In 1929, the Communist International (Comintern) sent an open letter to the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA, henceforth CP) complaining about the lack of native-born Americans in the Party’s leadership circle and encouraging them to remedy this situation by promoting more Americans to committees. Foreign-born men of eastern European origin had maintained control of the CP since its inception in 1919. Now, with this new directive from Moscow, the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the CP began a campaign to diversify its cadre by periodically examining the background of each member and appointing more native-born personnel to the national office. In order to appeal to those sections of society the Party ostensibly represented, they did not limit their efforts to the Americanization of the Central Committee, but also increased the number of women, minorities, and trade unionists.

Five women who came of age in the late 1920s and early 1930s got their on-the-job training in the outback of the American Party’s District 13 in California. Their names were Louise Todd, Elaine Yoneda, Peggy Dennis, Caroline Decker, and Dorothy Ray Healey. Four of them would achieve national prominence in subsequent years, but at the height of Communist influence in the 1930s, they were participating in working class struggles on the waterfront and in the orchards and fields of California’s agricultural sector. These women were young, intelligent, idealistic, and the children of radical immigrants. Moreover, they were willing to sacrifice almost anything for what they perceived to be the coming revolution. The Communist Party embraced them when they were children, molding them through Marxist social and educational groups, and then used their youth, idealism, and gender for the promotion of various struggles.

In 1984, Harvey Klehr, the Andrew W. Mellon professor of Politics and History at Emory University, published the most comprehensive monograph available on the American Communist Party during the 1930s, the decade in which the political influence of the CP surpassed what its membership numbers implied. In The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade, Klehr describes events at the upper echelon of the CP as they related to events in

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2 Klehr, 13.
Moscow, with only minor references as to how they affected the rank-and-file. He argues that political clashes over theory and tactics in the first decade of its existence greatly affected later decisions regarding leadership and policy in the next. According to Klehr, women were typically members of the rank-and-file, and never accounted for a large percentage of Party membership. He devotes just one paragraph to the general topic of women in the Party, none of which examines the activities of the Women’s Commission.

Much of the California CP activity documented in Heyday centers around Upton Sinclair’s 1934 gubernatorial campaign, the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) strike from that same year, and the dual-union of canny and agricultural workers, known as the Cannery and Agricultural Workers’ Industrial Union (CAWIU), which had some early success organizing farm workers in California during the 1930s. California gets a more detailed treatment in two articles by Robert Chemy, “Prelude to the Popular Front: The Communist Party in California, 1931-1935,” and “The Communist Party in California, 1935-1940: From the Political Margins to the Mainstream and Back.” Chemy’s articles are based on research at the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History, which opened to researchers in 1991. To that end, they provide the most up to date analysis of Secretary Sam Darcy and District 13. As the title of the former suggests, Cherny argues that California adopted United Front strategies before they became the official policy of the Comintern.3

Susan Ware’s 1980 book, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s, is an excellent basis for research on women in the Communist Party during the Great Depression. Written as “a general introduction to women’s activities in the United States during the decade of the 1930s,” Holding Their Own is an amalgamation of then-current scholarship on women in the Depression years.4 It begins with a general history of 1930s America, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, and then crosses the Atlantic to discuss the rise of fascism. The remainder of the book focuses on women during this period and explores the ways in which these three factors changed (or did not change) their personal lives, careers, educational opportunities, political activism, and culture.

Ware contends that women, like their male counterparts, were attracted to the CP because they saw it as a beacon in the midst of economic and political turmoil. Contrary to Klehr, she believes women to be crucial to the revolutionary struggle, citing the contributions of Ella Reeve Bloor, Anita Whitney, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Margaret Cowl, among others. Cowl’s work as head of the CP Women’s Commission and that body’s support of the

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3 Organizer of the 1930 unemployed march in New York City, Samuel Darcy was district organizer in California (District 13) for the next 6 years. Often at odds with the national headquarters in New York and the Comintern in Moscow, Darcy worked with other left-leaning organizations during some of the state’s most contested political campaigns, including Upton Sinclair’s race for governor and the longshoremen’s strike in 1934. This “united front” policy was used to great effect in French elections in 1936 and formally adopted at the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935.

