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“WHO’S GOING TO DANCE WITH SOMEBODY WHO CALLS YOU A MAINSTREETER” COMMUNISM, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY IN SHERIDAN COUNTY, MONTANA, 1918-1934

GERALD ZHAHAVI

“The Catholics and the Lutherans met the train,” recalled Bernadine Logan, a former schoolteacher in Plentywood, Montana, “to get the nab on the new teachers, any crop that would come in. Did they take care of us women teachers! We had a list of the people with whom we were not to associate; the school board gave that to us. . . . Anybody that was connected with liquor—and then there were some of these people that we weren’t supposed to have dates with either.”¹

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So began Logan’s long career in Sheridan County. The year was 1930, and she had just arrived from North Dakota, a fresh *Cum Laude* graduate of Jamestown College.² The social and cultural walls that divided the community were at once unambiguously defined for her—with a simple list. The good Catholics and Lutherans of Plentywood made sure that the custodians of their children’s minds would be well insulated from the ruffraff of the town—the liquor distillers, the bootleggers, and, of course, the *reds*. The social center of the community, the Farmer-Labor Temple—the “Red Temple” to local conservatives—was generally off limits to Logan and her fellow teachers. The countless parties, dances, and celebrations held there were not to be part of *their* social life; that list guaranteed it. Emblazoned with hammers and sickles, the red flags that occasionally adorned the Temple marked for Plentywood’s teachers and their middle-class guardians—contemptuously referred to as “mainstreeters” by local left-wing critics—an ideological divide so immense as to be unbridgeable. Local communists were “socially unacceptable,” Bernadine Logan concluded,

and anyway, “who’s going to dance with somebody who calls you a mainstreeter?”³

Whether one is an “old” or “new” historian of American communism—to use historian Theodore Draper’s terms—it should be evident by now that there are several levels on which twentieth-century communist movements played out. The first and most obvious is the one that predominates in the literature: the institutional hierarchical web of authority that constricted American communism in the twentieth century to develop along Soviet lines.⁴ Bernadine Logan’s encounter with Sheridan County communism, however, suggests a more subtle cultural and contextual approach to the study of the subject, one that recognizes that the history of American communism is not only Party and institutional history but also community and regional history.⁵ Certainly, the local history of the Communist Party (CP) was linked to national and international party institutions and agendas. Yet sympathizers and allies, right-wing adversaries, local political antagonists, community and church leaders, teachers and school boards, bankers and merchants, and thousands of male and female farmers and farm workers all shaped the evolution of Sheridan County communism. All were likewise influenced by it. Though a local study, the following pages serve a broader agenda—one that aims to situate an international radical movement within the social and cultural horizons of an American prairie region, more specifically, within a single county in eastern Montana. Exploring how such a movement saturated local political, social, and cultural life—education, youth culture, town-country antagonisms, religion, prohibition, and crime, as well as personal and political conflicts—reveals both hitherto hidden and complex dimensions of American Communism and the important role that cultural conflicts played in limiting its expansion.

SHERIDAN COUNTY

Sheridan County lies in the northeast corner of Montana, bordered by North Dakota to

the east and Saskatchewan to the north. In the nineteenth century it had been a battleground upon which local Assiniboines beat back repeated incursions by adjacent Northern Cheyennes and Sioux; now they share reservations with them. In 1920, the county had a population of 13,847; around a thousand lived in Plentywood, the county seat. Lying at the eastern edge of America’s northern short-grass prairie, at around two thousand feet of elevation, it was a gently rolling land, with flat breaks and occasional ravines. In the 1920s the land appeared as a patchwork quilt of grazing land and farm fields on which wheat, flax, oats, rye, barley, corn, and hay grew. Few of Sheridan’s farmers irrigated their lands. They relied instead on the natural rainfall and on the Big Muddy River, which flowed down from Canada and through the county, finally emptying into the Missouri River to the south. Along with good crop soil, Sheridan county was also blessed with an abundance of lignite—a brown, low-carbon coal. Small mines were scattered along the Big Muddy, where the coal came close to the surface. Local farmers “stripped” surface outcroppings for cheap fuel or readily obtained the lignite from local miners.⁶

Rising grain elevators and flour mills broke the vast open landscape of the county, marking the presence of its nearly two dozen towns. Before the coming of farmers to the region, the area was entirely the domain of ranchers who were first drawn to the northeastern edge of the “High Line” (the plains region north of the Missouri River) by the Big Muddy River and the lush grasslands that surrounded it. Homesteading farmers soon discovered the potential of this land. During the first and second decades of the century, they arrived in waves—from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, England, Germany, and Ireland. Many were second generation ethnics who moved to the region from the upper Midwest. They came for jobs, for adventure, but most of all they came for the land. Scandinavians came in droves. By 1920, 560 Danes and 698 Norwegians had settled in

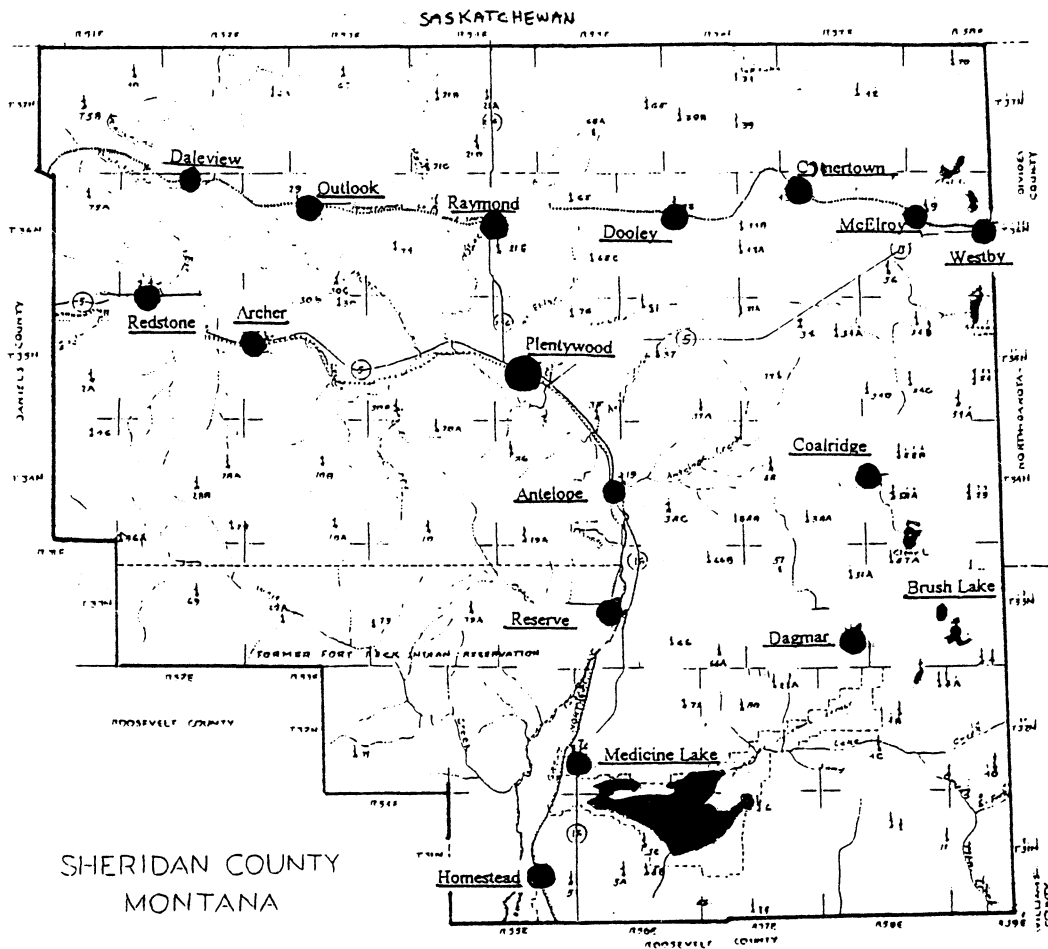


FIG. 1. Sheridan County. Source: *Sheridan's Daybreak* (with additions by author).

Sheridan County alone. Danish and Norwegian colonists were recruited by land companies, Lutheran ministers, and cultural nationalists like Emil Ferdinand Madsen, the founder of the Dagmar Danish colony in eastern Sheridan County.⁷

Migrants made their way to this northern prairie frontier on wagons, on model Ts, and, most commonly, on trains. Oscar Eklund, a second generation Swede, recalled: "We came out in 1917, by rail. We shipped an emigrant car out. That was the way most of the homesteaders came." They took passage on the Great

Northern or the Soo Line; both offered reduced fares to prospective settlers. A few, trying to save as much of their meager savings as possible, stowed their children away on the immigrant cars. Homesteaders like Jens and Nielsine Brinkman were typical of the first generation of migrants, though in advance preparation they were much luckier than others. They had "read in the Danish paper about Dagmar and the homesteads and had corresponded with E. F. Madsen. Madsen chose a homestead for them and had a shack built for them before they came." Others read

promotional pamphlets like “The Call of the West’: Some Solid Facts About Sheridan County Montana,” put out by “the Pioneer Land man of Sheridan County,” L. S. Olsen, with the support of numerous local merchants. “Sheridan county presents the last opportunity to the landless to receive a donation at the hands of the munificent nation,” Olsen declared, and proceeded to describe the county in romantic terms to prospective homesteaders. For the landless, it was convincing. Unfortunately, however, Sheridan County’s ranching and farming fortunes were controlled by the weather. The limits of prairie ranching and western dry wheat farming, with periodic droughts, grass fires, wind storms, and grasshopper plagues, insured that the pastoral beauty of the region would not be disturbed by over-development or over-population. Sheridan County remained a sparsely populated land.⁸

Some of the migrants who made their way to Sheridan County were Wobblies—members of the radical Industrial Workers of the World—rough, well-weathered men looking for threshing or ranching jobs or a little charity. As one resident recalled, “Some of those guys had razors in their shirts, and they had pistols in their pockets and they were pretty damn tough. We knew that.” For the most part, if the recollections of old timers can be trusted, Wobblies received a tolerant reception; their labor was crucial in bringing in the crops during harvest seasons. Not all of them were transients; a few settled in the region and helped shape its political temper for years to come.⁹

Political radicalism had always been something that desperate rural Montanans took up when all else failed: when their crops withered, when the banks or implement companies breathed down their backs, when the railroads overcharged them, when the tax collectors came calling. It came naturally through moderate organizations like the Grange, the Farmers Union, and the Equity Cooperative Exchange, through the more militant Socialist Party, Nonpartisan League, Progressive

Farmers clubs, the Farmers National Holiday Association, and in Sheridan County, it also came with the Communist Party and its agrarian arm, the United Farmers League (UFL).¹⁰

FROM SOCIALISM TO COMMUNISM

Decades of political agitation had preceded the planting of the hammer and sickle in the county. The region had long been a center of Montana socialism and progressive thinking in general. A 1936 Works Progress Administration (WPA) history noted that “the county has always been moderately leftist. In 1912, while still a part of Valley County, it voted for the Bull Moose, and soon after its creation it began to have active socialist groups among its citizens. During the trying years of war and drought the tendency grew until it became the outstanding characteristic of the county’s social development.”¹¹ Another source, an FBI general intelligence report on Communist activities in the area, noted that “almost since the time this county was organized there has been some type of Marxist movement in it. In the early days old time Socialists, many of them members of the first international came and settled in this district. As time went on and the second international was formed the ideology of the county was Socialist of perhaps the Kautsky School.”¹²

There were around four or five Socialist locals in Sheridan County in 1918, stretching from Outlook, northwest of Plentywood, the county seat, down to the Danish colony in Dagmar, to the southeast. From 1918 to 1920 the Socialists gained strength in the county, electing one of their number, Oscar Collins (running with Nonpartisan League backing on the Republican ticket), sheriff in 1920. This growing socialist influence in the region triggered a successful secessionist move by the more conservative southern tier of the county (leading to the creation of Roosevelt County in February of 1919). The Nonpartisan League (NPL), in which Collins was “quite prominent” was a radical farmers organization that had emerged in North Dakota in

1915, advocating the establishment of state banks and the nationalization of grain elevators, packing plants, and railroads. Sheridan County socialists had been very much inspired by the League's growing success in North Dakota. They, and their non-Socialist allies, followed the lead of the North Dakota organization; they established a county NPL and pursued a vigorous electoral and grassroots political strategy. When the North Dakota organization successfully swept its candidates into office in 1918 and took over the state government, Sheridan county radicals followed suit locally.¹³

The growing Socialist and Nonpartisan League movement in the area gave birth to two left-wing papers, both apparently financially unstable and of poor quality. That was probably why, in 1918, local radicals asked the national office of the Nonpartisan League in Minneapolis to provide them with an experienced editor. Charles E. Taylor, a Wisconsin-born socialist who had edited a Socialist paper in International Falls, Minnesota (*Border Call*), a Democratic paper in Buffalo, Wyoming, from 1914 to 1918 (the *Buffalo Voice*), and several of his own "little papers," had recently volunteered his services to the NPL. Taylor's radical roots extended to his grandfather, an abolitionist and follower of Horace Greeley (who had published Karl Marx's writings in his *New York Tribune*), and his father, an active and prominent member of the Farmers Alliance and the Populist Party in Minnesota. As Taylor recalled, "The Non-Partisan League was organizing papers, county papers. They'd get farmers together and raise the money. I knew the plight of the farmers, how they were exploited by bankers and elevator companies. . . . I became very captivated with what they were trying to do out there and the way they did it. . . . So I offered my services to the Non-Partisan League." Taking command of the new paper, the *Producers News*, from veteran local socialist Ira Worley, Taylor thus began his long and controversial career in Plentywood and in Montana. "The town was hostile as hell to us," he recalled.

"They probably would have mobbed me but they were afraid of the country. We had a lot of young pretty husky guys that would do things out there. They were rough."¹⁴ As strong as socialism was in Sheridan County by 1918, it was also true that its greatest strength came from the countryside. Plentywood was generally hostile to it. That would not change.

