

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Fall 2011

## Review of *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* by Verlaine Stoner McDonald

Bradley D. Snow  
*Montana State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Snow, Bradley D., "Review of *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* by Verlaine Stoner McDonald" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2715.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2715>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana.* By Verlaine Stoner McDonald. Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2010. xvii + 232 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$16.95 paper.

It's not often that such names as Stalin, Lenin, and Trotsky figure centrally in works dealing with Montana history. But that's the case with Verlaine Stoner McDonald's *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana*. McDonald's history deals with a little-known but fascinating chapter in Montana, and western, history—

the 1920s electoral takeover of the local government of Sheridan County, Montana, by Communist Party members. As McDonald shows, Sheridan County, an agrarian territory of 10,000 persons in the extreme northeastern corner of the state, proved fertile territory for a variety of leftist political movements, including Bryanite populism, the Non-Partisan League, and, for a brief period, Communism.

In demonstrating how it was possible for international Communism to gain a foothold in "the heartland," McDonald effectively evinces both the severe challenges that faced the dry-land farmers of Sheridan County in the first part of the twentieth century and the political traditions that organizers such as Charles "Red Flag" Taylor successfully exploited. A good portion of McDonald's story is devoted to Taylor and the local newspaper he ran for many years, the *Producers News*. This is only fitting, since Taylor and his newspaper, as McDonald shows, share the bulk of the credit, or blame, for the political accomplishments of the northeastern Montana Reds. Drawing upon the agrarian ideology of Thomas Jefferson and the class consciousness of the Populists and labor organizations such as the Western Federation of Miners, the *Producers News* injected a frothy, feisty mix of political agitation and local humor into the culture of Sheridan County. This mix proved potent at the polls. Taylor and his cohorts, first under the banner of the Non-Partisan League and later as avowed Communists, were elected to fill the county's state legislative seats and almost all of its local government offices from 1923 through 1929.

Eventually, however, as McDonald skillfully illustrates, the northeastern Montana Communists fell out of step with the local populace. In part this was due to personal indiscretions of some of the leading Party members and in part to the increasingly doctrinaire nature of the local Communists and of the *Producers News*, particularly following the replacement of Taylor with Eric Burt at the newspaper's helm. Events like the sensational 1928 "Bolshevik funeral" of fourteen-year-old Janis Salisbury and organizations like the

Sheridan County Young Pioneers (Communist alternatives to the Boy and Girl Scouts, who sang, "One, two, three, young Communists are we. Four, five, six, we're happy Bolsheviks"), increasingly alienated the Communists from the community. After 1928, they never again were a political force in Sheridan County. In 1936, the *Producers News* folded up.

McDonald has produced a deeply researched and valuable work. In addition to its skillful tracing of the rise and fall of Communism in northeastern Montana, *The Red Corner* also contributes to the history of the American Communist movement. While it would have been helpful had the book done more to fit the events in Sheridan County into a national political and cultural framework, McDonald's work is nonetheless worthwhile for anyone with an interest in Montana or western American history, the history of American Communism, or of leftist agrarian politics.

BRADLEY D. SNOW  
Department of History and Philosophy  
Montana State University