A Bingham Strain of Re

By Don Miller

An assistant professor of history at Monmouth College in New Jersey, Miller wrote his doctoral thesis on Alfred Bingham and Common Sense magazine.

THE DEATH OF the imprisoned Soledad Brother, George Jackson, in an escape attempt at San Quentin has brought national attention to a young California lawyer, Stephen Bingham, who has been charged with murder for allegedly passing a gun to Jackson before the shooting.

Bingham has mysteriously dropped out of sight, and authorities have still not located him. But his presence at San Quentin on the fatal morning and his strange disappearance have thrown the white, well-bred New England Binghams into the center of the swirling controversy around the Soledad Brothers.

At first glance, the Binghams of Connecticut seem to epitomize staid New England respectability. The family traces its lineage back to Deacon Thomas Bingham, one of the founding fathers and first proprietor of the Town of Norwich, and its history is replete with colonial governors, Revolutionary War heroes and Congregationalist ministers.

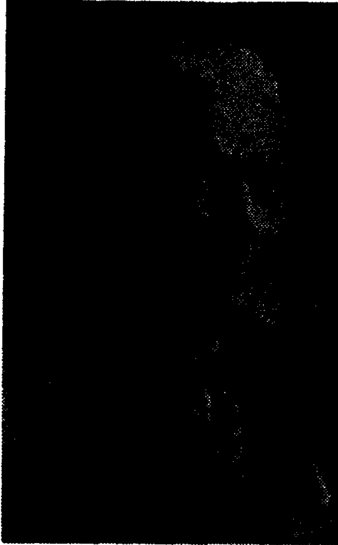
Stephen Bingham's grandfather was the former Connecticut Sen. Hiram Bingham, his uncle is Rep. Jonathan Bingham of New York, and his father is a wealthy Connecticut lawyer and former state legislator.

When viewed against this background, Stephen's burgeoning career in social protest as a Berkeley storefront lawyer and migrant labor organizer would appear to be a familiar episode in the continuing revolt of the young against the conventional politics and conservative mores of their parents. Yet a closer examination of the Bingham family tradition yields a fascinating strain of non-conformity and even outright radicalism.

Youthful Zeal

THE SAME youthful zeal that inspired an idealistic Stephen Bingham to the cause of the black man and the Chicano drove his 19th-Century ancestors to become leaders of the first Congregationalist missions to Hawaii and the Gilbert Islands.

It also fired grandfather Hiram, who broke with his family home and tradition to become a Latin American explorer and discover the lost Inca city



Harris & Ewing

Hiram Bingham, senator - explorer.

Hiram, and become an avowed revolutionary.

In early November, 1932, the New York newspapers announced the publication of Common Sense, an obstreperous new radical journal deriving its name from Thomas Paine's revolutionary pamphlet. Just as Paine's stirring tract had aroused a people "to the absurdity of clinging to a useless foreign king," so Common Sense, its editors proclaimed, would seek to incite popular sentiment for a "Second American Revolution."

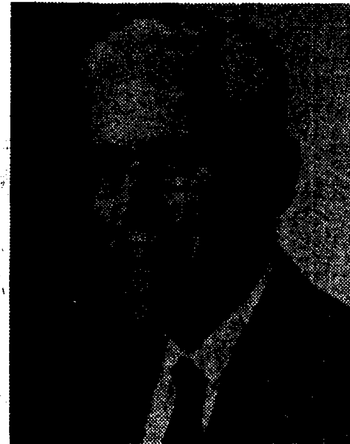
Alfred Bingham, the chief editor and theorist of Common Sense, was a recent convert to radicalism. The son of Old Guard Republican Sen. Hiram Bingham, he had been reared in a secure and affluent New England environment. As a youth, he rarely questioned the conservative political ideas of his father; and even his later radicalism bore the imprint of Hiram Bingham's stern dedication to the principles of individualism and decentralization of governmental responsibility. At Yale Law School, Alfred had served enthusiastically as president of the Hoover-for-President Club and aimed toward a career in law and Republican politics. But immediately after graduation, he took off on a two-year world tour that changed the course of his life.

With the help of some newspaper credentials and his father's name, he interviewed Mussolini, Gandhi, Chiang

Russia, the Bank of England went off the gold standard and the Russian newspapers were headlining hunger riots in America. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was pushing ahead into the third year of the first Five-Year Plan. Her people seemed filled with a surging pride in communism's commitment to build a new world order. Bingham deeply envied the sense of purpose and blind adherence to the goals of the Revolution, a zeal he equated with the unswerving faith of the early Christians. What most impressed him, however, was the perspective he got from Russia of his own capitalist world, which appeared to be "crumbling into ruin."

