

The Cool Moose: Robert J. Healey, Jr. Beyond the Beard

One evening as I drove in heavy traffic through Warren, Rhode Island, I took notice of a tall figure about a hundred yards ahead to the right. He wore a white shirt and black tie, framed by an oversized dark colored suit jacket. As I drove closer, I noticed the man stood on a slim strip of grass that had grown almost two feet high. That sliver of lawn served as the only separation between a yellow ranch to the man's back and the busy main road to his front. As my vehicle drew nearer, I recognized the person on the side of the road as Robert J. Healey, Jr., the perennial third party candidate.

Bob, known widely as *the Cool Moose*, held a smoldering cigar between two fingers in his right hand, nestled a phone between his cheek and right shoulder, and cut the grass with a sickle clasped in his left hand. His multi-tasking included receptive body language to drivers who tooted their car horns as they passed his home, which also served as his law office. The whole impromptu arrangement provided the perfect backdrop for a vintage Cool Moose photo op. As his flowing hair blew in the wind, he enjoyed the smoke, listened to a caller's phone message, and tended to a primitive form of landscaping. He relished the state affairs, unconcerned about others' perceptions of him, but intent on acknowledging them all the same with a grin or head nod. As I drove past Bob, I smiled to myself. He often had that effect on me.

Bob and I crossed paths numerous times between 1983 and 2016. During those years our talks became more meaningful, but never very personal. Still, a friendly comfort developed between the two of us. I do not know what he made of me, but I came to see him as a melody of normally incompatible descriptors: engaging, self-effacing, familiar, mysterious, brilliant, at times odd, and always fascinating.

Bob Healey appeared eternally young to me. He acted young, too. Ready to engage, eager to make a point, and ever present, he embraced life as a youthful spirit pursuing an unending adventure. As such, when I first thought to explore his political career, I didn't feel hurried to undertake my research. I thought I had lots of time. As it turned out, Bob Healey did not.

To some onlookers, Robert Healey presented as an alien hairy political candidate in a familiar world of polished and preppy politicians. Looking like a hodgepodge of Grizzly Adams, Frank Zappa, John Lennon, and Jesus Christ, he stood out to a sizable number of prospective voters as either an active hippie or a sixties leftover. Neither characterization comes close to capturing the Cool Moose's essence. Others saw him as an individualistic showman, and the hair and beard factored into the act. That portrayal proves erroneous as well. Those who read his political position papers and platforms may have thought they understood Bob Healey. They probably did not. Bob Healey defies surface focused descriptors. His substance does not communicate from a look or stance. To discover Bob Healey's core, one must delve deeper, and look wider.

Undeniably, Bob made an indelible mark on Rhode Island's political scene. By the early 2000's, it seemed almost every Rhode Islander knew of him. Though in many cases that familiarity extended only to appearance recognition, over a 30 year span no political figure (with the possible exception of Providence Mayor Vincent (Buddy) Cianci,) garnered more consistent attention throughout Rhode Island (and beyond) than Robert J. Healey, Jr. From 1982 to 2016, Healey's unconventional appearance, head turning campaigns, and candid informative commentary enticed inquiring looks, occasionally incited spontaneous laughter, and ultimately caused political and personal reflection. He drew national attention and conveyed a base message that could resonate across the political spectrum. Robert Healey made people think, and

challenged them to act. Even a Healey detractor would have to acknowledge that at the very least, Healey attracted looks and fostered contemplation. Some politicians would spend handsomely for that acknowledgment. For Healey, the attention came free of charge, literally.

I first thought about writing a biography about Robert Healey in 2013. I did not tell him of my intention. I had numerous questions for my welcoming thick bearded acquaintance. Did he truly want to win election to a statewide office? How might he have governed had he won? What made him tick? Was he an overlooked third-party prophet, or did he amount to little more than an endearing cultish political figure? But all those questions aside, one overriding factor compelled me to learn more about his story; the man intrigued me. He still does.

Biographies typically tell the story of winners. Even though failure might enter into the plot, the main character's victories make them narrative worthy. Employing that qualifier, Healey falls far short of the biography prerequisite. For all his efforts over a 30 year period, encompassing eight campaigns, (including seven runs for state-wide office), he never served as Rhode Island's governor or lieutenant governor. In fact, even the most ardent Cool Moose fan club member has to admit, he never came close to winning a state-wide election. Regardless, Bob Healey's allure endured all the disappointing political defeats.

Bob presented to most as a political anomaly. Among other considerations, that made him interesting. But his distinctiveness and originality do not account for his significance. Clearly, Robert Healey mattered. But how so? And from what origin? And to what end? This work pursues the answers to those questions.