple times which we won't dwell on. Instead, we'll focus just on Anna, given she became the feminine image of the entire legal charade, the very face of the dreaded *nude anarchist bather*.

Anna was one of the few to briefly serve jail time for nude bathing at Home. While the publisher of *The Agitator*, Jay Fox, faced the most serious charges for writing an article in defense of nude bathing, he wasn't the only lightning rod for the public imagination. As Radium Lavene recalled, *when Anna Falkoff served a jail sentence for nude bathing—she was met at the wharf by a big crowd upon her release, and escorted in honor up the hill to her home (which had previously been ours)—Here she found that while she was away her house had been cleaned and papered—and a big dinner was waiting her home coming. She may have been considered a “crack pot” in the city—but in Home she was a heroine.* And so, within this context, of her own free will, Anna decided to make the most of the publicity, and when she was contacted by a journalist for the *Los Angeles Record*, she not only answered his questions, she posed for a photograph.

In this short article (just a single column) dated December 29, 1911, we learn that one Anna Faulkoff [sic] lived at Home, where *Emma Goldman has her hand in pretty strong there and they read her works instead of the Bible.* The article is sensational, but the strangest part is at the end. According to the journalist, *Anna was a graduate of the Russian Imperial University and is considered a scholar in her native country. She is a member of the nobility, but was forced to leave. She is now a radical anarchist.* In case it isn't obvious, Anna is lying to the journalist and having

a bit of fun, although it remains possible she entered one of the twelve Imperial Universities that existed in pre-revolution Russia.

This article was widely syndicated across the US, appearing in multiple daily newspapers including the local *Tacoma Times*, where we've taken the image from. Anna appears again in the *Times*, just once, a short entry from January, 19, 1912, that reveals *the nude bathing cases against the Home colonists will be dropped. There was little chance of convictions and the expense was piling up. This decision today frees Adrian Wilbur, who drew a hung jury yesterday, Anna Faulkoff, Stella Rosnick, Stella Thorndale, and Anton Zonconelli, all of who were up on appeal.*

Free from the stress of a potential jail sentence, Anna returned to her life as a sometimes school-teacher, traveling to Seattle every weekend to run the Modern School. It's unclear what happened, but the school closed in 1912, and rather than return back to the commune, Anna decided to take her two kids and move permanently to the city, having resolved to earn her teaching degree at the University of Washington. Beyond this motivation, Anna likely knew how involved Home had been in the recent *Los Angeles Times* bombing in 1910, and given the Pinkerton detectives creeping around the woods, she likely decided it wasn't the best place for her children, not with her friends harboring dynamiters and smuggling bombs.

From what we know, it seems Anna moved directly into a house at 3731 14th Avenue [now University Way], perched above the water of Portage Bay, and she immediately began to garden the acre of land around this pleasant house. It's possible her lies to the Los Angeles Record helped her get into UW, what with her reputation as a fallen Russian noble of high-learning, but who can say? After successfully being admitted to UW, she also began to garden in the plots the university set aside for students. According to everyone who could remember, she always gardened barefoot.

One of the people who remembered this fact is Harvey O'Conner, a young Wobbly who often stopped by her house on 14th, which he described as *a rallying point* near campus, and one time when he was there, *a whole bunch of people were seated around a table and they offered me a glass of water, which I gulped down. But it turned out to be vodka. It was my first introduction to hard liquor.* This house where she lived with young Ernest and Emma quickly became *a hotbed for young revolutionists*, one that Anna didn't feel the need to hide.

In fact, it was during this time period, in 1913, that we find the first published works of Anna Falkoff, all included in this pamphlet. Each were printed in the anarchist newspaper *Why?*, published in Tacoma. It served as the defacto Home newspaper, given Jay Fox had taken *The Agitator* to Chicago and renamed it *The Syndicalist*. It's not much, and her writing tapers off in 1914 when she began her classes at UW, but these articles reveal her knowledge of Yiddish and are often far more poetic than what surrounds them, dwelling on things like nature and the heart.

From the fall of 1914 to the summer of 1917, Anna earned her teaching degree, as well as her high-school diploma, and in the process became widely known as the barefoot anarchist of Seattle, with a picture of her gardening in the October 7, 1917 edition of *The Seattle Times*. It seems that her ex-husband Philip also moved to Seattle, and a 1916 city-directory confirms he lived across town in the Central District at 316 20th Street, with him and Anna on good terms. She was well liked, as were her children, at least until the Seattle General Strike of 1919.