4 Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne Publishers: 1980), ix.
Women's Charter while simultaneously denouncing the National Women's Party and the Equal Rights Amendment is an intriguing topic for possible future exploration.

Klehr detailed the CP's Americanization campaign in his 1978 monograph *Communist Cadre*. Using lists published by the Party in its national journal, *The Daily Worker*, Klehr shows how the sociological makeup of the CEC changed over the course of its life. Because the CEC primarily consisted on members of District cadre, Klehr argues that this was the best method of doing a sociological study of the "professional revolutionaries" who made careers out of Party work. Women in particular seemed drawn to radical associations in the California District, the most famous being Anita Whitney, who was a perpetual candidate on the CP ticket. Records from a variety of surviving sources show that many women were CP members during the Depression and a large percentage of them were the native-born children of radical immigrants. The CP also provided radical education in place of the formal one that these women were denied because of the Depression or because it was deemed "bourgeois," enabling the Party to train them to be the next generation of revolutionaries. In examining the lives of Decker, Todd, Yoneda, Dennis, and Healey, this study will place them in the context of a radical, immigrant tradition, and answer several questions regarding their activities as District 13 operatives. In what ways were they connected to radical organizations in California? How did their education effect their commitment to revolutionary struggles? And finally, how did District and Section organizers utilize their youthful enthusiasm, idealism, and gender for the advancement of CP policies?

This paper will challenge Klehr's assertion that women were mostly rank-and-file activists in the CP during the 1930s. Moreover, as a biographical analysis of five women activists in California in this same period, it will show that, contrary to Ware's argument, many women were Party functionaries long before the stock market crashed.

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Growing Up Red

The Americanization of the Party involved less recruitment than one might imagine. From its inception, the CP was composed of a combination of American-born charter members from the Socialist Party (SP), such as Ella Reeve Bloor and Anita Whitney, and recent immigrants from Eastern Europe with familial ties to revolutionary organizations in their home countries. As these new arrivals came of age and married, they gave birth to the next generation of Party people—native-born, English-speaking children who memorized revolutionary poetry while their contemporaries recited nursery rhymes. What was life like in these radical households? A brief summary of each woman’s life, including her ancestry, religious tradition, education, and introduction to Marxist theory helps to provide the answer.6

Louise Todd was born in San Francisco in 1905, the second daughter of working-class, German immigrants who left the SP and became charter members of the CP upon its founding in 1919. This radical tradition extended back several generations and included followers of the German philosopher Ferdinand Lassalle and the anarchist Johann Most. Todd described her parents as having a “concept of Socialism that was almost a utopian thing. Their god was Karl Marx.”7 As a result, Louise grew up in a household that was replete with revolutionary discussions instead of religious ideology. Because her father had a particular aversion to steady employment, the family could not afford to send her to college, so Todd trained to be a secretary at the High School of Commerce.8

Born in 1906 to Russian Jewish parents, Elaine Yoneda grew up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn where she occasionally attended SP Sunday school. In 1911, she accompanied her mother to Russia to visit family near Minsk where she spent one terrifying night hiding from vigilantes during a pogrom. Although she celebrated holy days with her Orthodox grandparents, Yoneda said her father did not want her exposed to religious ideology and insisted she attend school on Jewish holidays. She described her parents as active in SP labor organizations who became charter members of the CP just before the family relocated to San Diego in 1920. With the exception of the SP Sunday school, Yoneda claimed to have been more concerned with fashion than her parents’ political activities, remembering her first Young Workers’ League (YWL) meeting in 1924 not as a radicalizing event, but as the day she met her first husband. She decided to join the International Labor Defense (ILD) in 1930, after witnessing police brutality against CP members in Los Angeles during a February demonstration and at the March 6th hunger march.9