A Revolutionary

BY THE TIME Bingham left Russia, he was calling himself a revolutionary. But his knowledge of practical politics made him skeptical of propaganda about the imminent rise of the American proletariat. Marxism, with



Alfred Bingham, 1930s radical.

its emphasis on the working class as the vanguard of the revolution, seemed hopelessly inappropriate to American realities. He returned to America in the summer of 1932 with a burning determination to pursue a career in radical journalism as a public advocate of the coming revolution. But he rejected Marxism and the Marxist parties for an independent radicalism, a radicalism drawing on the American revolutionary tradition and capable of enlisting the support of the middle classes as well as labor. "There is material enough in American history, for . . . a (revolutionary) tradition," he wrote in

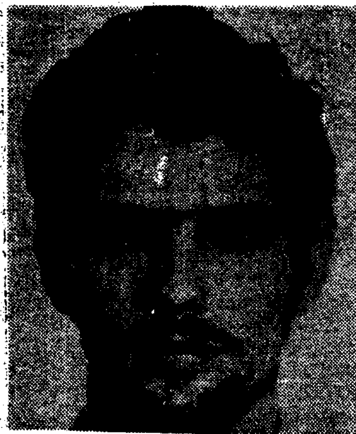
bellion

inciting the first stirrings of a revolt against capitalism. Common Sense was small and inexpensive, attractively designed and easy to read; a magazine for the people rather than the "highbrows." Inventive art work and cartoons ridiculing fat plutocrats and grasping politicians lightened the tone of the magazine, giving it a breezy, satirical flavor that balanced well with the seriousness of its editorials and feature articles.

For the elaboration of its social program, Common Sense drew together a distinguished corps of contributing editors, comprising a veritable "who's-who" of America's non-Marxian, radical community. In the early years of the 1930s, John Dewey, Lewis Mumford, Paul Douglas, Charles Beard, John Dos Passos, Stuart Chase, Upton Sinclair and John Flynn all appeared prominently on its masthead.

In one sense these contributors traversed the spectrum of the ideas, plans, and aspirations of American radicalism in the 1930s. All, however, rejected the New Deal as a pale substitute for the type of vast reconstruction they believed the depression demanded. They believed in one form or another in the need for a democratically planned collectivism. The revolutionary idols of Common Sense were Thorstein Veblen, Edward Bellamy and Henry George, not Marx, Engels and Trotsky.

As editor of Common Sense and author of "Insurgent America," a ringing challenge to the Marxian analysis of social change, Bingham made a lasting contribution to the formulation of a uniquely American radical philosophy and program. Yet his radicalism went beyond the bounds of theory into active political organizing.



'He Has Done Some Good'

Following is an excerpt from an interview with Mrs. Georgia Jackson, mother of George Jackson, that was broadcast on National Education Television's "Black Journal" last week:

I know once I was lucky enough to talk to a counselor at San Quentin who happened to be a black man, and he told me that my son spoke out too much in his own defense, and if he would learn to keep quiet more and just be humble when he went before the board, take everything they accused him of and not say anything back that he would be better off.

But I don't see how a person can be better off making a dog of themselves, or bowing down to anybody. And I think that people —I didn't raise them in the way where you could accuse them of something, and if they were guilty or not, they just take it.

I think every man should have the right to stand up and defend himself. I don't think that should be a privilege only reserved for white people. I think black people should have it too.

I have talked to prisoners who's come from San Quentin and Soledad and Tracy, who said that my son taught them how to read, and so I said well maybe if he has been in prison for 10 years and he's labeled an animal, he has done some good in this world, and that's the only consolation I can have right now. That he has tried to help his fellow man, even at the risk and the cost of his own life, and staying in prison so long.

While the first issues of Common Sense boldly proclaimed the need for social revolution, Bingham hoped that the type of broad reconstruction he envisaged could be effected peacefully, through the vehicle of a united third party of farmers, workers and the middle classes.

Dewey Group

BINGHAM'S search for a political organization able to mobilize wide support for a revolution led him in 1933 into active cooperation with John Dewey's League for Independent Political Action (LIPA). The Dewey group, which included Paul Douglas, Oswald Garrison Villard, Reinhold Niebuhr and other prominant leftist intellectuals, had since 1932 been attempting to form a democratic socialist party. But its efforts to put forth a presidential candidate in the 1932 election had failed miserably and, by the winter of 1933, it was losing many of its liberal members to Roosevelt's New Deal.

Bingham, in cooperation with Rep. Thomas Amlie, a former Non-Partisan League organizer from Wisconsin, took over the LIPA, infused it with new spirit, and pushed ahead with the determination to form a third party in time for the 1936 elections. For the next three years all of Bingham's creative energies were consumed in this ever-retreating dream of creating a new radical party.

Under Bingham and Amlie's forceful direction the LIPA and its successor organizations, the Farmer Labor Political Federation and the American Commonwealth Federation, concentrated its peak. Bingham pinned his new party hopes on the likelihood that the continuing decline of capitalism and the New Deal's inability to restore prosperity would drive this insurgent farmer-labor movement steadily leftward toward an acceptance of his program.

But Roosevelt's success in restoring a measure of economic prosperity, and his limited social welfare legislation effectively undercut Bingham's potential third-party support. Bingham's new party movement thus ended as it had begun, an isolated and tragically ineffective political force, a monument to the triumph of New Deal liberalism.

After 1936 Bingham steadily drifted from a radical to a more conventional liberal position on domestic issues. He abandoned his efforts to form a third party and eventually supported the New Deal. Also, Bingham moved from his belief in replacing capitalism with a centrally planned, socialist economy, to advocacy of limited "strategic" planning within the capitalist framework. His goal, however, remained consistent: the achievement of a democratically planned economic system capable of providing full employment and a decent standard of living for the entire population.

Alfred Bingham today is no longer a radical. For him, the present brand of radicalism is too pessimistic, too anarchistic. He still believes that man has the skills and resources to control his environment and end poverty and war. And he is still optimistic enough to think that it is the "disparity between what a society says and what it does