The left-wing turn of the county continued through 1919 and into the early years of the new decade, as the impact of the Russian revolution reverberated through the region's radical communities. Communism came early to the region and spread rapidly into small enclaves of left-wing socialism. To the west, Bill Dunne, head of the Butte Socialist Party, moved his followers into the Communist Labor Party in 1919. To the east, across the border in North Dakota, 200 farmers, by one estimate, joined the new Bolshevik party by 1924. Sympathetic allies undoubtedly increased the Party's strength there. In Williams County, North Dakota, adjacent to Sheridan County, the Party elected a prominent Communist to the state legislature in 1924. Between 1919 and 1923, as left-wing socialists abandoned the Socialist Party and established what came to be known as the Workers (Communist) Party, Sheridan County socialists went through similar turns, though apparently not without some controversy. As an FBI report noted, "During the split in the Socialist Party in 1919 and the forming of the Communist Party in the United States, there were heated arguments in Plentywood, and naturally enough some of the people went Communist while others stayed with the second international." Just after the election of 1920, a local Communist Party organization was established in Sheridan County. Apparently, not until after the Palmer Raids and the repression of the early 1920s did the local organization experience substantial growth.¹⁵

In its early years, the Sheridan County CP, like other local party organizations active among farmers, was a neglected waif. The national party organization seemed to care little

about what it contemptuously termed “bourgeois” farmers. But by 1922-23, it began to change course and sought to build bridges with them.¹⁶ Throughout the country—in Washington, the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Montana—it took advantage of already established movements of farmer activism. In northeastern Montana, it tapped the talents of Charles Taylor. According to an FBI interview conducted with him in 1953, Taylor joined the Party in 1922.¹⁷

The full story of Charles E. Taylor, or “Red Flag” Taylor as he soon came to be known, is an engaging tale in itself. His record as a Montana state senator and an active and vitriolic participant in Farmer-Labor and CP politics remains a fascinating chapter in the history of agrarian radicalism in America. My aim here, however, is to explore the community of radicals and non-radicals around him and to situate the ideological and political dramas that Taylor and others were a part of within the local conflicts that transfigured them and that were *in turn* transfigured by them. Taylor joined an established socialist community, one with a conjoined Wobbly and Scandinavian lineage. It included, among others, Rodney Salisbury. Born in Brinsmade, North Dakota, on 2 May 1888, Salisbury was lured to Montana by the promise of cheap land and a homestead. He settled near the small community of Raymond, just north of Plentywood. Working as a grain elevator operator—and apparently a very honest one—he soon earned the respect of the farmers of the region. He first attained public prominence by serving as undersheriff of Sheridan County from 1920 to 1922. In 1922 he became county sheriff and remained in that post for six years, one of the few Communist sheriffs in the nation. Taylor later described him as “an extremist and kind of a Wobbly type,” but also a “good lieutenant” who traveled all over the state and aggressively distributed copies of the *Worker* (the Communist Party’s paper) wherever he went. Along with Salisbury was Robert Larsen, who had been “one of the founding members of the Wobblies,” and served in the Montana legis-

lature from 1924 to 1928. Born in Denmark in 1871, Larsen had come to the Volmer community, southeast of Dagmar, in 1910 to homestead. “He was a Communist,” recalled Taylor, but recognizing the ideological syncretism that characterized many of the county’s radicals, added, “His turn of mind was largely Wobbly . . .” There were also more obscure Party members, like Charles Lundeen, a Swede who had emigrated to North Dakota in 1902, where he worked in a tailor shop before moving on to a homestead near Outlook, Sheridan County in 1908. In the early 1920s, there were around twenty or so core Communist Party activists in the Plentywood area; more were active in the outlying county hamlets.¹⁸

With Rodney Salisbury, Robert Larsen, Charles Lundeen, Arthur Reuber, Hans Rasmussen, Peter Gallagher, John Boulds, Pat Wallace, and dozens of sympathetic radical Danish and Norwegian farmers, the editor of the *Producers News* helped establish the early foundations of Sheridan County communism. As Taylor recalled years later: “We did it ourselves, from communications with them [the CP]. The fact is, I would bring in some prominent Communist. We used to have picnics. . . . five and six and seven thousand people there, at [Brush] Lake. All that area around there we used to organize some time in the summer.”¹⁹ (Fig. 2) The radicals’ growing prestige and political success in subsequent elections helped shape the social and ideological relationships of the region for years to come.

In their early years, local CP members generally kept their party affiliation secret. But few who paid attention could mistake their ideological fealty. In 1920 and 1922, they utilized the Nonpartisan League to run candidates on existing party organizations—Democratic and Republican. In 1924 and 1926, they ran their candidates under the banner of the Farmer-Labor Party, and in 1928, they ran as independents. As late as 1930, the first year that the Communist Party appeared on Sheridan County ballots, they still avoided the label and returned to the Farmer-Labor fold. In 1932 and 1934, however, adopting a

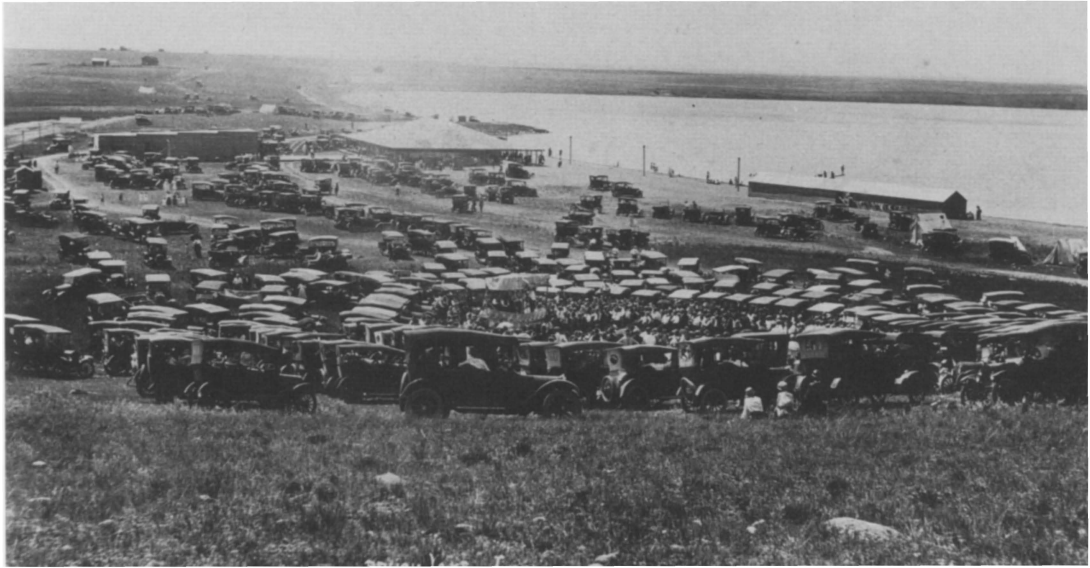


FIG. 2. *Brush Lake, 1919. Site of many radical rallies, and of the Communist-run Pioneer Camp in 1932. Courtesy of Sheridan County Museum.*

more militant separatist strategy, they ran openly as Communists.²⁰

COMMUNIST ASCENDANCY

Throughout the 1920s, Sheridan County Communists built widespread support in the countryside, but it is hard to measure the depth of that support. Undoubtedly, there were plenty of rural folk who joined the Party for its social and cultural life, not because they concurred with its vision or programmatic stances. Who can say how many joined for reasons that one farmer admitted to: “Because they always had such good food at their picnics. I never missed one.”²¹ Certainly, the organizational strategies employed by the Party suggest less than widespread ideological consonance between Party and following.

Until the end of the decade and the coming of “Third Period” Communism (encompassing the years 1928-35, characterized by radical separatism and a sense of imminent economic crisis) the local CP operated through a variety of existing non-communist agrarian organiza-

tions, like the Farmer-Labor Party (FLP) and the Western Progressive Farmers (WPF)—later Progressive Farmers of America (PFA)—a more politically aggressive alternative to the Grange from which it had split. The WPF, set up by former Washington state Grange leader William Bouch, came to Sheridan County in late 1925 and immediately drew the attention and support of local Communists. Working within the WPF and other such groups, party activists tried to align them more closely with national CP agendas and priorities. Organizations like the Sheridan County Progressive Farmers represented an arena of struggle for Communists, one in which they were continually forced to compromise. Culturally and politically they were confronted with hundreds of farmers whose religious, ideological, and cultural traditions fell outside the radical heritage of Marxism, particularly as defined by New York or Moscow party leaders. The Progressive Farmers, for example, operated more or less like a fraternal lodge, and local meetings “opened with some religious song, had a prayer, and they had a chaplain.” As

Taylor recalled, "it went over good with a lot of the farmers that had a lot of religion."²² Naturally enough, few militant secularists could gain much support within such a group by openly challenging religious faith or traditions. Few even considered it. While local conservatives might mine Marxist texts for dogmatic atheist tracts with which to discredit and isolate radicals, tolerance of religious and cultural diversity was the rule among the county's party members. This is hardly surprising, since even within the local party organization, cultural and ideological diversity (within limits) was a given.

Most local Communists recognized, as Taylor did, that "the United States wasn't Russia," and that they could not take "arbitrary positions" but needed to develop an ideological and social constituency. Within most of the mass organizations in which they were active, Communists were a minority. Even though they could draw popular support, there were limits to where they could steer non-Communists, and there were explicit ground rules for shaping organizational policies and members' opinions. Within the Sheridan County Progressive Farmers organization, Charles Taylor recalled, party activists between 1925 and 1927 "worked on a policy of making it appear that everything came from the farmers." He continued, "And we used a lot of farmers. Instead of our men doing so much talking, they'd talk to some farmer, win him over—and lots of them liked it. Then he goes to present a resolution or take a position on the floor. . . . If we made a decision, we worked out among them by ideological work so that we had most of it come from them."²³ Though it may appear cynical and self-serving, such a strategy was forged in the era of the Palmer raids and with a recognition that political repression was a given in American political life. To be too open, many Party members argued, was to leave oneself vulnerable to social and political ostracism.

Whatever one might think of the local Party's tactics, they didn't harm its political fortunes. On the contrary, between 1922 and

1928, radical candidates consistently won county and town elections. As one FBI report noted, by 1927 the Communist Party controlled a "majority of officers in Sheridan County, including Sheriff, [State] Senator, Clerk of District Court, Treasurer, etc." (Fig. 3) Salisbury's pluralities from 1922 to 1928 were truly impressive. He consistently swamped his opposition in some communities. In 1922, for example, he received 181 out of the 213 votes cast in Raymond. A similar pattern was also true for other candidates, such as Hans Rasmussen, who ran for County Assessor. Not until 1928, did the political influence of the "red machine" begin to wane.²⁴

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND COMMUNISM

Sheridan County Communists and their allies molded a powerful counterculture within the greater society around them. Though the nature of that oppositional culture changed dramatically and significantly over time, and—as we shall see—was influenced by party "colonizers" from the East, some elements remained constant. Like the socialist movement that preceded it, the growth of the communist movement paralleled the geographical class divisions that defined townspeople ("main-streeters") and rural folk as separate. According to Roy Rue, a resident who recalled the era, although many of the Party's leaders resided in town, "the Communist Party was really more the rural area. . . . The townspeople had very little to do with it." Large pockets of strong CP support emerged in the farming and lignite-mining area just west of the North Dakota border, in Comertown, west of Westby, and south toward Coalridge and Dagmar. That region's reputation as a "red" enclave was firmly established, surviving well into the 1980s; former residents of a conservative bent referred to the eastern edge of the county as "Communitic country" and "Mother Bloor country." Especially radical was the rural crescent that circled Plentywood roughly from the southeast to the northwest, starting around



Fig. 3. Sheridan County Courthouse personnel during the “red” years, in the mid to late 1920s. Back row: Ralph Hare, Hans Rasmussen, Pete Gallagher, James Ostby, George Wheeler, C. F. Christensen, Clair Stoner, Lois Aspeland, Nicoli Slettebak, Dan Olson, Rodney Salisbury, Ed Koser, Neils Madsen, Bert Thorstenson, and George Bantz. Front row: Linda Hall, Alice Redmond, Lillian Paske, Ethel Holmquist, Emma Crohn, A. C. Erikson, S. E. Paul, Anna Hovet, Helga Hanisch, Ann Hanson, Erna Timmermann, and Ellen Pierce. Courtesy of Sheridan County Clerk and Recorder’s Office.

Dagmar up toward Coalridge and Comertown and west to Raymond and Outlook. Heavy concentrations of radical Danish and Norwegian farmers in the northeastern quadrant of the county gave that region a reputation as unsafe territory. “They were up against it, down and out. . . . Really, it was dangerous,” Anna Dahl recalled.²⁵

The large concentration of radical farmers in the region is confirmed in accounts of local meetings of the Communist-led United Farmers League that appeared in the county press, in the concentration of subscriptions to the left-wing *Producers News*, in rural precinct election results, and in FBI reports. For example, one account of a meeting of the United Farmers League in Comertown described the crowd that attended as follows: “On Tuesday evening, Oct. 20, the Comertown members covered themselves with glory by filling the big consolidated high school to the doors and

windows. Every window was full of farmers. After the meeting many new members joined the Comertown U.F.L. A big supper was served.” Another report on the Comertown local referred to a “packed house of four hundred people.” Similarly, a report on a meeting at Westby, thirty miles to the northeast of Plentywood, read as follows: “There was a remarkable meeting at Westby last Saturday when the farmers packed the theater to hear editor Taylor and Hans Rasmussen speak. Many farmers joined after the meeting.” The *Producers News* explained in November 1931 that a shipment of papers destined for Westby was delayed for several days for unknown reasons by the mail clerks, and that it was difficult to send a replacement shipment since “the Westby list is a large one.” Consistent with the aforementioned impressionistic evidence were the vote tallies published in local papers in the 1920s and early 1930s. The largest CP

pluralities came from communities in the region previously described. FBI reports obtained under the Freedom of Information Act further confirm the concentration of party members in sections of the county where Danes and Norwegians predominated.²⁶

Not surprisingly, Danish radicals, like Niels C. Jessen, who came to the Dagmar area and settled in the Volmer community in 1909, came to the region for the same reasons that others did: to take advantage of free or inexpensive land. He and his brother-in-law Jans Brinkman were part of a rural, ethnically-defined, and ideologically radical subculture. Jessen's world partook of Grundtvigian Lutheranism—with its powerful nationalistic strains and equally firm belief in a broad enlightenment-based education appealing to both “hearts and minds”—and Marxism. His neighbor, Hans Rasmussen, a local architect, bricklayer, outspoken Communist, and business manager of the *Producers News*, designed the community's first Lutheran Church, built on “Himmelbjerget” (“Sky Hill”). There, the love of Danish culture was reflected in the decision of local residents to hire a Danish teacher from Tyler, Minnesota, to teach Danish Summer School. Services at the local church, the Volmer Lutheran Congregation Church, were in Danish until the 1930s. Volmer and the other Danish enclaves were also very *convivial* communities—with dances, picnics, meetings, Fifth of June celebrations (Danish Constitution Day), Fastelavns (pre-Lent carnivals), and Fourth of July festivities that engaged all.²⁷

The Dagmar-Coalridge region was well known for its extensive cooperatives, manifestations of both Danish institutional traditions and Montana economic realities. A cooperative store in Dagmar was incorporated in 1916 as the Equity Cooperative Association of Dagmar. Though it encountered hostility from wholesalers in its early years, it was able to establish a solid reputation and “won acceptance as a thoroughly trustworthy organization.” It was a center of radical activities—with regular meetings of the United

Farmers League held there. Another cooperative, the Acme Coal Mine in Coalridge, with 80 acres of “excellent lignite,” was incorporated in 1918 to “furnish coal cheaply to people in its immediate vicinity”; it issued stock to local residents, and paid regular dividends. Additional cooperatives included a phone company, fire insurance company, and a burial association. Not surprisingly, when the FBI surveyed the area's left-wing movements, an agent's report noted “the Danes and Norwegians are, by their very birthright, inclined to be Socialistic, since they have always favored a system of cooperation and a community spirit.”²⁸

FBI reports, such as the one cited above, suggest an exaggerated level of ideological homogeneity within the Scandinavian community. Extensive evidence, particularly related to the region's Danish colonies, reveals significant divisions reflected in differing opinions about religion and religious institutions, as well as disagreements over individual involvement in secular fraternalism and Communist activities. Sheridan County's Danes were denominationally divided, with two Danish Lutheran churches coexisting in the region: the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (the “Happy Danes”), heavily influenced by the populist Reverend Frederick Lange Grundtvig, and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (the “Holy Danes”), a more legalistic and formalistic theological body. The “Happy Danes,” with their folk schools and singing societies, concentrated around Dagmar. Those who settled further north, near Westby and McElroy, were members of the United Lutheran Church.²⁹

Within the churches, differing views on the propriety of participation in fraternal and political organizations divided congregations. Obviously, not all Danes were radical; many were more deeply anchored in the various strains of conservative Lutheranism. Some were Marxist but were also drawn to secular fraternalism; others were anti-Marxist, and equally attracted to the social and cultural life that ethnic clubs and associations offered

them. All of these conflicting loyalties caused inner turmoil within the community and occasionally led to painful periods of intra-community conflict. The early history of the relationship of Dagmar's Nathanael Lutheran Church (a Danish Evangelical congregation) to the local lodge of the Danish Brotherhood (Lodge 283) is merely one illustration of this.