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7 Todd, 1, 5th interview.
8 Todd, 1-15, 1st interview.
Regina Karasick, better known by her chosen Party name Peggy Dennis, was born in New York in 1909. Her parents had been members of what she called rival revolutionary Leninist groups in Russia and had escaped the tyranny of that country as young newlyweds. The family relocated to Los Angeles in 1912, where they joined a thriving Jewish enclave in Boyle Heights and participated in highly charged political discussions following the 1917 Russian Revolution. They eventually transferred their allegiance to the Communist Party. Dennis began her training in the SP Sunday school the same year she entered kindergarten, memorizing revolutionary poems that she would later recite for her parents and their friends. She graduated from high school at sixteen and, "imbued with the Jewish immigrant's respect for education," enrolled in the Teachers College of the University of California. She left after one year to follow her sister, Mini Carson, into the CP children's education movement.

Born in 1912, Caroline Decker spent the first ten years of her life in the small Jewish community of Macon, Georgia during the height of Jim Crowism. Having fled pogroms in the Ukraine, the family chose this potentially hostile location because of a familial connection that translated into employment for her father. They moved to Syracuse, NY in 1922, where her conservative father got a job working for Thomas Edison. It was her older brother who introduced Caroline to Marxism at an early age, by bringing home for dinner such New York intellectuals as Rose Pastor Stokes, Jay Lovestone, and William Z. Foster. Decker remembered her mother felt sorry for the emaciated men wearing threadbare clothing, and relished the opportunity to fatten them up a bit. Because of the Depression, Caroline lost the opportunity to attend college, prompting her to follow her sister and become a full-time organizer for the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL).

Born in Denver, Colorado in 1914, Dorothy Rosenblum, the daughter of Hungarian, Jewish immigrants, grew up in a house full of turmoil. Her father seemed incapable of providing for his family and her mother rebelled against her Orthodox upbringing, resenting the limited formal education she had received as a result of that Orthodoxy. Because of her father's various jobs as a traveling salesman, the family moved frequently before settling in Berkeley in the 1920s. Dorothy's mother was a Socialist turned Communist who introduced her daughter to the writings of Upton Sinclair, Walt Whitman, and Charles and Mary Beard in addition to Marx and Engels. It was her brother Bernard, however, who acquainted the family with the California CP when he enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley in 1928. In short order, Dorothy joined the Young Communist League (YCL) and her mother, having let it lapse during her childbearing years, renewed her membership in the Party.

In Communist Cadre, Harvey Klehr contends, "many Party members grew up in communist households and naturally progressed from the Young

10 Healey, 25.
11 Ibid., 19-25.
12 Decker, 1-30, 1st interview and 32, 2nd interview.
Pioneers to the Young Communist League to the CPUSA just as other Americans went from the Boy Scouts through college fraternities into the Elks or Kiwanis.”14 These social clubs, as well as alternative schools to the “bourgeois education” of the capitalist system, became the instruments of these women’s radicalization.15 One of the tenets of Marxism-Leninism is the necessity to educate the masses, and this instruction began in the cradle—Healey, Dennis, and Todd lived their entire childhoods in this insulated world, whereas Decker’s lessons came in the form of intense debates between her conservative father and her brother’s comrades from New York. Although as a teenager Yoneda’s interest in these tenets was purely social, she and the other four women joined child-centered Marxist groups as soon as they were able, and quickly lost contact with what Healey called “the straight world.”16

As a result of this early education in revolutionary struggle, these four were fully immersed in Party activity at the start of the Depression. Todd, who had spent her childhood attending suffrage meetings, hiking with likeminded friends in the German outdoor club Nature Friends, and participating in the YWL, was traveling with her first husband, living and working with comrades in New York and Florida before returning to San Francisco to begin life as a professional revolutionary.17 After causing a stir over a senior thesis on women in the Soviet Union, Decker gave her first public speech during International Women’s Day activities sponsored by the Young Communist League.18 From the age of twelve, Healey knew she would devote her life to the revolution, and joined the YCL two years later.19 Dennis, who like Todd was older than the others, followed her sister’s example and became a teacher of the next generation of revolutionaries. “My traditional sweet sixteen party celebrated too my graduation from high school, my passing from the children’s movement in the Young Communist League, and into the Communist Party where my first assignment was that of adult leader of the children’s organization.”20

