



**NEWS FROM  
RAIN  
SHADOW  
COUNTRY**

**TIM WHEELER**

*Tim Wheeler Oct '05*

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ISBN 978-1-63491-568-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2017

First Edition

Cover art: Timothy Wheeler  
Artwork throughout this book by Timothy Wheeler unless noted otherwise.

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## **We Host Barack Obama (the Elder)**

Slightly altered from story printed in the *Sequim Gazette* (Story first appeared in *The Ditchwalker*, newsletter of the Sequim High School Alumni Association) August 3, 2014

SEQUIM, WASHINGTON—I had gone back to the University of Washington in the spring of 1961. By then I was courting Joyce Provost who was to become my future wife.

I ran into Muga Ndenga hurrying across the Quad. He was the exchange student from Kenya who had suffered such grief from the eruptions of our infernal manure pump when he visited our farm a few weeks earlier. He was fully recovered from that tragedy.

“Tim,” Muga exclaimed. “It’s so good to see you. I enjoyed the visit to your farm soooo much! Is there any chance I can come back for a second visit?”

“Of course, Muga. You’re welcome to come anytime you like.”

“Is it O.K. if I bring my best friend? He too is an exchange student from Kenya. He has a big, fast car. I think it’s a Buick. We could all ride up to your farm together.”

“That’s a great idea, Muga. What’s his name?”

“Barack Obama.”

And indeed we did ride in Barack Obama’s Buick. He was sitting in the front seat with his girlfriend and another woman classmate. Joyce, Muga and I sat in the back seat—frozen in white-knuckle terror.

Obama drove at eighty or ninety miles-an-hour on the twisting curves of Old Olympic Highway. We were convinced we all would die. We made it safely to our other handsome farmhouse, the Bell House up on Bell Hill.

Obama slept in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Next morning, we drove down to our new farm along the west bank of the Dungeness River. I took Muga, Obama, his girlfriend, the other young woman, and Joyce on the Cooke’s Tour of our State-of-the-Art dairy farm. I sized Obama up: slim, dark-complexioned, strikingly handsome, courteous and soft-spoken. Like Muga, he spoke the “King’s English.”

He was dressed in a cashmere sweater, neatly creased chinos and a pair of Gucci loafers. He looked like he had just stepped out of the pages of one of those fashion magazines. I decided then to remove from the tour a demonstration of the wonders of our manure pump.

He died years later in a fiery auto accident in Kenya—but not before he fathered a son.

Over four decades later, I was sitting at our breakfast table in Baltimore reading the morning paper.

“Listen to this, Joyce,” I said. “Some guy named Barack Obama is running for the U.S. Senate from Illinois. That can’t be the Barack Obama we know can it? This guy is far too young.”

Joyce and I mulled it over. Maybe Barack Obama was a commonplace name in Swahili, like Smith. A bit more research made it clear: The Barack Obama in Illinois was the son of the man we had hosted in Sequim. The son won a landslide victory in Illinois capturing seventy percent of the vote in winning a seat in the U.S. Senate in 2004.

Four year later, Senator Barack Obama was a candidate for President of the United States. Joyce and I worked hard in Maryland to help Obama carry that state. At the time, we were dividing our time between our home in Baltimore and our home in Sequim. I covered Obama’s campaign writing many articles in the *PW* about his victories.

I remember with pride riding the Maryland Black Caucus bus down to Columbia, South Carolina to campaign for Obama in the spring of 2008. I also went door to door for him in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington State.

Clallam County, Washington, where we now live, is a swing district. George W. Bush carried Clallam County, narrowly, in 2000 and 2004. Obama carried the county narrowly in both 2008 and 2012. We think our diligent work was a factor in his victory.

We organized street corner “waves” in Sequim and Port Angeles in 2008. Four years later, I marched with the Democrats in the Irrigation Festival Parade in Sequim and the



Fourth of July parades in Forks and Port Angeles holding up a giant sign that I had lettered, "OBAMA: FOUR MORE YEARS!" We got resounding applause and cheers in all these parades from the crowds that lined the parade routes.

The last weekend of the 2012 election, about thirty of us met at Democratic Party headquarters in Port Angeles. A gifted Obama campaign organizer told the meeting, "Let's set ourselves a goal: We will knock on 1,000 doors for Obama this weekend."

Joyce was there even though she was badly crippled with pain in both knees. She was scheduled to have both knees replaced.

I was working with another woman and we finished up our list as the sun was setting that Sunday evening. I called Joyce on her cell.

"I have about fifty names on my list," she told me. "My partner has to leave. Can you come and help me?"

I drove immediately to pick her up. Then together we drove from one farm house to another in the pitch dark. She had a flashlight and climbed painfully out of the car and limped up to each door, knocked, and spoke to the voters. We completed the list. That weekend, our valiant team achieved our goal, knocking on 1,000 doors, talking with hundreds of voters on why it was so urgent to defeat Mitt Romney and reelect Obama.

Washington State has an all-mail ballot so on election day, Joyce was scheduled for her knee replacement surgery at Olympic Medical Center in Port Angeles. When the votes were counted, Obama carried our country by a margin of fewer than 100 votes. We celebrated in Joyce's hospital room, both the success of Joyce's surgery the day before and Obama's reelection victory. Sylvia Hancock, a wonderful grassroots leader of the Democratic Party came to visit Joyce and thank her for her heroic effort. She gave Joyce a comical figurine of a snowman. We treasure it still.

Joyce's "bum-knee-be-damned" attitude is one reason Obama won. We were part of the vast majority movement that

elected—and reelected—our nation’s first Black president, a victory over racism.

## Plotting to Defend Free Speech at the “Blue Moon”

*People’s World* April 26, 2016

Gus Hall was coming to the Pacific Northwest in February 1962. Members of the Communist Party of Washington State were elated. Party organizer, Milford Sutherland, had worked hard setting up speaking engagements for Hall to speak at campuses all across the state from Spokane to Bellingham to Ellensburg to Seattle and Tacoma.

Hall had recently been released from Leavenworth Penitentiary where he had been railroaded to prison for over six and a half years falsely charged under the Smith Act of “conspiring to teach or advocate the overthrow of the government by force and violence.”

Hall and the twelve others jailed under this infamous witchhunt law were not accused of a single act of violence. They had not stockpiled arms or trained in the woods for terrorism or guerrilla warfare. No, Hall was imprisoned for his ideas, for upholding the notion that at some time in the future, the majority of the people of the United States might decide to “alter or abolish” the government and replace it with another government. In Hall’s words, he was jailed for “the crime of thinking.”

Hall’s life was an open book. He had been a steelworker, a founder of the United Steelworkers, one of several Communist Party union activists recruited by United Mine



Clip from “The Worker” of Gus Hall with his photograph courtesy of *People’s World*