The Danish Brotherhood, a fraternal and sick relief organization founded in 1882 in Omaha, met a mixed reception in the Dagmar area in 1910. When a group of men requested permission from the local church to use its meeting house to organize a branch of the Brotherhood, the conservative pastor fought hard to deny them access. Viewing the organization with the contempt that many Grundtvigian ministers had for secret fraternal societies, he no doubt argued to his flock—as Frederick Grundtvig had done years earlier—that the organization was “the lap dog of the devil.” His arguments swayed the congregation, but its denial of church access to the Brotherhood precipitated an internal fissure and many years of ill will; a number of church members withdrew from the congregation. Ultimately, the pastor resigned.³⁰ Similar conflicts emerged over Communism in the 1920s and early 1930s. Ministers came and went; some were conservative, others, like Marius Larsen who arrived in Dagmar in 1930, were more radical, and quite willing to work with Communists. Nonetheless, throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the Danish community was hardly unanimous or consistent in its support of political radicalism.

The Scandinavian community, especially the Danish enclaves, was merely one part of the region's complex cultural and ideological fabric. There were many other communities that defined Communism's local possibilities and limits. Most of the towns in Sheridan County were quite small, with only a few hundred residents. Only Medicine Lake, in the south, and Plentywood had sizable populations, which explained why they so assiduously competed for the designation of county seat in 1913. Plentywood, which won the designa-

tion, was by far the largest community. (Fig. 4) Its food and provision stores, Ford dealership, and farm machinery suppliers drew farmers in from the countryside, as did its modest though important social life. The Kitzenberg store brought in working girls off the farms—girls who worked as servants for neighbors, or cooks on the cooking cars that accompanied the harvesters. The store was a meeting place for local women, a place to “get out of the weather and wait” for husbands, brothers, or fathers to collect provisions. There, they could catch up on the latest clothing styles.³¹

Saturday night was dance night. “Everyone went to the dance. Old men and young girls danced together,” recalled one resident of the town. The local Farmer-Labor Temple (Fig. 5), built in 1924, was the center of the community's social life—and also the center of community tensions. It was where local children went roller skating and where the town's Saturday night dances took place. It was also where the Plentywood unit of the Communist Party met, where county-wide Party meetings were held, where CP leader Ella Reeve (“Mother”) Bloor spoke, and where, in the early 1930s, the local Young Communist League (YCL) school conducted its classes.³²

Plentywood was a community of social contrasts and political divisions; in addition to the left-wing organizations that periodically met at the Farmer-Labor Temple, it had a local Ku Klux Klan that occasionally burned crosses on vacant lots, a popular baseball team (and a long-standing rivalry with nearby Scobey in Daniels County), a branch of the Women of the Eastern Star, a Masonic lodge, a Legion Post, and a handful of mainstream political associations. Yet, two easily discernible ideological and cultural communities existed in the diminutive city throughout the 1920s and 1930s. While Saturday night dances at the Temple and the dance culture of the Blue Moon night club may have represented a common experience to local residents (with the exceptions of the rigidly controlled teachers and their moral guardians), there were



FIG. 4. View of Plentywood, Montana, c. 1930. Courtesy of Sheridan County Museum.

plenty of institutional and social events that defined their separateness and plenty of moments when these divisions surfaced. Take for example those Saturday evening dances. As Einar Klostad, an old-time resident recalled, "Even at dances, sometimes, they would get this bunch together and they would sing these Russian songs — the *International*, they called it." Another noted, "You never knew if you were talking to friend or foe."³³

RADICALS, RIFFRAFF, AND CRIMINALS

Throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s, many in the local community associated local murders, robberies, and assorted other criminal activities, including bootlegging, with the local Communist Party organization. Many still do. While the exaggerated connections that local citizens made and make between criminality and radicalism can naturally be questioned on the basis of distortions of memory serving an ideologically-based mythology, there is sufficient evidence to give some credibility to them.³⁴

That Plentywood's "criminal element" may have developed working connections with lo-

cal radicals is suggested by several sources. FBI reports from the 1920s, during the prohibition era, indicate that at the very least, radical county and town officials "tolerated" the sale of liquor and other such crimes, reaching an accommodation of some sort with those who operated outside the law.³⁵ A summary report, written in the early 1940s, noted that Sheridan County had been a "radical melting pot" in the 1920s and that "With this melting pot came a criminal element, who, while not members of any school of Marxist thought, stayed very close to the radical movement and used it for protection when time needed. This criminal element survived by running whisky over the Canadian line, running houses of ill-repute and robbery."³⁶ Plentywood's conservative press exploited and overstated the connections between criminal activities and the local radical community in order to discredit the social and economic activism of local reds. Take, for example, the case of Robert Stephen, a Plentywood distiller who was arrested by federal agents for "transporting, possession and manufacturing of intoxicating liquors" in late 1931. Stephen was beaten by two local men, but the *Plentywood Herald*

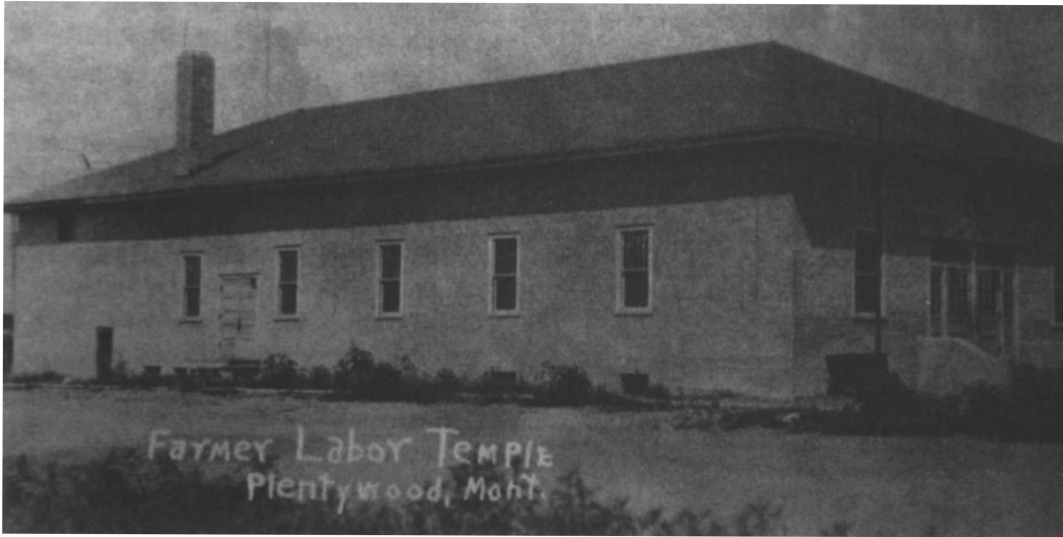


FIG. 5. *Farmer Labor Temple, Plentywood, Montana.* Courtesy of Sheridan County Museum.

hardly expressed much sympathy for him. It instead pointed out that he was the same man who had recently participated in a local Communist-led anti-hunger demonstration: "At a recent demonstration or parade staged in Plentywood this distiller carried a banner reading 'We want shoes.'" ³⁷

In his selective interpretation and application of the law, local Communist sheriff Rodney Salisbury undoubtedly demonstrated a certain sympathy for Plentywood's underworld, at least its bootlegging element. A similar sympathy was reflected in the *Producers News*, when it attacked federal prohibition agents, calling them "stoopigeons" and more colorful pejoratives. ³⁸ In fact, Charles Taylor confirmed that an "accommodation" of sorts was reached between local radical officials and individuals involved in the illegal liquor trade, though one with a particular twist that was absent from FBI reports or conservative press headlines:

We used to haul them all in, when business was the lowest, on the state law [. . .] at

Christmas time, right after Christmas. That was always a big lull, and in order to satisfy the Prohibitionists in the state group and the teetotalers, that had to be pacified, because they always wanted somebody arrested. . . . Rodney [Salisbury] would pull them all in just after Christmas, the whole damn bunch, and have the whole jail packed full of them, and then they'd slip away Saturday night and go home. . . . Then the district judge would slap a big fine on them. We re-elected him, too, so he knew how much—we'd kind of assess them according to their trades, you know. So they got \$500 fine and \$250 fine. On top of it they got a 30 day sentence in jail. That's the easiest time to be in. And all the money went into the school fund, you know, and that satisfied all these church-going people. And of course I played that in big headlines in the paper, big raid and how they were all dragged in and thrown in jail and what fines they got and things like that, in the paper. That was duck soup for them. They didn't pay high for their license, you see. They didn't

pay anything to us at all. So they paid that to the school fund and everybody was satisfied.³⁹

Taylor and his supporters got far more than contributions to the school fund out of this arrangement. The left-wing *Producers News* and the Communist *Daily Worker* were readily available at local “blind pigs,” and no doubt, when legal fines were imposed, it was more than the individual’s trade that was considered. Naturally, the local “whites,” as anti-Communists were called by the left, condemned the selective enforcement of the law. The Republican editor of the *Plentywood Herald*, for example, a critic of Taylor and the local Farmer-Laborites, sarcastically referred to a series of police sweeps in late summer of 1926 as “Reform Sweeps Sheridan County.” He wrote, “All these disturbances coming up just at this time, and all in a heap, has a tendency to make the casual observer wonder whether or not this has any political significance—or if it is just a general round up before the Harvest Festival.” Yet the selective toleration of liquor or prostitution and the practice of collecting “virtual”—and idiosyncratically imposed—license fees were not novel behaviors introduced by Communists. They were practices with a long history—earlier adopted by Republicans as well as Democrats in other midwestern and western communities. This fact was conveniently ignored by the conservative press. In 1928, in the midst of a highly contested election, the *Plentywood Herald* charged Taylor and the local Left with coddling the criminal element: “your friends, the gun toters, the tin horns and honky-tonk owners, car thieves, store robbers and thugs.”⁴⁰

The growing reputation of the county as a center of radicalism was a source of pride as well as embarrassment for local reds. Less-than-reputable individuals were sometimes drawn to the community, seeking a permanent haven from an exploitive and harsh capitalist world or merely looking for a comfortable and safe temporary way-station. Ironically, this may have contributed to the erosion of the

movement’s initial base of support. Take, for example, the events surrounding the arrival of Walter Currie, an itinerant Wobblie who drifted into town in the summer of 1928 and was arrested for vagrancy and drunkenness. Upon his arrest he “requested to be taken to the office of the clerk and recorder in order that he could register to vote in the coming election” that fall. Currie stated that he wanted to register so he “could vote for Salisbury for Sheriff.”⁴¹ Salisbury’s reputation as a left-wing sheriff had spread through the national radical grapevine, but Currie’s publicly expressed desire to help reelect the sheriff was the last thing that Salisbury could want.⁴² He was already being severely excoriated by the *Plentywood Herald*, which had recently passed from the hands of editor Burley Bowler to an even more aggressively anti-red publisher, Henry E. Polk. The opposition Republican press severely criticized Salisbury for allegedly padding his expense bills and took on the entire Taylor machine in town, particularly targeting the *Producers News*’s “irresponsible” policy of encouraging economic boycotts against specific merchants.⁴³

There was also the matter of the late November 1926 robbery of the county treasury that many Plentywood residents associated with the work of local reds. Though there was little hard evidence to suggest his involvement, rumors implicating Salisbury in the crime circulated widely through the county in the years that followed. (Fig. 6) On top of this, factional struggles within the Farmer-Labor party were taking their toll; like the other left-wing candidates that year, Salisbury ran as an independent. In a move that anticipated the anti-red fusion politics of the early 1930s, the local *Plentywood Herald* had called on moderates and conservatives to join together in 1928 to defeat their common foe and used the Currie incident to galvanize public opinion against the reds. Salisbury, recognizing that any suggestion that outsiders were coming in to vote for him threatened to undermine his support, convinced Currie to sign an affidavit stating he did not know the sheriff and had not made

THIS CASE ORIGINATED AT **Butte, Montana**

REPORT MADE AT: Butte, Montana	DATE WHEN MADE: 12-23-27	PERIOD FOR WHICH MADE: 12/5-22/27	REPORT MADE BY: D. H. Dickason
TITLE: CHARLES E. TAYLOR RODNEY SALISBURY P. J. WALLACE		CHARACTER OF CASE: Miscellaneous - Vio. Various Laws Probably Through Conspiracy, Sheridan County, Montana	
SYNOPSIS OF FACTS: <p style="text-align: right;">62-185</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Communist Party has majority of officers in Sheridan County, including Sheriff, Senator, Clerk of District Court, Treasurer, etc.; also Party, through "The Producers News," their paper, which runs in the form of a blackmailing proposition, is reported to have formed a conspiracy with Federal prohibition officers and to be interested in car thefts and the looting of banks in Sheridan County and adjacent thereto. OFFICE OF ORIGIN - PENDING</p> <p>Reference: BEGINNING (Letter from Director)</p> <p>DETAILS: At Scobey & Plentywood, Montana. Pursuant to information transmitted by Director, investigation was made as to some of the alleged violations of law in Sheridan County through the Communist officials there, which include the Sheriff, Senator, Clerk of District Court, Treasurer, etc.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">DO NOT WRITE IN THESE SPACES</p>			
APPROVED AND FORWARDED: <i>D. H. Dickason</i> SPECIAL AGENT IN CHARGE	62-15962-9		RECORDED AND INDEXED: DEC 29 1927
WASHINGTON REFERENCE: #2	COPIES OF THIS REPORT FURNISHED TO: Butte.-7n.3	BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION DEC 29 1927 A.M. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	CHECKED OFF: DEC 29 1927 JACKETED:
		ROUTED TO: <i>Mr. O'Neil</i> <i>Mr. Tule</i>	FILE 74