By the 1929 stock market crash, Yoneda had been married for four years and had a two-year-old daughter. While she treated the YWL as more of a club than a political organization, Yoneda noted that several friends who were members of the Trade Union Education League (TUEL) repeatedly asked the couple to join. In retrospect, Elaine admitted that her husband’s $80/week salary (the equivalent of $1084.65 today) as a union machinist might have contributed to their initial complacency.21 When he lost that job, and the couple had to move in with Elaine’s parents, she became more active in the YWL and ILD while he joined the neighborhood Unemployed Council. Only after she began working for the Party’s legal arm did Yoneda delve into a Marxist-leaning

14 Klehr, Cadre, 5.
15 Healey, 28.
16 Healey, 24.
17 Todd, 15, 1st interview.
18 Decker, 33-34, 1st interview.
20 Ibid., 24.

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education, primarily focusing on civil rights’ legislation and the Constitution, always keeping a copy of it and the Bill of Rights in her purse for reference.22

**Love and Marriage**

Once a member joined the ranks of paid operatives, every decision about her personal life was in the hands of the district or national office. As Beth Slutsky states in her dissertation on the lives of three Party women, “[many] seemingly personal decisions—marriage, sexual relationships, children, birth control, family life, gender roles in the home—were constrained both by American gender norms and by Party directives.”23 While Slutsky’s emphasis is on the effect these directives had on women, her suggestion that “subordination to the Party’s primarily male leadership” was evidence of chauvinism is shortsighted.24 These determinations sometimes took weeks, even months while members’ lives hung in the balance, and this affected entire families, not just female members. For example, as warrants accumulated for the arrest of labor activist Gene Dennis in the early 1930s, he went into hiding while Peggy continued doing Party work for months before learning of the CEC’s determination to relocate the family to Moscow.25

Slutsky was correct, however, in her assertion that women like Healey had a “[personal] and professional life [that] centered on the Party.”26 This contention could be applied more broadly, as all five subjects in this study married twice within the insular world of CPUSA, an impressive statistic given the low rate of marriage during the Depression.27 Rather than pay for the cost of a divorce, families also tended to stay together during the economic crisis.28 This was evidently not the case in District 13, but none of the women suggested that the district or national bureaucracy interfered with this aspect of their personal lives.

On the subject of children and abortions, however, the Party and the women had much to say. Elsa Dixler maintained, “American Communists were...trapped by their vision of women as mothers above all else,” but the truth was less simplistic, as these women’s lives reveal.29 As Dorothy Healey so succinctly put it, “Who could think of a revolutionary having a child? We couldn’t take time off; it was unthinkable.”30 But, rather than Party directives, childbearing decisions appeared to have been made in a variety of ways. Todd, who chose not to have children because of her dedication to the revolutionary struggle, as well as the economic crisis, claimed to have made this decision with

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22 Yoneda, 16.
23 Slutsky, 87.
24 Ibid., 8.
25 Dennis, 56.
26 Slutsky, 5.
27 Ware, 7. In 1935, the number of single women aged 25-30 was 30% higher than in 1930. Although they were together for over 30 years, Gene and Peggy Dennis never married.
28 Ware, 7.
29 Dixler, 181.
30 Healey, 38.
both husbands. As a member of the California Executive Board of the CP, she recalled that women (including Healey in 1943) often came to her with this very question, and she advised them to do it if their marriage was an equitable one. Decker, whose first husband was also an organizer during the few years she was active in District 13, said, “If I had had children, I would not have been doing what I was doing. It’s that simple.”