After the collapse of that promising moment, the Seattle longshoremen blocked a shipment of arms to the White armies of Russia, provoking a reaction against all the local radicals, with Anna accused of being a Bolshevik by a patriotic inquisition. These proto-fascists were convinced she had been indoctrinating the youth of Seattle all these years with her brand of Marxism. In

response, she told them, *I am no Marxist and I have never studied Marxist economics. And anyway, I doubt it would be worthwhile to teach Marxist economics to such young children.* When asked if she was indoctrinating the youth with any type of ideology, she replied, *Yes, I try to teach them to be free.*

Anna suffered no consequences for teaching and harboring countless radicals in her house, probably because of how loved she was, and in the years that followed she would write for the *Seattle Union Record*, teach at a school in the remote logging town of Index, Washington, run a school for gifted children in Seattle, and managed the Hollywood Tavern Apartments in the 1930s.

The Hollywood empire was run by the Stimson family, a settler logging dynasty, who had a farm out near Woodinville that supplied their Hollywood Farm City Store in Seattle. In the 1920s, the family branched out and opened the Hollywood Tavern Apartments, which housed not only the Dairy Store, but the restaurant, which served organic, *farm-to-table* meals, 35 cents for lunch, 50 cents for dinner, some solidly middle-class pricing. According to the 1936 city-directory, Anna Falkoff was not only the manager for the Hollywood Tavern Apartments, she lived in unit D, having moved out of her University District house sometime after 1929. Unfortunately for her, this place closed in 1937 thanks to the Great Depression, and Anna was out of a job.

The next mention of Anna comes from the 1940 census where she's listed as managing an apartment building in Covington, a rural town south of Seattle. After that, we find her in 1941 renting a room at 1705 East Howell Street. The next year, 1942, she rents an apartment down the street at the La Quinta, residing in Unit 11. And then, suddenly, in 1943, Anna Falkoff bought the La Quinta for over \$70,000, its valuation in 1930. \$70,000 was a fortune in 1943. Where did she get it?

This story is actually a mystery, but here are the facts. In 1929, there's a record of Anna returning to the USA from Bremen, Germany on the *SS President Harding*. There's no information on what she was doing there, but it's possible she went to visit her family in Latvia. In the years that followed, unspeakable darkness descended on the country of her birth.

As far as can be discerned, nearly all of her Latvian relatives were killed in WWII, likely by the Nazis, with their deaths recorded in 1941, the same year 25,000 Jews were murdered in the Rumbula Forest in Latvia. It's possible these relatives were able to send Anna all their money before they died, because in 1943, suddenly wealthy, she bought La Quinta and moved into Unit 9. By 1955, she owned two other apartment buildings.

She lived at La Quinta in Unit 9 until 1954 when she moved to one of her other properties, a giant apartment building at 1605 East Madison known as The Olympian. Positioned at the summit of Capitol Hill, the upper floors could see both the Olympic and Cascade Mountains, and she built herself a penthouse here when she was over seventy years old.

In 1964, she sold La Quinta to a black Boeing worker named Richard Norman, breaking the real estate *red-lining* then in practice. Not only had she brought a black family into Capital Hill, she brought many, given the Norman's could legally rent their twelve apartments to black people. She was eighty-five years old when this transaction was finalized, and she died two years later in 1966.

Anna had been a great lover of opera and once offered to sell La Quinta to raise funds for a new Seattle opera house. This means she rubbed shoulders in the opera with people like Bill Gates' mom, whom she likely hated.

Anna Falkoff was well known in Seattle, as were her hyper-intelligent children. Emma went to UW and then became a librarian there in the 1930s, which she kept at her whole life, while her brother Ernest was the youngest person to ever enroll at UW, starting his freshmen year at the age of 14.

Despite his intelligence, Ernest studied law and took a job with the Department of Justice, although he ended up being a private lawyer in Yakima. It's doubtful he knew the implications, but Ernest helped negotiate the land-sale for what ended up being the Hanford nuclear plant, something which is still poisoning the region. He stayed in Yakima and helped form the Northwest Horticultural Council, a fruit cartel that negotiated prices with the federal government and made private deals with foreign states. During his time there, Ernest arranged to send Washington apples across the Pacific to the USSR, something which rarely happened during the Cold War. He died in 2005, although by then he had changed his last name from Falkoff to Falk.

While there's much still to be discovered about his mother, Anna Falkoff, it goes without saying that she left her mark on the region, probably in more ways than we realize. 1919 was a terrible year for anarchists in the US, a year that nearly crushed the movement forever, but Anna survived and stayed put, never once forgetting Home or the utopia that could have been, and if you doubt how fervant an anarchist she was, please read her following texts. With any luck, the fire of her rebellion is still raging in there, bright enough for all to see.

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