Mr. Luchman
12/27/27

7-1228

FIG. 6. Cover sheet from a 1927 FBI file on Charles Taylor, Rodney Salisbury, and P. J. Wallace. Courtesy of Gerald Zahavi (Freedom of Information Act).

the statement ascribed to him by the conservative press. But all of this was to no avail; Salisbury was defeated 1154 to 1879. All of the local left-wing candidates met similar fates. Still, in spite of their defeat, many radical candidates received substantial voter support; the reds remained a significant threat to conservatives and local defenders of Montana capitalism.⁴⁴

RADICALS AND "MAINSTREETERS"

The growing animosities and constant accusations and counter-accusations between the radical *Producers News* and more conservative regional papers, such as the *Daniels County Leader*, the *Plentywood Pioneer Press*, and the *Plentywood Herald* were noted by an FBI agent in 1927: "The feeling in this section is very bitter." Conflicts between farmers and banks, land sharks, grain elevator operators, and railroads had long defined rural politics in the plains and western states. Yet, in the confined and intimate world of Plentywood, such conflicts took on a personal edge as the local *Producers News* actively defined the class struggle as one between Main Street and local farmers. Businessmen and merchants, and those socially identified with them, were called "mainstreeters." They were lumped together and condemned as creditors and controllers of capital to whom everybody was beholden, and as such they were continually lambasted by Taylor and his supporters. Roy Rue recalled during an interview how Taylor and his associates rewarded their friends and punished their enemies. "When they were adding on to the school," Rue recalled, "one of the bricklayers . . . very active in the Communist Party was laid off by the contractor. And he [Taylor] really wrote an article, 'what a horrible building the school was putting up,' and [condemned] the way it was being built."⁴⁵ Merchants who "boycotted" the *Producers News* and refused to carry advertisements in the paper, or who engaged in what local activists felt were exploitive practices, were occasionally the victims of boycotts themselves—or

embarrassing stories printed in the *Producers News*. The Elgin Café, and its owner Jim Popesku, were prime—and often recalled—targets.⁴⁶

Similarly, bankers or implement dealers who tried to repossess property or machinery were blocked by radical farmers acting under the banner of the Nonpartisan League, or in the early 1930s, more aggressively by members of the Communist-led United Farmers League and the local CP-dominated Sheridan County Farm Holiday Association. Andrew Michels, born south of Archer (west of Plentywood), typified a generation of farmers who found a real resource in the CP: "We were in favor of it. God, you don't like to see your neighbor or anybody have their combine or tractor taken away from them. And Charlie Taylor psyched his people up. We were known at one time as the red capital of the United States."⁴⁷

In early 1929 Hans Madsen became Sheridan County's new sheriff. The *Plentywood Herald* celebrated his rise to power; when Madsen and three federal agents raided three local "blind pigs" in town, it declared, "Sheridan County has a sheriff. There is nothing extraordinary about that. Most communities have sheriffs. But, somehow or other, since that six-foot, square jawed farmer from down in the Archer Country took charge of the Sheriff's office—just three days ago—there has been a change which one cannot help but notice." Madsen's deeds, however, were continually criticized by local radicals. When, in 1931, Madsen illegally seized steers not covered by a foreclosure order, he—along with County Attorney Grant Bakewell—was severely reprimanded by the *Producers News*. Meanwhile, the county UFL stepped in, recovered the steers and initiated a boycott of the Dooley Implement Company, the holder of the original note.⁴⁸

Political factionalism was rampant in Plentywood and throughout the county, becoming especially acute in the early 1930s. An active but small Ku Klux Klan organization operated in the town and regularly clashed with local

Communists. As one resident recalled: "They used to burn crosses on top of a hill, in back of the schoolhouse—the Ku Klux Klan—and I know of two places in town . . . [where] they burned crosses on their front lawn[s] because they figured they were leaning too much to the Communist Party." Political and ideological conflicts spread into social life, across generations, and especially into the schools. Andrew Michels recalled: "The more stable element were repulsed by the communistic trends." Children of "mainstreeters" regularly taunted the sons and daughters of local left-wingers. The token signs and symbols of radicalism were enough to invite abuse, and children's cruelty knew few bounds. The nephew of one non-Communist local resident, who wore a red tie to his own birthday party at school, was ridiculed by his classmates. He came home and told his mother, "Mama, I ain't gonna wear a red tie anymore. They called me Taylor." The daughter of Marie Hansen, a local radical, recalled young children yelling at her, "You dirty red! You dirty red!"⁴⁹

CHILDREN'S WORLDS

Ideological differences clearly defined the social and cultural worlds of children as well as adults. At no time was this more true than in the early 1930s, when local Communists—consistent with "Third Period" thinking—openly and vocally identified themselves with the CPUSA. Since 1923, agrarian Communists had organized a number of groups, including the North Dakota-based United Farmers Educational League. Though the League was marginally active in the 1920s, when it was led by Harold Ware and Alfred Knutson, in 1930 it was transformed into the more militant and visible United Farmers' League. The UFL came into existence as a result of a shift in Communist Party strategy—away from working *within* existing farmer organizations and toward establishing autonomous agrarian Communist institutions. Under the leadership of Charles Taylor, Ella Reeve ("Mother") Bloor, Harold Ware, and Lem Harris, UFL locals were swiftly

created throughout Montana, the Dakotas, and Minnesota.⁵⁰ Along with the formation of the UFL came the Party's more open electoral presence. In 1930, the CP first appeared on Sheridan County ballots. Thus, not surprisingly, local factional conflict, and especially conflict over the hearts and minds of children, became especially acerbic then.

Elderly residents of Sheridan County still recall Communist attempts to "recruit the young folks." The established middle class of Plentywood aggressively sought to protect its children, defending them against both Communists and sellers of liquor, the "devils' brew." One need only recall the list handed to Bernadine Logan. Hence, when the *Producers News* announced on 13 November 1931 that a regional "School for Young Farmers and Workers" would start classes on 22 November in the Farmer-Labor Temple, the moral and ideological guardians of the community were up in arms.⁵¹ Here was an ideological and institutional challenge to their authority.

With pride, the student council of the new Young Communist League Training School, representing "31 sons and daughters of poor and middle farmers from North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana," sent its greetings to the local radical community. The students extended their "revolutionary appreciation to the farmers" of the region for their economic and moral support. "The students have, without exception, found in the school the greatest spur to further activity in the struggle of the oppressed masses," they wrote in a letter that appeared in the *Producers News*. "The theoretical training has opened to them a world view of the struggle of the oppressed against the exploiters. It is providing them with a very sound understanding of their place in the vanguard of the exploited masses and particularly in the struggle of the farm youth against the misery and exploitation of this robber system." The *Producers News* had earlier sent its own cheerful greeting to the "sons and daughters of poor farmers who have shown by their enthusiasm and activity that they were all leaders . . . in the struggles . . . against

the present system of exploitation, hunger and brutality.”⁵²

The panicked citizens of the community acted swiftly. The Plentywood school board passed a resolution “that any pupil taking part in the activities sponsored by the so-called Young Communist school at the Farmer-Labor Temple will not be permitted to participate in any extra-curricular activities during the balance of the school year.” The resolution was announced to all pupils on 3 December. Almost immediately, the local YCL lashed out at the Board; it issued a circular “denouncing the Board and faculty as hypocrites.” The *Producers News* pointedly announced that “after the board had made the order, the number of children visiting the Temple trebled.” At the Plentywood public school, trouble immediately broke out. According to the *Plentywood Herald*, “four pupils absented themselves and attended classes at the Farmer-Labor Temple. On Friday morning three had admitted they had played ‘hooky’ and were asked to bring written excuses after lunch”; the fourth claimed she had not gone to the Temple but had been at home. When all of the children brought in parental excuses, the school faculty ruled them unacceptable and the pupils were “penalized by having to make up this lost time after school.”⁵³ The four students, Jardis Salisbury and her twin sister Janis (daughters of former sheriff Rodney Salisbury), Ellen Taylor (Charles Taylor’s daughter) and Josephine Walkowski were all quite active in the local Pioneers, a communist youth group.

A DEFINING TRIAL

This minor event in the lives of these children and in the lives of their teachers might have gone unnoticed—if it had not been for the actions of Janis Salisbury’s mother and the Salisburys’ hired hand. Their actions precipitated one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of Sheridan County Communism. On the day after they had absented themselves from school, and after their parents’ excuses had been rejected by school authori-

ties, the four students were told to stay after school by Doris Granger, their teacher. All four, including Janis who had not gone to the Temple, but instead had stayed home to help her ill mother, Emma Salisbury, were told to stay until 6 P.M. Pete Stoyanoff (or Steinoff—his last name appears in various spellings), a Bulgarian immigrant working on the Salisbury farm as a hired hand, was sent to the school by Mrs. Salisbury to pick up her daughter Janis. According to the *Plentywood Herald*, Stoyanoff “came to the eighth grade school room,” and when the teacher hesitated to let the young girl go, “allegedly brandished a stick at the teacher, used threatening and profane language towards her,” and finally left with Janis.⁵⁴

After a joint meeting of the school board and teachers, a member of the board, Walter Raess, signed a legal complaint against Stoyanoff; as suggested by the *Producers News* (alluding to its ability to initiate economic boycotts of local merchants), “other members of the board did not care to for business reasons, and Raess did not know any better.” A warrant was issued against Stoyanoff and Sheriff Madsen was notified that “Rodney Salisbury was harboring this man.” Madsen went out to the Salisbury farm to arrest the hired hand. There are various versions of what transpired next, but the detailed account in the *Plentywood Herald* best captures the tenor of the confrontation that took place on the Salisbury ranch.

Mrs. Salisbury called to Steinoff. “Don’t accept service Pete.” The sheriff again told Steinoff that he was under arrest and to come along with him. Noting that Steinoff hesitated to come with him, and having been told that he carried a dagger, sheriff [sic] Madsen kept his right hand on his gun in his overcoat pocket and took Steinoff by the shoulder with the other hand. At this point when the sheriff was thus handicapped, Mrs. Salisbury sprang between the two men and began to beat the sheriff on the face. Steinhoff made a lunge, tore his

clothes loose from the grasp of the sheriff and ran back into the house.

Apparently, according to the *Plentywood Herald's* account, Emma Salisbury continued to strike the sheriff. Not wishing to hurt her, Madsen retreated to seek assistance. He returned with deputies and found the doors locked with Emma Salisbury inside announcing she had three loaded guns; again he retreated.⁵⁵

The following week, Rodney Salisbury, not wishing to make things worse for his wife and his family, brought Stoyanoff to the sheriff. The hired hand pled “not guilty,” and a \$200 bond was set. The trial was scheduled for the following Monday. Attempts by Salisbury to convince the school’s board of trustees to drop their proceedings against Stoyanoff failed. Consistent with Charles Taylor’s description of the former sheriff’s personality, Salisbury probably did, as the *Plentywood Herald* claimed, threaten to “make things interesting for the school officials.” The school board was ready for a legal fight.⁵⁶

The conflict that ensued, and that culminated in a jury trial, was obviously not really about what Stoyanoff said or did not say, did or did not do. Nor, notwithstanding the *Plentywood Herald's* suggestion, was it an indirect act of revenge for the loss of the use of the Farmer-Labor Temple for school athletic functions. An arrangement with A. C. (“Red”) Erikson, secretary of the Temple and former county attorney, that permitted the school to use the Temple for basketball practice, had been rescinded by Erikson when he learned that the school’s practice schedule conflicted with the planned activities of the Communist-led United Farmers League. That was a peripheral issue. The trial that began in mid-December was not specifically about broken promises, or truant children, or the actions of a hired hand, and *everybody knew it*. It was about two cultures coming to blows—both figuratively and physically. As the *Producers News* put it, “It would not have been so bad if the girls had played ‘hooky’ to visit a picture

show or a dance or for some respectable purpose, but for all things, to play ‘hooky’ to attend a ‘red’ school, that just simply should not be allowed to run in the town, especially when all the prune peddlers, nickel chasers, and money changers don’t like to have it here.” The editor concluded: “In fact, the United Farmers League, the Communist activities, the school, the demonstrations, the farmers themselves are on trial in this ridiculous, farcical prosecution, and not Pete Steinoff.”⁵⁷

The two-day trial was local high drama—from the picking of the jury (“most of the business men are said to be catching cold feet,” declared the *Producers News*) to the final tirade issued by Rodney Salisbury. “The court house was packed from the moment the case opened until it closed, some even taking their lunches, so as not to miss a word of the farce—it was so good,” the *Producers News* also observed. The jury, composed of only six jurors, required but four votes for a conviction. With “Mainstreet tool” Judge Edgar Belanski presiding, and an assortment of local shopkeepers and businessmen sitting on the jury, including one “Ku Klux Krost,” known for his participation in the local Klan, and with Doris Granger testifying first, “daintily attired, eyebrows plucked, face tinted, and in her most exclusive society poses,” the courtroom was transformed into a microcosm of local conflicts. On the stand, Granger said that “SHE had been TOLD to go TO HELL by the defendant” and that he had held a stick in a threatening fashion. Miss Nordgren, another teacher, was called forward to corroborate some of Granger’s assertions, and the prosecution rested.⁵⁸

The defense began with Janis Salisbury, who claimed the two teachers lied about Stoyanoff’s words; he had not sworn at Granger. Ellen Taylor followed Janis to the stand, as did Emma Salisbury, who testified that she was ill and worried that her daughter had not arrived home in time. As the *Producers News* commented, “She was worried about Janice [Janis] because of the brutality of the teachers: how they had scratched and struck other children

in the nose.” Janis’s twin sister Jardis had telephoned her mother to tell her that two teachers, Nordgren and Granger, had locked Janis in the classroom. Furthermore, the angry mother testified, Janis had not played ‘hooky’ on the previous day, and she had taken a proper excuse to her teachers. The *Producers News*, in its vituperative tradition, added: “In fact, Miss Granger is reputed to have a very violent temper and a tongue like a wasp. . . . She is said to just hate the reds, and never missed a chance to ‘smart crack’ about them.” Stoyanoff took the stand last, and confirmed to the jury how concerned Mrs. Salisbury had been, and that he did not tell Granger to “Go to Hell,” nor had he threatened her with a stick. The defense rested. Rebuttal witnesses, including once again Granger, were brought forward to support the prosecution’s case, though the defense was partially effective in discrediting them. It was all a field day for the local papers. As Bernadine Logan recalled of the *Producers’ News* coverage of the trial, “They called our superintendent a ‘three thousand dollar a year janitor’ and a few other things.”⁵⁹ The *Plentywood Herald*, though employing fewer hyperboles, nonetheless demonized Stoyanoff and his supporters just as effectively.