Dennis and Yoneda both juggled Party work with motherhood in the 1930s. After continuous prodding from her husband, Dennis consented to have a child, with the stipulation that she could remain a professional revolutionary. Once she had Tim, to her increasing consternation, her husband, mother, and her Party superiors put constraints on her activities because she was a nursing mother. “Not getting arrested meant staying out of street actions or public meetings. I taught classes, wrote leaflets, served on committees that planned actions for others who would get arrested. I felt guilty.” While Yoneda continued to work after giving birth, her employment as an ILD operative brought new challenges for her young family. Unlike her previous jobs, the ILD required her to be ready at a moment’s notice in order to bail out political detainees, but when her husband got home, “he wanted dinner ready and the table set—whether I was working or not.” Still, Elaine claims their separation in 1932 was due to his drinking and infidelity and not because of any conflict over the demands of her job.

Guilt can be a strong motivator, as can the misinformed accusations of comrades. Todd noted that women who chose to have children were often ridiculed for trying to get out of doing Party work. She saw mothers in the CP as reflections of working mothers everywhere—under-supported and often victims of chauvinism, but still dedicated to making better futures for their children. To that end, she enlisted in several United Front campaigns for childcare centers. Because of the stigma associated with motherhood, CP women used birth control obtained from Sanger clinics if they could afford it or less reliable “feminine hygiene” products if they could not, and resigned themselves to illegal abortions if necessary. Healey, who had the first of three abortions at the age of 16, said, “It was just taken for granted that we would have [them].” Yoneda had an abortion at the beginning and, when a diaphragm proved ineffective, at the end of her first marriage. Dennis also had several abortions—one of them in Moscow while it was still legal, but she had to apply for permission from some Party bureaucrat before getting the procedure. Reproductive freedom was but one example of the ways in which

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31 Todd, 9, 4th interview.
32 Ibid., 5, 5th interview.
33 Decker, 84, 2nd interview.
34 Ibid., 41-42.
35 Yoneda, 137-139.
36 Todd, 1-5, 5th interview.
37 Healey, 38.
38 Yoneda, 134, 142.
39 Dennis, 102.
Party officials controlled the lives of operatives, as will be apparent in the next section.

"Anybody was used."

From the Party? Independence from the Party? Well, you know, it was in those areas that I really first found disagreements with the Party. I was kind of independent to begin with and things were so loose. Anybody who would get in there, and was willing to give his life and his freedom and could speak and who cared, was used.— Caroline Deckerm

By far the greatest influence the Party had on individual members was in their professional lives. CP operatives were regularly transferred between districts, sections, committees, and front organizations as the need arose, often with little regard for the experience, training, or wishes of the individuals. The small number of qualified cadre in the District and the numerous activities associated with the Party in the 1930s could easily explain this phenomenon, but factors such as youth and gender must have played a part in some of the decisions. In 1933, for example, Healey was sent to Brawley for the CAWIU during a lettuce strike. She was nineteen, pregnant, and had no knowledge of organizing agricultural workers, but she was a young, articulate female just like CAWIU organizer Caroline Decker, and perhaps the Party thought these qualities were a major reason for Decker’s success. After a night of vigilantism, during which the police obtained a warrant for her arrest, the CP decided that Healey, rather than her comrade Stanley Hancock, should address the strikers to give assurances that the Party had not abandoned them. It is possible they believed she would escape unharmed, but a more likely explanation is that they expected her to be arrested and serve as a symbol of police brutality. Released on bail in order to have an abortion, Healey was later convicted of disturbing the peace and sentenced to 180 days in jail, missing the Upton Sinclair gubernatorial campaign and the San Francisco general strike because of her incarceration.