The trial ended with a guilty verdict and a recommended fine of \$10. It was not surprising that the only vote for acquittal came from Anton Solberg—according to the *Producers News* “the only man in overalls in the bunch.”⁶⁰ The rest of the jury were “mainstreeters,” the paper had repeatedly pointed out, and what could you expect from them? Apparently, the jury of six were convinced of the prosecution’s case, but perhaps tempered the sentence in consideration of the potentially explosive outcome of the verdict.

SCHOOL BOARD POLITICS AND DEFEAT

The outcome of the Stoyanoff trial was explosive indeed. “After the jury came in with its verdict,” the *Producers News* went on in vivid detail,

Rodney Salisbury mounted a table in the court room, denounced the trial as a kangaroo affair, from start to finish, and called attention of the audience of the trial as an exhibition of capitalist justice: that the whole case was a fight on the workers and farmers and those working for the overthrow of capitalism; that the school system was a part of the support of capitalism, and the trial was a proof of it—there was nothing to the case but a premeditated effort to put a working man in jail.

If anyone had missed what the trial was really all about, the *News’s* rival paper, the *Plentywood Herald*, put the whole matter in its own perspective when it emphasized: “This verdict will have a wholesome affect [sic] on the morality of Plentywood schools. It also is approval of the policy of the school board in their determined attitude towards an organization which has recently attempted to inculcate disrespect in the minds of a few pupils for their teachers.”⁶¹

The *Producers News*, too, spelled out the issues boldly: it was all a conflict between mainstreeters and reds. Erik Bert (actually “Herbert Joseph Putz”), a New York CP operative trained at Columbia University in agricultural economics and statistics, had recently taken over the left-wing paper and transformed it into the official national organ of the United Farmers League.⁶² The more visible presence of the Communist Party and its farmer front organization, the UFL, and a series of militant actions by the two, had stimulated forceful responses from local moderates and conservatives. The trial of Pete Stoyanoff was merely another manifestation of right-wing reaction. As Bert noted:

The basis of the fuss is the hatred of Mainstreet for the United Farmers League, which has not yet forgotten the big parade of October 16th and the anti-red activities of a number of local nit-wits. While Pete Steieoff [Stoyanoff] has been arrested and an effort made to convict him

as a basis for deportation, the animus behind it is the fact that Pete marched in the parade. It is the fight against the farmers, pure and simple. The mainstreeters are mad because the farmers fight for Red Cross relief, and government feed loans for their starving cattle, and demand money for new clothes. . . . Teachers and school boards can always be relied on to assist in any dirty work directed at the workers and farmers, from insulting, abusing, and discriminating against children of red farmers as has been the practice on the part of several ignorant and snobbish teachers in the Plentywood schools for some time, to arresting Pete Steieoff [Stoyanoff].⁶³

The events of early December spilled into the following year as local Communists and their supporters challenged School Superintendent W. E. Stegner and the school trustees in the local board elections. The firing of two teachers and the strict social control imposed by Plentywood "mainstreeters" were directly challenged by left-wing candidates and the local radical press: "Here in Plentywood, strict rules are laid down for the teacher's behavior. They are told when and where they can sleep, the proper places for them to eat, and what kind of people they can associate with, even what kind of clothes they can wear. Teachers have been here for years and are known by and associate with only an exclusive few."⁶⁴ Emma Salisbury and Anna Herron ran as a progressive block but lost easily to Dean Moore and Mrs. Oscar Opgrande. Opgrande was a local English and Speech teacher and a devout Lutheran. She and Moore were both active in local church choirs. The *Plentywood Herald* chortled, "Communist aspirants for berths on the board of trustees of the Plentywood school board went down to complete and ignominious defeat at the election held Saturday. They were snowed under to the tune of about six to one."⁶⁵

The victory of conservatives in the school board election was yet another confirmation that the struggle against local Communists was

making progress. To the established middle class, it was a momentous achievement; it signified the community's rejection of those "who ridicule our schools, defy the administration, and hold in derision the very ideals for which those institutions stand." The good citizens of Plentywood had declared that they would not "sacrifice our religion, the sacredness of the home, or the advantages to our children in public schools for Utopian promises from Communists who are seeking to overthrow the government." The conservative editor of the *Plentywood Herald* praised them for choosing "sane, constructive thinking" over radicalism.⁶⁶

Yet local Communists did not give up. In the November 1932 general election, they ran Anna Lutness for county school commissioner. Lutness, who had come to the Outlook area to homestead in 1910 (as Anna Ueland), won her first political election in 1914, when she was elected postmistress of the town. She and her husband, Odin Lutness, were both well educated and active in local left-wing causes. Odin Lutness had helped organize the Co-op Equity Elevator at McElroy (in northeastern Sheridan County). Having spent many years as a teacher in country schools, Anna Lutness obtained a position as school clerk and trustee in McElroy. In spite of her fine reputation, she attracted only 736 votes in the November 1932 election. The victorious Republican candidate came in with 1067 votes. Still, Lutness' showing was not a bad one for an openly Communist candidate.⁶⁷

Again, in early 1933, the Communists shifted focus to the city level and challenged the Plentywood school board, this time running Hans Rasmussen for school trustee. Rasmussen attacked not only the content of the local school curriculum—its deference to elite occupations, its celebration of militarism and capitalist leaders, and its neglect of working-class heroes—but also class and structural inequities. He advocated taxing those who could most afford school taxes, while relieving the burden on "people who can not pay taxes." He called for free milk for the undernourished, free medical and dental care for all

pupils, free school supplies and the elimination of fees for those unable to afford them. Anna Herron, who had unsuccessfully run for the school board earlier that year, ran for councilwoman of Plentywood's first election ward. She, Rasmussen, Communist mayoralty candidate John Boulds, and all other Party candidates lost. Rasmussen polled only 45 votes to his opponent's 316. Similar tallies came in from Outlook, Raymond, and Dooley. Clearly, electoral support for radicals was declining, but rather than wallow in discouragement, local Communists continued their campaign for school reform through petition drives and public demonstrations.⁶⁸

BEYOND ELECTORAL POLITICS

Shut out of political power, Sheridan County Communists sought to carve out more aggressively alternate social, intellectual, and psychological spaces within the greater society around them—spaces that embraced fraternal organizations, schools, camps, social and athletic activities, and a wide-ranging musical, theatrical, and literary culture. An increasingly significant part of that space was devoted to youth. While the school board and local conservatives retained control of the county's public educational institutions, outside their dominion a left-wing youth culture was growing, with Emma Salisbury, Anna Lutness, Ruth Bert, Anna Herron, and many adolescents and teenagers taking a lead in building it. Jardis Salisbury, for example, was one of the more prominent young firebrands. She, along with sixteen other youngsters, organized a "Red Spark" troop, a rival to conventional youth scout clubs. Utilizing the kitchen of the Plentywood Farmer-Labor Temple as their club room, the young people met regularly on Saturdays. Jardis described their activities in the *Producers News*:

We are decorating our walls with pictures of Revolutionary leaders and labor cartoons. We have a reading table on which we display "The Daily Worker" and "The New

Pioneer," and "The Producers News". We are collecting books, magazines and pamphlets pertaining to the class struggle. These include stories by Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Sam Darcy, etc. . . . Either a Young Pioneer or a Y. C. L. member gives a short talk each meeting. We have a wall newspaper. . . . We endeavor to learn something concerning the working class every meeting.⁶⁹

Raymond, just north of Plentywood, also had an active youth group—a Young Communist League branch—that organized a study group and periodically passed political resolutions. Like left-wing youth organizations throughout the country during this period, it took up anti-war and anti-imperialism causes. Ervin Nelson, Harry Juul, and Henry Umback, members of the Raymond YCL Resolutions Committee, issued a condemnation of Japanese imperialism in late February 1932. Young Pioneer youth groups and Young Communist League organizations self-consciously differentiated themselves from the politically mainstream or reactionary youth organizations with which they competed. The Boy Scouts, for example, were continually condemned as an instrument of capital and militarism. When the *Douglas County Republican* of Lawrence, Kansas, printed a story about a practice "emergency mobilization" of Lawrence Boy Scout troops, the "Pioneer Corner" of the *Producers News*, a regular youth news section of the paper appearing in the early 1930s, criticized the action and argued that the mobilization was part of preparations for crushing "the demonstrations of the workers and farmers in the coming months of misery and oppression."⁷⁰

Likewise, youth sections throughout the upper Midwest and West criticized the domination of athletics and mainstream athletic organizations by capital and the rich. Hence, an International Workers Athletic Meet was organized in Chicago from 29 July to 1 August as an alternative to the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, and farmers and students were encouraged to join the Labor Sports Union.

“Demand the building of sports facilities in each township with no raising of taxes for the poor farmers; demand that the government turn over the funds that are now given to the 4-H clubs for sports facilities for the youth. Organize sports among the young farmers and in the youth branches of the UFL,” one writer in the *Producers News* exhorted. Locally, the county’s most popular sport, baseball, took on an ideological edge when Raymond radicals organized a team and named it the “Reds.”⁷¹

Theater, summer camps, UFL organizing schools, picnics, and musical events were also part of the counter-culture of radical farm youth—and their parents. The community of Navajo in adjacent Daniels County had a UFL youth section which, in April 1932, came into Plentywood to put on a “home talent” play titled, “Farmer’s Problem and the Remedy.” The play followed the plight of a debt-ridden farmer through two seasons of debt and recovery and debt again, culminating in his joining the UFL and achieving solidarity with other farmers in similar straits.⁷²

Out on the shores of Brush Lake, a local resort area east of Dagmar, summer dances and musical concerts were regularly scheduled by the United Farmers League and by local radical youth groups. A Pioneer camp for eastern Montana and North Dakota was held at Brush Lake in the summer of 1932 for children between the ages of ten and sixteen—all with support from regional farmers. Ruth Bert, sent to Plentywood by the Communist Party with Erik Bert in 1931, took charge of the camp. Emma Salisbury, James Ostby and his wife, Sigfrid, of McCabe, Martin Homme of Outlook, Mrs. William Herron of Outlook, Anna Herron, and Hans Rasmussen’s wife were all active in the camp.⁷³

MARGINALIZATION AND CULTURAL WARS

Still, the cultural efflorescence of the Left in 1932 corresponded to its decline, not its rebirth. The louder, more militant, and more

strident the movement became through the early 1930s, the fewer supporters it retained and the more marginalized it became. Election after election demonstrated this. By 1933 the political star of local Communists was rapidly descending, and the vindictiveness of the ever-more confident anti-Communist establishment began to show itself. Direct action by Communists or the Farm Holiday Association, locally dominated by Communists, increasingly faced effective mass opposition.

The growing impotence of the movement is best illustrated by its desperate and ineffective use of direct action tactics, tactics which had proven successful in the past when political power was in the hands of radicals. On 3 May 1934, around 200 militant farmers from rural Sheridan County—Communists and Holiday Association members—converged on Plentywood, where the auction of an Anderson combine was scheduled. The county sheriff, Hans Madsen, had placed the required notices in the local papers. The group of farmers, led by a stalwart group of Communists, surrounded the combine and confronted sheriff Madsen. Local Dagmar Communist Chris Heiberg, the son of Danish immigrants, climbed onto a truck and declared that he would challenge Madsen in the next election (he did, and lost). The farmers made the anticipated first bid of 50 cents, but it was unsuccessful. The winning bid came from the Rumley Company, holders of the mortgage on the combine; it was for \$200. A near riot erupted and the local fire department, which on previous occasions had stood by passively, was called into action. According to one account of the event: “One person attempted to cut the fire hose, but was sent sprawling behind the fist of one of the deputies. Another went down under a heavy blow from the city policeman’s billy. Aside from a few swollen jaws and water soaked clothing, no serious damage resulted.”⁷⁴

Unlike in former years, when farm and implement sales were successfully blocked or when the bidding was rigged to benefit the bereft farmers, the twenty to thirty deputies recruited by the sheriff insured that the sale

would take place—and that aggressive bidders would be protected. The *Plentywood Herald*, always concerned about the reputation of the community, noted: “To find it necessary to arm officers with loaded guns in order for them to carry out the mandates of the law and to turn water streams from fire hose[s] on an angry mob in order to prevent open riot, is nothing any law-abiding citizen will care to point to with pride.” It warned the citizens of Plentywood that the actions of the Communists demonstrated that “Communism in Sheridan County is not dead” and beseeched its readers to form “a united front against Communism” and fight “it out to the finish” at the next election.⁷⁵

Personal conflicts accompanied political backlash. Key leaders were targeted by local anti-Communist officials. Rodney Salisbury, for example, who was experiencing exceptionally hard times, was denied economic relief. Local UFL farmers had to help him and his family plant their land. Occasionally, too, ideological and personal conflicts exploded into fistcuffs. But the failure of direct action and the bitter personal antagonisms that erupted in the early 1930s were only some manifestations of an eroding mass base. The disturbing and growing potency of cultural war was another. The UFL was “anti-religious,” conservatives declared: Communists were un-Christian; their ideology, secular rituals, and behaviors all demonstrated that; the loose morals of Communist organizers threatened to corrupt adults and youths alike. All of these accusations appeared in the local anti-Communist press. Ruth Bert was apparently hounded out of the community because, according to one FBI report, “at a big meeting of farmers, a farmer’s wife got up and made a speech that they [she and Erik Bert] were not married, were just living together and were advising other local young couples to do the same.”⁷⁶

Similarly, Rodney Salisbury’s affair with Rhoda Marie Hansen, a fellow local Communist who was then married to a Plentywood miller, Andrew Hansen, may have further isolated the radicals from the mainstream com-

munity. Rhoda Marie Hansen (Fig. 7) had come to Montana with her parents while still a baby. Her youth and young adulthood in the community suggest that she fit into the mold of what Jacqueline Dowd Hall has termed the “disorderly woman.” Her daughter recalled her as an “advocate for the ‘underdog’ . . . One day I came into the room where she was talking on the telephone. It was strange, because it was her, but it didn’t sound like her. When I looked more closely, I discovered that she had inserted a short pencil in her mouth, horizontally, so it pushed her cheeks out and changed the tone of her voice. I found out later that she was telling the owner of a bakery in town that she wasn’t paying her employees enough.”⁷⁷