While Healey did not speculate that gender was somehow a factor in this instance, she did note its significance later in the decade when, having gained a considerable amount of experience in the fields, she was nominated for international vice president of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), saying:

The speaker kept stressing the fact that I was a woman. I was resentful and thought, ‘What the hell difference does it make that I’m a woman? Am I qualified or not?’ I suppose you

40 Deckerm, 70, 2nd interview.
41 Healey, 43.
42 Ibid., 48-49.
could say I was not very advanced in my thinking on the ‘woman question’ in those days. Actually the fact that I was a woman was a very legitimate consideration. On the other hand, being female could work in a radical’s favor. In a related story about the 1933 pear strike, Decker stated that the Party had determined that she should not be served an injunction: “It could be that my comrades made that decision because I was the only female in the group. There were many advantages to being a female, and one of them was staying alive.” Following a series of successful strikes between 1932 and her arrest on charges of vagrancy in 1934, Decker became the poster child for recruitment drives for the CAWIU and the Party. “Because of my speaking ability and because of the fact that I was young and female, I was used a lot for mass meetings and mass speaking.” District 13 organizer Sam Darcy even tried to make her a section organizer in Bakersfield because of her celebrity status among agricultural workers, but Decker refused. “They wanted to take advantage of the fact that I was so well known. They wanted to take advantage of it for the party... [and] being a party organizer was really being an office hack of some kind. It didn’t attract me.” Forty years later, she did not “blame the party for trying to take advantage of it. You know, any organization would do the same thing.” The raids on the CP and CAWIU offices, as well as her arrest, prevented what she imagined would have been a great confrontation between her and Darcy.

While it is true that “women could find in the CP a structure that encouraged their participation in progressive collective activities,” more important than gender must have been their American citizenship and command of the English language. Louise Todd ran for supervisor in San Francisco twice in the 1930s because she possessed the necessary qualifications to do so—she was an American citizen and a resident of the city for the requisite number of years. Moreover, connections through her father to American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions secured some mainstream support for her candidacy. The same could be said for Yoneda, who in 1939 was nominated to run for supervisor on what she described as a nonpartisan ticket while her husband Karl was in Alaska organizing cannery workers. This campaign was waged in the midst of her continuing work for the ILD, the birth of her second child, her involvement in the fight against Japanese imperialism in China, and the turmoil in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.

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43 Healey, 66.
44 Decker, 28, 1st interview.
46 Ibid., 19, 8th interview.
47 Ibid., 22, 8th interview.
49 Todd, 7-8, 2nd interview.
50 Yoneda, 158.

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Decker agreed that place of birth and language mattered, surprised to be "a kid still wet behind the ears teaching a class on Marxism" to older people she knew were more knowledgeable.\(^5\) She was aware that her natural speaking ability contributed to her rise in the Party, but admitted that it was also because, "I was English speaking you see. And that was such a plus in those days amongst radicals to be American born and English speaking."\(^5\)

As mentioned, the CP sometimes used arrests of its operatives to direct attention to what it considered to be the fascist policies of the capitalist state against the working class. In the vigilantism that followed the 1934 San Francisco general strike, Decker and other CAWIU organizers were arrested, as were several hundred others. The charge was originally for vagrancy, but soon it was elevated to criminal syndicalism. Allowed to languish in a Sacramento jail while the national and district offices debated how best to proceed with her case, Decker realized she was being used as a symbol of capitalist repression, saying, "this is where Elaine Black [Yoneda] fits into my life in a way that I have nothing but contempt for."\(^5\) She did not elaborate on Yoneda's involvement in the decision to let her stay in jail. Convicted and sentenced to one-to-fourteen years, Decker was denied bail pending her appeal and served almost three years in Tehachapi Women’s Prison. "So naturally, sitting up there in jail for almost three years, I did a lot of thinking on democratic centralism versus democracy," and, when released, "I had very serious doubts and questions."\(^5\) She did not renew her membership in the CP after being released from parole, and limited her future participation to sympathetic fund-raising and campaigns associated with second husband (and CP member) Richard Gladstein’s law firm.\(^5\)