From being one of the first young women in the town to get her hair “bobbed” and to smoke in public, to taking up a career as a printer and then reporter on the *Producers News*, and finally to becoming mistress to Rodney Salisbury (whom she met while working on the *Producers News*), Marie Hansen’s life was filled with unconventional behavior and scandal. Her affair with Salisbury may have played a part in ending the sheriff’s political career back in 1928, when their liaison apparently began. All sorts of gossip spread through the community concerning Salisbury and Hansen’s relationship—and especially about Marie’s two children fathered by Salisbury. According to Rhoda Marie’s niece, “It was public knowledge that Marie and Rodney were ‘together,’ and he spent his time between the two homes.” (Fig. 8) By 1933 the two had begun to travel and live together, taking along their two children. A third child was born to them in 1935, in Billings, Montana, where they had settled. Some time in late 1934, Marie and Andy Hansen were legally divorced.⁷⁸

Open challenges to accepted community mores weakened the credibility of reds and undermined the movement for economic justice they led; so did the Communists’ reputation for being antireligious. A former resident recalled going roller skating at the Farmer-Labor Temple, overhearing a group of young

Pioneers singing and joining in: “Of course, we knew it was terrible, because they were anti-religious, weren’t they? We didn’t dare tell our folks that we had anything to do with them.” Likewise, both Carl Hansen, a Communist elected in 1930 as County Commissioner (though not under the Communist party ticket) and Magnus Danielson, who unsuccessfully ran as the Communist candidate for County Commissioner in 1932, were condemned by conservatives as “men who would overthrow the Christian religion and substitute in its stead the practice of ‘free love’ and paganism.”⁷⁹

Still, religion and Marxism could coexist on friendly terms in northeastern Montana. Regardless of the critical anti-religious writings of Marxist theoreticians or the exploitation of such writings by local conservative editors, Sheridan County socialism and communism had long been syncretic movements that effectively blended Lutheranism, Catholicism, Congregationalism and other Christian religious faiths with anti-capitalism. Religious idioms were regularly employed by local farmers in their condemnation of mainstreeters and distant capitalists. As one Raymond farmer, Otto Grantham, wrote to the *Producers News*, “The capitalists are coming out with all the dirty lies they can think of against the Communist Party, but the truth will prevail. The Communist Party stands for humanity, truth and hard-boiled facts. In that they are closer to God Jehovah than the capitalists, whose God is money, power and greed.” The merging of religious and radical secular idioms was not unusual and characterized radical movements throughout the country.⁸⁰ Local radical leaders demonstrated in their own behaviors that religion and radicalism could coexist. Charles Taylor’s children, for example, regularly attended Sunday school, as their former Sunday school teacher recalled. The Salisbury children, recalled Jardis Hughes [Salisbury], attended Lutheran services (though their mother was a Catholic). Again and again, local radicals answered conservatives by declaring, as Taylor did during the election campaign of



FIG. 7. Rhoda Marie [Chapman] Hansen, with her first child, Jim, born 1924. Courtesy of Toni Martinazzi.

1932, that Communists fought “those who rob the starving people while wallowing in luxury. We fight those and the profit system, and not God. . . . We fight for justice, opportunity, and life, liberty and the pursuits of happiness, for believer and unbeliever alike.” A few local ministers listened and agreed. In Dagmar, Pastor Marius Larsen was active in a number of left-led organizations, including serving as first vice-president of the first Sheridan County Branch of the American League Against War and Fascism.⁸¹

A DEFINING FUNERAL

Nonetheless, radically unconventional secular rituals introduced during the separatist “Third Period” suggested that something entirely new and potentially challenging to sacred beliefs had come into the county. Nowhere was this tension more evident than during and after Janis Salisbury’s funeral. On 1 March 1932, Janis Salisbury died following an operation for appendicitis. She was only



FIG. 8. 1934 photo of Rhoda Marie [Chapman] Hansen, (left, back) and Rodney Salisbury (right, back) visiting Rhoda's brother in Dayton, Wyoming. Courtesy of Toni Martinazzi.

fourteen years old. The *Producers News* noted her passing with a detailed account of her funeral. "BOLSHEVIK FUNERAL FOR VALIANT YOUNG PIONEER, JANIS SALISBURY" read the headline. Hundreds of local citizens, of various political persuasions, attended the event—and witnessed the procession of Young Pioneers, the singing of the *Internationale*, the windows and stage deco-

rated with hammer and sickle emblems, and the draping of a red flag over the young girl's coffin. Harold DeSilva, a classmate of Janis, recalled the event more than fifty years later: "I remember their funeral was communistic. . . . Everybody sang and made a big whoop-dee-doo out of it and I thought that was terrible." Another local resident, a friend of the Salisburys, also recollected the funeral:

They had this big Communistic funeral at the Farmer-Labor Temple here in town. The father gave a long sermon at that funeral about how the daughter said she was dying. "I could see the workers coming, and everything is going to be saved for the working class of Sheridan County." Then Charley Taylor . . . got up and gave a talk. . . . And then the first sister played the piano at this funeral, and all the brothers and sisters danced and sang during the funeral. Then the father got up and the twin daughter played some music, and he did the shake. He was quite a jigger. Then they took her. They buried her in what they called the Rose Garden out north of town here, out near the Salisbury place. This was a Communistic funeral.⁸²

The events recalled so many years later reflected some of the cultural barriers that local anti-Communists began to exploit so effectively in the early 1930s. It was not surprising that the *Plentywood Herald* alluded to Janis's funeral in July of 1932 when it attacked the United Farmers League for being a tool of the Communist Party, an organization that failed "to preserve and hold sacred the institutions and rituals of the Christian church."⁸³

The secular ritual and the burial of Janis Salisbury outside of the town's official cemetery represented yet another assertion of separateness between local Communists and mainstreet culture, one that conservatives began to exploit to further isolate radicals. "As soon as the funeral was over," wrote Hans Rasmussen more than a month after Janis' burial, some of those who attended the event "got busy telling everybody who would listen, that Rodney Salisbury was a member of the United Farmers League, and from now on everybody who belonged to the United Farmers League would have to bury their dead exactly the same way as he did." Rasmussen lectured his readers on the diversity of burial customs, and argued that "no concrete rule has ever been laid down saying just how we should be buried after we die." He concluded that the

real purpose for the spread of such ridiculous rumors was to discredit the United Farmers League, since Salisbury was the State Organizer of the UFL at that time.⁸⁴

THE DEMISE OF SHERIDAN COUNTY COMMUNISM

Cultural wars clearly weakened Sheridan County communism; the New Deal, fusion politics, and internal factional struggles between Stalinists and Trotskyists did it in. As wheat prices began to revive in April of 1933 and Sheridan farmers began to recover from several years of devastating drought, the New Deal optimism of the new administration in Washington began to sweep through the county. From March 1933 until 1939, Montana received more than 380 million dollars in federal relief funds and an additional 142 million in loans; it was second in the nation in per capita New Deal investment. A substantial part of federal aid made its way to Sheridan County. With economic aid and reform coming out of Washington, local Communist sympathizers undoubtedly reevaluated their commitment to radical politics.⁸⁵

At the same time, effective local opposition developed as a result of a united strategy by Democrats and Republicans. In 1932, the anti-Communist Taxpayers Economy League was formed; it supported a fusion ticket running on the Republican line. The League's tactics worked. In 1932, fusionists drew a record vote and swept into office every one of their endorsed candidates. Two years later, a fusion ticket running under the Democratic Party heading repeated the performance of 1932—in spite of the fact that non-fusion Republicans ran a separate ticket.⁸⁶

Radical electoral support declined dramatically from 1930 to 1934. For example, in 1930, the total left-wing vote for county sheriff (running under the Farmer-Labor party ticket) amounted to 1332 votes, or approximately 44% of all ballots cast. In 1932, the left-wing candidate, now running under the Communist banner, had dropped to 1037, or 32% of

the vote. By 1934, the Communists were only able to draw a vote of 437, or 14% of the total. Separatist Trotskyists attracted only 123 votes for their candidate, Rodney Salisbury. Together, Stalinists and Trotskyists realized only 19% of the vote in 1934 in this highly contested race—a truly dramatic decline from their performance in previous elections.⁸⁷

The disunity of the left in 1934 was clearly also a factor in its decline. The formerly united radicals split in that year. Stalinist stalwarts, like Hans Hardersen and Hans Rasmussen, defended the Third Period party line, and confronted a rebellion led by Trotskyists who had broken away from the CP. The insurgent group included Rodney Salisbury, Art Wankel, John Boulds, Peter Gallagher, and many others—most of them active in the local Farmers Holiday Association of Sheridan County. The two factions now competed for votes. It was an unseemly divorce, with slanderous accusations and vicious personal attacks on all sides. Robert F. Hall, a Mississippi-born Columbia University graduate who had been sent into Plentywood in the winter of 1933-34 to replace Erik Bert as editor of the *Producers News* for the CP, recalled just how vicious the split was: “There was this Danish guy who was our business manager [Hans Rasmussen]. So I was editing the paper, writing the stuff, and so forth, and Salisbury came in and started beating up on this little Danish business manager, so I picked up a piece of lead pipe. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t really hit him hard, I just put it on Salisbury’s head lightly and it scared him to death, he jumped up and ran away.”⁸⁸

The division among local reds was not something that arose suddenly. Many local radical leaders, including Charles E. Taylor, had long resented the dominating hand of a capricious and authoritarian Stalinist party machine. They equated the New York-led American party organization with its Russian taskmaster. The imposition of outside CP control from 1931 through 1934 angered local radicals. As the New York organization sent in various Party operatives to edit the *Producers News* or

to organize various local organizations, tensions naturally built up. Erik Bert, one of the most prominent “colonizers” and an avid Stalinist, was not well liked locally. In converting the *Producers News* into a mouthpiece of the UFL, the Party, and of Third Period separatism, he had undermined its local constituency. There is considerable evidence of this in the columns of the newspaper and in the recollections of activists. In late 1931 and early 1932, letters streamed into the editor of the *Producers News* bemoaning the loss of the paper’s local focus. Hans Rasmussen, the business manager of the paper, noted in early 1932 that “Some of our old subscribers have complained about the *Producers News* not being what it used to be. What they are missing is some of the local country stuff.” Taylor himself recalled: “The paper not only lost kick and zest but had lost local interest, because actually we were running a county paper and you had to understand that you see, and they couldn’t make it the mouthpiece of the Communist Party—although they could have supported the Communist Party, but they didn’t do it correctly. They didn’t know how to do it.”⁸⁹

Likewise, outsider Ruth Bert’s control of the local Communist youth school and her controversial leadership roles in various county left-wing children’s organizations also fed tensions within the movement; certainly it was the basis of a mutual animosity between her and Taylor. Even Robert Hall, a premature Popular Fronter who sought a broad left unity and was philosophically closer to Taylor than to Bert, was viewed as an arrogant Party hack by Taylor—and ideologically linked to Bert. Though he maintained a cordial relationship with Taylor, Hall recalled: “I think he resented me a little bit. I was smart and probably presumptuous and probably didn’t treat him with as much respect as he expected from a young [man]. After all he had done all these years in struggle and so forth—and there was this young punk who could write and edit, and I knew what I was doing, or thought I did, and I think he resented me a little bit.”⁹⁰ The

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Communist Party Election Platform For Sheridan County, Montana

Adopted Unanimously at the Convention of the Communist Party Held in Plentywood Tuesday, July 12

The farmers and workers of Sheridan county are suffering extreme privation at the present time as a result of the economic crisis which has penetrated the foundations of the capitalist system throughout the world. The continued deepening of the crisis means that we shall be forced to suffer even worse misery unless we organize for struggle against the capitalist class which is responsible for this crisis.

This fall the government and other collectors will come to take every cent they can out of the crop which we are going to get. The agents of the bankers and other capitalists will soon start a campaign of seizures and forced sales in order to make us pay for the crisis thru the loss of our land and chattels. It is only by organized mass action that this can be prevented, it is only by mass action that we can win relief from the toiling farmers in the county has been, and is being further, organized in the United Farmers League which has the leadership and support of the Communist party. During the past year it was the United Farmers League of Sheridan county which carried on the struggle against the county agent, exposing the vicious discrimination practised by him and his main street tools in the distribution of the federal feed and seed loans.

U. F. L. Won Relief

It was the United Farmers League which won the greatest distribution of Red Cross relief anywhere in the northwest for the farmers of Sheridan county. In the attempt to deport Simon Swanson carried on by the main-streeters and their political accomplices like Jack Bennet, postmaster, Oscar Collins, etc., it was the United Farmers League which fought and won his release. In this the United Farmers League

against the life interests of the impoverished farmers.

County Offices: Outposts in the Struggle

The candidates of the Communist party, chosen by the Communist party and the farmers and workers of the county, will hold office as fighters for the immediate and basic interests of the working class. These candidates will run the county offices solely in the interests of the farmers and workers and are prepared, to sacrifice their own personal interests and the county offices, when that becomes necessary in the course of the struggle. These offices will be held as an outpost in the struggle against the class enemies of the farmers. The candidates will conduct the offices under the direct guidance of the Communist party. The party unhesitatingly declares that it will direct the running of these offices. The interests of the toiling masses of the county will be served by these officials under the direction of the Communist party.

Fake Issues

The local capitalist candidates, Republican and Democratic, in full support of the platform of their national parties which are directed by Wall Street, come to the farmers with a collection of hypocritical issues and planks. They talk of "economy" and "law enforcement." This gang of political highbinders is interested in "economy" only insofar as it will get them the support of the voters of the county. Those now in office have shown that "economy" meant to them keeping their own pockets lined regardless of the privation suffered by the farmers. Those within the capitalist parties are interested in "economy" only insofar as it will give them a chance to get their noses into the feed bag. This is what "economy" means when all the hypocritical phrases are torn

"law enforcement" for the capitalists, for the bankers, the machine companies, and the rich in general our sheriff will do all in his power to prevent the foreclosure of any farmer's or worker's property. We will do everything in our power to prevent any sheriff sales and any eviction of a poor farmer or worker.

Prevent Eviction

We will prevent the county from taking over the land of any impoverished farmer or worker, and will take over the land owned by bankers, landcompanies, or any rich absentee owners as soon as delinquency in taxes by them make this possible. This land will be sold to the farmers of the county on whatever terms are possible for them to purchase it. We will force the machine companies to pay the same taxes on machinery owned by them in the county as the farmers are now forced to pay.