In many ways the ILD functioned like any other law firm, but ultimately their clients were the Party and CP front groups, not prisoners such as Decker. Leaders from these organizations made all decisions regarding bail and legal strategy. In her capacity as an ILD representative, Yoneda bailed out the chosen few, arranged visits to those serving time, and found jobs for parolees. The CP even used her name on bail bonds in a fruitless attempt to hide their involvement in certain cases. While she claimed to have had no say in where bail was applied, as the executor of these Party directives, Elaine must have angered more operatives than Decker over the course of her career.\(^5\) She was also a victim of Party machinations during the maritime strike when, after being arrested during an attempt to post bail for striking sailors, Yoneda got caught up in a prison hunger strike that lasted several weeks.\(^5\)

Louise Todd also spent time in Tehachapi. Her conviction for perjury in conjunction with a petition drive to get the CP on the 1934 state ballot netted

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\(^5\) Decker, 69, 2\(^{nd}\) interview.
\(^5\) Ibid., 41, 2\(^{nd}\) interview.
\(^5\) Ibid., 12, 7\(^{th}\) interview.
\(^5\) Ibid., 19, 8\(^{th}\) interview.
\(^5\) Ibid., 8, 7\(^{th}\) interview.
\(^5\) Ibid., 31, 33, 77.
\(^5\) Ibid., 40-41.
her a sentence of one-to-fourteen years—the same sentence given to Decker and the others convicted of criminal syndicalism. Although this conviction usually carried a much lighter sentence (and sometimes only a fine), the Party’s attorney, George Anderson, decided against pursuing the matter once he lost the appeal. Years later, when Todd was working as his secretary (a condition of her parole was that she have a non-Party job), Anderson had her listen in on a conversation between him and the prosecuting attorney. Through this she learned that City Hall had ordered her conviction and the resulting harsh sentence. Todd did not expand on this assertion, so it was unclear whether the directive came from Mayor Rossi or the District Attorney. In this respect, Todd was a pawn for both radical and anti-communist forces in the state.58 Unlike Decker, she returned to her duties as a District functionary after parole in 1938, became a member of the CEC in 1940, and went underground as a part of the “reserve cadre” during the McCarthy years. She left the Party in the massive exodus following Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin in 1956.59

Klehr saw CP women leaders as powerful only because of their “ties with men,” or because they were Party “ornaments” to be “displayed frequently as symbols of Communist commitment to women’s rights.”60 Decker’s frequent speaking engagements qualified her as an ornament, but she was also one of the most informed agricultural organizers in the California Communist Party. It should be noted that Dennis was the only one of the five who was married to the same powerful operative in the 1930s. The others divorced and married men with less stature in the CP (Todd, Yoneda, and Healey) or married a Party man who was not a paid functionary (Decker).61 Both Healey and Todd were selected for the California State Executive Board in 1938 and were promoted to the CEC in the 1940s. Yoneda was elected Pacific Coast Vice President of the ILD in 1937 as that organization’s representative to the national convention and was the only woman in this study who remained a communist her entire life.62 Dennis is perhaps the only one whose career was overshadowed by her relationship with her husband Gene, the Party’s future national chairman.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, District 13 in California was the hub of radical activity during arguably the most radical period in American history. Five women—Louise Todd, Elaine Yoneda, Caroline Decker, Peggy Dennis, and Dorothy Healey—were at the center of that activity. Idealistic and intelligent, they were radicalized by the times and by familial ties to European Marxist groups. Deprived of formal educations, drawn to “action, not theory,” and feeling “a great sense of responsibility to do something about [the economic crisis],” these

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58 Todd, 8-12, 3rd interview.
59 Todd, 12, 5th interview.
60 Klehr, 72.
61 Todd, 10, 5th interview; Healey, 67.
62 Yoneda, 193.
women committed their lives to the CP with a zealously that Todd likened to religion. She specified:

I have to say that [my] relationship to the Communist Party was just as religious as the relationship of a Catholic is to the Catholic Church. It was a religious dedication [that] engendered no kind of disagreement. It meant that we accepted what came from above wholly, without ever asking, 'Is this correct?'

This unquestioning devotion to Marxism and the revolution resulted in the exploitation of these young women.

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63 Healey, 29. Todd, 6, 4th interview.
64 Todd, 13, 5th interview.