Against Capitalist Terror, Against Deportations

We will fight the persecution of any farmer or worker by the capitalist class, and especially the attempt to deport any foreign born farmer or worker. We demand that the state furnish sufficient funds to enable the school districts to conduct schools for the full term. We will fight every attempt of the capitalists to oppress the masses by cutting the school term for our children. We are opposed to the present gasoline tax of 5 cents per gallon turned over to the state without any roads being built in the county. We demand free hospital, and medical and dental care for the impoverished farmers and unemployed workers of the county. These are the things the farmers are being forced to "economize" on. This economy means sickness, disease, and death.

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FIG. 9. News of Sheridan County CP convention held in Plentywood in July 1932. From The Producers News, 22 July 1932.

conflict between local farmer-based radicalism and imported Stalinism no doubt played an important role in fueling rifts within the movement.

Finally, political and intellectual debates over international Marxism remained important to many local Party leaders in the early 1930s and disagreements over them festered during the Third Period even as Taylor, Rasmussen, and others remained within the Communist Party fold. "I was always sympathetic with Trotsky," recalled Charles Taylor, who since 1928 had tried to disguise his true ideological leanings. Many central Party leaders had already recognized Taylor's potential for ideological apostasy, and in fact generally distrusted many of the Sheridan County reds. In 1930, a year in which ties between local reds and the national CP were severely strained, Taylor and fellow Sheridan County radicals were even denounced as "social fascists" by the Party leadership. Local visits from CP national officers had only increased the Party's doubts that radical Montana farmers could be relied upon to be loyal and disciplined Communist troops. Ella Bloor, for example, who was soon destined to join the powerful Central Committee of the Party, had come to Plentywood in 1930 and reputedly told Taylor and John Boulds that "you two aren't really Communists. You are Leftists and I am going to see that you are both thrown out of the Communist Party."⁹¹

In 1934 Taylor's fealty was again openly challenged by Party dogmatists.⁹² Although exonerated in the summer of 1934 by national Party head Earl Browder, Taylor continued to buck the Party's sectarian leaders by promoting the creation of a broad Popular Front Farmer-Labor party. In August of 1934, after Sheridan County Trotskyists had already split with the Stalinists, running their own United Front Party, Browder wrote to Taylor demanding that he renounce the Trotskyist movement within his ranks: "In view of the situation in Plentywood, we are asking that you send to us at once a statement denouncing the Trotskyite renegades there and disassociating

yourself from them. Such a statement is necessary and will have a great political effect in this section."⁹³

Taylor responded to Browder with a letter from Grand Island, Nebraska, that was printed in the *Producers News*, calling on the Trotskyist rebels to return to the fold: "Comrades, back into the ranks of the Communist Party, where you belong. Back into the Plentywood section and District Committees. Back behind the Communist candidates in the Sheridan election campaign." This was the last token of loyalty Taylor would ever show the CP. By early 1935 he was already on his way out of the Party. Stalinist agrarian leaders, like Henry Puro, continued to accuse him of deviating from the party line. Rather than face a Party trial, in the summer of 1935 Taylor made his break with the CP official.⁹⁴

Much of this, of course, is somewhat peripheral to what was going on in Sheridan County. By 1935, Taylor was no longer a major player in county politics. He had already been on the road for several years, in Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Washington, and points east, speaking and organizing for the United Farmers League and for a number of regional radical and reformist organizations. By 1935, when he returned to the county to take back his paper from the Communists, the region was solidly Democratic and the movement of the 1920s had been significantly absorbed by the New Deal coalition.⁹⁵ Sheridan County's radical era had come to an end. Stalinists and Trotskyists continued to fight it out, but their battles were increasingly peripheral to the everyday lives of mainstreeters and farmers.

Still, the reputation of the county and the memories of those who lived through the decade of radical rule recall an era when Marxist radicalism took on a significant place in the lives of everyday people, and when it saturated various aspects of their social, cultural, political, and economic lives. The interpenetration of radicalism into daily life, into social and cultural struggles as well as overtly political competitions, discloses a hidden world

of conflict over community mores, religion, children, gender roles, and much more—a world of conflict all too evident today in the struggle between liberal and conservative ideologies. While it has recently become the fashion to delve into newly opened Russian archives, looking for those unequivocal links between American Communism and the former Soviet state, it is nonetheless equally important for scholars to seek out the hidden *American* history of *American* Communism. It lies buried close at hand, in local and regional archives and in the memories of thousands of people. It lies buried, among other places, in Sheridan County's past.

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Finally, my thanks to Anneva Jensen (Rhoda Marie Hansen's daughter), Toni Martinazzi (Marie Hansen's niece), Jardis Hughes [Salisbury], and Ruth Putz for kindly sharing some of their recollections of Sheridan County in the 1920s and 1930s.

NOTES

1. Bernadine Prader Logan, interviewed by Jackie Day, 14 May 1985, tape recording, Small Town Montana Oral History Project (Montana Historical Society [MHS], Helena).

2. Magnus Aasheim, compiler, *Sheridan's Daybreak II* (Aberdeen, South Dakota: North Plains Press, 1984), p. 636.

3. Logan interview (note 1 above).

4. For an introduction to divisions between "old" and "new" historians of American Communism, see Michael E. Brown, "Introduction: The History of the History of U.S. Communism," in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, ed. Michael E. Brown et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993) and Theodore Draper, "American Communism Revisited," *New York Review of Books* 32 (9 May 1985): 32-37; Theodore Draper, "The Popular Front Revisited," *ibid.* 32 (30 May 1985): 44-50; and Theodore Draper, "The Life of the Party," *ibid.* 41 (13 January 1994): 45-51.

5. Some recent works devoted to analysis of communism in a local and regional context include Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Michael Keith Honey, *Labor and Civil Rights in the South: The Industrial Labor Movement and Black Workers in Memphis, 1929-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

6. Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), pp. 114-44; Tom Stout, *Montana: Its Story and Biography*, vol. 1 (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1921): 824-25; *Producers News*, 3 November 1922; *Plentywood Herald*, 13 February 1925; Walter and Leona Parkhurst Yaeger, interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 22 October 1982, tape recording, Montanans at Work Oral History Project (MHS).

7. Stout, *Montana* (note 6 above) 1: 825; a firsthand account can be found in the "Reminiscence" of Henry B. Syverud, folder 1/5, Henry B. Syverud Papers, SC 1504 (MHS); Malone, *Montana* (note

6 above) pp. 145-71; United States, Department of Commerce, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Vol. 3: Population 1920* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), p. 586; Virgil Andreasen, interviewed by Rex C. Myers, 27 May 1984, tape recording, Danish Oral History Project (MHS); Mette B. Peterson, interviewed by Rex C. Myers, 28 May 1984, tape recording, Danish Oral History Project (MHS); Thomas Peter Christensen, *A History of the Danes in Iowa* (Solvang, California: Dansk Folkesamfund, 1952), p. 37; Stephen Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 276, 280; *Producers News*, 9 October 1931; Magnus Aasheim, compiler, *Sheridan's Daybreak: A Story of Sheridan County and Its Pioneers* (Great Falls: Blue Print & Letter Company, 1970), pp. 237-41.

8. Malone, *Montana* (note 6 above), pp. 232-53; *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 8; Mette B. Peterson interview (note 7 above); William Haas, "Stouthearts of the West: Toil, Sweat and Heartaches!" *Farms Illustrated* (May 1946), pp. 21, 24; Oscar Eklund, interviewed by Bob Lettinga, 26 September 1979, transcript, p. 1, Montana Farmers Union Interviews (MHS); *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 914; for another tale of Danish migration, see Jorgen Jorgensen, "Autobiography," translated by Henry W. Jorgensen, 1958, Folder 1/1, Jorgen Jorgensen Family Papers, SC178 (MHS); L. S. Olsen, "The Call of the West: Some Solid Facts About Sheridan County, Montana." Pamphlet [1915], Pamphlet Collection (MHS).

9. Andreasen interview (note 7 above); Mette B. Peterson interview (note 7 above); *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 8; Clarence Onstad, interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 20 October 1982, tape recording; Anna Boe Dahl, interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 20 October 1982, tape recording, both Montanans at Work Oral History Project, MHS.

10. On these movements, see Robert M. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955); Lowell K. Dyson, *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 1-50, 67-82, 99-122; "Agrarian Radicalism," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, et al. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp. 7-13. For a good overview of the historiography of the region's agrarian movements, see William C. Pratt, "Radicals, Farmers, and Historians: Some Recent Scholarship about Agrarian Radicalism in the Upper Midwest," *North Dakota History* 52 (Fall 1985): 12-24, and William C. Pratt, "Rural Radicalism on the Northern Plains, 1912-1950," *Montana: The*

Magazine of Western History 42 (Winter 1992): 42-55.

11. *Plentywood Herald*, 27 August 1936. The *Herald* ran installments of John A. Stahlberg's WPA Sheridan County history in 1936.

12. "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," 16 June 1941, FBI Butte File 100-721-50, p. 81 (FBI-FOIA). This characterization suggests the heavy influence of German Marxist ideology.

13. Charles E. Taylor, interview by Lowell K. Dyson, 2-3 August 1965, transcript, p. 32, Columbia Oral History Collection, Oral History Research Office (Columbia University, New York); Merrill G. Burlingame and K. Ross Toole, *A History of Montana*, vol. 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1957): 102; *Sheridan's Daybreak II* (note 2 above), p. 10; Taylor interview (above), pp. 40, 34; *Montana Socialist*, 30 December 1916, 28 July 1917; Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire* (note 10 above), p. 225; see also "The Nonpartisan League" (typescript), Alfred Knutson file, Lowell Dyson Research Files (in Dyson's possession).

14. Charles E. Taylor to Lewis J. Duncan, 29 April 1911, folder 83, Socialist Party of Montana Collection (microfilm edition: reel 2), MF 425 (MHS); "Charles Edwin Taylor, with aliases, 'Red Flag Taylor, Carl Snyder,'" FBI Seattle File 100-55987-21, 1 May 1944, p. 3 (FBI-FOIA); Taylor interview (note 13 above), pp. 12-17; 24-26; 30-31; 34.

15. Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), pp. 316-17. On socialism in Butte, see Jerry W. Calvert, *The Gibraltar: Socialism and Labor in Butte, Montana, 1895-1920* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1988), and David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Pratt, "Rural Radicalism" (note 10 above), p. 45; Taylor interview (note 13 above), pp. 43, 45; "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," 16 June 1941, FBI Butte File 100-721-50, 82-83 (FBI-FOIA).

16. On the Party's early attitude toward farmers and farmer organizations, see Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), pp. 1-5.

17. "Charles Taylor," FBI Minneapolis File 100-55987-38, 28 May 1953, 3 (FBI-FOIA).

18. For Taylor's political career, see: Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), pp. 1-26 and passim, and Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 139, 143-44; Plentywood Diamond Jubilee Corporation, *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (Plentywood: Herald Printing, 1987), p. 37; Taylor interview (note 13 above), pp. 83, 97, 89; *United Farmer*,

1 March 1926; *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 925. Larsen died in 1940 in Volmer; "Charles Taylor," FBI Minneapolis File 100-55987-38, 28 May 1953, 4 (FBI-FOIA).

19. Taylor interview (note 13 above), p. 42; Charles E. Taylor to Lowell K. Dyson, 7 May 1964, Charles E. Taylor file, Lowell Dyson Research Files.

20. See late October and early November editions of local papers for party affiliations.

21. *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (note 18 above), p. 33.

22. Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), pp. 34-41; Lowell K. Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 290-95; *Producers News*, 4, 11, 18, 25 December 1925; 1, 15 January 1926. John G. Soltis and Hans Rasmussen, both in the CP, were active organizers for the Progressive Farmers in 1926, with the former taking a more prominent role in organizing the region; Taylor interview (note 13 above), p. 93, see also pp. 93, 109-11 for more on the Progressive Farmers.

23. Taylor interview (note 13 above), p. 94.

24. "Charles Taylor, Rodney Salisbury, P. J. Wallace," FBI Report 62-15962-9, 23 December 1927 (FBI-FOIA); See Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), pp. 10, 31-32; Charles Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 18 (January 1968): 2-18; *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (note 10 above), p. 217; Butte FBI File 100-506, 7 April 1943 (FBI-FOIA); *Producers News*, 17 November 1922.

25. Roy Rue and Helen Dahl Rue (with Anna Dahl, Helen's mother), interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 23 October 1982, tape recording, Montanans at Work Oral History Project (MHS); see also Anna Boe Dahl interview (note 9 above) for more on the "communitistic" regions of the country.

26. *Producers News*, 30 October, 20 November, 21 August, 6 November 1931. The best FBI report for a general historical overview of CP activities in Montana is "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," 16 June 1941, FBI File 100-3-51-16 (FBI-FOIA). See post-election vote counts printed in local papers for vote breakdowns by towns and election districts.

27. Christensen, *A History of the Danes in Iowa* (note 7 above), pp. 37, 237; *Producers News*, 11 March, 23 September 1932; *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), pp. 237-42, 913. Rasmussen had been active in the local Socialist party in the 1910s then switched over to the Communist Party in the 1920s. For more on the Dagmar colony, see Irving Andreasen, ed., *The First 50 Years: Glimpses from the Dagmar Community, Dagmar, Montana, 1906-1956* (Cedar Falls, Iowa: Holst Printing Co., 1956);

on life in Dagmar in the pre-1920 era, see Henry Jorgensen, *The Way it Was: The Childhood of One Boy and One Montana Danish Community* (Helena: Falcon Press Publishing, 1989).

28. The Dagmar ECA was a member of the Montana Equity Cooperative Association, organized in 1915 to establish cooperative grain elevators, stores, and warehouses. The state-wide organization declined after WWI, and the Dagmar Association severed its tie to Equity and reorganized itself as the Farmers Cooperative Association. Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations* (note 22 above), p. 77; Andreasen, ed., *The First 50 Years* (note 27 above), pp. 38, 57, 90-92; *Plentywood Herald*, 24 September 1936; "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," Butte FBI File 100-721-50, 16 June 1941, p. 88 (FBI-FOIA); on local cooperatives, see also Jorgen Jorgensen, "Autobiography," (note 8 above), p. 49.

29. Andreasen interview (note 7 above); E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 267-72; Christensen, *A History of the Danes in Iowa* (note 7 above), pp. 39-54.

30. *Sheridan's Daybreak II* (note 2 above), p. 193; Jorgen Jorgensen, "Autobiography," (note 8 above), pp. 46-47; Joan Miller, ed., *There is a Way: History of the Nathanael and Volmer Lutheran Churches of Dagmar, Montana 1907-1975* (Billings: Western Printing, 1975), p. 148; on the anti-fraternalist arguments of Danish Evangelical Lutherans, see Christensen, *A History of the Danes in Iowa* (note 7 above), pp. 131-34.

31. Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), p. 3; Lillian Nelson Kitzenberg, interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 24 October 1982, tape recording, Montanans at Work Oral History Project (MHS); Logan interview (note 1 above).

32. Kitzenberg interview (note 31 above); Fay and Violet Chandler, interviewed by Jackie Day, 15 May 1985, tape recording, Small Town Montana Oral History Project (MHS); *Producers News*, 14, 21 November 1924; *Plentywood Herald*, 29 October 1936.

33. Ella Sunsted, interviewed by Rex C. Myers, 28 May 1984, tape recording, Danish Oral History Project (MHS); Einar Klostad, interviewed by Jackie Day, 13 May 1985, tape recording, Small Town Montana Oral History Project (MHS); *Plentywood Herald*, 27 August 1936. The KKK was apparently most active in 1923; Klostad interview; Logan interview (note 1 above).

34. Rue interview (note 25 above); Charles Carbone, interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 21 October 1982, tape recording; Nancy Marron, interviewed by Jackie Day, 16 May 1985, tape recording; Clifford Peterson, interviewed by Jackie Day,

13 May 1985, tape recording, all Small Town Montana Oral History Project (MHS).

35. [Agent] D.H. Dickason to J. Edgar Hoover, 23 December 1927, in "Charles E. Taylor, Rodney Salisbury, P.J. Wallace" file, FBI Butte file, 62-15962-11 (FBI-FOIA).

36. "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," FBI Butte File 100-721-50, 16 June 1941, p. 82 (FBI-FOIA).

37. *Plentywood Herald*, 31 December 1931.

38. See, for example, *Producers News*, 4 January 1929.

39. Taylor interview (note 13 above), pp. 53-54.

40. *Plentywood Herald*, 27 August 1926; Robert Smith Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 119; Barbara Neil Hobson, *The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 47; *Plentywood Herald*, 25 August 1928.

41. *Plentywood Herald*, 16 August 1928.

42. *Plentywood Herald*, 1 November 1928. According to the *Herald*, "one of the I.W.W.'s that came here to Plentywood informed one of the citizens of Plentywood that he had visited practically every I.W.W. jungles (sic) from Texas to the Canadian boundary, and as far east as the state of Virginia; and in every one of these jungles he heard Rodney Salisbury's name and he was extolled and praised as the best Sheriff in the United States . . ."

43. *Plentywood Herald*, 23 August, 25 October 1928.

44. Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), pp. 12, 17; hearings on the robbery—to determine if the insurance company were obligated to pay the county's claim—were reprinted in the *Plentywood Herald* just before the November election. See *Plentywood Herald*, 16 August, 4, 18, 25 October, 8 November 1928.

45. Dickason to Hoover, 23 December 1927 (note 35 above), Rue interview (note 25 above).

46. Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), p. 11. *Producers News* 19, 26 August, 2, 16, 30, September, 1927. In earlier years, the Elgin Café had regularly placed advertisements in the *Producers News*; a typical one read "Elgin Cafe, A Good Clean Place to Eat." *Producers News*, 3 November 1922; Rue interview (note 25 above); Chandler interview (note 32 above).

47. Andrew Michels, interviewed by Laurie Mercier, 21 October 1982, tape recording, Montanans at Work Oral History Project (MHS).

48. *Plentywood Herald*, 10 January 1929, 13 November 1931.

49. Roy Rue, Rue interview (note 25 above); Michels interview (note 47 above); Louis Kavon, interviewed by Jackie Day, 16 May 1985, tape re-

ording, Small Town Montana Oral History Project (MHS); Anneva Jensen [Hansen], phone conversation with Gerald Zahavi, 11 October 1995.

50. On the shift in CP policies in the 1920s, see Theodore Draper, *Heyday of American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), pp. 282-441; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism* (note 18 above), pp. 3-27; Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), pp. 8-58; Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations* (note 22 above), pp. 338-43; on "Third Period Communism" and U.S. agrarian movements, the UFEL, and the UFL, see Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), pp. 27-50, 99-122; Pratt, "Rural Radicalism" (note 10 above), p. 48.

51. Kloftstad interview (note 33 above); *Producers News*, 13 November 1931. Some of the students in the Communist school were sent to New York City for "further training." *Plentywood Herald*, 8 October 1936.

52. *Producers News*, 20, 27 November 1931.

53. *Producers News*, 11 December 1931; *Plentywood Herald*, 10 December 1931.

54. *Plentywood Herald*, 10 December 1931.

55. *Producers News*, 11 December 1931, *Plentywood Herald*, 10 December 1931.

56. *Producers News*, 18 December 1931; *Plentywood Herald*, 10 December 1931. Lord Anton Nelson, Ernie Helgeson, Walter Raess, J. G. Debing, and Mrs. Oscar Opgrande were members of the school board.

57. *Producers News*, 11 December 1931.

58. *Producers News*, 11, 18 December 1931.

59. *Producers News*, 11 December 1931. The judge, Edgar Belanski, was a second generation Polish-American who had migrated to Montana in 1909. His civic and club activities suggest the validity of the "mainstreeter" appellation. Belanski was also a "Royal Arch Mason, a charter member of the I.O.O.F., a member of the Knights of Phythias and a charter member of the Modern Woodmen of America." *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 602; Logan interview (note 1 above).

60. Anton Solberg [occasionally spelled "Stolberg" in the paper] had come to the area from Minnesota in 1908. Until the last few years of his life, when he moved to Plentywood and took up the carpentry trade, he homesteaded on his farm southeast of Outlook. He died in 1945. *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 545. The paper's characterization seems to have been correct.

61. *Producers News*, 18 December 1931. The *Plentywood Herald* reported somewhat differently: "Immediately after the court adjourned, Rodney Salisbury crowded his way into the courtroom and jumped onto a table and commenced to harrangue

the crowd about Plentywood justice, government gunmen, jury bought, starving populace and a lot of other nonsense." *Plentywood Herald*, 17 December 1931.

62. Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), pp. 12-13; *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (note 10 above), p. 11; Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), p. 70; Allan Mathews, "The History of the United Farmers League of South Dakota," (master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 1972), p. 8. Herbert Joseph Putz was born in 1904 in the Bronx, the son of a machinist. His family was deeply enmeshed in the German socialist subculture of New York. He attended a German socialist Sunday school, later Stuyvesant High School, Columbia University, and the University of Berlin. Around 1929 or 1930, he joined the CPUSA and adopted the name Erik Bert. He died in 1981. His papers, which in any case have little material before the 1940s, are in two locations. See Ruth Putz [Bert], phone interview by Gerald Zahavi, 15 June 1995, tape recording (in Zahavi's possession); Erik Bert Papers (Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa); Erik Bert [Herbert Joseph Putz] Papers, (Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York).

63. *Producers News*, 11 December 1931. The parade mentioned took place on 15 October in Plentywood, following a large meeting of the newly organized county UFL organization. See *Producers News*, 11 September, 16 October, 1931. The most detailed (and inflated) account of the school board fiasco—including a summary of the trial proceedings—appears in the *Producers News* of 11 and 18 December 1931. The school's principal, Professor Stegner, later apologized to Janis Salisbury for unjustly punishing her. "In a conversation with Rodney Salisbury, Professor Stegner admitted that the prosecution was based on politics and said that he just had to get along with the mainstreeters." *Producers News*, 11 December 1931. Claims about teacher abuse of children are partially corroborated by an account of Anneva Jensen [Hansen]. According to Jensen, her brother was once badly beaten by a teacher after running in the hall of the local school. The teacher [one Miss Anderson?] came out of the room and asked Anneva for a handkerchief to "mop up the blood." She gave it to her, Anneva recalled. "I was such a good little girl!" Anneva Jensen [Hansen], phone conversation (note 49 above).

64. *Producers News*, 27 May 1932.

65. *Sheridan's Daybreak II* (note 2 above), pp. 663-64; *Producers News*, 27 May 1932; *Plentywood Herald*, 7 April 1932.

66. *Plentywood Herald*, 7 April 1932.

67. *Producers News*, 2 November 1932; *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 950; *Plentywood Herald*, 10 November 1932.

68. *Plentywood Herald*, 30 March, 6 April, 24 March, 31 March, 28 July, 1933.

69. *Producers News*, 19 February 1932; Jardis Salisbury turned away from left-wing politics in her post-adolescent years and recalls little about her CP youth activities. In the late 1930s, she attended the University of Montana, graduating in 1940. In 1945 she moved to Seattle and later worked for Boeing and the Port of Embarkation. Her memories of Plentywood are filled with bitterness and regret, mainly due to the separation of her mother and father some time around 1930, but also because of the town's treatment of her family. Jardis Hughes [Salisbury], phone interview by Gerald Zahavi, 16 February 1995; *Plentywood Portrait: Toil Soil Oil* (note 18 above), p. 390.

70. The best source on the youth anti-war and anti-imperialism movement in the early 1930s is Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Producers News*, 26 February 1932.

71. *Producers News*, 4 March 1932; Leora Johansen, interviewed by Rex C. Myers, 30 May 1984, tape recording, Danish Oral History Project (MHS).

72. *Producers News*, 3 March 1933; 29 April 1932.

73. Lement Harris, *My Tale of Two Worlds* (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 137-38; *Producers News*, 27 May, 17 June, 1932; Putz [Bert] interview (note 62 above).

74. *Plentywood Herald*, 3 May 1934.

75. *Plentywood Herald*, 10 May 1934.

76. *Producers News*, 1 July 1932, 14 April 1933; Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), p. 14; "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," FBI Butte File 100-721-50, 16 June 1941, p. 83 (FBI-FOIA); Putz [Bert] interview (note 62 above). Ruth Putz [Bert] did not recall the circumstances of her departure nor the events described in the FBI report; Charles Taylor's account of Ruth Putz's activities and demeanor in Sheridan County suggests that she did not develop a good rapport with local farmers: "She was a very severe type; she knew more than anybody else." Taylor interview (note 13 above), p. 151. Former CP organizer and editor Robert F. Hall, in several informal conversations with me during the summer of 1991, vaguely recalled that Ruth and Erik Bert were not formally married at the time.

77. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian

South," *Journal of American History* 73 (September 1986); Anneva Grace Hansen to Toni Martinazzi, 8 June 1993, printed in Toni Martinazzi, *Albert Rice Chapman 1866-1948 and his Descendants* (Glenview, Illinois: self published, 1993), p. 153.

78. Anneva Jensen [Hansen] told me that Rodney and Emma Salisbury were actually never divorced because Emma refused to agree to it. A few years after Sheriff Salisbury's death (14 June 1938), an FBI report noted that "the belief is prevalent that he [Salisbury] was poisoned by Marie Hanson (sic)." An obituary in the *Plentywood Herald* stated that he died of a "brain hemorrhage" following "a three day illness." Marie Hansen's niece claims that he was in a fight and died as a result of the fight. Jardis Hughes [Salisbury], however, claims that Salisbury probably died of a stroke, and his death certificate lists "cerebral hemorrhage." "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," FBI Butte File 100-721-50, 16 June 1941, p. 83 (FBI-FOIA); *Plentywood Herald*, 16 June 1938; Toni Martinazzi, phone conversation with Gerald Zahavi, 15 February 1995; Martinazzi, *Albert Rice Chapman* (note 77 above), pp. 134-37; Toni Martinazzi to Bernice Van Curen, 8 December 1989 (in Van Curen's possession); Hughes [Salisbury] phone interview (note 69 above); FBI Butte File 100-113096 (FBI-FOIA).

79. Chandler interview (note 32 above); *Plentywood Herald*, 6 October 1932.

80. *Sheridan's Daybreak* (note 7 above), p. 625; *Sheridan's Daybreak II* (note 2 above), pp. 451-52; *Producers News*, 27 May 1932; on the merging of religious and radical cultural symbols, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* (note 5 above), pp. 92-116, and Gavin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976); for a specific discussion of the language of radicalism in Sheridan County, see Verlaine Stoner McDonald, "Red Waves of Grain: An Analysis of Radical Farm Movement Rhetoric in Montana, 1918-1937," (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1994), pp. 82-212.

81. Yaeger interview (note 6 above); Hughes [Salisbury] phone interview (note 69 above); Miller, ed., *There is a Way* (note 30 above), p. 5; *Producers News*, 2 November 1932, 16 November 1934.

82. Harold DeSilva, interviewed by Jackie Day, 15 May 1985, tape recording, Small Town Montana Oral History Project (MHS); Rue interview, Roy speaking, (note 25 above); for local newspa-

per accounts of the funeral, see *Producers News*, 4, 11 March 1932 and *Plentywood Herald*, 10 March 1932.

83. *Plentywood Herald*, 14 April 1932.

84. *Producers News*, 15 April 1932; Marron interview (note 34 above). See also Logan interview (note 1 above) for another account of the funeral.

85. *Plentywood Herald*, 20, 27 April 1933; Malone, et al., *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (note 6 above), p. 296.

86. *Producers News*, 22 July 1932; *Plentywood Herald*, 5 May, 10 November, 1932; 8 November 1934.

87. *Producers News*, 14 November 1930; *Plentywood Herald*, 10 November 1932, 15 November 1934.

88. *Plentywood Herald*, 11 October 1934; *Producers News*, 12 July 1934; Robert F. Hall, interviewed by Gerald Zahavi, 13 February 1990, tape recording (in Zahavi's possession). This story was also told to William C. Pratt by Rob Hall. In that version, Hall recalled that Salisbury had come in with Pete Gallagher. See Rob Hall, interview (notes) by William C. Pratt, July 1988 (in Pratt's possession).

89. *Producers News*, 22 January 1932; see also Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), p. 13; Taylor interview (note 13 above), p. 234.

90. Taylor interview (note 13 above), pp. 146-47; Robert F. Hall, interviewed by Gerald Zahavi, 19 July 1991, tape recording (in Zahavi's possession).

91. "Communist Activities in the State of Montana," FBI Butte File 100-721-50, 16 June 1941, p. 91 (FBI-FOIA). An FBI informant, "L12," recounted the conversation during which Bloor reportedly said this.

92. Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), pp. 118-21.

93. Transcription of Earl Browder to Charles E. Taylor, 17 August 1934 in "Charles E. Taylor with aliases, 'Red Flag' Taylor," FBI Seattle File 100-55987-10, 22 September 1942, 5 (FBI-FOIA). Extensive correspondence between Taylor and various members of the CPUSA was obtained by the Seattle FBI, but later apparently destroyed.

94. *Producers News*, 27 September 1934; Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), p. 127.

95. *Producers News*, 19, 26 July 1935; *Daily Worker*, 17 September 1935; Taylor interview (note 13 above), pp. 233-34; Dyson, *Red Harvest* (note 10 above), p. 127; Vindex, "Radical Rule in Montana" (note 24 above), p. 15.